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Welcome to World Traveler



In this issue, we start our world-wide tour in wonderful East Asia visiting beautiful Japan as we explore the exciting Tokyo Island of Hachijojima. Next, we swing south to enjoy the best of Western Japan traveling through big cities, small towns and into the rural areas to experience relaxing Onsens, watch entertaining traditional theatre, walk along the dunes, visit a historic Shinto shrine and taste wonderful fine Japanese gastronomy.

Onwards to China, where we visit the fairytale Watertown of Gubai, climb the incredible Wall of China at Simatai ending up in the exciting city of Beijing and visiting its legendary Forbidden City and many other great points of interest.

Next, we get a 'Thailand Trifecta' by visiting three wonderful and contrasting areas in Phuket, Chiang Mai and Bangkok. While on the on the peninsula, we head on down to tour a 'Wonderfully Diverse Malaysia' and then onward to find Singapore has both Creativity and Innovation. Last Asian stop is the 'The Heart of Bali' to Ubud for Indonesian culture and relaxation.

We then jet-off for the European leg of our voyage. In the very far north we enjoy a luxury cruise with Viking through the most popular Baltic capitals and end up in Norway. In Northern Ireland, we find the shine and experience the best that Derry-Londonderry has to offer.

Much further south, near the tip of the continent, we visit the less traveled and quaint Region of Basilicata and this year's European Capitol of Culture in the historic and charming hill town of Matera.

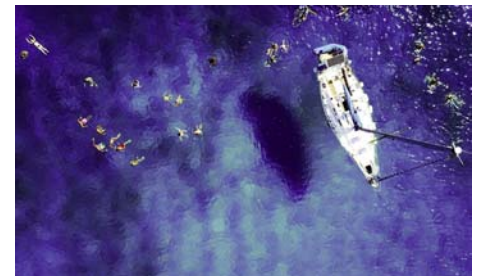
In Spain, we head to Romantic Seville to find it 'Full of History and Excitement'. Being so close to Africa, we take another cruise, this time to Morocco on the Seabourn Odyssey and discover the amazing city of Marrakech.

To the Americas we go. In Canada, we have 'A Winter Hoot on Amherst Island' in Ontario as we get blinded by beautiful Snowy Owls. To warmer climes, we pack the car and head straight south on a road trip through the states to where the highway ends and take in the sunshine and warm weather of the Florida Keys. In Orlando, we eat our way through the best eateries and live diner clubs this magical city has to offer.

Onto the Caribbean, we take two more cruises, first is a refreshing two day trip to the beautiful Grand Bahama Island with Bahamas Paradise Cruise Line. Next we sail the old fashioned way on a masted tall ship with Star Clippers to the best islands in the Lesser Antilles.

Finally, we head to Central America and in Puerto Vallarta we get mesmerized from way up high by the Papanila Flyers and in Panama we head to Gatun Lake for more great wildlife sightings.

Happy travels!



A low-angle photograph of the Great Sphinx of Giza, showing its massive head and the tiered body. The Sphinx is made of light-colored limestone. In the foreground, there are several large, rounded stone structures, likely part of the Sphinx's enclosure. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

THIS IS EGO



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Where it all begins

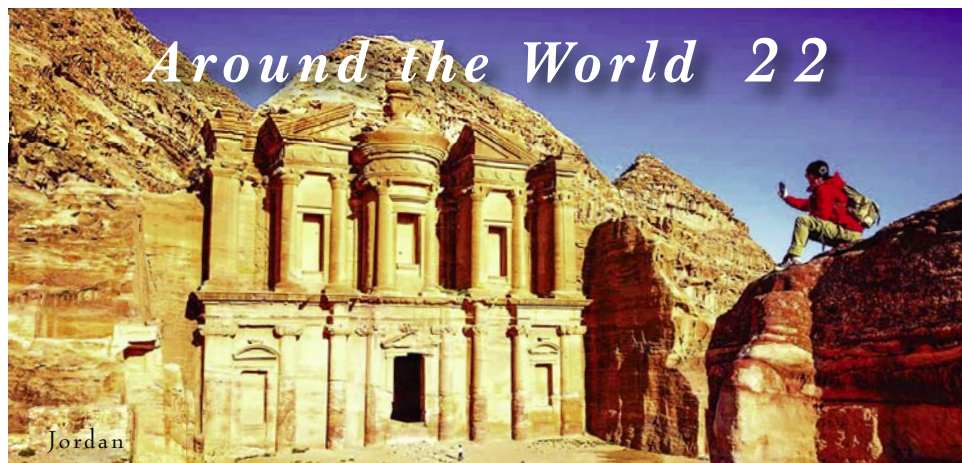
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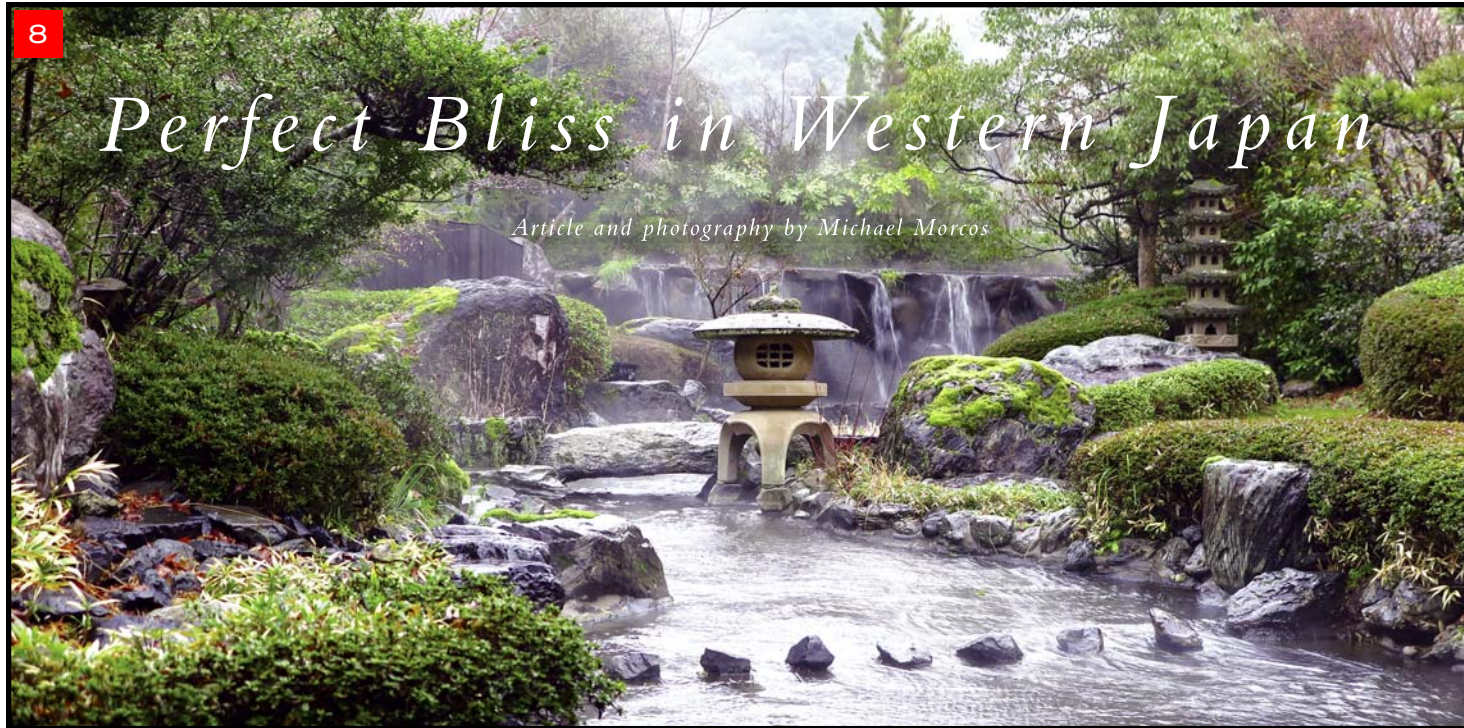
Stay & Play - 60



Luxury Hotels...Grand Resorts...
Charming B&B... Opulent Villas...
Quaint Country Inns... Ecolodges...
Luxury Safari Camps...
Ice...Cave...Treetop...Hotels

Perfect Bliss in Western Japan

Article and photography by Michael Morcos



It would be difficult to find enough time to see all that Japan has to offer, even in a lifetime there would still be endless things to see and experience and then re-see and re-experience. This is how deep and diverse the culture is, and my one week of discovery was but a drop in the ocean - but a meaningful one with wonderful fond memories.

So packed was my time that I must leave out the visit to amazing Kyoto for our next issue and devote the whole article just for this really incredible city. For now, we will visit the Akiyosido limestone caves, the Kintaiyo arch bridge in Iwakuni, the Itsukushima shrine, Hiroshima, Kurayoshi city, the Tottori sand dune, Osaka and experience traditional kaiseki meals, seafood markets and meals including seasonal crab dishes, onsens in natural hot springs and "kagura" traditional dance performance.

Sea fresh

Our first day of discovery would bring us from Fukuoka to the Akiyosido limestone caves, but first we would stop at the Karato Fish Market which would offer quintessential understanding of the Japanese people's love of the ocean and

seafood. We found a multitude of seafood that was as fresh as it could be as the ocean and harbour were right in front of us. Our favourite was the freshly made sushi. This would be unlike what we would find at home and it included rare cuts of fish including the very expensive Fugu. Not even hungry, we would still devour the delicacy. Throughout our trip we would have fresh seafood and on one occasion an all crab meal as it was in season and the catch was abundant.

Japanese underworld

Akiyosido limestone caves would be a marvelous way to see Japan from under it. These caves were enormous and went on forever- so much so that it felt like a city of its own. The whole complex is well laid out and well lit with colourful lights, paved walkways and educational stations.

A bridge so close

The Kintaiyo arch bridge is a historical and marvel of technology and consists of five different wooden arch bridges on four different piers. This specific bridge is located at the foot of Mt. Yokoyama, which boasts the Iwakuni Castle on top of it, which is a major tourist

attraction and especially during the cherry bloom and the maple tree festivals. I personally enjoyed the natural views of the surrounding areas and a stop for some wonderful Japanese ice cream in the main town square.

Shinto shrine

After a short ferry ride to the island of Miyajima, we would be mesmerised by what is known as the floating Torii that jettied out of the water and glimmered in the morning sun. Here we would wonder around the impeccably restored complex that is built on stilts and looks like it floated on water. The Itsukushima shrine is dedicated to the Shinto god of seas and storms. To our delight, we would witness a holy ceremony by many monks and priest. I was in Bliss.

Live theatre

After a wonderful Japanese style meal we would head for kagura theatrical dance/play put on by locals. Not sure what to expect, all I can say is this was a spectacular performance put on by a small cast and included some magic and delivered plenty of laughter including seven bigger than life snake costumes that changed themselves into many different



shapes and forms that took over the whole stage. Even though the play was in Japanese, the story line was easy to understand and finished with a standing ovation.

Hiroshima Memorial park and museum

I was expecting a very sombre visit to Hiroshima but, on the contrary, our visit here was uplifting and the museum and park perfectly addressed this very sad point in our humanity. Of course, there were some disturbing images in the museum, but after this visit I took a walk in the beautiful and exceptionally well designed memorial park that made me feel that this now a thing of the past and hopefully will be a lesson for all to be sensible.

Kurayoshi city

In this sleepy town we would partake in traditional Hakota doll face painting. This would be a fun experience as we felt like school kids. We would be given ready-made paper Mache dolls, paint and brushes. All that was left to do was paint faces on the dolls, and we all drew many different looking eyes, noses and lips. Truly a Japanese experience!

Unusual sand formation

The Tottori sand dunes stand out like a sore thumb. Not even knowing they existed, they are a major tourist draw throughout the year. Our time here was short but still long enough to enjoy the fresh air and walk along what could be mistaken for the Sahara. Somewhat physically demanding, we would reach the outer edge of the dune and from up high would get a magnificent bird's eye view of the whole area, including the ocean and natural surroundings. There were even camel rides available that would rival any in the Middle East.

Onsen anyone?

Our stay at a ryokan style Misasa Onsen hotel was a highlight to our trip. This is a destination on its own. Guests come here to experience Japanese relaxation and rejuvenation and this was what we had in the hot springs, among the wonderful Japanese style gardens, during the wonderfully prepared dinners and excellent and attentive service by the staff.

My room had very little furniture, and it sure did settle the mind and gave a refreshing view of how much we have in our modern life. My bed when set up by the hotel staff was on a futon in the middle of the room. I slept like a baby.

The piece de resistance was the all-natural hot springs. This I would learn much more about, such as it is frequented at least three times a day and usually before meals. I would also learn the proper ethics of preparing for an Onsen. It would include dressing in a traditional Japanese robe (provided by the hotel) and washing thoroughly Japanese style on a stool and keeping quite during the time in pools. Clothing is optional but it would be unfashionable (pardon the pun) to wear a bathing suit.

Osaka

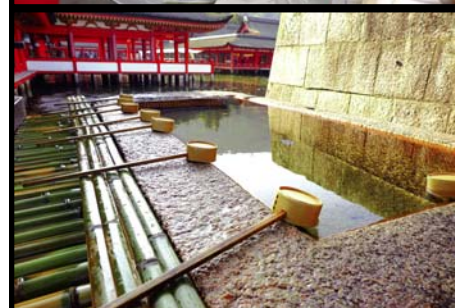
Japan's second largest city does not play second fiddle to Tokyo, as it is a major cosmopolitan area by its own rights and is filled with love of life its citizens. Life is generally slower here, and people like to get out socialize and eating in restaurants. With all its sites, my most memorable time is going to the ebisuhighashi district. Here in the shadow of the Osaka tower you will be in neon heaven with a lively atmosphere and a wide choice of restaurants and bars. The street entertainment is everywhere and always free. Our choice of food was endless at this Izakaya style tavern, only thing is you would have to cook it yourself on one of the grills found at each table. What a meal, what a time!

Fine dining Japanese style

Kaiseki meals are a traditional multi-course Japanese dinner. On our trip we would be feast like kings at many occasions. Our meals would be nothing short of magnificent and include a multitude of exquisite and nutritious small servings of fresh fish, tender meats and delicious vegetables. The table settings alone looked so elegant that is seemed a shame to move anything around or disturb the impeccably displayed dishes. If the meal was not enough, the general restaurant decor and atmosphere would create a lasting memory of traditional Japanese dinning.

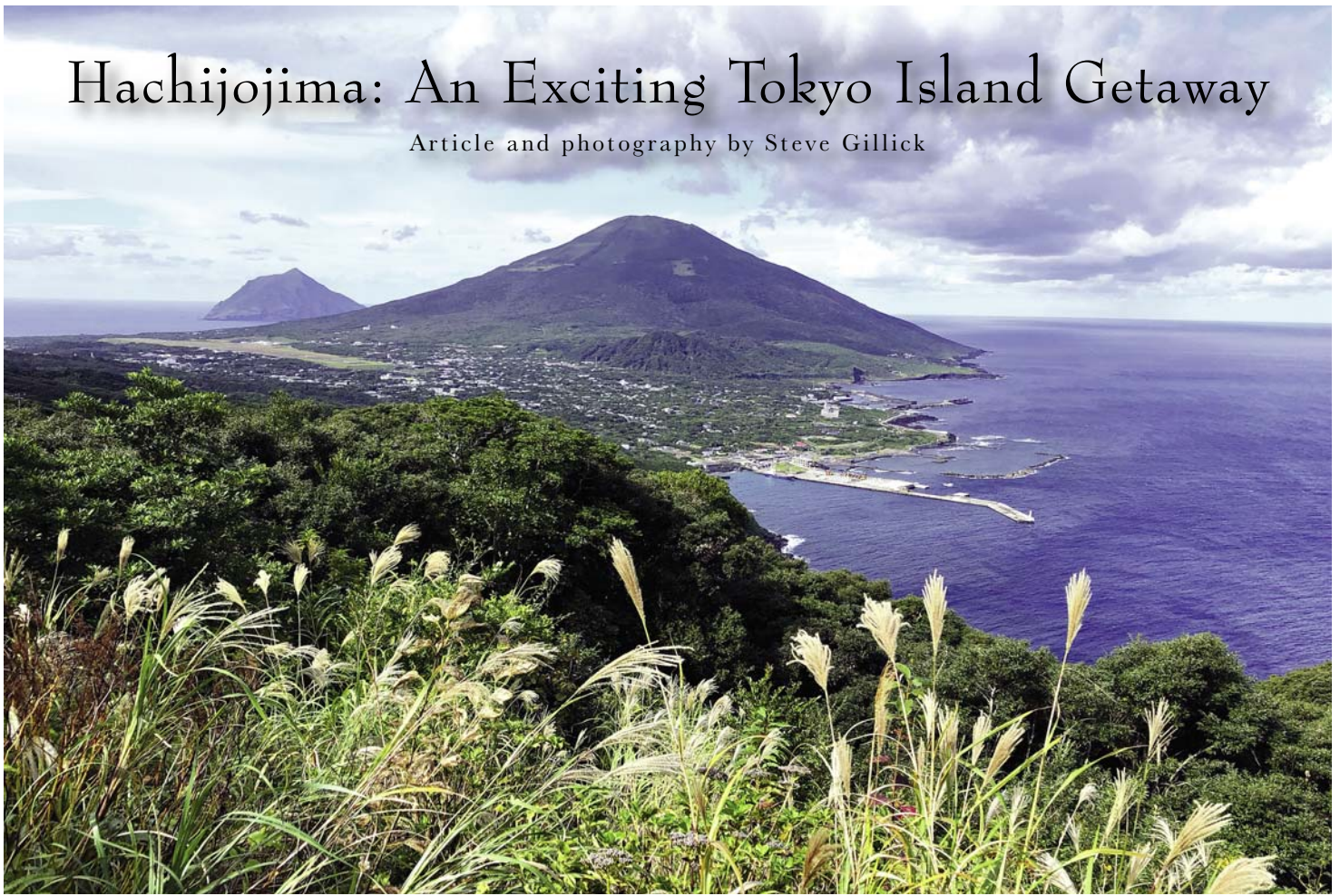
My trip to western Japan was both fun and educational, I relearned the basics of Japan - that it is welcoming, very humble, holds on to the best of its traditions, it is both unbelievably clean and safe and is truly a one of a kind culturally and socially in the world. It is a must see destination. If you have been you will know what I am saying, if it is your first trip then be prepared, you will go back. You will be absorbed by wonderful, beautiful, mystical Japan! ■

WWW.JAPAN.TRAVEL



Hachijojima: An Exciting Tokyo Island Getaway

Article and photography by Steve Gillick



When we entered the “Yellow Cloth Dream Factory” (Kihachijo Yume Kobo) on Hachijojima Island, we didn’t realize that we were about to embark on a journey to the past. Homare Yamashita, the owner, sat at one of the looms making the yellow silk cloth for which the island is famous. After using a wooden baton to press the weave tightly, he shared some insight into his world.

Homare-san married into a family that has been making yellow silk cloth for hundreds of years. At 77 years of age he is nurturing an island tradition that began in the 16th century when Hachijojima could

no longer provide rice as a tribute to the Shogun, and therefore substituted a fine silk cloth that soon became an upscale status symbol. The cloth was based on a “jo”; a measurement of roughly 3 meters (9.8 feet). The standard length of cloth required to make a kimono was 8 jo (24 meters). “Hachi” is the Japanese word for ‘8’ and therefore “Hachi-jo-jima”, literally means, “the island of the 8 jo”.

To drive home his proud connection with the island’s past, we were invited into Homare-san’s home where he showed us three Buddha statues, explaining that they were given to his ancestors on the island over 300 years ago.

Travellers searching for a fascinating, off-the-beaten-track adventure, where history, conversation, culinary surprises, natural attractions and photographic opportunities abound, need look no further than Tokyo’s Islands. While the Ogasawara Islands of Chichijima and Hahajima are a 1000 km (621 miles) to the south with access only by a 24 hour, one-way ferry ride (but well worth the time), the Izu Island chain will appeal to those looking for a short ferry or flight getaway, without ever having to leave Tokyo Prefecture.

From the window seat on our one-hour flight from Tokyo’s Haneda Airport, we caught a glimpse of Hachijojima’s two



volcanos, Mt. Mihara and Mt. Hachijo-Fuji (the latter, so-named as it resembles the shape of the iconic Mt. Fuji). Thousands of years ago, the two separate volcano-islands merged, creating one land body with one peak at either end, making for some spectacular scenery from the island's two panoramic lookouts.

Our very affable guide, Ms. Yumi Iwasaki, met us at the airport and then drove us to the History and Folk Museum where the Director, Shoji Hosoya, provided an enthusiastic overview of Hachijojima's rich history. From 1606 to 1871, the island was actually a destination for those banished from the mainland. One of the exhibits told the story of an exiled "mobster" who met a woman, exiled for prostitution. They married, and an account of their life together, forms the basis of a popular Kabuki play. Nearby at Hattori Yashiki (the Hattori Homestead), folk dancing and taiko drumming performed by community elders, provides a cultural window into themes that range from exile to daily life on the island.

One unique aspect of island life involves the maintenance of the round-stone walls found in many residential neighbourhoods. Kunihiro Kikuchi, who builds and repairs the walls, told us that the ball-shaped stones, some weighing as much as 60 kilograms (132 pounds) are naturally shaped by the sea and are retrieved by passing them in a fireman's chain, from one man to another, before they're secured in a wall. No mortar is used, as the weight of the adjacent stones keeps the wall sturdy.

And the bounties of the sea play another role in island life. We stopped for lunch at Aigae Suisan, a popular restaurant where our fresh-out-of-the-water meal of Golden Eye, Skipjack and Snapper, was accompanied by a delicious miso soup filled with nori (seaweed) and kamenote; shell creatures whose name literally means "turtle hands", due to their unique shape.



But the expression, "there's no accounting for taste" came to mind shortly after lunch when we visited the Stinky Fish store. And there is no possibility of exaggeration when describing this popular island treat as 'extremely odiferous'. Sadae Nishihama and her sister run the 100 year old family 'kusaya' (literally 'smells bad') business where fish, principally horse mackerel and flying fish, are fermented in tanks. The actual taste of the fish is much milder than the smell, especially when mixed with ashitaba (a type of leafy green) and mayonnaise, or drunk with shochu, the alcoholic beverage of choice on the island.

And at this stage of our visit we were quite familiar with shochu. Earlier, we had visited the Wine and Liquor store where 20 different types of shochu (containing 25% to 45% alcohol) were available for self-serve sampling and of course, to fully immerse ourselves in island life, we felt it our duty to try most of them.

This also prepared us for our visit the next day with Kiyomitsu Okuyama, a 3rd generation shochu maker who now runs the 100 year old family business. After a tour of the distillery, we asked Kiyomitsu-san what he liked about his business, and his wife laughingly responded, "He loves shochu"! Out of the four brands produced with wheat and/or sweet potato, our verdict was that the Tsubaki (Camellia flower)-infused shochu was our favourite.

A visit to any island would not be complete without some maritime adventure and so we boarded one of the traditional fishing boats at Yaene Port, and set out to explore the small island of Hachijo-Kojima, just 30 minutes away. After dropping off some fishermen on outcroppings of craggy rocks jutting out of the choppy waters of the Pacific Ocean, we proceeded to dock on the island, where the only inhabitants are Black-footed Albatross. We encountered two of the large seabirds sitting comfortably along the main path, and after many photos of the island's dramatic volcanic scenery, we returned to the port.



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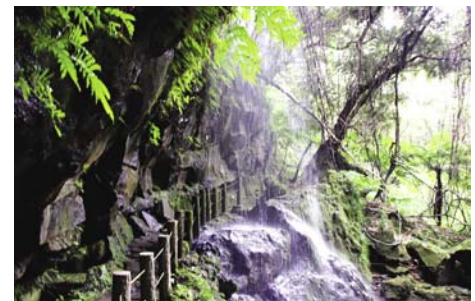
Our accommodation on Hachijojima was in a tatami room at the Hachijo View hotel. Aside from delicious meals, the hotel has an onsen (hot spring bath); perfect for a relaxing soak after a day of adventure. In fact, the island is known for its onsen. After a short hike to explore the beautiful Uramigataki Waterfall, we visited both an outdoor and indoor onsen as well as a free cliffside foot bath where visitors can soak their feet while dreamily gazing out on the ocean.

And for enhanced visual relaxation, Bird of Paradise flowers, with their characteristic orange, blue, red and yellow foliage, grow throughout the island.

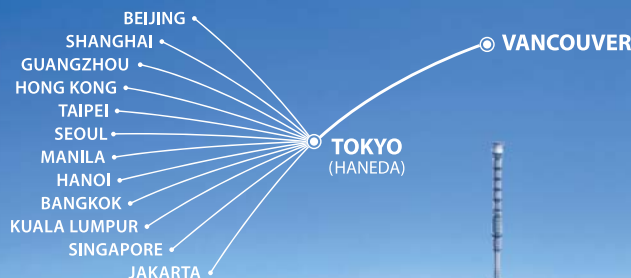
Hachijojima is the embodiment of the new Tokyo Brand, "Old meets New". Aside from the beautiful vistas and culinary scene, our three-day getaway captured the connection between the past and the present, very much kept alive by the amiable island residents. On our last day, we walked through a beautiful round-stone wall entrance to have lunch at the popular Kominka Kissa Nakanosato café. When we complimented Miki-san, the chef/owner on the traditional tea-house style of the building and its wooded surroundings, she explained that the property was settled by her great-grandfather 163 years ago and she was carrying on the family provenance.

Our visit to Hachijojima confirmed once again, that Tokyo's island life plays an integral role in the unique tourism opportunities that Tokyo has to offer. ■

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Creative and Innovative: Singapore Today

by Olivia Balsinger

Singapore is an entire nation whose population is about the same as an average American city. Yet despite this, or perhaps because of it, Singapore is home to some of the most marvelous examples of modernity that continues to defy expectations on a global scale. Its airport, Changi Airport, for instance is considered to be one of the best in the world, as its architecture is stylistically groundbreaking and its culinary traditions are a curiously curated mix of those of the nations that border it.

A hub of urbanity and innovation, Singapore is also a highly creative locus for artists as its laws give them freer reigns to express themselves. Each of its neighborhoods represents a unique personality of its nation, while their proximity awards an effortless harmony between, say, the ancient shops of Joo Chiat and the chic, hipster outlets of Tiong Bahru.

The area that is perhaps the most recognizable from the skyline views of Singapore is the former British colonial port of Marina Bay, a Jetson-like scene that makes up Singapore's business district. As the name implies, the area exists on what was an overgrown parcel of land flanking Singapore's river, now reclaimed and converted into one of the most

recognizable skylines, which hosts perhaps the newest, most popular tourist attraction in the country: The Marina Bay Sands. More than a luxury hotel, The Marina Bay Sands is an impressive complex stacked with celebrity-chef-headed restaurants, world-class shopping, exhibition centers, theaters, and a curious museum built in the shape of the lotus flower. The highlight is perhaps the Skypak, which stands on a platform that extends across the three towers that make up the hotel. The three-acre area houses an infinity-pool, and at night becomes a popular hang-out for those looking to dance or simply to grab a nightcap.

Singapore is known as a City in a Garden — a moniker which is perhaps best understood with a visit to the Botanic Gardens. It first opened its doors in 1859, when the Agri-Horticultural Society transformed 60-acres of disused plantation into a vibrant, impossibly beautiful haven of verdant trees and colorful plant life. The National Orchid Garden is the largest display of orchids in the world, while its SBG Heritage Museum has some entertaining, interactive exhibits that explain the garden's history, as well as inform on the diverse fauna it houses. Of course, the world-famous Gardens by the Bay, with its three waterfront

gardens and futuristic Cloud Forest, with its 35-meter tall mountain covered in tropical vegetation and world's largest cascading indoor waterfall, is not to miss.

Where to Stay & Eat

It seems a new hotel is built every day in Singapore. With that being said, there are some hotels that truly rise to the top. The design-centric Warehouse Hotel is a restored "godown," or warehouse, building on the Singapore River which focuses on preserving local culture and charm. In stark contrast, The Andaz Singapore Hotel in Kampong Glam, nearby Marina Bay Sands, is a modern two-tower complex with a rooftop infinity pool and views overlooking Little India and the Muslim Quarter, where street food has a reputation for being delicious. Speaking of food, The Telok Ayer Arts Club is a must-visit for those craving a unique dining experience—the space brings together art, music, food and drink. Similarly, Kilo Kitchen, in Singapore's bustling Chinatown district, creates a space that goes beyond the gastronomic experience with communal dining and soulful music. ■

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Thailand Trifecta: Phuket - Chiang Mai - Bangkok

by Olivia Balsinger



Phuket

When one daydreams of escaping to paradise, Phuket, Thailand's largest island should come to mind. With the most splendid beaches where aquamarine waves break on its pearly white, powdery shore, each of Phuket's tropical havens are equally beautiful but very much different. Besides the obvious draw of the beach, the culture of Phuket is also not to miss. Its capital Phuket Town on the east coast is home to fascinating mansions and shophouses that exemplify the curious local Sino-Portuguese style. There is also easy access to many of the area's sacred temples in Chalong and Thalung, as well as a close proximity to two national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

Stay & Eat

The Slate Phuket, close to Phuket's airport, is a modern architectural model in design, with its most predominant feature being a steady palette of azure blue. In the calm but centrally located Kamala beach sits Andaz Resort & Villas, ultra-luxurious with panoramic view of the Andaman Sea. If you are looking for accommodations outside of the city center, where you can truly escape the bustle of urban life, The Vijit Resort is a breath of fresh air, situated on a tranquil, secluded beach,



where tall palms sway and salt water tickles nostrils. For a quick diversion from Thai food, Acqua Restaurant in Patong is a futuristic take on traditional Italian cuisine.

Chiang Mai

A breath of fresh air from Bangkok is the northern city of Chiang Mai, where lush trees canopy the streets and the peaks of the surrounding mountains appear in seemingly every peripheral view. Although the capital of its namesake Province, Chiang Mai is more like a sleepy town than a bustling city. The former seat of the Lanna Kingdom is the nucleus of bucolic serenity; if you travel a straight line on any of the roads radiating from its epicenter, you will be sure to find yourself in an abundant rainforest, or a verdant countryside, or even stumble upon one of the areas many glorious waterfalls. One of the best places to really soak in the soul of this beautiful city is its oldest public market, Warorot.

Stay & Eat:

The Anantara Chiang Mai resort rests on the banks of the Mar Ping River — a blissful paradise in city center. The resort's restaurant, Service 1921, serving zesty Asian fusion, was once a British Consulate and now reimagines the era in décor. The Veranda High Resort, in contrast, is located outside the city proper, set in a visionary panoramic of breathtaking landscapes of rice fields and mountain streams, which creates a true escape to breathe.

Bangkok

Bangkok is a vibrant metropolis whose beauty comes in the quirky harmony between old

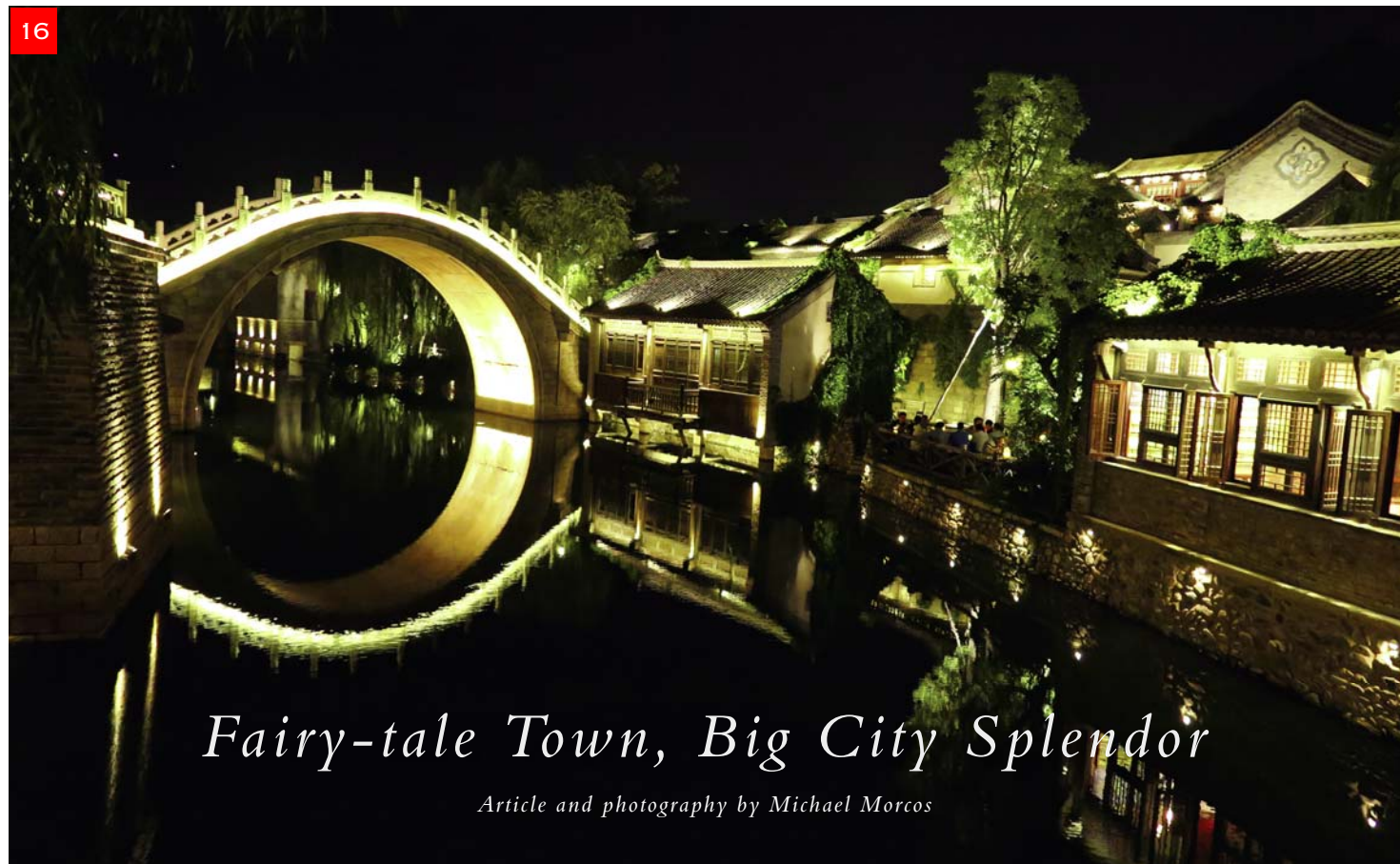
and new, traditional and modern. Towering skyscrapers dominate the skyline, while on street view, Buddhist monks clad in terra-cotta colored robes tap on their iPhones while waiting to cross the street packed with zooming lines of taxi cabs and motorbikes. The pulse of the city reveals itself most aptly on the streets, where markets bustle with locals and tourists haggling prices for produce, clothing, souvenirs and the like. Bangkok street food is arguably the best in the world, flavorful and colorful dishes with an immense mix of flavors that hits every single taste bud.

Stay & Eat

The SO/ Sofitel Bangkok is a five-star hotel that combines fabulously the "five elements" of Water, Earth, Wood, Metal, and Fire into a refreshing contemporary vision. Reflecting the city within whose heart it resides, SO/ Sofitel is elegant and refined, yet casual and vibrant. Banyan Tree Bangkok is located in the Silom area, allowing easy access to city, and is Bangkok's largest luxurious accommodation, with an award-winning spa and world-class dining experiences. ■

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Fairy-tale Town, Big City Splendor

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

Think back to when you were a child and the many exotic ideas China would elicit in your imagination. The grandeur and you will get a glimpse of all this in Gubei Water Town. Perfectly restored historic buildings, cobble stoned streets, arched bridges, water canals and the majestic Great Wall as a back drop would be the ideal setting for a child's fairy-tale novel. This is a marvelous atmosphere by day as well as a romantic setting by night.

Gubai would be just the beginning of a two city tour that would end in the dazzling city of Beijing.

Gubei Water Town

Situated in Miyun County in Beijing, Gubei Water Town lies on the shore surrounding the

beautiful Mandarin Duck Lake Reservoir and contains the Simatai Great Wall, a majestic section of the Great Wall.

For visitors, Gubei Water Town has a myriad of attractions with its combination of mountains, water and ancient villages and has developed into a large-scale sightseeing and holiday destination.

I started my visit with a boat ride on the canals which was very relaxing and offered wonderful scenery. The best part was that the pilot would only use muscle power to get around, so there was no motor to disturb the silence.

I then visited the garment museum with its exhibition of the fashions of this ancient land – enlightening and beautiful. Another fasci-

nating part of our visit was a trip to a liquor making facility that makes Chinese style spirits. A great experience and one that offered some interesting taste tests.

I also enjoyed many Chinese delicacies in restaurants throughout the city.

Simatai Great Wall

This would be the third section of the Great Wall that I have visited. The other two were as magnificent as this one is, but the Simatai section is far less crowded, so much so that I felt at times free to just sit and imagine of the many centuries through history it has been there.

Being situated high in the mountains would make one believe it would take hours and a





lot of effort getting there, but this is not true. A cable car quickly and comfortably whisks tourists up in mere minutes.

The views were breathtaking. Below us was the Gubai Water Town and endless miles of uninhabited natural environment. The Wall itself went on for as far as the eye could see with equidistant watchtower stations. It is times like these that I think of how incredible our earth is and how innovative and industrious humans can be, after all, the wall stretches for thousands of miles and was built without modern mechanical tools.

Old Town to Big City

The tranquil and serene visit of Gubai and Simatai would be left behind as I would now venture to a completely different atmosphere after the short drive to the cosmopolitan city of Beijing.

Beijing Dasein Youlan Hotel

In the past, I would be in modern high rise hotel complexes, but this time I found myself in a small boutique style hotel. Unlike the large hotel that would be situated on busy boulevards, the Dasein Youlan Hotel was hidden in a tranquil alleyway. The area was so quiet that I could hardly believe I was in one of the most populated cities in China.

My room, like the hotel itself, was straight out of the last century. Very basic accommodations that were comfortable and extremely relaxing, yet I had high speed Wi-Fi and all the creature comforts you would want in a hotel. The decoration was unmistakably Chinese and had a sense of peace, quiet and

offered guests a relaxing state of bliss. The meals served were unbelievably delicious and highly nutritious. A wonderful place to stay.

The Forbidden City

My third visit here and I still find things I missed before. This is one of the star attractions of not only Beijing, but of all of China. This time around I would see the many highlights of the Forbidden City but would also witness a remarkable tourist trap that made me laugh with delight.

As with every visit, I am always struck by the scope and opulence found here as it was the imperial palace for 24 emperors during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368 - 1911). It is the world's largest palace complex and is surrounded by a moat, a wall and contains more than 8,700 rooms.

Everywhere you tour on the grounds or in the rooms, the opulence is amazing to behold. Vases, linens, gardens, all with history and worth small fortunes!

This time we also got a treat. Somewhat tacky, tourists can dress in imperial clothing and have their pictures taken on a throne. Why not, I thought, this is after all is the best and most desirable position in China for centuries!

Other Beijing sites and experiences

The Beijing Ancient Architecture Museum contains a vast collection of ancient Chinese architecture, with exhibitions displayed in throughout several halls and rooms. I highly recommend that visitors go to this house of marvels.

Tiananmen Square is the main square is in the centre of Beijing close to the Forbidden City. I like it for its central location that makes it a hotspot and many Chinese visitors enjoy coming here, as it was where Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

Another in the long line of locales to visit is the Temple of Heaven, which has been one of the most holy places in the whole country for more than five centuries. I was lucky to visit in the morning, and saw the morning workouts of dozens of people practicing all types of kung fu and others just chatting or playing games.

For flower lovers and gardeners, you must visit the Summer Palace, an imperial garden that has been preserved with rich landscapes and cultivated gardens. Exact and transcendent, it was added to the world cultural heritage list in 1998.

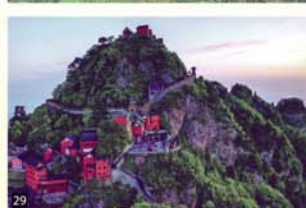
A visit to the old Beijing hutong areas, where the narrow, twisting streets offer a touch of the "real life" of Beijing, I wandered the passageways and courtyards filled with traditional compact homes. Tours of the hutongs cover the attractions that normally include the Drum Tower, courtyard neighborhoods and Prince Gong's mansion.

There is so much more to see, do and eat in this worldly capital. I never get enough! ■

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Wonderfully Diverse Malaysia

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

The smile on my face lingered just like the hot and humid night. This was already day five of our 12-day tour of Malaysia. The time was speeding by, but I relaxed with the knowledge that there were seven more days ahead to explore this fascinating country.

A Diverse City

Kuala Lumpur (KL), the capitol of Malaysia is extremely diverse. To my delight we were able to visit three different religious holy places in the same day and all within walking distance of each other. Our guide led us to the Anglican Church of St. Mary the Virgin, the Masjid Jamek Mosque and the Sze Ya Chinese Temple.

Chinatown

We were given time to shop in Chinatown along Petaling Street's night market. We ended our day here, as we shopped for that almost-looks-like-designer stuff. Adding to the hustle and noise of the tightly placed stalls was the ever-present heat, humidity and pungent smells. This was as it should be in any street market and it was perfect!

Sightseeing in KL

Over the coming days we would be treated to the best sights in KL including the Royal Palace, Merdeka Square, the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, the Petronas Towers, the KL Tower and the impressive Batu Caves.

Petronas Towers

A visit to the Petronas towers was a great occasion to ascend the tallest twin towers in the world. Although the towers are impressive from a distance, it is nothing compared to being right in front and just below these giants.

Getting up to the viewing bridge was a well-scripted affair, due to the airport-like security. The high-speed elevator whisked us up to the Skybridge in less than a minute. Because of the number of tourists, our viewing time was limited to only ten minutes. However, this short time was truly unforgettable, as we stood on the bridge, suspend-





ed between the two remarkable shiny towers, with a panoramic view of all of KL.

Batu Caves

The Caves are a sacred place for Malaysia's Hindus. They consist of three main caves and a number of smaller ones. A 42.7m high statue of Lord Murugan is clearly visible from far away but dwarfs the visitor upon entering. You have to climb 272 steps, which lead you to the religious parts of the Caves. Luckily, during our visit we witnessed a baptism-like ceremony of a Hindu baby.

Kuala Terengganu

Kuala Terengganu was very laid back as compared to KL. People took their time doing things. Noticeably, most women wore headscarves and long traditional dresses that covered all but their faces and feet. This day and the following morning were spent visiting the floating mosque, the Royal palace, the local market and the State museum.

The Pasar Payang local market is where local merchants sold fruits, vegetables, spices and locally produced arts and crafts. I bought fresh spices packed in clear bags that I would give to family members back home. Each bag had four different spices, including cinnamon, anise, cloves and coriander.

These turned out to be the perfect gifts and cost almost nothing. They also made my luggage that much sweeter smelling. The other gifts I purchased included stone necklaces, rings, bracelets and other beautiful locally designed jewelry.

The Art of Batik

The following day saw us making a last quick stop before heading out to a tropical island. Our shopping lists of souvenirs and gifts were drastically reduced as we visited the Noor Alfa Batik store and factory.

Batik cotton sarongs are typically Malaysian. They are either machine made or hand painted and can be worn in a multitude of ways or used to decorate furniture. The ever so patient artist, who painted the cloths and turn them into works of art, fascinated me.

Redang Island

The following three days spent in Redang made me realise what a true tropical paradise is like. Our hotel the Berjaya Redang Beach resort was in more than one way as far away from home as I had ever been. The hotel was located at the end of the island on a secluded bay.

I was able to rent a motorcycle and ventured out to explore the lesser-travelled areas of the island. It took me less than 15 minutes to cross the island. There, I visited a tiny village where I met some of the friendliest people a person could ever meet.

I was greeted with shy but curious smiles from everyone. In the end, I was humbled by the spirit of these people who though having little in material wealth, had an over abundance of happiness.

Kota Bharu

Our two days and nights spent in Kota Bharu saw us visiting the Istana Batu Royal

Museum, the State Museum and the Istana Jahar Museum that were centrally located and walking distance of each other.

In the same neighbourhood we made a trip to the Handicraft Village that found us buying more gifts, which included locally made silver jewellery and traditional art in many forms. We also visited the night market, which is a place not to be missed.

On our last full day in Malaysia, we visited a Buddhist temple, located only ten kilometres from the Thai border.

Malaysian Memories

As I sat in the plane coming home, I reflected on my trip. I was delighted to have had this great Malaysia experience, but it's no easy task describing such a diverse country.

Let's see now. I rode up the tallest twin towers in the world, swam at a secluded beach on the East China Sea, snorkelled in a tropical paradise, visited a Buddhist temple, a Hindu temple, a mosque and an Anglican church.

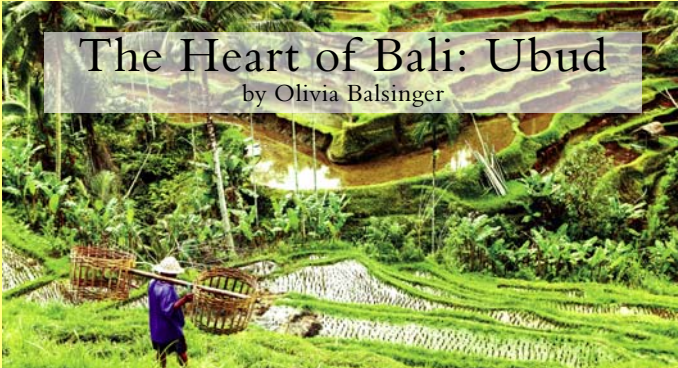
Other wonderful experiences included listening to the Muslim call to prayer, shopping in Chinatown, dining on Malay, Indian and Chinese cuisine and much more.

All this and I didn't even have the time to explore to the more popular West Coast or to the Island of Borneo. I guess Malaysia just might just be the ultimate country of contrasts. ■

WWW.MALAYSIA.TRAVEL



Around The World (in 18 pages)



The Heart of Bali: Ubud

by Olivia Balsinger

Ubud is a highly seductive haven with a hypnotic quality — something its large expat community attests to. Traditionally Balinese in its architecture, culinary innovations, and colorful bustle that permeate its everyday life, Ubud is the perfect destination if you are looking for an equally magical and unique experience. If ever there were a place for spiritual or personal awakenings, whether it be in the pristine verdant trails of its playful Monkey Forest or its many alluring, beautiful Hindi temples (or pura), or even a stay at one of its world-class yoga retreats, it is here.

Dance performances are something truly special, with the Pura Dalem offering the perfect open-air venue for different companies to put on a show. Flame-lit, and a carved-stone serving as the backdrop, it is a perfect emblem to the rich and beautiful culture of this tucked away paradise.

And located a mere 2km from Ubud is the perfect retreat—The Stonehouse Bali. This boutique hotel is tucked away among the exquisite landscapes of this gorgeous place, made up of verdant lush forests and green rice paddies, with stunning examples of traditional Balinese architecture scattered about.

WWW.INDONESIA.TRAVEL



Puerto Vallarta's Papantla Flyers!

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

While strolling along the Malecon, Puerto Vallarta's beautiful seaside promenade, travelers can see more than just scores of noisy Brown Pelicans when they look toward the sky. In fact, there is a 23 meter (75 foot) metal pole standing between the Malecon and Banderas Bay, on which five men in colorful traditional clothing sit.

While one man plays the flute and drum, the other four fall backward. A rope attached to one of each man's ankles slowly unwinds as the 'flyers' circle the pole and descend to the sandy beach below. After a few minutes they climb the pole and prepare for another descent.

What might appear as a busker act is actually a 900 year old ritual. Kevin Simpson, our Art Walk guide, and the owner of Colectika, an art gallery showcasing the works of local indigenous artists, explained that the 'flyers' are members of the Totonaca tribe that traces its origins to the Pre-Columbian city of El Tajin, once located in the current municipality of Papantla in Mexico's gulf state of Vera Cruz. According to legend, during a severe drought, the Totonaca decided to appeal for help from Xipe Totec, the god of the Spring. In order to attract his attention, they cut down the tallest, straightest tree they could find, erected it in the city, decorated their bodies with feathers to resemble birds, and then attached vines to their feet and to the top of the pole so they could 'fly'.

Today the sacred symbolism remains. The flute and drum player represents the center of the universe. The four flyers represent the cardinal directions and the thirteen revolutions they make around the pole as they descend, represent the 52 weeks of the year.

The Papantla Flyers are a great example of the rich cultural heritage Puerto Vallarta offers its visitors.

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CHINA TOURISM INTRODUCES NEW BRAND LOGO

China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) has made "Beautiful China" the tag line of its tourism and introduced a new global brand logo. With an overall look as a stamp, the new logo integrates modern messaging with the ancient Chinese art form of calligraphy. The hieroglyph in the back-

ground means "travel" in ancient Chinese language, which shows a flag guiding a couple around. The blue color represents the sky, delivering China tourism's concepts - vitality, harmony and green travel. The red color gives tribute to the Chinese civilization that has been going on for thousands of years. Illustrating an international vision, the "Beautiful China" logo represents China's promising and welcoming tourism industry.



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Come With Us & See The World!

Intrepid Travel Expands Range of Women's Expeditions to Mark International Women's Day



New tours in Kenya, Nepal, India and Turkey will uncover the customs, food, challenges and lives of local women

First three Women's Expeditions launched in 2018 were one of the most popular ranges in Intrepid's history, growing from four to 36 departures in a few months

Intrepid Travel has introduced four Women's Expeditions to mark International Women's Day, giving female travellers an opportunity to learn about the everyday lives and challenges facing women around the world.

The women-only tours, led by female guides, provide a unique insight into the lives of women in Kenya, India, Nepal and Turkey. Travellers will meet people from all walks of life and hear their inspiring stories, from Becky, the first female overland truck driver in East Africa, to Syrian refugees forging a new life in Istanbul.

These trips include experiences that would otherwise be off-limits on regular departures, such as swimming on a female-only beach in Antalya or celebrating the female-only Gangur Festival in Rajasthan.

They build on the success of the original Women's Expeditions in the Middle East, launched on International Women's Day 2018. The range has proven one of the most popular in Intrepid's 30-year history, growing from just four departures to 36 in the space of a few months.

Intrepid's global product manager Jenny Gray said: "These new tours follow an incredible response to the launch of our first three Women's Expeditions. The MeToo era is making its mark on travel - our female travellers want to hear the stories and struggles of women around the globe."

"This year we've discovered even more extraordinary stories of female empowerment. These remarkable new Expeditions give travellers the chance to hear from people from all walks of life about their personal and collective struggles and triumphs in achieving gender equality. They allow trav-



ellers to enter private spaces and foster conversations that would be impossible in mixed gender groups."

Intrepid is committed to diversity and inclusion at all levels of the business and in 2017 set the ambitious goal of doubling its number of female tour leaders globally by 2020. Thanks to the work of Intrepid's local teams in destinations including India, Morocco and Indonesia, the company has increased its number of female leaders by 70% and is on track to meet its target in 2020.

The new trips include:

Kenya: Women's Expedition (10 days)

Journey through Kenya with Becky, the first female overland truck driver in East Africa on this unique expedition. Starting and finishing in Nairobi, you'll visit women-only villages, safari in iconic and lesser known National Parks such as Samburu and Mount Kenya, join a cooking class with local women in Samburu National Reserve and swim in thermal baths in Hell's Gate National Park. Meet Kenya's female wildlife rangers and understand the challenges they face in a male dominated industry. You'll also spend time at Umoja Village, a women's-only Manyatta (settlement) which offers sanctuary for survivors of genital mutilation, rape, and forced marriages, and hear their stories. Finally, you'll visit the Mau Mau caves and hear how women played a key role in helping the Mau Mau war veteran win the war against colonial rule.

Turkey: Women's Expedition (12 days)

Meet the women changing the face of tourism in Turkey and learn about fascinating ancient traditions on this new trip from Intrepid. Beginning in Istanbul, you'll spend an afternoon with Syrian women and discover how they are trying to put their displaced lives back in order. From there, you'll head out to sea with a female skipper in Üçağız and learn about Intrepid's efforts to improve female participation in Turkey's tourism industry. In beautiful Cappadocia, hike among the fairy chimneys and enjoy a home-cooked meal in a cave with a local family. Enjoy a soak in an Ottoman-style hammam in Istanbul and learn about this ancient woman's ritual before taking a dip in the Mediterranean on a women's only beach in Antalya. Take part in 'altın günü' or Gold Day Eskisehir, a day for women to socialize and gift gold to a friend in need.

Nepal: Women's Expedition (13 days)

Join an all-female hiking crew for an unforgettable trek in Pokhara on this inspiring new trip from Intrepid. As very few women have the chance to become mountain guides, Intrepid is working with local suppliers to train and empower women from local

communities in this field. Hear first-hand how these women are breaking tradition and becoming breadwinners for their families. You'll also visit Seven Women, an organization empowering marginalized women through education, skills training and income generation, and cook some delicious Nepalese food.

India: Women's Expedition (12 days)

Led by one of Intrepid's female guides, travellers will celebrate the female-only Gangur Festival in Rajasthan, with Rangoli making, henna painting, dance show, and traditional dress. Enjoy a home-cooked meal at the home of a local family in Delhi and explore Jaipur with the female rickshaw drivers. Shop for clothes, accessories and crafts in support of the development and empowerment of marginalized women and girls in Rajasthan and visit the center where they produce their creations. Finally, stop by a cafe run solely by female acid attack survivors and hear the heart breaking yet overwhelmingly inspirational stories of perseverance and strength. ■



About Intrepid Travel

Intrepid Travel is a global adventure travel company that has been taking travellers off the beaten track to discover the world's most amazing places for 30 years. The company offers more than 1,500 trips in more than 120 countries and on every continent. Every trip is designed to truly experience local culture - to meet local people, try local food, take local transport and stay in local accommodation. A world leader in responsible travel, Intrepid's award-winning tour leaders, small group sizes and included activities mean they offer travellers great value for money.

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A Winter Hoot on Amherst Island

Article and photography by Steve Gillick



American and Canadian travellers who have experienced summer in Eastern Ontario with its lakes, beaches, country roads, B & Bs, wineries, shopping, culinary creations and fresh air, need not shy away when colder weather prevails. In fact, in the late fall and winter, Amherst Island takes on the role of "Owl headquarters" for Canada.

A car-ferry departs near the village of Millhaven, about 20 miles west of Kingston. Early morning winter crossings often showcase beautiful sunrises, reflected off the frozen surface of Lake Ontario, as the ferry crunches across the surface on the 20 minute journey to the hamlet of Stella. As the island is only 20 Km (12 miles) long and 7 km wide (4.4 miles), not only is it hard to get lost, but every road leads to picturesque lake views, seasonal bed-and-breakfasts, farms with cattle, sheep, horses and turkeys, White-tailed deer dashing through a field...and raptors!

On a January visit, with snow on the ground and a wind chill of minus 12C (10 F), we saw a number of Red-tailed Hawks, Peregrine Falcons, Red-shouldered Hawks and Northern Harriers. But we also counted 30 Snowy Owls dotting the landscape around the island; some perched in trees and on top of hydro poles, while others positioned themselves on fence posts and rocks in order to catch a meal of small rodents. Snowy Owls are the largest owls by weight in North America and so it's easy to spot their white colour (males are mostly white; females and juveniles have black or brown markings). Some are quite close to the main roads where their large yellow eyes stare down at photog-

raphers, with others appearing as small white dots across farmer's fields, where respect for private property is essential, as are binoculars or a camera with a tripod.

Later in February when the Snowy Owls become scarce, Long-eared Owls can sometimes be seen sitting alone in trees while Short-eared owls tend to flock and congregate near open fields.

And then there are Northern Saw-whet owls. These diminutive birds have been described as tiny owls with a cat-like faces, large heads and bright yellow eyes. While a Snowy Owl could be nearly 76 centimeters (30 inches) tall and weigh 1.3 kilograms (3 pounds), a Northern Saw-whet may be 20 centimeters (8 inches) tall and weigh 151 grams (5.3 ounces).

These nocturnal hunters can be found during the day, sleeping in coniferous trees, especially in the Island's Owl Woods Nature Reserve. On one of our visits we were thrilled to spot a large whitish-grey Barred Owl in a tall tree, just before a fellow birder doubled our pleasure by showing us two cedar trees nearby, each with an adorable Northern Saw-whet owl sleeping on a low branch.

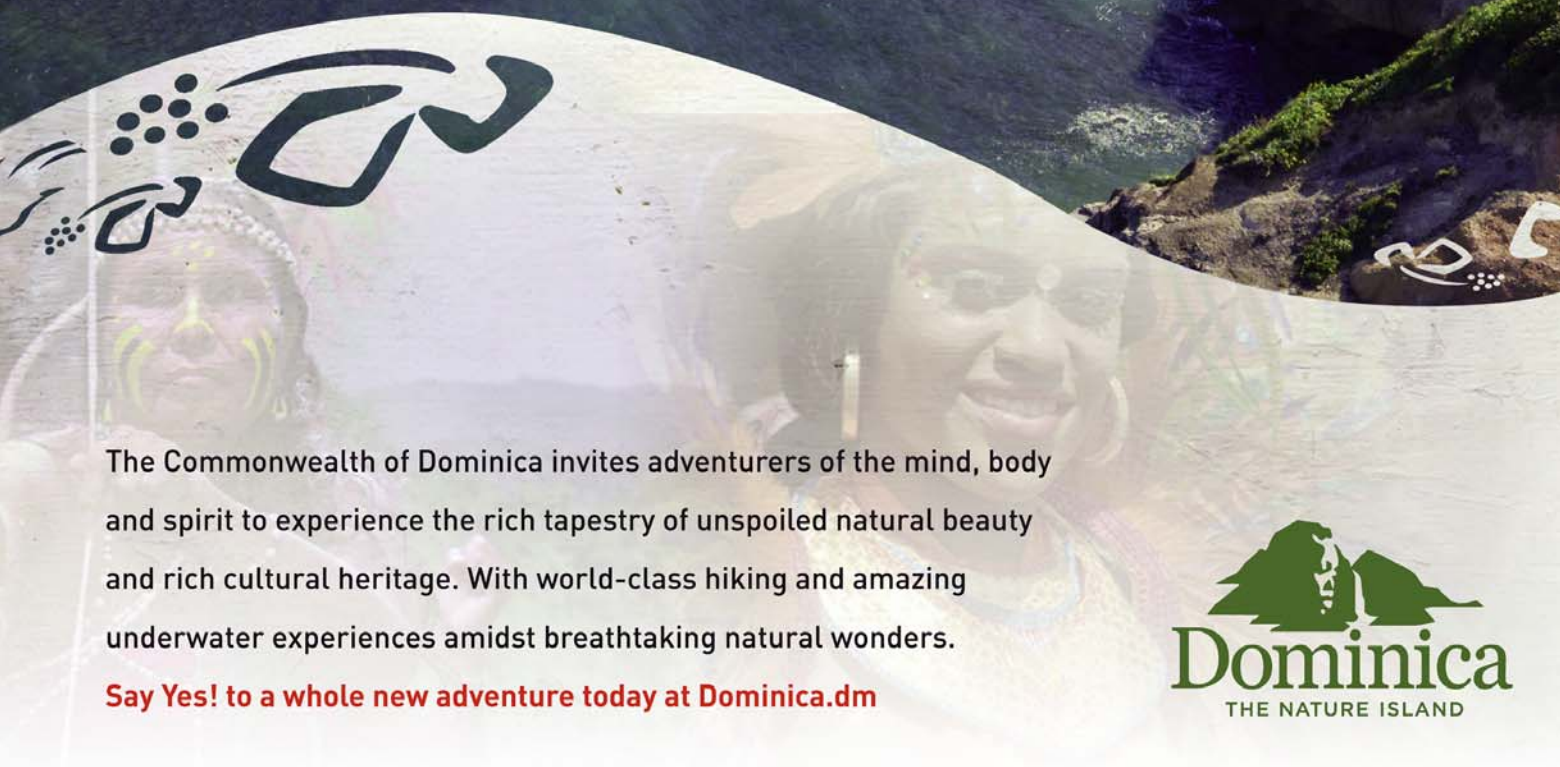
Amherst Island has proven itself to be Owl Heaven for us. It's definitely a great one day or multi-day discovery adventure for travellers whose special interests lay in photography, birding, nature, and the great outdoors. ■

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Encounters on Panama's Gatun Lake

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

Fascination, adventure and interaction with nature can be found only forty-five minutes away from the soaring residential and office towers that populate the downtown area of Panama City, Panama. Gamboa is a small town with huge appeal for outdoor enthusiasts, photographers, birders and amateur primatologists (people who love to encounter monkeys!).

Some visitors spend a day or two walking Pipeline Road in Soberania National Park to find two-and three-toed sloths, Howler Monkeys, Anteaters, Whooping Motmots, Kill-billed Tucans and hundreds of other bird species.

Some travelers visit the Sloth Sanctuary, where rescued orphans under the age of two literally hang out during the day. Individuals such as Joy, Ralph, Chocolate and Sebastian spend the day cuddling, scratching, sleeping and observing the visitors who in turn are observing them.

And then there is the Gatun Lake Cruise that leaves from the marina close to the Gamboa Rainforest Resort. Gatun Lake was created to be a reservoir for the Panama Canal lock system. (Fifty-three million gallons of water are required for each of the 36 daily ship transits). Once completed in 1913, the flooded valley was gradually populated by birds, mammals and reptiles, making this a nature paradise.



Donning mandatory bright orange life-jackets, we sat cheering and waving in our 12 passenger motorboat as our driver sped past some of the huge cargo ships making their way along the Panama Canal to either the Pacific Ocean to the south or the Caribbean Sea to the north. But then we turned into a small channel where, minutes later, Fabio our guide, pointed out a crumpled, almost indistinguishable mass of hair lying on a tree branch. It was a two-toed sloth resting in the morning sunshine.

And only a short distance away we found ourselves face to face with a family of diminutive, White-faced Capuchin monkeys poking their heads through the oversized rainforest foliage to evaluate the situation. Some jumped onto the canopy of the boat, down the silver support poles and across the backs of our seats, apparently looking for food or anything interesting (cameras, hats, glasses etc.). As we had been briefed on monkey behaviour, the Capuchins found nothing and jumped back onto their island. Two separate groups of Mantled Howler Monkeys on other islands followed the same routine, but a shy troop of Geoffrey's Tamarind Monkeys, distinguished by a triangle of white hair on their forehead, chose to simply watch us as we snapped away with cameras and iphones.

We also encountered crocodiles, Snail Kites, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Wattleed Jacanas and Blue Herons.

Gatun Lake is the perfect place to fascinate, unwind and interact with one of Panama's pristine, natural environments.

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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

Derry-Londonderry Shines in *Derry Girls*

by Cherie DeLory



Runaway hit sitcom, *Derry Girls* has everyone's eyes on Derry-Londonderry. Northern Ireland's Troubles have been over for more than 20 years, but the civil rights conflict figures as a backdrop in the outrageous dark comedy about an all-girls Catholic school. The series offers a glimpse into neighbourhoods like the Bogside, a predominately Catholic area on the City Side that was at the centre of the dispute. Derry-Londonderry has the Foyle River running through it, separating the City Side from the Water Side. The Bogside is known for its Free Derry peace murals emblazoned on the sides of buildings. The story of the civil rights movement is told at the Museum of Free Derry.

Derry-Londonderry is Northern Ireland's second largest city, next to the capital of Belfast, but its population of 85,000 evokes a quiet town ambience. The city built on linen shirt manufacturing hosts the biennial Maritime Foyle Festival, Ireland's largest maritime festival, and has been a host port for the biennial Clipper Round the World Yacht race. Several restaurants participate in the Seafood Trail, making this the ideal time to indulge in fresh

Irish catch of the day. A few of my favourites are Thompsons Restaurant in the Derry City Hotel, Browns in Town, Shipquay Hotel, The Bishop's Gate Hotel (circa 1899), and The Beech Hill Hotel on the outskirts of town where you can enjoy your meal in a countryside setting.

No visit is complete without wandering the Walled City. It's the only completely intact walled city in Ireland, totalling about a mile of atmospheric heritage stone wall. Take a historical tour with Martin McCrossan Walled City Walking Tour. Derry-Londonderry, or Derry as originally named, is the first planned city in Ireland, built between 1613 and 1619. The walls were built to protect the locals from settlers arriving from England and Scotland, and would later figure in the Great Siege of 1689. During the planning phase was when London was added to the name to reflect the Queen's influence. Derry in year 546 was a monastic settlement founded by the Irish monk, Saint Columba, who to this day is one of three patron saints of Ireland. St. Columba's Cathedral (circa 1633) is the oldest building in town, and home to the original keys of the city gates. Listen for the oldest peal bells in Europe.

Across the Peace Bridge footpath the stone walls continue around Ebrington Square, a former WW I and II marine barracks. It's been undergoing an ambitious redevelopment project since the city hosted UK's first Capital of Culture in 2013. Thriving Brewpub Walled City Brewery is the first listed building conversion. Ebrington Hotel and Maritime Museum are slated for completion in 2021.

Take time to explore the walking and cycling trails along the River Foyle. Venture beyond Ebrington Square and discover St. Columb's Park and Heritage Trail. Get on the River Foyle for a canoe paddle with Loughs Agency, a marine and fisheries outfitter, or sail away with the Lough Foyle Yacht Club.

Hugging the River Foyle is the Translink Rail. One of travel documentarian Michael Palin's recommendations for Great Railway Journeys of the World is the route from Derry-Londonderry to Coleraine. The scenic coastal and pastoral views continue to the seaside resort town of Portrush, host of this summer's 2019 Open Championship. ■

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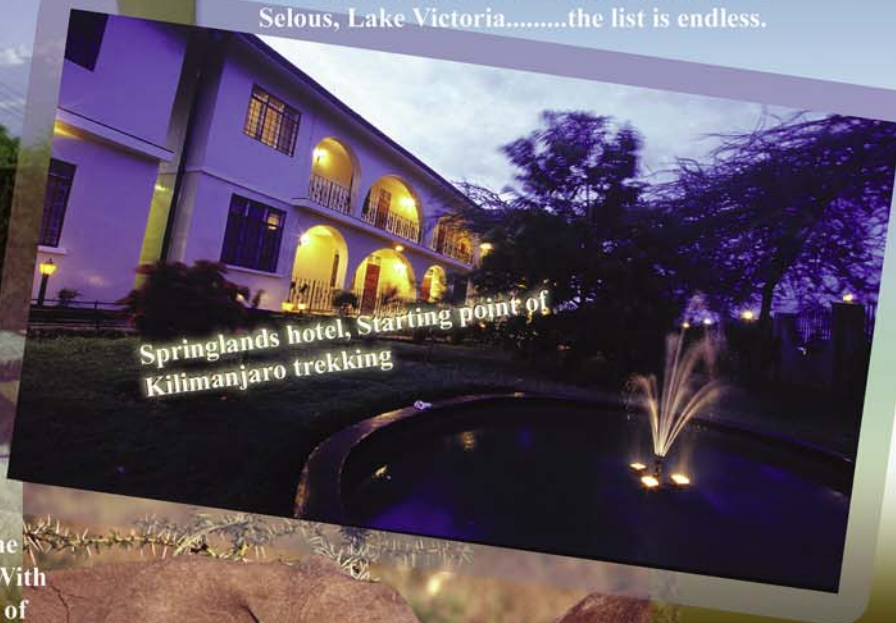


ZARA TANZANIA ADVENTURES

A land of many contrasts and pride, Tanzania. The country has reach and diverse natural resources. Among these is the legendary Serengeti National Park, with its spectacular Annual Migration of wildebeest. Then there is Mount Kilimanjaro, the Roof of Africa, the highest free standing mountain in the world and the permanently snow-capped peak in the tropics.

Also Ngorongoro crater, the world's largest intact caldera with the Olduvai Gorge and the 3.6 million years old human foot prints. The Spice islands of Zanzibar, the ultimate paradise with unspoiled beaches and historical sites. Manyara, Ruaha, Selous, Lake Victoria.....the list is endless.

Mt. Kilimanjaro, The Springlands hotel view



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Going Further With *Turkish Airlines*

Growing reviews and exceptional food are the order of the day for this up-and-coming airline!

Part of the Star Alliance network, Turkish Airlines (THY) offers service to Canadians from Toronto and Montreal, and connections to destinations all over the world from their hub in Istanbul.

Building on their international reputation, THY has been climbing the ranks as a top provider and doing very well in Canada.

With 200 destinations, and adding new ones at a rapid pace, THY welcome trav-

ellers with smiles and a friendly hello, though often with a charming accent! To help them usher in this growth, THY has a massive, world-class training center in Istanbul with numerous simulators. Pilots, flight attendants and support staff are all trained well and are ready to go after their courses are done.

Their aircraft include A330s, A340s, B777s, B737-800s and B727-800s, all well maintained and laid-out with the customer in mind. Each section is designed with creature comforts taking front and centre. The seats throughout the plane are comfortable and the facilities are kept impeccably clean and organized. Most Business Class passengers can expect either fully lie-flat seats or angled lie-flat seats that brings relaxation to a higher level.

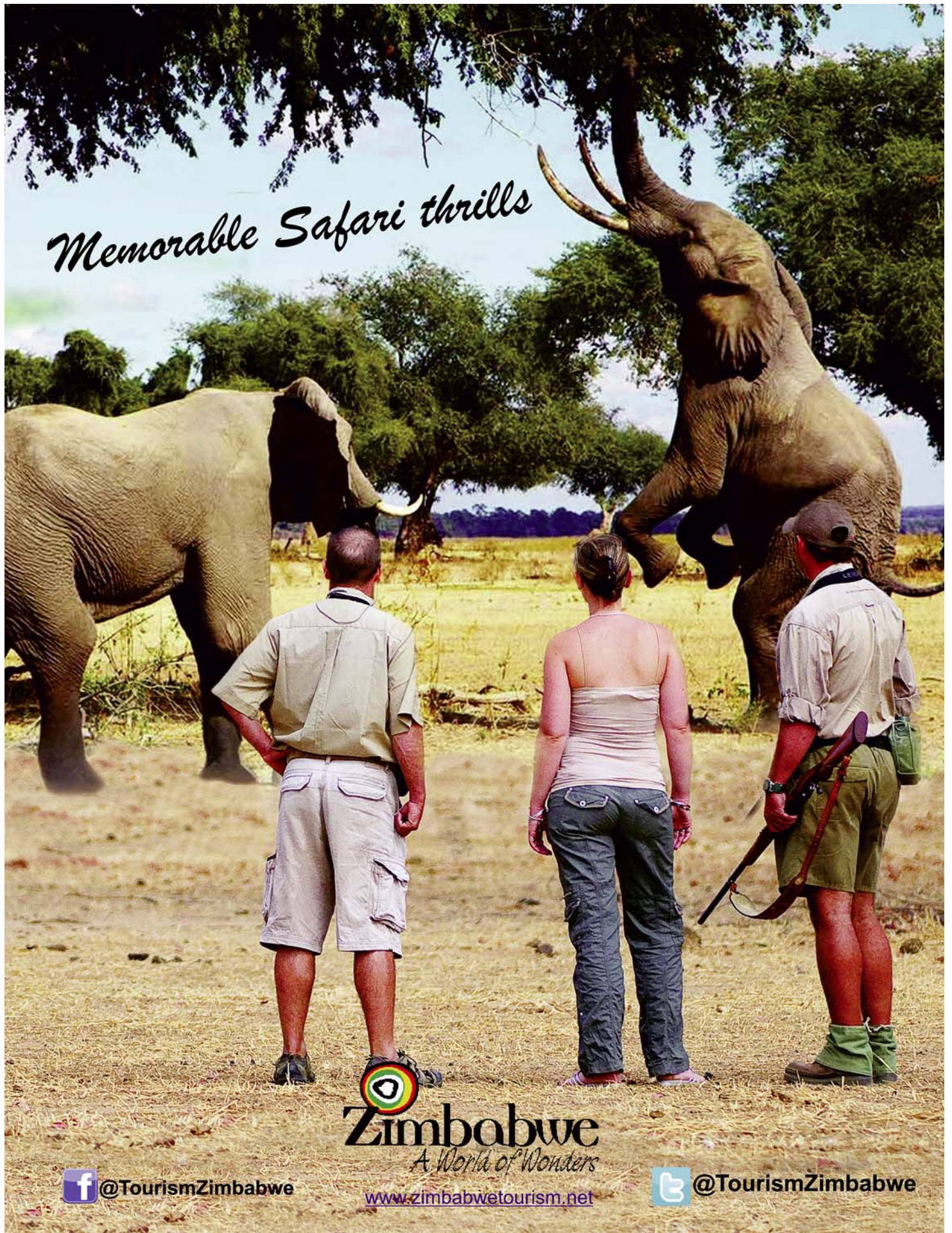
Comfort Class is Turkish Airlines' premium economy section is highlighted by slightly larger seats configured in two-by-three-by-two rows, a large video screen and entertainment system with an iPod outlet and a laptop power outlet for each seat.

Even passengers traveling in Economy Class can enjoy an above average trip, as all passengers enjoy the famed THY complimentary meal. Though multi-course meals are provided in Business Class on extended range flights, all passengers are treated to the award winning food served on board. Considering that THY deals with one of the world's biggest (maybe the biggest) catering service and are partners with Do & Co., there is no surprise in the quality THY can offer!

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Contiki's Top 10 Destinations in 2019



Contiki, the original travel company offering epic global adventures for 18 to 35-year-olds, recently polled young Canadians about their upcoming travel plans in 2019 and today releases a list of the top 10 destinations that are on everyone's travel radars. Where to next?

Jordan

Heaving with historical significance, spirituality and soul, Jordan is a serene sanctuary in a region of conflict. Ever since Jean Louis Burckhardt stumbled upon the 'lost' city of Petra in the 19th century – the jaw-dropping ancient metropolis that's carved into towering red cliffs – this land has ignited the imaginations of intrepid adventurers across the globe. Often overlooked in favour of its more mainstream counterparts – think Egypt and Morocco – Jordan offers safe and easy travelling thanks to its modern infrastructure, inquisitive locals and modest size. But the country isn't just about the 'rose-red city half old as time.' Boasting sweeping desert panoramas, fascinating ancient monuments,

fantastic food and warm hospitality, it's comfortably one of the top travel destinations for 2019. More and more millennials are discovering this gem and have returned to regale tales of treasured memories spent in the country – expect more to find out for themselves.

Sri Lanka

Endless beaches, timeless ruins, welcoming people, spectacular wildlife, rolling surf, affordable prices, fun trains, famous tea and flavourful food make Sri Lanka a hotspot in 2019. Sri Lanka is perfect for young Canadians longing for a mixture of wildlife adventure and beach time, but who tire of being stuck in a buffet line at yet another all-inclusive resort in the Caribbean. With an abundance of wildlife, from elephants to tigers, Sri Lanka's national parks are home to some of the world's top safari tours, while there's plenty of opportunity on the shimmering North East coast to relax on a secluded beach with a cocktail. It's the place many haven't been to yet but should.

Scotland

Come to Scotland for the spectacular scenery, charming cities and fascinating history, but stay for the unbeatable hospitality (and the whiskey). Whether you're walking through the gothic, cobbled streets of Edinburgh, gawping at the incomparable vistas of the Isle of Skye or trekking through the vibrant landscapes of the Highlands, this wild and beautiful land will steal your heart over and over again. Scotland has also seen a spike in interest thanks to the cult following of the hit TV series *Outlander*. It seems that many millennials are looking to find their own versions of Jamie and Claire somewhere in the Highlands.

Japan

Japan is truly timeless, a place where ancient traditions are fused with modern life as if it were the most natural thing in the world. While the country has always been a perennial favourite, the 'land of the rising sun' has recently seen an influx of Canadians with the latest statistics showing a 10.8% increase in Canadian visitors, thanks to direct flights from Canada and word-of-mouth from family and friends. Canadians are now beginning to realize that this island archipelago boasts some of the world's most eclectic cities, fascinating museums and countryside that leaves all its visitors enraptured. A technological hegemon on the one hand, but also full of people who are polite to a fault and generous too, Japan hits almost every button. From its unique culture, food (oh the glorious food) to contrasting landscapes (from snow-capped mountains to coastal beauties), expect an influx of visitors to Japan in 2019 before the Olympics arrive in 2020 that will undoubtedly come with an increase in travel costs and patience.

South Africa

Full of adventure, culinary delights and rugged landscapes, South Africa has so much to offer. Take a cable car up Cape Town's Table Mountain for the best view of the city, embark on the famous Panorama Route to Kruger National park where you can spot Africa's Big 5 and stand in awe of the wonders of the world, Victoria falls. And for those looking to surf, South Africa (Supertubes in Jeffrey's Bay to be exact) has the best right-hand ride in the world according to experts. It's no wonder why more and





more Canadians, especially millennials, have this country on their 2019 travel radars. With adventure in abundance and a great exchange rate for the loonie, South Africa is calling.

Turkey

Move over Croatia and Greek Islands! Turkey is poised as the next pick for your sailing holiday with friends. A land of remarkable diversity, Turkey is a melting pot of seething cities, colour, music and some of the best beaches in Europe. Framed by the Mediterranean and Black Seas, Turkey is a heady mix of visible history and inviting culture. Here, you can meander the pretty streets of Istanbul or Ephesus for boundless historical excavations and ancient Greek and Roman structures. Or if a sun escape is what you're after, you can island hop from pure white beach to pure white beach. Turkey is an underrated travel gem that is as easy to access, thanks to direct flights from Canada, as it is to fall in love with.

Egypt

Ancient, exotic and fascinating, Egypt is a tempting proposition for any visitor. Once home to one of the oldest and most advanced ancient civilizations on the planet, Egypt is a vast treasure house of history waiting to be explored. Imagine standing at the foot of the colossal stone statues of Abu Simbel or smelling the musty air of the 3,000-year-old tombs in the Valley of the Kings, some of which still look like they were painted with the infamous blue and gold scenes of the pharaohs just yesterday. Lose yourself in Karnak's Hypostyle Hall, a veritable stone forest, housing 134 giant decorated columns. Watch feluccas sail the Nile, a scene hardly changed since the time of Cleopatra or explore Cairo and its plethora of ornate mosques, churches and museums.

Mexico

While most Canadians have visited Mexico, staying within the confines of their all-inclusive resort, many have never actually travelled to the country – that is, exploring the real, authentic side of Mexico. For those willing to venture beyond the resort environment, Mexico sizzles when it comes to travel. From buzzing city to idyllic bay, this country has boundless biodiversity, kaleidoscopes of colour, overflowing natural beauty, ancient archaeological sites and one of the world's

most vibrant cuisines. Wander through the spellbinding jungle ruins of Palenque; snorkel with turtles in Cabo Pulmo, or explore some of Mexico City's up-and-coming and underrated neighbourhoods (such as Roma, as seen in Alfonso Cuarón new critically-acclaimed masterpiece). No matter what type of traveller you are, Mexico will have something to make you fall head over heels.

Slovenia

Looking at images of Slovenia is a bit like looking at teasers for a new Disney movie. But this is no fairy-tale – it really does look like that in the flesh. Emerald lakes, enchanting forests, hillside castles, alpine panoramas and oh yes, the food is delicious.

Belize

Boasting the best parts of both Central America and the Caribbean, this underrated palm-fringed paradise is packed with treasures. Looking for a hike through the northern foothills of the Maya Mountains, where you'll find faded relics of ancient civilizations? Or how about a cold cocktail on some of the most idyllic beaches in the world? If you're looking to dip your toes in those crystal-clear waters, you'll find one of the longest barrier reefs on the planet (outside of Australia), brimming with colourful marine wildlife. ■

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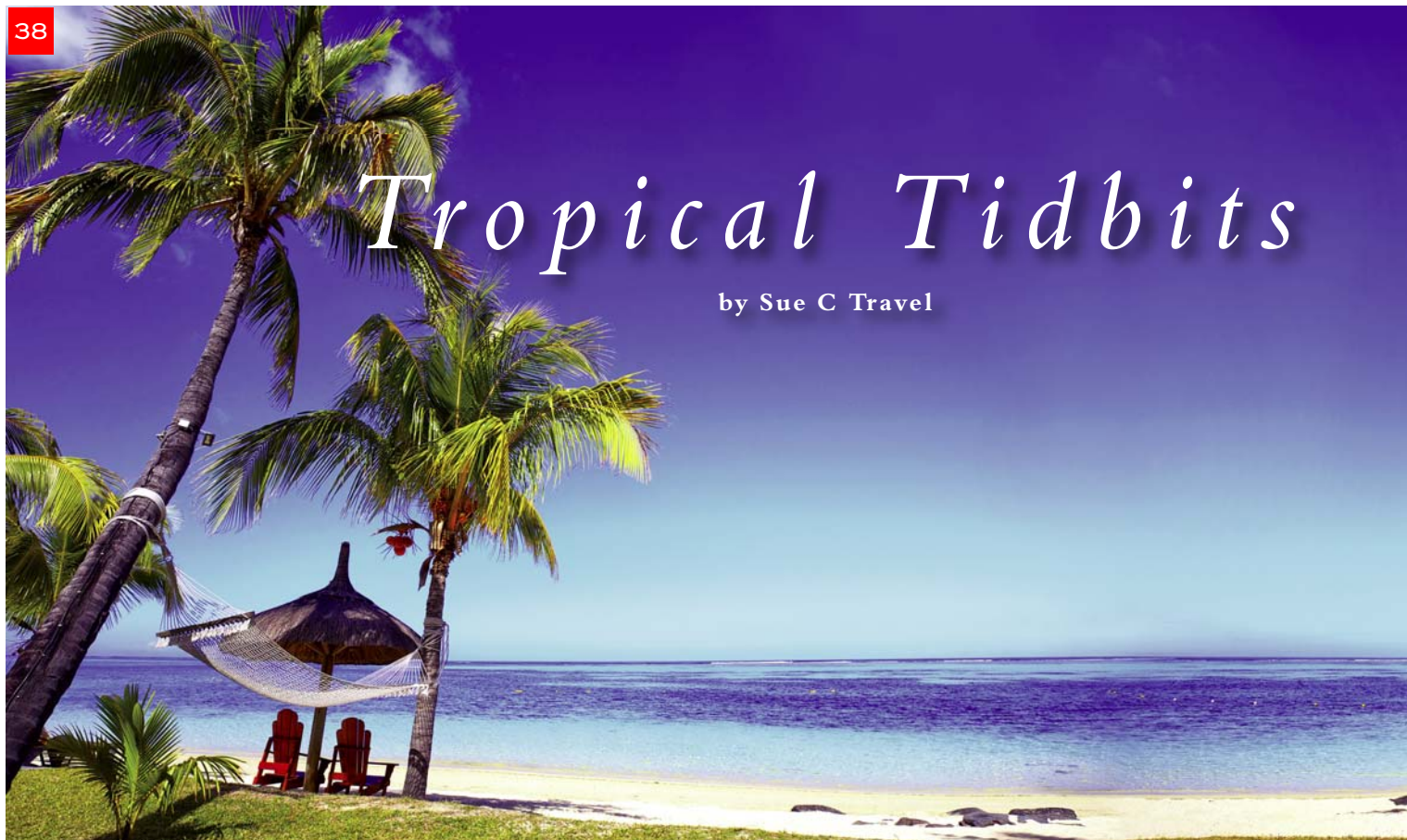
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Tropical Tidbits

by Sue C Travel



Island Hopping with the Star Flyer

As I mentioned on page 50, my recent Caribbean sail with the Star Flyer tall ship included stops at six different islands. Here are some highlights of our week's onshore adventures...

Nevis

Our first stop was Nevis- sister island to St. Kitts- a lush and lovely sparsely inhabited laid-back escape famous for having more monkeys than people! Excursions offered were an island tour in an air-conditioned bus, or a rainforest hike. The Star Flyer set up was at Pinney's Beach- ideal for swimming, and also where Sunshine's Bar is located, famous for their potent rum concoctions called "Killer Bees". Passengers could also stroll downtown Charlestown and visit the birthplace of Alexander Hamilton. I know Nevis well, so I

revisited my favorite haunts- Nisbet Plantation Beach Club- the only ex-sugar plantation resort on the sea. Their mill ruins are epic, and this is also where Horatio "Lord" Nelson met and fell in love with Fanny Nisbet, whom he later married. I swam in the turquoise ocean and then dug into an excellent Caribbean lunch while being serenaded by a local band. A perfect afternoon. The Nisbet plantation property is also a stop on the island tour.

Dominica

Next up was Dominica, dubbed "Nature Island"- a verdant hiker's paradise with 12 waterfalls and 365 rivers flowing through a wild, mountainous rainforest terrain. Excursions offered were the Indian River row-boat (famous for being where Pirates of the Caribbean shot their voodoo scenes) which I highly recommend, a rollicking river tubing

adventure, and a nature walk through Syndicate National Park. I had already thoroughly explored Dominica, and yes, the nature IS epic- but the languid scene of empty beach where we had docked in Portsmouth was too alluring. I found the "The Purple Turtle" beach bar to be the perfect authentic local food spot and spent a lazy afternoon in the water. You can also climb the hill nearby to see the remnants of old Fort Shirley.

Îles des Saintes

I'd never heard of this little archipelago of eight tiny islands off Guadeloupe. But that's the beauty of sailing in a small vessel like the Star Flyer- you get to visit spots where the big cruise ships can't go. Our approach into the narrow bay was incredibly picturesque, flanked by ancient cave-carved cliffs topped in greenery and dotted with small pleasure craft and fishing boats bobbing on cobalt





waters. "Les Saintes" as they are also called, is anchored by the tiny fishing village Terre-de-Haut on Pain de Sucre Beach. No excursions were offered, so I spent the morning exploring its colorful Caribbean creole houses and shops and the charming stone church in the centre of town called Notre-Dame de l'Assomption. Then I went snorkeling at the spot where the Star Flyer crew had set up on the beach in front of a hotel. Apparently, the diving is also very good around these islands, too.

Guadeloupe

Another island I'd yet to visit was Guadeloupe- but I'm a snorkel and marine life fanatic and this stop offered great water excursions so I really didn't see much of the island on the ground. There was a cetacean encounter with a specialist, a private sailing tour, a motorboat tour to an uninhabited

island, and a solar boat snorkel tour through the mangroves – I opted for the last one, and it was an absolute delight. The excursion takes place in the pristine waters of Grand Cul de Sac Marine nature reserve. We snorkeled a small shipwreck, explored the mangroves, and then were served an incredible Creole lunch. We were amazed at how they whipped up this feast aboard the tiny boat - hot curry chicken and rice, salads, and killer rum cocktails... but the piece de resistance was the barbecued bananas with dark melted chocolate grilled within the skins and covered in hot rum sauce! And on the way back we stopped by to see the large colony of birds at l'Ile aux Oiseaux. Another excellent day.

Antigua

I'd already done many of the excursions offered on Antigua-canopy zip-line tours, ATV tours, sailing tours, eco-kayak tours, snorkel tours, Segway tours, and even the chance to swim with stingrays up close- but I'd yet to explore much of Nelson's Dockyard National Park (a UNESCO World Heritage site). And since we docked at Falmouth Harbour, it was walking distance to visit some of the attractions like the old forts, so that was my plan for the morning. And I didn't want to miss the famous Star Flyer barbeque on Pigeon beach later that day. We marveled at the magnitude of the buffet they presented- all brought in via the tiny tender- and then packed up again like puzzle pieces to return to the ship. It's a gorgeous beach and we enjoyed it immensely. And though I do recommend taking excursions if it's your first time on Antigua- this bountiful beach day was a highlight of the trip for many as well.

St. Barthélemy

French "St. Bart's" is known to attract the rich and famous to its shores- the plethora of mammoth mega-yachts dotting the waves and docked in the marina simply scream big money. The uber high-end duty-free shopping along the main streets of Gustavia also attract the well-to-do. (Think Prada, Louis Vuitton, Dolce & Gabbana, Cartier etc.) Sailing, a semi-submarine trip and an ATV tour were offered, but I know this island well and was anxious to return to my favourite haunt Le Select- the little burger joint and bar that Jimmy Buffet loves so much. Their signa-



ture Cheeseburger in Paradise was named after his song in exchange for a free tab for life for him and his family when they visit, and the bar is adorned with photos of Jimmy Buffet playing there. I also wanted to visit Shell Beach - it's walking distance from downtown- and is almost South Pacific looking, and the sand is indeed all made of tiny shells. This stop was the only one when we also had tenders going ashore at night, so the chance to hobnob with the elite along the boulevard in the cafes in the evening was also a bonus.

St. Maarten

The cruise departs and ends in Dutch St. Maarten, and it was great to spend a little time there the day before at Divi Little Bay Resort (see our Stay & Play section in the next issue) and to see that the island on that side has truly bounced back big time from last year's hurricane. Philipsburg was jumping with at least five cruise ships in port. Before heading home, we stopped by the Sunset Beach Bar by the airport to watch the crazy famous plane landings over the beach and raised a cold Carib beer to toast a fabulous week of Caribbean adventures aboard the Star Flyer.

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Award-winning travel journalist Sue Campbell is based in Montreal but makes it her business to be on top of everything cool, hot, and new under the sun throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. World Traveler welcomes her as a regular columnist. Follow her on Instagram and Twitter @suectravel



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CRUISING SECTION

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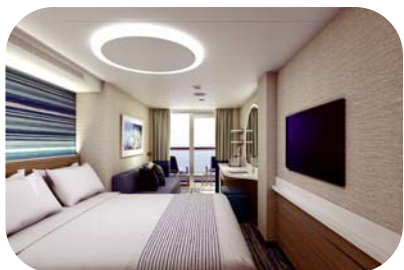
Epic Nordic Adventures with Viking Ocean Cruises - page 48

Stellar Sailing Aboard The Star Flyer - page 50

Palm Beach to Grand Bahama Island - page 52

This Photo: Seabourn Odyssey

Sail The World!



Carnival Cruise Line's Mardi Gras Introduces Innovative New Stateroom Design

Cruise lovers who sail on Carnival Cruise Line's newest and most innovative ship, Mardi Gras, set to debut in late summer 2020, will enjoy an array of architectural features and designs that will enhance many aspects of its balcony, ocean view and interior staterooms. The staterooms' are enhanced by design touches that include:

- Floor-to-ceiling glass sliding doors on nearly all verandahs;

- New sofas that "flip" into a bed and foot stools that open up for storage;
- Clear glass doors on the in-room mini-refrigerators to see what's inside;
- More 110V power outlets and USB connections;
- A larger, customizable wardrobe with two pull-out bins and a sliding shoe rack;
- Spacious bathrooms with glass shower doors. ■

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Viking Expands European River Fleet With Launch of Seven New Ships

Viking has recently welcomed the latest additions to its river fleet, with the naming of seven new river ships during a celebration on the Rhine River in Basel, Switzerland. Of the seven ships, six are Viking Longships – Viking Einar, Viking Sigrun, Viking Sigyn, Viking Tir, Viking Ullur and

Viking Vali – which will be deployed on Viking's most popular itineraries on the Rhine, Main and Danube Rivers. The seventh new ship – Viking Helgrim – was inspired by the Longships design and built specifically for the Douro River, bringing the company's total number of sister ships in Portugal to four. ■

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Virgin Voyages Redefines Cabin Design and Traditional Caribbean Holidays



Virgin Voyages, the new lifestyle brand set to disrupt the travel industry, recently released itinerary details and cabin designs for the company's first ship, Scarlet Lady. With four and five night voyages to the Caribbean, Sailors will set sail in sleek uber yacht style with Virgin Voyages' patent pending cabin design featuring the Seabed, a completely new transformational bed that converts from European queen-sized bed

to lounge. The Seabed allows Sailors the unique opportunity to transform their cabin from a quiet hideaway to relax to a place to revel among friends. ■

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Silversea Announces First Ever Expedition World Cruise

Silversea Cruises continues to push boundaries with the announcement of two pioneering World Cruises in 2021, including the world's first ever Expedition World Cruise. Offering distinct sets of experiences and differing ways to discover our planet, the two World Cruises will enable Silversea's guests to travel deeper into the world's authentic beauty on their own terms, as they cruise in superlative comfort.

In its 10th year of expedition travel, Silversea reveals the 2021 Expedition World Cruise, described as the 'uncharted world tour.' Fully inclusive, Silversea's Expedition World Cruise 2021 is unprecedented with regards to the scope of immersive experiences on offer: the itinerary is crafted to connect the most rewarding travel experiences around the planet. This experience-focused expedition will appeal to those with a passion for discovery, who like to stay active on their travels, and continue to challenge their own sense of adventure. From Ushuaia to Tromsø, the 167-day voyage will call at 107 of the planet's most amazing destinations, in 30 must-visit countries—including six new ports of call for Silversea (Naxos, Folegandros, Nafpaktos, Ksamil, Bejaia, and Fort William).

This highly experiential expedition will enable guests to engage with remote destinations through hands-on exploration; immersive shore excursions, which are included; informative lectures from Silversea's Expedition Team; and featured lectures from many world-class experts. ■

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CruiseCompete has compiled a listing of all cruise ships set to launch this year

Every year, the world welcomes a variety of new ocean and river-faring cruise ships, and 2019 is no exception. In total, the cruise industry will launch 37 new ships this year. Here is the list:

Contemporary Cruise Lines

- Aida Cruises will debut the AIDAmira in December 2019.
- Carnival Cruise Line will debut the Carnival Panorama ship in December 2019. It will carry 3,974 passengers.
- Costa Cruises will debut the Costa Venezia in March 2019. It will carry 4,200 passengers. This ship will be part of the Costa Asia brand.
- Costa Cruises will debut the Costa Smeralda in October 2019. It will carry 6,660 passengers.

Upscale Contemporary Cruise Lines

- MSC Cruises will debut the Bellissima in March 2019. It will carry 4,500 guests.
- MSC Cruises will debut the MSC Grandiosa in November 2019. It will carry 4,800 guests.
- Norwegian Cruise Line will debut the Norwegian Encore in November 2019. It will carry 4,200 passengers.
- Royal Caribbean International will debut a new Quantum Class ship, Spectrum of the Seas, in May 2019. It will carry 4,180 passengers.



Premium Cruise Lines

- Celebrity Cruises will debut the all-suite Celebrity Flora in May 2019. It will carry 100 passengers and be year-round in the Galapagos.
- Princess Cruises will debut Sky Princess in October 2019. It will carry 3,660 passengers.
- Tui Cruises will debut the Mein Schiff 2 in Spring 2019. It will carry 2,500 passengers.

Ultra-Premium Cruise Lines

- Viking Ocean Cruises will debut Viking Jupiter in February 2019. It will carry 930 passengers.

Ultra-Luxury Cruise Lines

- Hapag-Lloyd will launch Hanseatic Inspiration in October 2019. It will carry 230 passengers. This will be an international ship.
- Hapag-Lloyd will launch the Hanseatic Nature in April 2019. It will carry 230 passengers. This ship will be designed for German speakers.
- Ponant will launch Le Bougainville in August 2019. It will have 92 staterooms.
- Ponant will launch Le Dumont D'urville in 2019. It will have 92 staterooms.

River Cruise Lines

- AmaWaterways will debut the AmaMagna in May 2019. It will carry 196 passengers.
- AmaWaterways will debut the AmaMora in 2019.
- AmaWaterways will debut the AmaDouro in 2019. It will carry 102 passengers.
- American Cruise Lines will debut the American Harmony in 2019.
- American Queen Steamboat Company will debut the American Countess in 2019. It will carry 248 passengers.
- Avalon Waterways will debut the Avalon Envision in 2019. It will carry 166 passengers.
- CroisiEurope will debut the Amalia Rodrigues in 2019. It will carry 132 passengers.

- Emerald Waterways will debut the Adriatic Princess II in 2019. It will carry 36 passengers.

- Emerald Waterways will debut the Emerald Harmony in 2019. It will carry 84 passengers.

- Viking River Cruises will debut the Viking Helgrim in 2019. It will carry 106 passengers.

- Viking River Cruises will debut the Viking Sigyn; Viking Tir; Viking Ullur; and the Viking Vali in 2019. Each ship will carry 190 passengers.

- Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection will debut the SS Bon Voyage in 2019.

Sailing Vessel/Yacht Cruise Lines

- Emerald Waterways has ordered its first Yacht. The MV Adriatic Princess II will debut in 2019. It will carry 36 passengers.

Expedition Cruise Lines

- Ecoventura will debut the MV Theory March 2019. This ship will carry 20 passengers.
- Hurtigruten will debut MS Roald Amundsen in July 2019. This ship will carry 530 passengers.
- Oceanwide Expeditions will debut a new polar vessel the Hondius in 2019. It will carry 180 passengers.

Small Ship Cruise Lines

- Marella Cruises will launch the former Celebrity Century as the Marella Explorer 2 in April 2019.
- Saga Cruises will introduce a new ship, Spirit of Discovery, in summer 2019. It will carry fewer than 1000 passengers.

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Cruising to Morocco on the Seabourn Odyssey

by Janice Mucalov



A snake charmer threatens to wrap a cobra around my neck. “La shokran!” (no thank you) I manage to squeal. The town square pulsates with activity – acrobatic entertainers, fortune tellers, Berber musicians; it feels like one huge carnival. From the square, a labyrinth of narrow alleys fans out into the souk (market), which brims with brassware, pyramids of colored spices and pointy beaded shoes.

I’m visiting the medina (old quarter) of Marrakesh on a shore excursion while on a

Seabourn cruise. Our ship, the Seabourn Odyssey, is sailing from Lisbon to Barcelona, calling in at Madeira, the Canary Islands and Morocco. Our two full days in Morocco are the most exotic part of this itinerary – and while it’s thrilling to get a taste of such a different culture, I’m ready to shed the sensory overdose when we return to the luxury and calm of our ship at night.

Our first port-of-call is Casablanca. There, I could tour the world’s largest mosque, the Hassan II Mosque. But how could I give up

the chance to see Marrakesh? The three-hour bus ride is admittedly long. But it’s comfortable on a high-speed highway. And the almost biblical scenery – farmers herding sheep with sticks and donkeys pulling hay-filled carts – keeps my face glued to the window.

Magical Marrakesh

Entering Marrakesh, we pass the famed La Mamounia. A former centuries-old palace, it was once the vacation haunt of Winston



Churchill, who declared Marrakesh the “last paradise on Earth.” Though it’s now one of the world’s most exquisite hotels, its façade is relatively unassuming; I wish we had time to peek inside.

And then, we see it – the huge red brick walls of the medina. They stretch 19 kilometres around the old city, soaring up to 12 metres high. And those holes in the walls? “Some say they were formed by canon blasts,” says our guide. “But the holes were actually made to allow the walls to breathe.” Whatever the explanation, it’s obvious pigeons like to roost in them.

Once inside the medina, our group leaves the bus for the 19th century Bahia Palace. Commissioned by Si Moussa, a slave who became a sultan’s powerful Grand Vizir, it’s a mind-boggling tangle of some 160 rooms.

Where to look? At the intricate ceilings with their painted inlaid woodwork? At the floors? They’re decorated with hand-made tiles, coloured blue, mustard, green and white to represent the four seasons. At the trickling fountains and gardens blooming with orange trees? Off one courtyard, four doors lead to four rooms, one for each of the wives of Si Moussa’s son; I note that the favorite wife’s room is bigger and has a higher ceiling. If only the furnishings were still around; unfortunately, when Si Moussa’s son died, his wives and sultan snatched the art and valuables to adorn their own palaces.

I’d like to dawdle and soak up the atmosphere but lunch awaits. We’re escorted to the Dar Rihlane hotel for lunch in its fountain-filled garden courtyard. I feel like Scheherazade as we dine on course after course of salads, couscous, fragrant lamb tagine and almond delights, finishing off with mint tea.

After, we’re taken to a Berber pharmacy to sample genuine Moroccan oil skin and hair products. Then we’re given some free time to wander the souk on our own. (That’s where I encounter the snake charmer.)

Returning back to the ship, Jen, a fellow passenger we’ve befriended, finds her cabin stewardess has drawn her a hot bath, sprin-

kled with rose petals, and left her a sweet note: “Welcome back. I thought you’d like this after your long day.” Not unusual on Seabourn. The line, which is famous for its unlimited complimentary champagne and caviar, is also known for its exceptional service. Jen tells us about her surprise treat the next morning as we leave for our tour of Tangier (our second Moroccan port-of-call) and Tetouan.

Tangier and Tetouan

In Tangier, we first drive past villas owned by Arabic magnates – eye-popping in their opulence – then stop at the Caves of Hercules. According to Greek mythology, the demigod Hercules is said to have rested here in these caves after finishing his 12 labours. An astonishing large gap in the rock wall is the highlight of the main cave. It’s perfectly outlined in the shape of a reverse Africa; looking through, I marvel at the breathtaking view of the blue sea beyond. There are also fascinating inscriptions made by early Phoenicians on the rock walls, believed to be maps of the surrounding area.

Then we drive an hour through green hilly fields to Tetouan. One of the oldest cities in Morocco, Tetouan receives far fewer international tourists than Marrakesh. The souk in its medina, stuffed with 40,000 shops, feels more authentic. (In fact, apart from our small group, I don’t see another Western face among the throng of locals.)

Our guide warns us: “If you get lost, I’ll never find you!” And so we follow him single file, sticking to each other like glue as we navigate the souk. A kaleidoscope of psychedelic scenes rapidly unfolds one after the other – live chickens, cobblers hammering shoes, sardines on ice, colorful veggies and even goat heads hanging on hooks.

Later that evening on the Seabourn Odyssey – over a fine dinner of Dover sole meuniere in the specialty Thomas Keller Grill restaurant, washed down with a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, of course – I chat with my mother (and cruise companion) about our brief introduction to Morocco. The excursions involved two long days. But visiting Morocco has been a highlight of our Seabourn cruise.



Now we look forward to the next day’s adventure.

About Seabourn

Seabourn is a luxury cruise line with five, small, all-suite ships. Seabourn Odyssey carries 458 guests. Specialty dining, WiFi, liquor and 35+ premium wines are included complimentary in the rates. Several Western Europe itineraries call in at both Casablanca and Tangier. ■

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Other Cruises That Visit Morocco

Oceania Cruises

Known for its excellent cuisine at sea, Oceania Cruises serves up Tangier on several European itineraries and Miami-to-Barcelona repositioning cruises. Shore excursions include a 5-hour tour of Tetouan as well as a half-day tour of Tangier.

Royal Caribbean

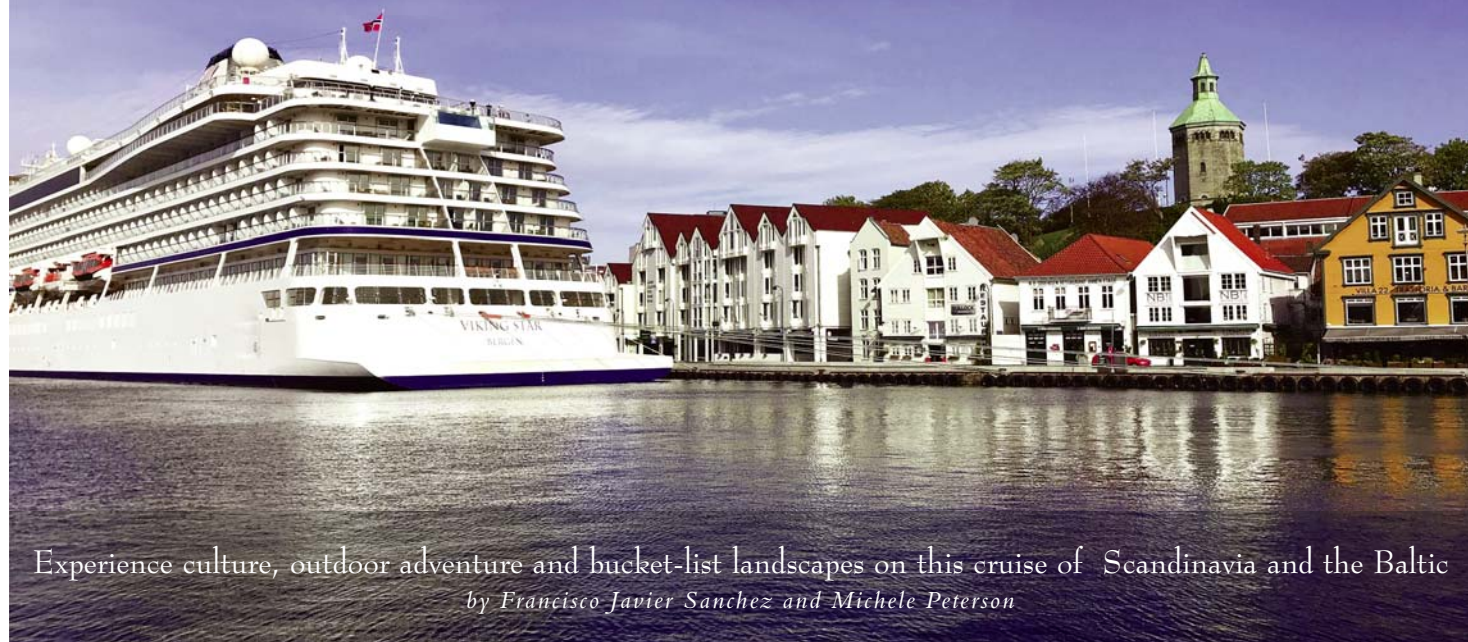
The Independence of the Seas visits Agadir, Morocco, on two “Canaries and North Africa” cruises in 2020. In Agadir, you can rock the 1541 kasbah (citadel) and visit the souk.

MSC Cruises

The line that gives you cruising with an Italian flair – MSC Cruises – includes a day in Casablanca on several cruises that dock in Spain, Italy and France. MSC Orchestra, for example, offers 13-night roundtrip cruises from Barcelona in October; MSC Preziosa sails from Marseille on 9-night trips in November.



Epic Nordic Adventures with Viking Ocean Cruises



Experience culture, outdoor adventure and bucket-list landscapes on this cruise of Scandinavia and the Baltic
by Francisco Javier Sanchez and Michele Peterson

It's early afternoon when our fishing boat The RAPP heads out from the harbour of Stavanger, Norway. Soon we've left the 17th century wood-framed shops of Old Town behind. A gunmetal sky looms on the horizon, icy water splashes our faces and sea birds soar overhead.

Welcome to deep-water fjord fishing in Norway. Norwegians live and breathe the sea. Here, fishing is more than just catching fish. It's one of the most cherished traditions in Norwegian culture.

"The deep, cold waters of southwestern Norway are rich in marine life," explains Skipper Ulf Torresen as we chug through the silent fjords. He tells us that beneath our boat, at a depth of between 40-80 metres, the waters are teeming with torsk (cod), flyndre (flounder), hyse (haddock), Atlantic mackerel and more.

We set our rods, sit back and get ready to wait. Fishing in most parts of the world is all about patience, yet within minutes we're on our feet reeling in strings of mackerel. I've got three fish on my line and everyone in our group is hauling in fish as fast as they can.

It's all part of a traditional fjord fishing excursion with Viking Ocean Cruises on the Viking Star, a luxury cruise ship. This adventure is just one of many Nordic traditions we'll experience on this cruise.

Fascinating Shore Excursions

My itinerary is part of a 15-day Viking Homelands cruise through the waters of Scandinavia and the Baltic visiting eight countries including Berlin (Germany), St. Petersburg (Russia), Bergen (Norway), Copenhagen (Denmark), Tallin, Gdansk,

Helsinki and more. It's one of several ocean cruise itineraries offered by Viking Ocean Cruises, a division of Viking Cruises.

Our 930-passenger ship, the Viking Star, is the first of Viking's ocean cruise ships. Launched in 2015, it was followed by five more sister ships, including most recently the Viking Jupiter in 2019. Four more ships are scheduled to launch by 2023. Itineraries for their river and ocean cruises include sailings to Scandinavia and Northern Europe, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand, Asia, Alaska, North and South America, and Africa.

Classified as small ships, the fleet's ocean vessels allow direct access into most ports, which means easy embarkation and disembarkation. Viking's ocean itineraries are also designed to maximize the amount of



time travelers spend in port, which appeals to travellers who want to immerse themselves in local culture and experience as much as they can at each destination.

Viking's 11 included guided tours at each port help make this happen. It's possible for travellers to combine included guided tours with optional shore excursions and independent explorations.

That's what we did in Copenhagen. There, we began our morning in the Danish capital with a walking tour introducing passengers to sights such as the iconic Little Mermaid bronze statue and a range of landmarks, buildings and gardens from a history dating back to 1043. Participants learned of Denmark's occupation during WWII and the resistance movement that helped protect much of the country's Jewish population.

In the afternoon, during our Charming Coastal Copenhagen excursion, we headed southeast beyond the city limits to the windswept village of Dragør. Founded in the 12th century as a port for the herring fishing fleet and sailing ships, its harbour and narrow cobblestone streets lined with homes topped with thatched roofs seem unchanged with time. We returned in time to hop on the complimentary Viking shuttle bus into Copenhagen to enjoy time in the cafes, shops and boutiques later that afternoon.

Viking history loomed large at the next port of call, Alborg, Denmark. Founded by Vikings in the late 900s and set in picturesque Limfjord at its narrowest point, our escorted walking tour introduced us to the Old Town's half-timbered mansions, churches such as Vor Frue Kirke dating to 1100 and a wealth of well-preserved Renaissance architecture.

As with other ports of call, there was a generous amount of independent time giving us the opportunity to sample aquavit, the potent local aperitif and explore an underground Franciscan church, holding the bones of Alborg citizens buried centuries past.



Life Aboard the Viking Star

Life aboard the Viking Star is filled with light. All curves, blond wood and natural materials, the soaring modern design of the Viking Star is one of understated elegance. Each stateroom features a private veranda spacious enough to enjoy leisurely morning coffee or evening cocktails.

Dining aboard the Viking Star is a memorable experience. With six restaurants and six bars to choose from, options include a wide selection of cuisine from Italian fare at Manfredi's to a full breakfast buffet at the World Cafe. Beer, wine, juice and soft drinks are available during lunch and dinner at no extra charge.

One of the hidden gems for lovers of local cuisine is Mamsen's Cafe located within the Explorer's Lounge. Named in honor of Viking founder Torstein Hagen's mother, this take-out eatery features a variety of Scandinavian dishes such as open-face sandwiches, cheeses and waffles.

For those who prefer to wrap up their full days of explorations in a leisurely way, 24-hour in-room dining is available and features destination-inspired dishes such as Norwegian gravlax with sour cream and potato salad as well as hearty meals such as an Angus New York Strip Steak, grilled to perfection with a classic Caesar salad.

Onboard activities include performances of concert piano, dance shows and other entertainment within the cabaret-style theatre as well as live classical music in the Atrium, a sports deck with gold and shuffleboard plus a well-equipped fitness centre, infinity pool and swimming pool deck with retractable roof. An onboard historian provides welcome insights into Nordic history as well as upcoming ports of call.

A tempting array of spa treatments await within the LiV Nordic spa. The Nordic bathing ritual concept claims that alternating hot and cold hydrotherapy stimulates the immune system, offering a boost of well-



The expansive spa features a steam room, dry sauna, thermal pool, hot tub, chilly plunge pool and a frosty Snow Grotto at a frigid -10C, where spa enthusiasts can slather themselves with snow crystals. Less rigorous spa options include a Northern Still Treatment featuring a soothing blueberry body wrap.

More Nordic heritage awaits within the Viking Star's onboard museum featuring artifacts, clothing from the Viking era and a video explain the background of The Bayeux Tapestry, a work of incredible embroidery describing the Norman invasion of England. Passengers tempted to think they may have Viking ancestry can do a quick assessment without a DNA test.

At the heart of our Viking Homelands itinerary is the opportunity to "go-a-viking" on land and sea. Historically, the word "viking" was a verb meaning "to go on a waterborne adventure" and Norse farmers in Norway, Sweden and Denmark would go trading, exploring and raiding after their crops were planted.

It's easy to capture that sense of adventure as we glide through stunning Hardangerfjord of Norway and witness a magnificent rainbow arch across the charming hamlet of Eidfjorden. As we explore this gateway to the Hardangervidda, Europe's largest plateau, we traverse canyons, marvel at mighty Vøringsfossen waterfall and gawk at quaint homes topped with grass trimmed by goats.

While picturesque, it's a primordial landscape of epic proportions. As I hike up a hilly slope to capture a view of the lichen dotted valley, I'm met with a blast of icy snow and sleet.

It's a reminder that if seawater runs in the veins of every Norwegian, expecting formidable weather is also part of what it means to "go-a-viking." ■

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Stellar Sailing Aboard The Star Flyer

by Susan Campbell

“So, throw off the bowlines.
Sail away from safe harbor.
Catch the wind in your sails.
Explore. Dream. Discover.”
— Mark Twain

I'm not a morning person. But for some inexplicable reason, I found myself on the top deck of the Star Flyer before the crack of dawn my first day at sea. It was pitch black and windy, and I found myself hanging on tightly as I tried to steady myself to get in position in case the sunrise surprised me out of the blue. As dark dissipated, I noticed the silhouette of tall, bearded older

man frozen in position with a big serious camera- also poised to capture what might transpire. I could see he'd found the ideal spot, so I inched over to join him. He gave me a half-nod, and we silently leaned up against the rail waiting for the rays to break through the clouds. Then the ship suddenly lurched, and a large rogue wave tumbled over the deck and soaked us both to the skin. After the initial shock, we both laughed hysterically, and later we were joined by Tony, another early photo seeker. We quickly became pre-breakfast club pals of sunrise seekers for the rest of the trip. I truly enjoyed their company, and that's the beauty of this type of small ship sailing, by

journey's end, chances are very good, you'll have met everyone on board.

About the Ship

This truly is a craft for sailors. Evoking a more romantic time of sea travel, with big billowing sails - it's awe-inspiring the way it slices so silently through the water save the occasional whip crack of the sails or a slow groan of the timbers. Built in 1990 as a luxe cruise ship, Star Flyer is a four masted "barquentine" which means "a sailing ship of three or more masts rigged square on the foremast and fore-and-aft on the others". And yes, I had to look that up. This





one is 360 ft. long and accommodates up to 170 passengers and is operated by Star Clippers Ltd. of Sweden. Along with its twin sister ship the Star Clipper, they are the TALLEST tall ships in the world- both boasting masts of 226 ft. in height. They are very classy vessels- all rich polished teak complemented by gleaming brass brightwork with well-appointed, spacious cabins. (Though there are no private outdoor decks.) Each ship also has two top deck swimming pools- one with a peek-a-boo window below where guests below can observe the swimmers above.



Life on Board

So, what's it like to take a journey aboard this type of ship? Exhilarating, yet sometimes challenging. The motion of the ocean isn't for everyone. Though I got my sea legs early, the checkerboard of shin bruises I took home as a souvenir attests to the sudden shifts-although the constant swaying can really rock you into a nice deep slumber. Also, never leave your toilet seat open. My toiletries ended up in the toilet while I was in the shower when I did. But I was very impressed with the shower-it was very powerful for its small size. However, if you're prone to seasickness, this might not be the journey for you. And it's not for those with limited mobility either. There are no elevators, and even the able bodied had some precarious moments on the swinging stairs down the side of the ship to the tiny tenders. However, if you're up to an excellent sea adventure- this is definitely the ship for you. And the fact that you often dock in small marinas where the big boys can't go makes you feel far more like a voyager than a visitor at every port of call.

If you don't go ashore for excursions or enjoy the beach set-up the crew offers like kayaking, snorkeling or paddle boarding, there is a library with book lending and DVDs are also available. You're also welcome to learn to sail the ship, tie knots, and even climb the mast (under supervision.) I've written about all of our excursions and different ports of call in my Tropical Tidbits column on page 38 as there was a lot to cover in this Leeward Islands Caribbean itinerary. But do note that excursions cost extra.

Dining & Entertainment

Not that we didn't dine very well- we did- but if you're expecting the type of massive round-the-clock food offerings you receive on a typical cruise ship, you'll be disappointed. Meal times are strictly set with small snack offerings in between and no room service. But you won't be disappointed in the fare. We thoroughly enjoyed the bountiful breakfast and lunch buffets and

dinner is set five-course menus with options of usually fish, seafood, meat, and vegetarian specialties. A nice touch is that they set out each main dish ahead so you can see how it's served before ordering. There's only one main dining, room -no reserved seating -and their resident musician serenades all from a grand piano. Very sophisticated. But ladies, do pack a wrap as the air-conditioning can be chilly at times. The wine selection is good- but not included in the cruise, nor is the bar, but their prices are very reasonable.

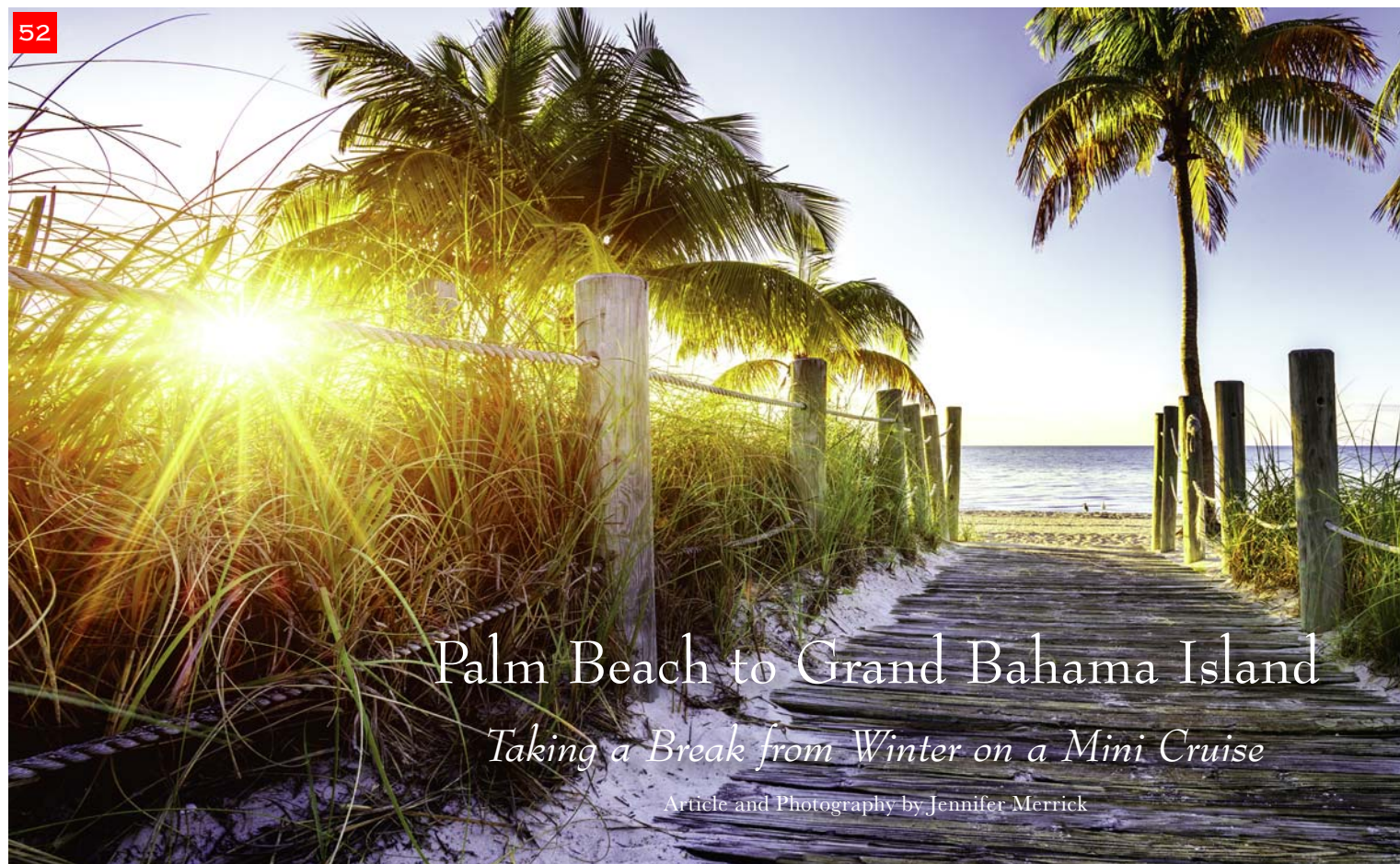
Entertainment wise, it's pretty low key, though daily Happy-Hour at the bar can be lively and we did enjoy some really fun nights themed around things like fashion and talent shows. And one night a steel band came aboard. But basically, the party was over by 11pm latest each evening though you can go star gaze on the top deck which is also great nightly entertainment!

Highlights

In this itinerary, the Royal Clipper- the Grande Dame of this outfit- graces you with a sail-by and joins for a brief time in Dominica. It's a big deal. The excitement of the crew as she arrived on the horizon in all her magnificence was palpable, and they ran around passing out flags to greet her while speakers blasted 'Conquest of Paradise' by Vangelis. It was impossible not to get caught up in the emotion of it all. But gala as that was, it was the final night and hoisting the sails one last time to a spectacular light show and more epic dramatic music that moved me the most. I'd become quite at home aboard our lovely little ship and very comfortable among my new-found sailor friends and wasn't ready to leave. But that's travel life. So, with bitter-sweet goodbyes, we eventually headed our separate way hoping to meet up again on another Star Clippers cruise one day. ■

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Palm Beach to Grand Bahama Island

Taking a Break from Winter on a Mini Cruise

Article and Photography by Jennifer Merrick

Two ships pass in the night. When Classica is enroute to the Grand Bahama Island, Celebration is heading to Palm Beach, Florida, and vice versa, each taking two days to complete the journey.

They're both cruise ships belonging to Bahamas Paradise Cruise Line, each with multiple dining options, onboard entertainment, spa, casino and deckchairs with views of the ocean and pools. But the ships are also a means of transportation.

"Some guests stay in the Bahamas for a couple of days or longer," said Paulina, one of the ship's friendly crew. "And local Bahamians come to Palm Beach to shop or a change of scenery."

But for the majority of the passengers, including our family, the two-day cruise was a way to escape to warmer climates that we could fit into our schedule without breaking the bank.

Coastal Riches

Warm sunshine greeted us in Palm Beach, Florida. The 25°C temperatures were a tonic for our winter-weary bodies, and our dry, pale skin thirstily soaked up the moist, salty air. Honestly, that would have been enough for us. But the Palm Beaches, a county in the state's southeast that extends from Jupiter in the north to Boca Raton in the south -- along 47 miles of Atlantic shoreline, offered a wide variety of attrac-

tions from nature reserves and eco-centres to top-notch shopping and dining.

John D. MacArthur Beach State Park, located in the north of the county, preserves the lush, subtropical coastal habitat that once covered southeast Florida. As we crossed the 1,600-foot boardwalk, a flock of pelicans flew over us; and in the estuaries, we spotted cranes, egrets and a singing fisherman. His obvious joy was contagious, though it would be hard not to be happy in this spot. The boardwalk led to an interpretive nature trail, which then opened up to a postcard-perfect stretch of sandy beach. We rubbed our eyes in case it was a mirage; but when we opened them, the ocean was still there inviting us to take off





our shoes and stroll barefoot in the waves, which we promptly did.

After seeing this natural treasure, we found riches of a different nature on a tour of the Town of Palm Beach. Sometimes called the island of Palm Beach or simply 'the island', this 18-mile-long swath of land between Lake Worth Lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean is home to some of the nation's wealthiest citizens.

"There are more billionaires in this zip code than anywhere else in America," said Leslie Diver, a long-time resident and owner of Island Living Tours. "But I'm not one of them," she added. She was, however, loaded with a passion for architecture and

rolling in information about the island's rich history and even richer residents. Diver's tours included driving, walking and biking, and on this sunny day we chose the latter. As we pedalled down palm-lined streets and the scenic Lake Trail bike path, Diver would periodically stop and comment on the architectural style, the striking trees we passed and the town's gilded past, including some juicy, historical gossip.

It turned out that Flagler, who built the railways and developed the town into a destination resort, had a colourful personal life. By bribing the state legislature to temporarily change a law forbidding a divorce when your spouse was confined to a mental institution, he was able to marry wife number three.

"He was 71; she was 34," said Diver. "And some say that started a Palm Beach tradition that remains on the island today."

Money has always been in abundance here, and we could see just how well-heeled residents were on Worth Avenue, where over 200 shops offered a mix of high-end retail shops, art galleries, jewellers, antiques and dining.

Though I enjoyed the ambiance, especially in the courtyards, which were designed by American architect Mizner to mimic the piazzas in Italy and the Mediterranean, the only shopping I'd be doing here was of the window variety. Fortunately, there were more affordable retail options, including the nearby Palm Beach Outlets, whose outdoor complex housed over 100 shops with discounted brand-named merchandise. There were also attractions that don't cost a cent, and two of my favourites were the Gumbo Limbo Nature Center, a turtle rescue facility, and the Manatee Lagoon. At the latter, we spotted one of these endearing creatures who came to this location to enjoy the warm waters during the winter months. Just like us, I thought. This eco-discovery center is located right next to the Port of Palm Beach, where we embarked on our Bahamas Paradise Cruise.

Sailing to Grand Bahama Island

53

Aboard the *Classica*, we waved goodbye to the manatees and the mansions of Palm Beach as they disappeared into the sunset, and then turned our attention to onboard leisure pursuits of which there were many. Like a kid in the proverbial candy store (and there was a real one of those, too), the ship was fraught with temptations: spa specials, professional photo apps, a casino and specialty dining options.

Resistance was futile, and we decided to celebrate a couple of birthdays with an admiral's dinner of surf and turf. Looking around at the many birthday and anniversary cakes, other passengers were doing the same. There was an extra charge for this meal, but the inclusive dining options, especially the a la carte menu at Yellow Elder Restaurant and the deck barbeque were also superb. Variety shows, a stand-up comic, lounge singers, Spanish dance lessons, Bingo and a Latin music party highlighted the entertainment portion of the cruise.

Grand Bahama Island awaited us in the morning, and we had a full day (8:00AM –4:30PM) to enjoy its charms. There are over a dozen optional shore excursions offered, ranging from jeep tours and sailing to relaxing on a beach and shopping. We decided to arrange our own adventure and spent the day at Paradise Cove, known for its excellent snorkelling and beach. Under the water, colourful fish and turtles swam by; on the beach, large conch shells hid in the tidal pools; and in the sky, sunshine smiled down on us.

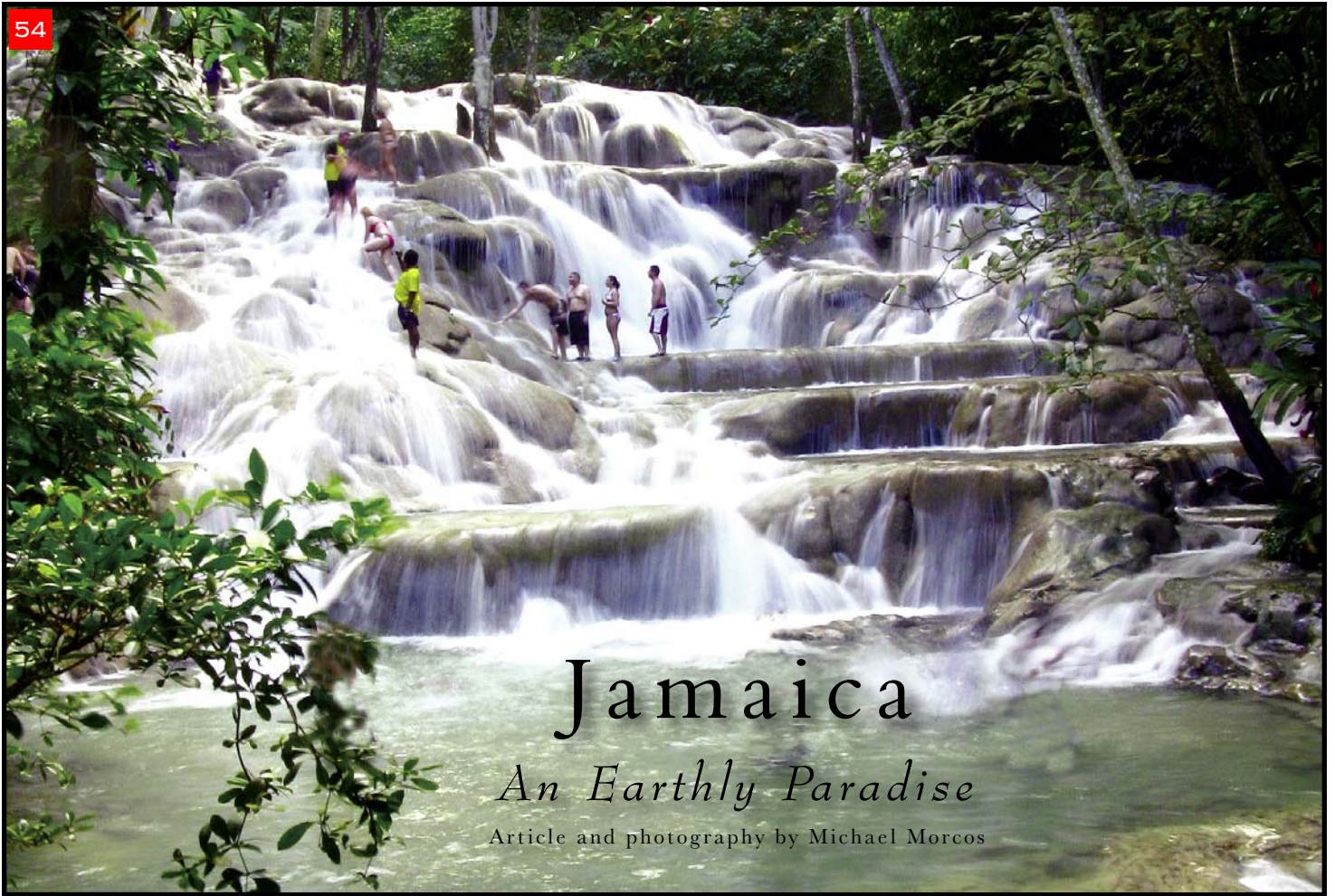
We now understood how Bahama Paradise Cruise Line got its name. Next time, we'll stay a little longer on the island, knowing that *Classica* and *Celebration* will bring us back, as they crossing back and forth -- ships that pass in the night. ■

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Photo: Bahamas Paradise Cruise





Jamaica

An Earthly Paradise

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

Minus 30 to plus 30 equals plus 60. Not really, but leaving Canada for Jamaica in the midst of one of the coldest winter spells is like going from the freezer to the oven...and I welcomed the oven.

Jamaica is very well known for its beaches and all-inclusive luxury resorts and the thousands of tourists who visit can attest to that. However, beyond the shoreline there is a whole other world waiting to be discovered; a whole country to be exact, one that includes a unique Jamaican culture. Our visit would bring us across the north-western parts of the island, far from the big city of Kingston. Here we would enjoy some sand, surf and sun along with dabs of adventure and history.

Jamaican Luxury

Accommodations in Jamaica can vary and there are hotels for every budget. The most sought after places are the all-inclusive luxury resorts. Our stay while on the island was at the Excellence resort at Oyster Bay in Falmouth. This property is as perfect as any world-wide resort. Set on its own peninsula with a private white sandy beach, tropical manicured gardens and a large heated pool, it is a wonderful place to relax and recharge.

Simply put, our suite was amazing! It was a ground floor unit with a private plunge pool facing the ocean. Add to this the well-designed and handsomely decorated resort that is only months old and included all the

modern amenities and creature comforts and we had a home away from home. With a wide choice of dining options, top shelf spirits, wines and beers I could see why it would be hard to leave the grounds but even though we did, we enjoyed the resort thoroughly.

Hampden House

Jamaica and rum go hand-in-hand and a visit to Hampden House sounds perfectly Jamaican. Established in 1753, this is the oldest distillery on the island. Situated in the countryside, away from it all, it was an off road adventure just getting there. We would get a real feel of the authentic Jamaica, passing by farmers, villagers, school kids on



there way home, a wonderful bamboo forest and finally a palm tree lined driveway that led to the wrought iron estate gates.

The tour would start in front of a beautiful mansion nestled in a tropical paradise with geese, ducks and peacocks roaming around. With little time to spare, we would indulge in a delicious fruit punch made with over-proof estate rum. Rustic and well worn, the distillery tour is wonderful walk back in time. Needless to say, the educational and fun visit ended with tastings of aged rum!

Montego Bay

A stone's throw away from Falmouth is Jamaica's third largest city Montego Bay. There we would venture to visit a multitude of activities and offerings.

Tracks & Records

To me, Bolt would be the perfect name for the fastest man on earth. Another perfect name is 'Tracks and Records'. That is the restaurant that Jamaica's living legend 'Usain Bolt' started, first in the capitol Kingston and now the second location in Mobay. A wonderful and typically Jamaican meal of jerk chicken, fried fish, rice and beans made you know you are on the island (Mon)! I looked forward to this visit and enjoyed every last minute knowing I was in the shadow of a superstar athlete.

Rose Hall

Witches, voodoo and murder; sounds like plots from a Hollywood horror movie but this is the tale of Rose Hall in Montego Bay. Known as the White Witch and the mistress of Voodoo, Annie Palmer was a white Jamaican estate owner who became so by marriage. It seems that her three marriages did not work out as her husbands and several slave lovers would mysteriously die or disappear in the night.

Rose Hall mansion is a fine example of Georgian architecture. It sits on a hill overlooking the Caribbean Sea. The mansion was completely destroyed and refurbished to its original glory. The interior might be new but the facade and the spirit of Annie still live on.

Scotchie's Jerk

If Marley is Jamaican music then Jerk is Jamaican food. I was not sure what Jerk meant at first but put simply, it is marinated meats and fish that are slowly cooked over a charcoal fire. Often, the best meals are the simple ones.

Simplicity rules at Scotchie's outdoor restaurant. Our meal consisted of several courses: soup du jour (pea soup), bammy (deep-fried cassava flatbread), Jerk Chicken and Beef and Red Strip beer, filling the heart, soul and stomach. On our visit to the outdoor kitchen we learned that the specific spices used for marinating were a highly guarded secret and the wood used for cooking was Sugarwood brought in from the forest.

Ocho Rios

A short distance away is Ocho Rios, yet another popular sunny destination for visitors. The city is well known for its port of call for cruise ships and cargo ships that load sugar and limestone. The main natural attraction (besides the sandy beaches) is the Dunn's falls. Other off-site destinations to experience are the Enchanted Gardens and the Mystic Mountains.

The famous falls

Dunn's River Falls is one of the main tourist attractions and one that I had seen endless numbers of times in TV travel shows and travel magazines. After having scaled the site I can see why. Climbing the falls with a guide is a popular activity but visitors can also opt to walk the length of the falls on a well-paved sidewalk. Either way the falls are amazing; so much lush vegetation that border and canopy the falls.

Enchanted Gardens

The tropics mean rain and rain means lots of rivers and vegetation. You do not need to go very far for a communion with nature in Jamaica. A great deal of the island is forested. Enchanted Gardens is a great place to experience this tropical paradise. In it you will find 14 natural waterfalls, streams and natural spring-fed pools. In this venue however visitors cannot walk up the falls.



Visitors will find a wide variety of beautiful flowers, fruit and spice trees as well as a large Japanese Koi pond. The garden also includes a large walk-in aviary filled with friendly exotic birds such as parrots, budgies, and lovebirds, all of whom will literally climb all over you just to get a tasty snack.

Mystic Mountain

Imagine a ski-style chair lift bringing you up through a tropical mountainside. Then, once on top you get an outstanding 360-degree view of the surrounding area including the city of Ocho Rios, the Caribbean Sea, the beaches, the harbour area and the dense green forest. After that, a once in a lifetime experience as we climbed into individual roller-coaster style blob-sleds that whisked us through the canopy forest at breakneck speeds. It works well as a blend of nature and man-made contraptions co-exist and the whole thing was fantastic.

A final word

I have had a couple of very close Jamaican friends in Canada. They both proudly tried to describe their beloved country and always mentioned the easy-going lifestyle, the beautiful scenery, the great foods, rums and beers and their culture and music. Yet there is a world that lies between hearing of it and experiencing it. The very earth beneath your feet, the sun above, and the evening breeze all work in unison pampering your spirit, easing your soul. One would be hard pressed to be stressed on what is a true earthly paradise. ■

WWW.VISITJAMAICA.COM

WWW.EXCELLENCERESORTS.COM





Orlando Eats and Treats

by David J. Cox

This visitor paradise has so much to offer that travelers sometimes forget that there is a local cuisine to be discovered. In Orlando, you can find some great unique options, as well as every chain restaurant and fast food option you can imagine. We tried a little of everything.

Coco Thai

Authenticity is the name of the game at Coco Thai.

The menu is filled with colorful and flavorful creations, and the head chef ensured that the presentation that pleased the eye as much as the palate. For starters, we chose the basil rolls and steamed dumplings, both doing their job and whetting our appetite.



Coco Thai

Our table's entrées were a cross-section of the menu and included Thai favorites Vegetable Fried Rice, which was crispy and full of flavor, and a spicy Pad Thai (the national dish of Thailand) was perfect. A little more exotic were the Three Flavored Fish, a deep fried whole flounder topped with a delicious sauce and finally a potato, onion and peanut Masaman curry.

Though the food may be the reason to visit, the ambiance is also worth mentioning. Open since 2017, the restaurant is sleek, stylish and contemporary compared to most traditional Thai restaurants. Art in food preparation and in presentation!

WWW.COCOEAT.COM



Teak

Teak

This neighbourhood pub was welcoming, warm and friendly. The menu included traditional pub fare and some really odd and intriguing burgers, including the Cronie Burger, which is a French doughnut served with a half-pound Angus burger, topped with maple-pepper bacon, smoked Gouda cheese and an over-medium egg!

Our table decided on more traditional dishes. We started with some finger-licking BBQ wings and amazing loaded perogies that came smothered in a great siracha Alfredo sauce and fried onions.



Black Rooster

Main courses were next-level good. Though none of us tried their Teak Challenge burger (2 pounds of beef, 24 slices of bacon and 18 slices of cheese...for starters), we did enjoy the Pig burger with smoked ham, bacon and pulled pork, a pesto chicken flat-bread sandwich, and both salmon with lemon dill Buerre Blanc sauce and a salmon served on a great Greek salad.

A great personal touch was the walls of fame and shame, which are a great tribute to the brave souls who have attempted to eat the Challenge burger!

WWW.TEAKORLANDO.COM

Black Rooster Taqueria

The husband and wife team owners, John and Juliana Calloway, started this wondrous Farm to Taco concept restaurant in heart of the Mills50 District community after working in Mexico and falling in love with the food.

The recipes are based on authentic Mexican cuisine are made with fresh ingredients that make them simple and delicious. They are especially proud of the organic corn tortillas made to order right in front of the guests.

Though they do not have a "signature dish", the menu contains a collection of unique and authentic choices that build on the traditional foods of Mexico. Their Achioté Pork Taco is cooked for over 36 hours and is filled with melt in your mouth pork, and the Black Rooster Taco with seared beef, Applewood bacon, Oaxaca cheese and smoked chile poblano is pure bliss.

Their appetizers, including a made to order guacamole and a Pozole Verde bowl are must haves. But leave room for dessert! Their two mouth-watering choices are the chocolate-chipotle flan with peanut butter and a Tres Leches cake.

This small gem is a must-visit for foodies who love authentic cuisine. The Taqueria is a small, intimate space that makes visitors feel like they are in the heart of Mexico.

WWW.BLACKROOSTERTAQUERIA.COM



Cuba Libre

Cuba Libre

The Orlando incarnation of this chain, that started in Philadelphia's Old City in 2000, is a trip into Cuba's intriguing flavors, music and culture. The restaurant is housed in a multi-floor building with classic architecture and an open concept. You feel like you are in the courtyard of a Cuban villa. It is something to see in person as words cannot do it justice!

Waiting for dinner, we were offered coconut mojitos, which were quite good with high-end rum and a smooth taste. Dinner started with some delicious appetizers, including the unique Crab Guacamole with fried plantains, some 'traditional street Malanga snacks' and some delicious Manchego cheese and spinach fritters.

Dinner would offer the best fish I have ever had, the Pargo Frito, which was a whole red snapper served with a red curry-mango mojito sauce. Other dishes sampled were a fully loaded seafood Paella, the Ropa Vieja with braised shredded and stewed brisket, and their Arroz Con Pollo, with rice, chorizo and a roasted piquillo pepper salad. All were well presented, tasty and perfectly spiced.

Desert was presented a la cart, with a selection of freshly made single serve dishes. Every night is different, and we enjoyed a blueberry cheesecake, crème Brule and a rum-infused tiramisu.

Wonderful ambiance and great food!

WWW.CUBALIBRERESTAURANT.COM

Terralina Crafted Italian

Terralina Crafted Italian offers a perfect vantage point to Lake Buena Vista as guests enjoy the simple yet delicious meals offered by this unique restaurant.

Starting with a fresh loaf of bread with a side of olive oil and pickled veggies for dipping, the meal was off to a good start. Inspired by crafted Italian cooking, genuine flavors and authentic dishes, the kitchen uses its wood-burning oven for hand tossed pizzas and calzones. We shared a calzone for appe-



Terralina Crafted Italian

tizer and then moved onto our individual meals.

The grilled vegetable panini was perfectly seasoned and the veggies were a blend with mushrooms, peppers, eggplant and onions. The chicken parmesan was also prepared to perfection with a delicate sauce that accentuated the chicken without overpowering it.

The spaghetti and meatballs and penne and shrimp were simply marvellous and noting the silence during the meal, we were all enjoying the meal so much we were rendered speechless!

WWW.TERRALINACRAFTEDITALIAN.COM

Tin Roof

A tasty experience boosted by the great stage offerings of live music.

The Tin Roof prides itself on giving musicians a place to play and customers a place to enjoy a good meal. We were treated to a great solo artist offering his renditions of varied artists like the Eagles and Elton John. As he played, we chowed down on an appetizer of their delicious Dixie biscuits which are fried biscuit sliders with house smoked brisket, bacon, peach jam and cheddar cheese.

Our dinners would be equally tasty. The Crazy Fish tacos were made to perfection with picked red onion and gochujang mayo, and their Garden Quesadilla was bursting with flavour, as onions, mushrooms, corn and peppers were stuffed into a perfectly grilled tortilla.

The others at the table enjoyed the Candy Pig Mac and Cheese, with its sweet and spicy sauce and the Voodoo shrimp plate, where the seafood was smothered in Creole sauce and fresh cream.

A great place for comfort food and good music! ■

WWW.TINROOFORLANDO.COM



Tin Roof

“Let’s Drive til it’s Warm!”

Our Family’s Road Trip to the Florida Keys

Article and photography by Jennifer Merrick

Take the kids out of school for a vacation? Not anymore.

Exams, part-time jobs and school projects mean it’s a high season family vacation or stay at home. And winters are long. And cold. But four flights during high season for some fun under the sun is prohibitively expensive.

Our solution? Let’s drive til it’s warm! We had ten days, two teenagers, snorkeling gear and a cooler filled with food. Time to hit the road!

Racing Adventures

Four states (New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Virginia), 13 hours and 1086

km later, we were at our first destination: Mooresville, North Carolina, 40 minutes north of Charlotte.

Why Mooresville? Well, it’s about the halfway point on our trip, accommodation is right off the highway and most importantly, it’s the heart of NASCAR racing. And so if you’re a racing fan, like the two y-chromosome members of my family definitely are, it’s like being a kid in a candy store. There are so many car treats to choose from in the vicinity: high-speed go-karting at GoPro MotorPlex, numerous NASCAR shops and museums and the hometown of the legendary Dale Earnhardt.

What to do? We only had one day in the

area, but we squeezed in visits to Lake Norman State Park, NASCAR Hall of Fame, Charlotte Speedway (where we drove along this famous track for the Christmas Speedway light and sound installation) and some of the best ribs ever at Lancaster BBQ.

Our Fave? Not being racing fans ourselves, my daughter and I thought we were taking one for the team when we agreed to this pit stop. But we ALL had a blast at the NASCAR Hall of Fame, especially at interactive exhibitions like the car race simulation and the pit stop demo, where my daughter’s hair was flying as she raced to fill up the tank and change the tire to beat her brother’s time.





na hiding among them, too. But most people come here for snorkelling. Besides the coral, fish and sea turtles there's the famous Christ of the Abyss, an over eight-foot tall bronze sculpture of Jesus. Bahia Honda State Park was another gorgeous spot to spend an afternoon with its long white-sand beach on both the ocean and gulf side. For a view of both, we walked along the old Bahia Honda Rail Bridge, which is now just used for pedestrians. We also explored a little of colourful and historic Key West, tasting the best Cuban sandwich ever at Cuban Coffee Queen. And, of course, there was the Key lime pie, which we may have sampled a few times during our time here.

Our Fave: Aptly named, Sundowners in Key Largo has a large patio overlooking the water, delicious seafood and the best show in town – a Florida Keys sunset. A tradition at this restaurant is to feed the fish down at the docks, so off with their bucket of fish food the kids went. At first the cheeky pelican stole it all, but then came the big fish – a tarpon and a nurse shark – and the pelican backed off. It was amazing to watch but still not as enthralling as the sunset. We basked in the brilliant oranges and reds that reflected off the sailboats and palm trees. Happy. And happy at the same time (which is not always the case on a family vacation).

I now have it on my screensaver so that when it's -10°C or when we're arguing about homework, I can think back to this memory. It came in handy on the two-day drive back, too. ■

Sunshine Dreams

Sixteen hours of driving and two more states (South Carolina, Georgia) later, we found our Holy Grail. The warm temperatures in Florida were a tonic for our winter weary bodies, and our dry, pale skin thirstily soaked up the moist, salty air. And it only got warmer the farther south we drove. By the time we arrived in the Florida Keys, it was a blissful 27°C.

Why the Florida Keys? It's like driving to a Caribbean Island. In fact, the archipelago consists of approximately 1700 islands, 43 of which are connected by 42 bridges on the Overseas Highway. Key West, Florida's southernmost point, is only 150 kilometres to Cuba. It's a road tripper's heaven. One minute we were driving

down what looked like an ordinary highway, and the next, we were cruising on a bridge with a front-seat panoramic view of the most inviting turquoise water imaginable.

What to do? The keys have a laid-back vibe so some of the best moments involved a beach blanket or lounge chair and a view of the water. But there was lots to explore, too.

John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the first underwater park in the USA, has 170 acres of land and 48,000 acres of protected ocean. The Mangrove Trail was a great boardwalk that offered an introduction to this long-rooted species of trees that are often submerged in water. We spotted a very cool looking bearded iguana





An unconventional Retreat at the Le Monastère des Augustines

by Cherie DeLory

Le Monastère des Augustines in the heart of Old Quebec City is a one-of-a-kind wellness retreat and living museum that rejuvenates the body, mind and soul. Namaste to the Augustinian order of nuns, the pioneers of healthcare in Canada. In 1639, France's King Louis XIII sent three Augustinian sisters from Europe on a mission to start the first of twelve convent hospitals in Canada and the first in North America north of Mexico. Hotel Dieu de Québec is the first hospital they opened, located in a separate wing of Le Monastère des Augustines.

Upon entering the sun drenched, renovated front wing surrounding the chapel, there's a calming ambiance and a pleasant cedar and citrus aura. It's a similar essential oil to what the Augustinian sisters made in 1639 to "soothe the atmosphere around the monastery and the Hotel Dieu." It was called Parfum de Sanctuarie. Today's blend is called "1639" and is available in the gift shop along with other aromatherapy wonders.

Central to the ambiance of the monastery is the museum, showcasing the history of Quebec's convent hospitals, the evolution of medicine, and the role of the sisters. In the 17th century if a young girl dreamed of becoming a nurse she had to become a nun. Today, several of the Augustinian sisters live in a private wing, and you'll see them during morning mass or the Vespers, an evening choir service at 5pm daily in the chapel.

The cuisine is exceptional. From the homemade cashew yogourt during Breakfast in Silence to a relaxing organic lunch or dinner.

Sleep in renovated rooms with ensuite bath and cozy window seats, or the original nun's "cell" with shared bath. Amenities are immaculate and partially furnished with original heritage pieces.

Enjoy the spa, wellness seminars, yoga, meditation, dance, pilates and tai chi. Explore the apothecary garden courtyard and private walled garden. The monastery overlooks Marche Vieux Port with views of the Laurentian Mountains, and restaurants and boutiques of the Latin Quarter are a two-minute walk from the back door. I like to think that the sisters invite us to make wellness a good habit. ■

WWW.MONASTERE.CA/EN



The Evolution of the Grand Central Hotel Belfast

by Cherie DeLory

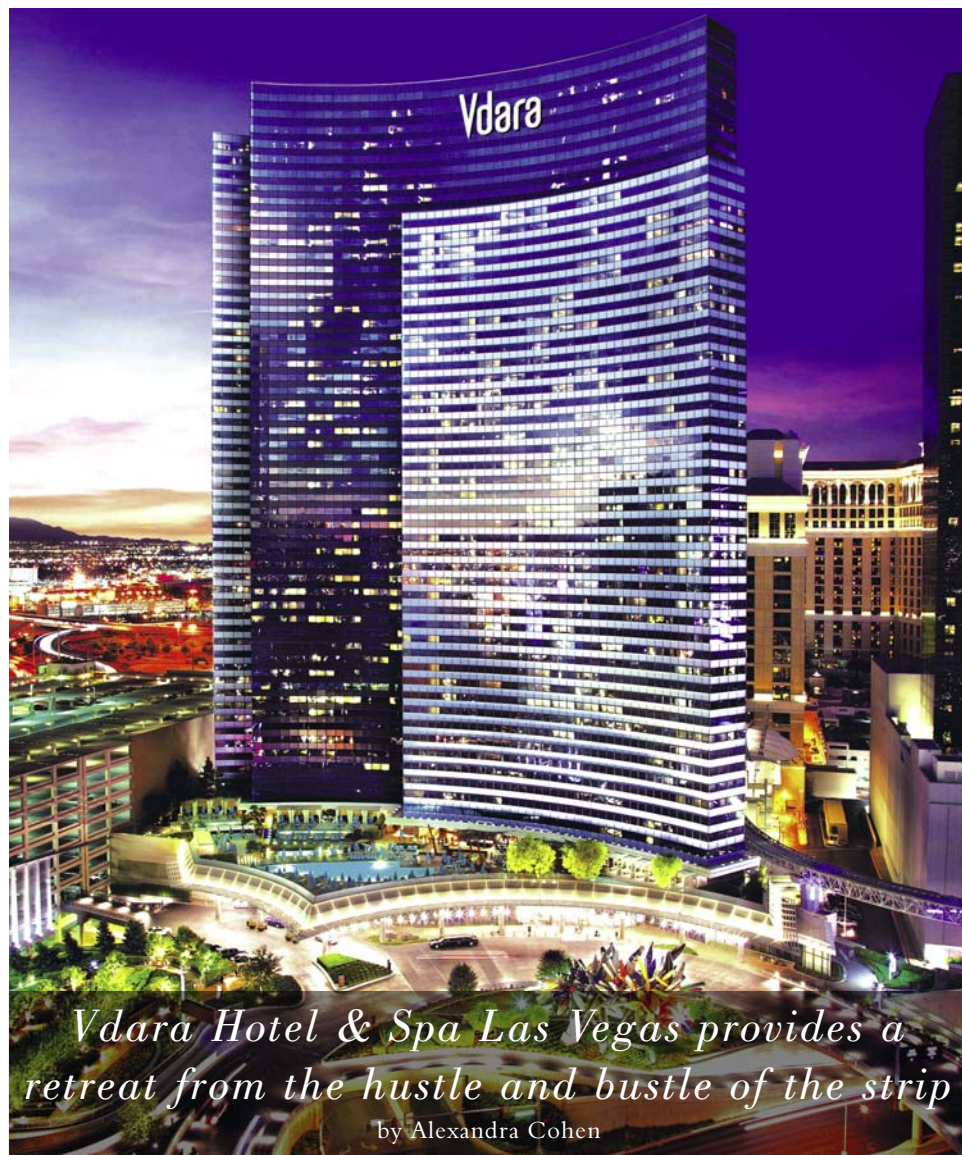
It's Northern Ireland's newest, largest, and most expensive hotel. The Grand Central Hotel Belfast, in the capital city, is a nostalgic ode to its inspiration, the Grand Central Hotel (GC) on Royal Avenue. Ireland's belle of hotels opened in 1893 and hosted the who's who of politicians and celebrities, until closing in 1971 due to civil unrest during the Troubles. It became a base camp for the British Army and was the target of terrorist bombings. The building was eventually demolished in 1984 and would become the Castle Court shopping centre, now the third largest in Northern Ireland.

The reincarnation of the Grand Central Hotel, conveniently located minutes from City Hall and Belfast Central Train Station, is a converted office building on Bedford Street. It's an homage to the glory days of its predecessor, where guests stayed prior to travelling on the maiden voyage of the White Star Liner RMS Titanic in 1912, and was host to the gala dinner. The wall in the dining area on the first floor boasts a whimsical art installation of the authentic silverware and dishes from the dinner. Enjoy a botanical cocktail and panoramic views of the city and Belfast Hills in the Observatory Lounge on the 23rd floor, the highest bar in Ireland.

Nearby must-dos include the Botanic Gardens and Ulster Museum in the Queen's Quarter, Belfast Castle, Titanic Belfast, and a brownie at Co Couture.

"The hotel has really become an iconic landmark and venue in Belfast and Northern Ireland," says General Manager Stephen Meldrum. ■

WWW.GRANDCENTRALHOTELBELFAST.COM



The gorgeous Vdara Hotel & Spa is an all-suite property designed for those who love the excitement of Las Vegas, but prefer to enjoy it in a smaller and more exclusive, non-gaming, smoke-free environment.



Vdara is physically connected to the Bellagio and directly adjacent to the Aria Resort & Casino, offering access to all of the amenities and energy of CityCenter while also providing a nearby retreat from the hustle and bustle of the strip.

The Vdara made its big debut in December 2009. Internationally-inspired, the chic boutique resort offers a holistic spa, luxurious pool, intimate meeting space, and the sophisticated and convenient Vice Versa Patio & Lounge and Market Café Vdara, both located in their small and easy-to-navigate lobby. Soaring 57 stories, Vdara has 1,495 suites ranging from 500 to 1,650 square feet. It also boasts some outstanding amenities, including its spa.

Featuring 10,000 square feet of contemporary conference space, Vdara has become the pre-

mier choice in Las Vegas for customized executive meetings, corporate, social, and banquet functions for up to 400 guests. The Pool & Lounge, a beautiful getaway that we had the chance to experience firsthand, also features 19 luxurious cabanas, including six spa cabanas.

While at the Vdara people have the opportunity to experience what is surely a first in many of their lives: snacks and coffee delivered to their rooms by two relay robots by the names of Fetch and Jett. These talented bots work alongside their human colleagues to transport an array of frequently forgotten and requested amenities including shaving and dental kits as well as tasty bites and drinks from Market Café.

We were pleased to see that our Corner Suite offered us a lovely view of some of the hotels on the Strip. The kitchenette features a two-burner stove and a full-sized refrigerator, while the living area offers a dining table fit for four. You can end the day by soaking in the spa-like tub sitting in the room's expansive bathroom. There are 42-inch, flat-screen, and high-definition televisions with media hubs for MP3 players, cameras, DVD players and game consoles as well as a work desk with a multi-line telephone in each of these suites. We also had access to large closets with plush robes and slippers, an ironing board and clothes steamer, and a washing machine. The in-suite, laptop-sized electronic safes were also very convenient.

The hotel has a fully equipped 2,000-square-foot fitness center, with cardio, exercise machines, and free weights, as well as personal trainers available for private or group instruction. A smoothie bar offers a selection of smoothies, nutritious snacks, and juices.

The Vdara lobby is quite nice and spacious. Above the registration desk hangs the 30-foot-long horizontal Frank Stella painting, "Damascus Gate Variation I," which draws immediate attention with its vibrant shades of blue, red, orange and yellow. ■

WWW.VDARA.COM



Puntacana Resort & Club - *Tropical Paradise Found*



Accommodations

Puntacana Resort & Club is the Caribbean's leading resort community on the eastern shore of the Dominican Republic. Tortuga Bay is member of the Leading Hotels of the World and the only AAA Five Diamond awarded hotel in the Dominican Republic, offering understated elegance, privacy and unparalleled personal service. Located at Playa Blanca is The Westin Puntacana Resort & Club, guest enjoys all of Westin's signature amenities and Don Queco Cigar Bar. Our Four Points by Sheraton is situated at Puntacana Village, few minutes away from Punta Cana International Airport (PUJ).

The Estates

Become a part of our magnificent paradise community with the purchase of a vacation home in the elite The Estates at Puntacana Resort & Club, where Julio Iglesias, Mikhail Baryshnikov call home. An exclusive lifestyle of relaxation, excitement and understated elegance, prospective buyers can choose among elegant homes perched above the Caribbean Sea or overlooking scrupulously manicured golf courses in Corales, Tortuga, Arrecife, Hacienda, Hacienda del Mar and Marina. Home and apartments are also available at Puntacana Village.



Golf

With 45 holes of championship golf, Puntacana Resort & Club is the Caribbean's premier golf & beach destination. The P.B. Dye designed La Cana Golf Course, consisting of 27 holes across Tortuga, Arrecife and Hacienda, was declared the number one course in the Caribbean by Golf Magazine. Designed by Tom Fazio and set between rocky cliffs, coral reefs and the expansive Caribbean Sea, the Corales Golf Course features six oceanfront holes, multiple lines of approach and picturesque canyons, making for an exhilarating experience.

Activities & Spa

Puntacana Resort & Club offers a wide range of adventures for guests of all ages including golf, tennis, kite boarding, scuba diving, horseback riding, fishing and numerous excursions by sea, land and air. The leading spa in the Caribbean, Six Senses Spa at Puntacana Resort & Club presents a range of innovative packages, Signature treatments and Asian therapies. Visit Galerías Puntacana to enjoy an assortment of shops, restaurants, playground, and our spirited nightlife.

Dining

Puntacana Resort & Club is home to 6 world class eateries with an indigenously delectable cuisine. Tucked inside Tortuga Bay, the AAA Four Diamond awarded Bamboo blends modern cuisine with Mediterranean influences. Specializing in local seafood, The AAA Three Diamond Award La Yola is located at the Marina. At La Cana Golf & Beach Club is The Grill, an American style grill offering views of the sea. The Westin Puntacana Resort & Club provides a variety of restaurants and bars from Ananí to Brasserie Grill. Next door is Playa Blanca, a beachfront tropical restaurant. Our Dine Around Program offers the best sampling of our finest culinary experience. All restaurants offer complimentary shuttle service within the resort. More dining options are available at Puntacana Village.



Corporate Social Responsibility

We believe that in development there needs to be equilibrium among the economic, environmental and social components. Our non-profit Grupo Puntacana Foundation serves both natural and social resources, while contributing to the sustainable development of our Dominican Republic. These practices have been guiding principles of our company, and along with vision, hard work and perseverance, the key to our success.

Punta Cana International airport

Punta Cana International Airport (PUJ), built, owned and operated by Grupo Puntacana, the resort's developers, and located within Puntacana Resort & Club, is just minutes away from check-in at any of our hotels or private homes. Punta Cana International Airport (PUJ) has direct service from 98 different cities around the world, making Punta Cana the most accessible destination in the Caribbean. Our VIP terminals service the needs of guests flying in private aircrafts.

The Caribbean's Premiere Golf
& Beach Resort Community
WWW.PUNTACANA.COM



EXPERIENCE LIFESTYLE

At Puntacana Resort & Club

The destination for relaxation, simplicity and convenience. With three miles of magnificent white sandy beaches and forty-five holes of championship golf, it's never been easier to call a place home. Our very own Punta Cana International Airport guarantees an effortless journey from the terminals to the lobby of our AAA Five Diamond Award-winning boutique hotel Tortuga Bay and The Westin Puntacana Resort & Club.



PUNTACANA®
RESORT & CLUB

For more Information visit: www.puntacana.com



The Buenaventura Golf & Beach Resort in Panama

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

Panama's appeal as a holiday destination goes far beyond a visit to Panama City. The five-star Buenaventura Golf and Beach Resort lies in the Riviera Pacifica community, near the town of Rio Hato, in Coclé Province. It's about a 2 ½ hour drive from Panama City or 30 minute flight from Panama's Tocumen Airport, followed by a 20 minute transfer. This oasis for the senses offers guests a unique experience that ranges from the gorgeous beach, to the 18-hole, Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course; from traditional-to-contemporary Panamanian cuisine, to awareness and interaction with Panama's rich indigenous heritage.

On arrival at the resort, we were greeted by Nonoska from the Palapa Bar, with refreshing and colorful "Coclé Tropical Mojitos", prepared by master mixologist Miguel Diaz. According to Diaz, his themed cocktails are "not just a recipe, but a reflection of the history and culture of the area". Certainly the green forest leaves covering our glasses fit right into the décor of the resort lobby where crafts of some of the country's seven major indigenous groups were on display, including Power Sticks that resembled decorated walking canes of the Cultura Conga-Caribe people, beautiful, life-size, Toucan-inspired Birds, made of palm tree fibre (chunga) by the

Embera-Wounaan people, and walls of woven chungu basket designs and intricately carved 'totuma' colanders.

Across from the resort entrance, the Mua Mua Foundation store sells similar arts, sculptures, masks and crafts, with the staff providing fascinating insights into the culture of Panama's indigenous people.

The actual hotel accommodation is no less inspiring. My large, comfortably-decorated room had a king size, four-poster bed along with a couch and a desk. The balcony overlooked one of the swimming pools surrounded by lush gardens, with trees full of Great-tailed Grackles, chirping and whistling at sunrise and sunset.

Some clients opt to stay on the resort property for all their needs including the health club, the long, white, soft-sand beach, and five swimming pools with semi-private pool-side enclaves for that 'far-away-from-the-crowd' feeling of relaxation. At the Corotu Spa (named after the eponymous tree that is the symbol of the resort), the Pixbae fruit treatment leaves clients with the sensation of vitamins seeping into their pores and "like the Corotu tree, you can feel your roots and your energy".

Outside the resort but still on the property there is the Sports Club, offering clinics and private classes in tennis, basketball, soccer, volleyball and more. A small zoo-wildlife rescue centre is a popular family attraction, and just down the road is the Golf Club where the Jack Nicklaus course (operated by Troon) has served as a three-time host of the PGA tour in Latin America.

Culinary highlights at the Buenaventura included the fresh-out-of-the water ceviche at Asa'o & Pesca'o Restaurant, tender grilled lobster at the El Faro Beach Club, and rum tasting with Robert Martin of Ron Abuelo rums, in which he assisted us in appreciating the hints of orange, vanilla, banana, crème brûlée, leather and tobacco in the five, fine, dark rums before us.

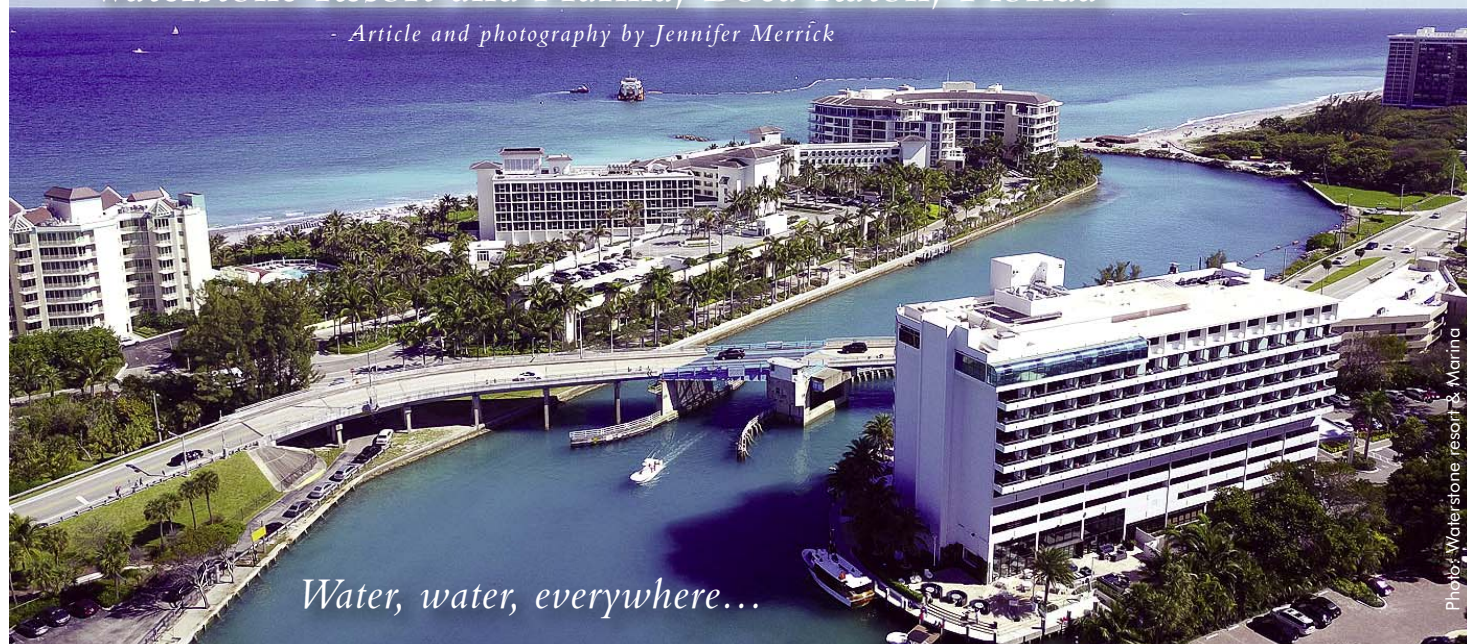
With ultra-friendly service, luxury accommodation, a variety of active and passive activities, and tasty and creative food and cocktails, the Buenaventura Golf & Beach Resort is a wonderful treat for the senses that perfectly complements a stay in Panama. ■

WWW.THEBUENAVENTURAHOTEL.COM



Waterstone Resort and Marina, Boca Raton, Florida

- Article and photography by Jennifer Merrick



Water, water, everywhere...

Photo: Waterstone resort & Marina

“Wherever you are in the hotel, you’re looking at water,” explains Jennifer Graham, a spokesperson for the hotel.

Located at the southernmost point of Florida’s Palm Beaches in Boca Raton, this luxurious boutique hotel overlooks both the Atlantic Ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway.

So whether your balcony is on the north or south side, you’re enjoying lunch or relaxing poolside in a cabana, holding a meeting in the event spaces or taking wedding photos on the dock, you are greeted with an H2O view.

One of the best places to appreciate this is at Boca Landing, an indoor and outdoor restaurant with a casual atmosphere and exceptional cuisine. Local seafood dishes delight with Chef Signature plates like Pan Seared Line Caught Grouper, Fresh Catch Popillote and Boca Landing Paella. Happy hour specials in the bar lounge are perfect for sundowners with half-priced wines and nibbles to share.

Though, you may prefer to order room service and take in the view from your room. Floor-to-ceiling windows, spacious private balconies and warm modern décor provide a relaxing ambience to chill out between outings.

Amenities at the resort, which is part of the Curio Collection by Hilton, include 24-hour fitness center, waterfront pool and deck, beach access with shuttle, bike rentals and in-room spa treatments.

As you would expect, water activities are a huge draw for visitors to the area as the Intracoastal Waterway that extends for about 4,800 km along the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico coasts is a much calmer thoroughfare for all types of boats. A Catamaran cruise is available for intimate parties or special events, and guests can rent stand up paddleboards, kayaks and WaveRunners (a personal watercraft similar to a Jet Ski).

But it’s not only aqua attractions that

endears Boca Raton to visitors. The community itself is thriving with restaurants, specialty shops and unique attractions. Just five minutes away from the hotel is Gumbo Limbo, a nature centre and turtle rehabilitation facility. Here, you can meet Crookshanks, a juvenile turtle whose front left flipper was entangled in a fishing line, causing severe edema. His future looks bright, and he’s expected to be released into the wild soon, like so many before him. The remarkable facility is part of Red Reef Park, a 67-acre ocean-front property with beaches, playgrounds, a tennis center, golf course and Children’s Science Explorium.

For more beach time, head to Spanish River Park, where you’ll find an uncrowded nature reserve with bike paths, nature trails, picnic facilities and an observation tower. Climb to the top, and check out the dunes, and of course, yet another gorgeous water vista. ■

WWW.WATERSTONEBOCA.COM
WWW.THEPALMBEACHES.COM



Photo: Waterstone resort & Marina



VILLA PARADISO



*Your Escape
Jamaica*

Jamaica, the land of Bob Marley and Usain Bolt, is also ranked as one of the **top five** most favoured **tourist destinations in the world**.



There are many excellent all-inclusive hotels on the island, but if you're looking for more **private and luxurious accommodation**, then we would be delighted to welcome you to **Villa Paradiso, an enchanting seven-bedroom seaside villa in Ocho Rios**.



Villa Paradiso is located in the **secure gated community of Mammee Bay**. The two-acre Villa Paradiso property is lush with tropical plants and flowers.

Villa Paradiso combines the sumptuous elegance of a Mediterranean-style villa with the welcoming warmth of Caribbean hospitality.

As you arrive at the villa in your **private coach**, our staff will greet you with cold towels and an even colder drink. Walk onto the **63-foot veranda** and view the **glistening waters of the Caribbean Sea**, the **immaculately private white sand beach** and the inviting pool terrace. Our five professionally trained staff, led by our housekeeper **Nadine**, will look after your every need and make your vacation **an unforgettable experience**.



Exclusive Private Jamaican Paradise

All seven bedrooms are individually styled with ensuite bathrooms, overheads fans and air conditioning. Your rooms will be cleaned daily by Nadine and our laundress **Judith**. The **spacious living areas** combine comfort and elegance with lots of space to relax with a cold drink served by **Jermaine** the houseman. Mealtimes are very special at Villa Paradiso. **Leila**, our superb cook, will prepare all your meals. **Local delicacies** to try include pumpkin soup, salt fish and ackee, jerk chicken and curried goat, all seasoned with delicious local herbs and spices. Meals are served by Jermaine and **Michael**, our grounds man, in a professional yet friendly way.



There are numerous **great attractions** to visit in the **Ocho Rios area**. **Ronnie**, your coach driver can take you **rafting, tubing, or golfing**, as well as **swimming with the dolphins** at **Dolphin Cove**, climbing the famous **Dunn's River Falls**, or zip lining at **Mystic Mountain**. Then there is **Bob Marley's birthplace/museum** in the hills above Ocho Rios, and the Crafts Market and duty free shopping in Ocho Rios, only 10 minutes away.

The Riu Hotel, a five minute walk down the beach, can offer you rental of **many water sport activities including sailing and scuba diving**. We look forward to welcoming you to Villa Paradiso, **your Jamaican home away from home**.



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Live Calendar

Two Key Resorts

by Jennifer Merrick



Fisher Inn

Ocean Pointe Suites, Key Largo

After driving almost 2500 kilometres with our teens to reach the beautiful Florida Keys, it was a treat to relax for a couple of days at the Ocean Pointe Suites. There was just so much space! All of the 170 accommodation at the resort are suites, and ours had two bedrooms (a considerable distance from each other), two bathrooms, a living room, laundry and a full kitchen. Two cozy balconies overlooked the mangrove forest and the blue Atlantic Ocean behind it.

Not only did the suites give us plenty of breathing room, the resort itself felt expansive and secluded with a private, secure entrance and 60 acres of oceanfront property.

A definite highlight was its newly renovated Junior Olympic-size pool that included a 12-person Jacuzzi hot tub. Surrounded by gardens and with a pool-side bar, it was a perfect spot for some much-needed R & R and soaking up some of that Florida Keys sunshine. For more active pursuits, there were tennis courts, beach volleyball nets, kayaks, SUP paddleboards and snorkelling gear.

The Waterfront Café and Lounge served up refreshments and meals. A rum cocktail and a slice of key lime pie were a great way to end a day exploring nearby points of interest, like John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park and Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Of course, no one would judge if you just wanted to hang out at the pool all day.

Fisher Inn Resort & Marina, Islamorada

"I am happy anywhere I can see the ocean," someone once said. I agree and was ecstatic to stay at the Fisher Inn Resort and Marina. A massive patio, which was half the size of the room itself, looked right over the sparkling blue waters the Florida Keys is famous for.

The all-new resort featured stylishly decorated modern rooms with cool touches, like a robin-egg-blue- coloured microwave and matching round metal chairs which accented the mostly white décor.

Also white was the sand beach lined with palm trees, perfect for lounging or playing games like the giant Jenga, chess and bean bag toss. The Atlantic water may have been on the cold side, but the outdoor pool was

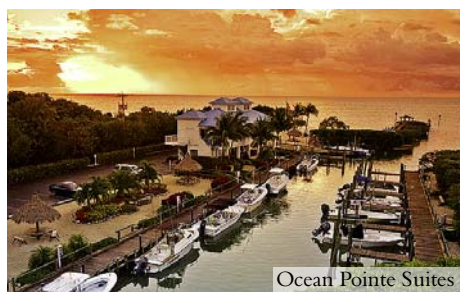
heated and had a view of the ocean. A private ramp and trailer park served guests with boats. Islamorada, 20 minutes south of Key Largo, called itself "The Sports Fishing Capital of the World", known for catches like marlin, tuna and swordfish.

Other attractions in the vicinity included Theater of the Seas, History of Diving Museum, Windley Key Fossil Reef Geological State Park and Lignumvitae Key Botanical State Park. But personally, one of the most interesting draws was that Islamorada was where the Netflix series Bloodline was filmed. Its sultry tropical scenes were one of the reasons I first thought about The Keys for a holiday. We contemplated Rayburn family secrets as we sipped our sundowners and watched the sunset on the patio. Looking at the purple and pink streaks in the sky, we also mused how romantic and fitting the name was. "Islamorada" means "purple island" and was named by Spanish explorers when they saw the purple sky at sunset. ■

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Ocean Pointe Suites



Ocean Pointe Suites



Fisher Inn



Club Med Turquoise *An Inviting Adult-Only Escape in Turks & Caicos* by Susan Campbell

I don't know about you, but when I used to think of Club Med, wild and crazy spring break romps and family vacations full of exuberant kids came to mind. So when I found out that Club Med also has an adult-only escape, and it just happened to be located right on one of my top three favorite beaches on the planet- I was all in!

Glorious Grace Bay Beach- Providenciales

Before we get into the nuts of bolts of this resort, we must talk about this beach. Seemingly endless uncrowded miles of brilliant white crushed coral carpet cresting turquoise calm aqua waters- it's seriously worth a trip to Providenciales - also locally called "Provo"- just to experience it. In fact, Grace Bay Beach constantly ranks in the top ten beaches of the world, and was chosen number one on Trip Advisor in 2018. It's that gorgeous.

Casual barefoot fun on Provo's best beach

Of course, Grace Bay Beach is the chosen location for all of Provo's main resorts, it all depends on the kind of holiday you're looking for. But if you're seeking a really fun, casual, all-inclusive adult-only escape there, look no further than Club Med Turquoise.



Newly refreshed

Following massive renovations after hurricane damage in 2017, and also because it was due as this was one of the very first resorts to be established on the island, the entire complex has now been upgraded to 4-trident standards- Club Med's internal rating system.

With 284 rooms stacked in colorful complexes, the resort spans 34 acres of super prime beachfront property. But I won't lie, the older rooms are still a tad small and Spartan by today's resort standards- and most don't have balconies. So do opt for one of the 92 new deluxe rooms, with balconies, fresh decor, and sea views. But seriously, you'll not be spending much time in your room anyway with so much to do.

For dining, there's one big main buffet restaurant- with indoor and outdoor seating. It's truly massive and comprehensive on all levels, and the fare was consistently fresh and creative. There's also a fancy wine tasting room with tapas, but not included in the price. Sharkie's Grill & Beach Bar is your only other option for food, but their casual fare is very tasty and the seaside location is lovely. They could use a few more food option spots to be honest, but they told me an additional more high-end dining room was in the works for this year, so that will be welcome.

Activities & entertainment

If you can tear yourself away from lounging on that soul-soothing beach, you can try windsurfing, kayaking, paddle boarding, sailing, and snorkeling, all included in the cost. There is also a great dive operator on site. There's also tennis, beach volleyball,

basketball courts and billiards as well. Or you can work out at the newly renovated indoor fitness centre and enjoy free fitness activities like sunset yoga. And of course, being a Club Med, there's always some kind of crazy races or themed activities and parties going on all day, and all night it's live music and energetic dancing by their newly renovated infinity pool. (Which is incidentally open 24/7 - a rare treat.)

Fly through the air or spa by the sea

Then there is the flying trapeze! The signature activity at this particular resort is a huge trapeze set-up for guests including free lessons. Even if you don't partake, it's a lot of fun to watch. Also fun is to hear the shrieks of those attempting it while you are getting a glorious seaside massage at the new spa nook right next door.

The beauty of this spot is that there is plenty of room to have some quiet time by the sea, but lots to do if you want to join in and be social. Best of both worlds, and a bargain on Grace Bay Beach. ■

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R o m a n t i c S e v i l l e

Full of History and Excitement

by Habeeb Salloum, M.S.M.

I was exhausted as I laboured up the last few steps of La Giralda - Seville's most outstanding monument. A steeple of Spain's most massive cathedral, that is the third largest in the world, it has been for centuries a mecca, drawing countless travellers. For over 770 years, along with other nearby historic structures, it continues to be a lasting reminder of the Moors and their architecture, drawing millions of tourists to Seville.

Struggling up the 97 m (318 ft) high former minaret of the city's once Great Mosque, it seemed the sky was near before I reached its top. Spent and weary, I clutched the side of the

railing and, in the dwindling twilight, surveyed the surrounding panorama.

Below, the Patio de los Naranjos of blossoming orange trees, once the Mosque's courtyard, along with its other remaining parts now integrated into the Cathedral, were clearly visible. In the distance, on all sides, the vivid colours of the skyline, dotted with the towering steeples of innumerable churches - many former minarets of mosques - created a delightful picture of an oriental town. It seemed that any minute the Moors would appear to make the picture complete.

The oldest and richest of the cities in Andalusia with an aristocratic history, Seville is a coquetish-cosmopolitan metropolis of some 1,500,000 - Spain's fourth largest city and the capital of Andalusia. Before and during Roman times it was an important urban centre, but it reached its age of splendour under the Moors. They called it 'Ishbiliya' (an Arabized form of the Roman Hispalis) and it became a dazzling metropolis and the home of kings, musicians, poets and men of letters.

The Christians recaptured the city in 1248, after which it lost some of its importance for some centuries. However, after the discovery



of the Americas, Seville again became important, controlling, for many decades, the trade with the 'New World'. The wealth this generated made the city one of the richest urban centres on earth and an important commercial and intellectual centre - a position it retains today.

Nevertheless, the illustrious monuments in the older section of town are almost all the legacy of the Moors. From among these, even more imposing than La Giralda, is the edging Alcázar, Seville's fabulous 14th century Moorish palace built by Mudéjar craftsmen - Muslims living under Christian rule.

The lavishly decorated patio and surrounding chambers incorporate some of the finest examples of Spanish Muslim art, reminding the visitor of Granada's famous Alhambra. On the outside, its vast well-groomed Moorish-style gardens of shrubs and climbing plants overflow with a profusion of jasmine, lemon, myrtle and orange flowers, giving the palace a 'Thousand- and One-Nights' setting.

Next door to this exquisite reminder from the Moorish age is the Barrio de Santa Cruz - after the Reconquista, becoming the Jewish Quarter. The most intriguing part of the city, it consists of a tangled mosaic of narrow streets and cobbled alleyways. Charming white-washed homes, secluded plazas filled with orange trees, comfortable bars and fine restaurants, cover every inch of the Barrio. Usually the visitor's first stop, it is a delightful section of town in which one can glory in the city's Moorish past.

From this Moorish section, it is only a short distance to the imposing Plaza del España with its twin spires dominating the skyline and the nearby María Luisa Park - a large expanse of manicured greenery. Full of flowers, tiled pools and fountains set amid towering trees, this park has, in the main, been responsible for the labelling of Seville as 'City of Gardens'.

Hidden amid the park's colours are the Archaeological Museum, housing an impressive collection of pre-Roman and Roman treasures; and the nearby Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions, located in a splendid Mudéjar pavilion - two places not to be missed, especially by first-time visitors.

If travellers have time to spare, there are countless other sites they can explore. From among these are the twelve-sided Torre de Oro, once a part of the Moorish fortification and now a Naval Museum; Pilate's House, an outstanding example of Mudéjar architecture; and dozens of other historic palaces and churches.

For many, overshadowing all these tourist spots are the colourful fairs and festivals making the city a tourist delight. Commencing on Palm Sunday and continuing until Good Friday, the Holy Week is celebrated by never-ending processions of endless floats carrying jewel-adorned and garlanded statues of the Virgin followed by bands and members of over 100 brotherhoods dressed in their eerie slit-eyed conical hats and black robes. Day and night, the heart-rending cries of saetas (songs of sorrow) echo throughout the city while improvised flamenco by Sevillanos burst on the scene accompanying these lamentations.

Shortly after Holy Week comes the six-day April Fair held in a vast canvas town. Hundreds of kiosks and pavilions, decorated with flags, flowers and lanterns, at night brightly illuminated, give the tent-fairground a seductive air. Amid this colour are held picturesque parades featuring magnificent stallions mounted by couples dressed in traditional Andalusian finery.

During the festivities, the foremost bullfights, highlighted by the top matadors of the season, are held. In every part of the city, from early evening until the wee hours of the morning, dancing, feasting, fireworks displays, music, singing and innumerable other types of merry-making make it an exciting week in which to be in Seville. The saying 'Oh to be in Seville that April's here' is not based upon fiction.

To understand the passion of Spain's proud cultural heritage is to spend an evening in Seville's Los Gallos, the city's oldest and most outstanding flamenco venue located in Plaza de Santa Cruz where one can experience the pulse of Andalusian-Spanish folklore. The 90-minute performances include a total of 10 singers, dancers, and guitarists whose exceptional talents leave the audience mesmerized. The voices of the male singers seem to hypnotize the audience into a state of ecstasy while

their emotional songs of love inspire the fiery black-haired women dancers as they stamp the stage floor with wild uncontrolled passion and rhythmic hand-claps. Beautifully costumed, their tight-bodied multi-coloured dresses, flaring at the hips and covering petticoats with countless ruffles, match the carnations in their hair. Turning, twisting and leaping up in a provocative fashion, they stir the audience's inner emotions.

Like purebred Arabian horses, sparks fly from their eyes as they hold their heads high. Now coy, now inviting, they snap and click their fingers as they twirl their erect bodies to the strains of the captivating music.

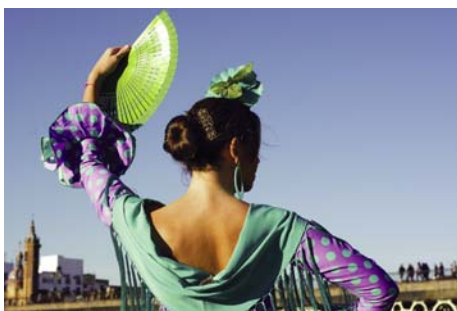
So much to see and experience but there is another side to Seville's signature lifestyle, a throw-back to its intermingling of cultures throughout the city's long history. Tapas bars, some say just over 3,000 of them, proliferate the most exciting of which are located in the old part of Seville along the cobbled streets of Santa Cruz. With the neighbourhood's narrow streets forming a labyrinth of exciting nooks and crannies, tapas bars are within footsteps of each other. Seville's tapas bar culture is the best by far in Spain. Chickpeas with spinach, stir-fried delicate liver pieces, cold tomato soup, croquettes, fried fish are just a few examples of must-tries in the city.

Year after year, masses of people come from all parts of Spain and beyond to join in the revelry. Hence, it is very important for visitors to make hotel reservations long before the events take place.

The excitement, drama and delights of Seville, especially during its fairs and festivals, have inspired a good number of novels and plays. The most popular drama in Spanish literature Don Juan Tenorio's novel and opera 'Carmen', and the 'Barber of Seville', all have some connection to that city.

They have given it a world-wide reputation as a place of dark-haired beauties, flowers, splendid processions, light-hearted gaiety and the halo of enchanted patios - all not figments of their authors' imaginations, but attributes of everyday Seville, much of which comes by way of the Moors.

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Our arrival to Matera could not have been any more spectacular. Just like a perfect postcard, this historic hill-top town glistened in the setting sun. It would prove to be the great beginning to a marvellous week of traveling through a wonderful and lightly traveled part of Italy.

Travelers will always associate Italy to its iconic destinations: Rome, Venice and Florence but there is a newly found travel

destination that is vibrant and exciting and still serene and welcoming.

This fascinating area of Italy, Basilicata, is one of the most southerly of the Italian regions and lies on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Filled with forests and mountains it also borders the Calabria and Puglia regions, as well as the Tyrrhenian and Ionian Seas. There is so much to see and do for the world traveler.

We would be concentrating much time in the region of Matera. Mainly known for its Sassi district, a vast, hillside complex of cave dwellings dating back thousands of years, which is itself part of the Murgia Matera area, a gorge between Matera and Montescaglioso that includes around 150 rock-cut churches. But there was much more to this locale.



Matera rising

For centuries, Matera was a poor area and right up to the middle of the last century, the population lived in appalling conditions. With the aid from the rest of the country it has now risen to be a magnificently beautiful city. So much so that it has been chosen as the European Capitol of Culture for 2019 and its people are proudly working hard at beautifying the city to welcome the thousands of visitors this year. Activities, tourist attractions and many ceremonies are already ongoing.

The very old quarters also called the Sassi are bound by hills and ravines that give it a secluded feeling. Here its people would dig straight into the hills to create home dwellings. This is apparent all round, as construction material was scarce and expensive. All that was left to do was add a facade.

For history buffs, there is the Tramontano Castle, begun in the early 16th century, it has three large towers and as it was being refurbished large Roman cisterns were unearthed. Whole houses were discovered and are now on display to explore how the people of that era lived.

The area has been featured in many films, including 2004's *The Passion of the Christ* and the 2016 version of *Ben-Hur*. We had fun spotting locations seen in the films.

The best thing for me was to wonder the streets of both the Sassi and the newer more flat part of town. Life goes by very slowly, where there is no stress, rush or crowds. There are plenty of beautiful old churches as well as many museums that depict the Matera's culture and struggles. There are also numerous Cafés, boutiques, artisanal shops and the main Cathedral to visit. My two favourites were a visit to a typical historic cave dwelling and a local bakery.

Panificio Cifarelli

What a delight visiting a local bakery where

you can smell this Panificio before you see it. This family business started decades ago and is now in the proud hands of the third generation. There are many offerings here but most of their regular clients bought Matera bread. This bread is special to this city and is made with a specific Durham grain from the region. The bread is also shaped in a unique way as it has been for centuries in Matera.

Aquatio Hotel

Not often have I slept like a king in a cave but this was no ordinary cave. Carved to resemble ancient grottos, it is none less than a luxury hotel with the best possible amenities including seamless Wi-Fi, floor radiant heating, marvellous washrooms and a to-die-for shower head.

The spa at the Aquatio is something to behold. Within the same design of caves and grottos, you can relax in the sauna, the Turkish baths or in a beautiful, heated swimming pool embedded in the natural rock with wonderful ambient lighting.

Palazzo Margherita Boutique Luxury Hotel

Leaving Matera, we would find this charming palace is owned by the famous Hollywood director Francis Ford Coppola. Having a grandfather from this region he decided to get back close to his roots and purchased this grand dame and turned it into a home for his family as well as a luxury hotel. The four year, top to bottom renovations have made this property a true gem and a delightful place to see Basilicata comfort at its best.

Our brief visit and tour of this remarkable estate included lunch but with a twist. We would have to make the meal ourselves. This was a blast as chefs taught us how to make three different kinds of pasta, all from scratch. With wonderful local wines we would feast Italian style in a marvellous atmosphere.

see following page





Lucanian Dolomites

Charm around every corner, our visit to the twin towns of Pietrapertosa and Castelmezzano was like being in another postcard. This is the mountainous part of Basilicata and driving there is half the fun with great views of an unspoiled and well-kept farms and vineyards. The locals welcomed us with open arms and we felt like family in no time. This is truly an Italian hidden gem!

Potenza

This lovely area has withstood bombs, invasions and earthquakes, and it is a treasure-filled town for visitors. I particularly enjoyed the San Francesco church which has been in existence since 1274 with a classic bell tower that dates from the 15th century. Our visit to the National Archaeological Museum is a trip into the past, with a twist, the building housing it is the Palazzo Loffredo, a 17th-century noble's residence!

There are multiple other ancient churches, the ruins of a Roman villa and the Musmeci Bridge, a unique construction of modern civil engineering.

Basilisco wines

A perfect trip to Italy would have to include wine, after all some of the best wines come from this land. As wine was on every menu, we had to include a trip to a winery. The Basilisco winery was perfect in size. Growing their own organic grapes and producing wonderful fine wines right on their estate. Their cellars are very unique as their storage areas are inside the fascinating caves of the area. The caves facing north have a stable 16-18 °C degrees temperature, and are ideal as storage, processing and preserving oil and wine.

Abbey of the Santissima Trinita di Venosa

This historic location has had parts of it dated back to the eighth century. I loved that the old church stands on the site of an Imperial Roman building as some walls of the church are built directly on the mosaic

floors of the earlier structure. The site holds the old church, the monastery buildings; and the Incompiuta, an unfinished church. The complex was declared a National Monument in 1897 and it is well worth a visit.

Cantina del Notaio

Another treat of the trip was a visit to this wonderful vineyard. The Giuratrabocchetti's family's passion for winemaking is evident in the exceptional quality of their projects. They believe that their unique blends come from three natural factors. The fertile and rich volcanic soil, the deep tufo rock layers that act as water reservoirs during the drier periods of the year and the unique micro-climate.

Be that as it may, after visiting the ancient wine cellars we would feast at a typical and wonderful Basilicata style meal here. A glorious Italian afternoon.

Cathedral of Acerenza

Again I was treated to a blast from the Roman past. This landmark has been around since Roman times, erected on what remained of an ancient temple of the Roman dedicated to Ercole Acheruntino. The current cathedral was built somewhere around the 11th century and the site is a wonderful place to visit. The Gothic architecture is really impressive and climbing up the four floors of the bell tower offers a great view. The most interesting detail of this place is the crypt, which contains a square space with four central columns. In front of the entrance there is a small altar surmounted by a niche that contains a tomb and the walls are covered with frescoes.

Although Basilicata is not very well known or travelled, it sure has a big heart and much to offer. It just might be the next big Italian destination to be discovered. Get there before the crowds and a wonderful laid-back and down to earth experience will be yours. ■

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GREECE

A 365 DAY DESTINATION

