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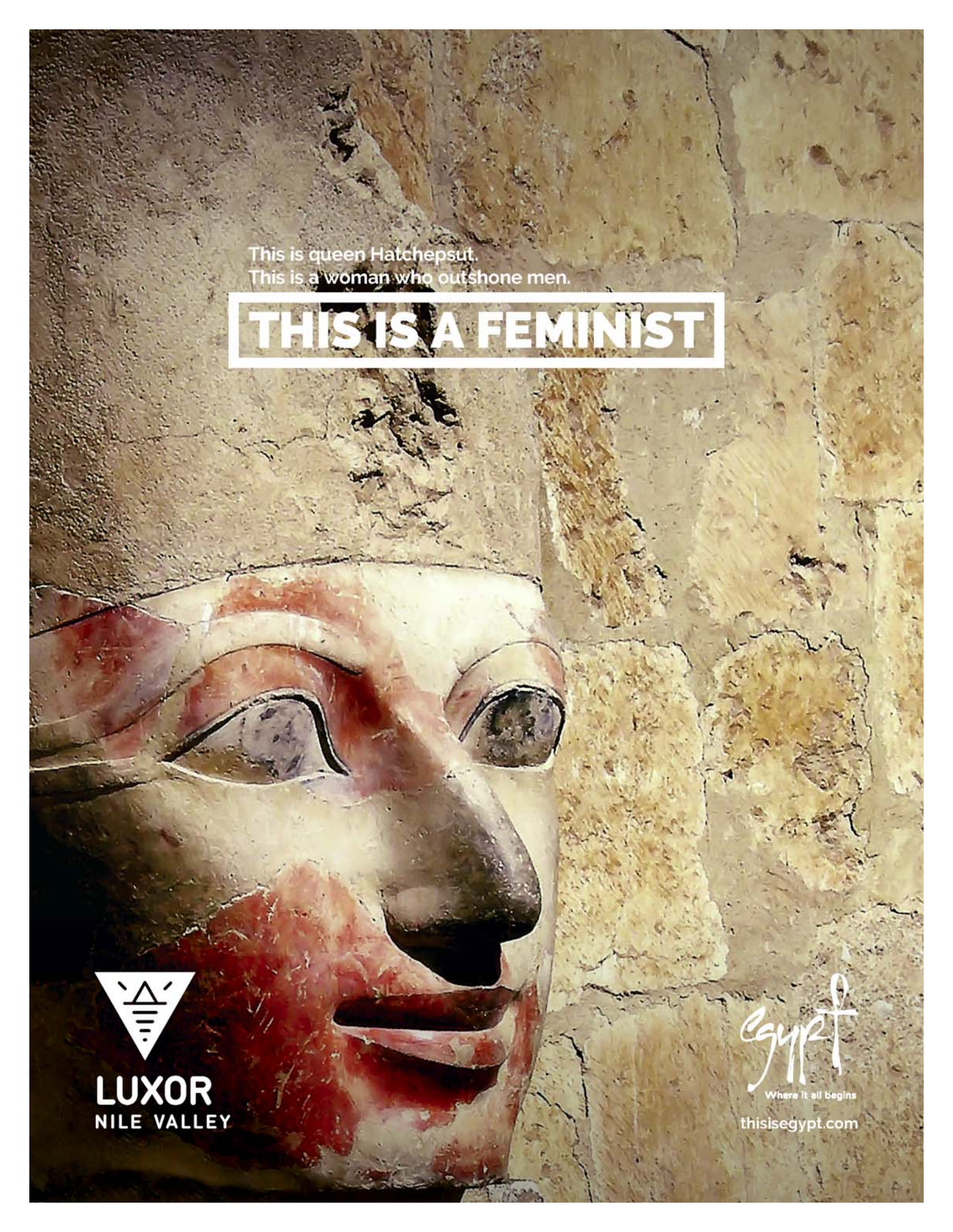
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Published by:

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Welcome to World Traveler



In this issue, we start our wonderful journey of discovery on the far corners of the world. First step is a cruise on the amazing Viking expedition ship the Polaris to the "End of the World". While there, we take another cruise, this one with a twist, a fly in/fly out excursion with Quark Expedition. Still in the south, we take yet another cruise with Variety Cruises to discover the tropical beauty of the Society Islands. Next, we head to the 'land down under' to see the best that Australia has to offer.

Due north, in Asia, we delight our international foodie selves by savouring the best international delicacies. In Japan we would experience, 'The Spiritual World of Wakayama', visit the tranquil Ishigaki Island and then try to fulfill our "bucket list in Japan". Too the far east of Asia, we find the top 10 reasons to visit the incredible Dubai. Nearby, we find the "Colorful Slices" and iconic places of Jordan. In Turkey, we discover the best cycling routes and why this country is one of the worlds most visited destinations.

Now in Europe, we embark on a beautiful Italian train ride to stay at some of the country's best hotels and then shop for Italy's finest fashions. In Malta, we partake in the wonderful art scene of the "Inaugural Edition of Maltabiennale.art 2024". In the Iberian

Peninsula, we visit the historic and well-kept Spanish cities of Cuenca and Toledo, visit the worldly cosmopolitan capitol Madrid, and plan a Castilla-La Mancha wine tour before heading to Portugal to enjoy "Delights and Discoveries" of this wonderful friendly nation. Then to the north where we find "Germany's Old Towns with UNESCO World Heritage Status".

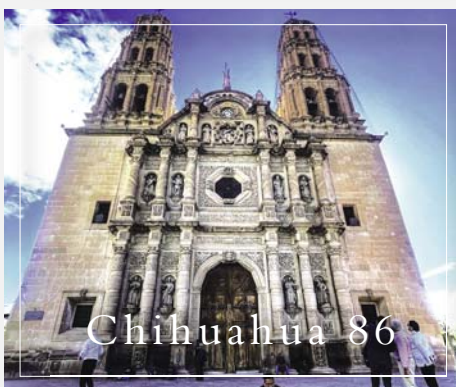
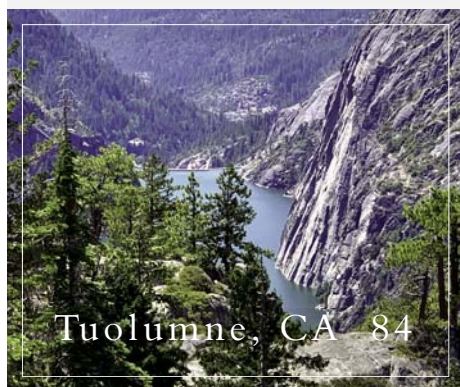
Next, we jet-off to North America and start with an Adventure Canada cruise to experience the best of Newfoundland and Labrador. In Montreal, we head to the exciting AURA show at the Notre Dame Basilica. In the USA, we find the best the southern states have to offer then west to find "What's New in Utah". In California, we take a road trip through the High Sierra and visit the amazing Tuolumne County before heading on a relaxing cruise with Princess from San Diego to Mexico. While in Mexico, we take yet another sailing, this time with UnCruise Adventures through Baja California Sur to find it is truly the "Aquarium of the World" before heading to see "a different Mexico" in the state of Chihuahua. We finish off this worldwide odyssey in the lush islands of the Caribbean and all they have to offer the traveler.

Happy Travels!



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Around the World (short informative travel pieces)



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Tale of Two Spanish Cities - *Medieval splendor dazzles visitors*



Hitting the Heights in Cuenca

by Randy Mink

With ancient buildings stacked on a steep promontory where two river gorges meet, Cuenca projects a dramatic profile, one different from any other city in Spain. Because it's not on the traditional tour circuit, this medieval gem 105 miles southeast of Madrid, is off the radar of most North American travelers, a fact that adds to its beguiling appeal.

In Cuenca it's all about the heights. Think vertical. Looking up or gazing down, you'll find yourself constantly taking in the views. Traipsing around narrow streets and passageways, you'll encounter one vantage point after another that provides a fresh new slant on the cliff-clinging houses.

Those afraid of heights get nervous crossing San Pablo footbridge, a wooden walkway that spans the Huecar River 200 feet below. It's a major attraction in itself, an Instagrammable spot for sure. If you're staying at Parador de Cuenca, as our group was, the bridge is the most direct way of getting to the atmospheric Ciudad Alta, or Old City. We crossed it several times a day. (Page 79 has my report on Parador de Cuenca, a monastery-turned-hotel.)

From the bridge you have fine views of Cuenca's most emblematic attraction—the Hanging Houses, or Casas Colgadas. The wooden balconies of this trio of 14th century dwellings jut out over a sheer cliff. Appearing to defy gravity, the buildings seem about to

topple off their perch and into the abyss. You can stand on one of the balconies if you visit the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art or gourmet restaurant Casas Colgadas Jesus Segura, tenants of the Hanging Houses.

In medieval times, why did builders push to the precipice? The answer: real estate was scarce and every foot counted. Because land was at a premium, some houses were built eight to 12 stories high. These "skyscrapers," many of them today painted in bright colors, were among the tallest buildings in Europe until the 20th century.

Cuenca does not have a long checklist of must-see sights, which suits me just fine. I'm happy just wandering and getting lost in the cobbled lanes, soaking up the history that crosses my path—and taking picture after picture. The refreshing lack of tourist hordes makes it even more delightful.

The heart of this UNESCO World Heritage city is Plaza Mayor, which spreads in a linear fashion from the Cathedral, passing through the arch of the town hall. Outdoor cafes lend a lively air, and the red tram departs from the square for tours.

While Spain has better known churches, Cuenca's cathedral is truly impressive. Largely built between 1156 and 1256, it was the first Gothic church on the Iberian peninsula. Statuary, paintings, expanses of marble and lavishly adorned chapels reflected the city's wealth in medieval days. The two pipe organs date from the 18th century. Our group heard their melodious sounds while seated in the ornately carved wooden choir stalls during an evening concert.

If staying in Cuenca overnight, make sure to walk the footbridge after dark and cast your eyes on the Old City's rock face, floodlit in all its glory. The magical vision lingers long after a visit to this intriguing city off the beaten path. ■

WWW.SPAIN.INFO/EN/DESTINATION/CUENCA/



to a pair of charmers in the Castilla-La Mancha region of central Spain

I could spend hours roaming through the tangle of cobbled pathways that thread the historic core of Toledo, one of the best places in all of Europe for getting lost in a medieval dreamscape. Loaded with Old World magic, Toledo projects the very essence of Spain and was once its capital.

On a recent visit to this fascinating city rich in Christian, Jewish and Muslim heritage, I never tired of probing the labyrinth's nooks and crannies while popping into souvenir stores, touring museums, and traipsing through an ancient synagogue, the world's fourth largest cathedral and a former mosque built during the Moorish occupation.

Like the Old City district of Cuenca, another charmer in Spain's Castilla-La Mancha region (see opposite page), Toledo's extensive medieval quarter sprawls across a hilltop bounded by the original city walls and surrounded by a river below.

Located 55 miles southwest of Madrid, Toledo overflows with tourists—attracting a million of them every year—and its pedestrian alleyways abound with gift shops. I'm not ashamed to say I loved shopping for refrigerator magnets and other tchotchkes in Toledo, but I also liked stepping away from the commercialism to explore back lanes accented with wrought-iron balconies, grillwork windows and massive, centuries-old wooden doors. Some of Toledo's narrow streets do allow cars, however, so be prepared to stand flat against the buildings to spare your feet from being run over by drivers barreling up and down the inclines.

Long known for its quality cutlery, Toledo has many sword stores and calls itself the Sword Capital of the World. At the Zamorano sword factory, where we watched craftsmen at work, one fellow traveler shipped home two swords, fitting reminders of this fortified city that harks back to the days of knights in shining armor. Since the Middle Ages, Toledo has been known for its steel craftsmanship. Stores offer a fine selection of knives, letter openers and scissors as well as swords, plus knight figurines in all sizes.



Toledo: A Perennial Crowd-Pleaser

by Randy Mink

Candy is always a good thing to bring home, and I stocked up on marzipan at Santo Tome's flagship store. The seventh-generation family company has been making its famous almond paste confection since 1856. For gift-giving, I bought wrapped boxes of six-inch marzipan bars inscribed "T-O-L-E-D-O," but my own bag of marzipan pieces was gobbled up before I got to the Madrid airport.

In between shopping and wandering foot-loose in the dense medieval mazes, I checked off a few places from my must-see list, including the El Greco Museum. Toledo is synonymous with the Greek-born painter Domenikos Theotokopoulos, better known as El Greco, or "The Greek." He moved to Spain in 1571 from the island of Crete and today is venerated as one of the country's old masters, along with Goya and Velazquez.

El Greco's religious canvases, distinguished by bold colors and elongated figures in voluminous robes, can be seen in the museum bearing his name and in Toledo churches and other museums.

The El Greco Museum resides next door to the 14th century El Transito Synagogue with its Arabic-influenced interior decoration, coffered ceiling and museum of Sephardic Jewish culture. The park across the street has a memorial to El Greco and a terrace affording panoramic views of the city, truly one of the most captivating places in all of Spain. ■

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The Poetry of the Mountains: The Spiritual World of Wakayama

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

The poster said it all. It was prominently displayed at the front of the local bus taking us from Shirahama to the Kumano Kodo Pilgrimage route in Japan's Wakayama Prefecture. Produced by GoTokyo, the poster read, "Discover Different Worlds: Tokyo – Urban and Energetic; Wakayama – Calm and Spiritual".

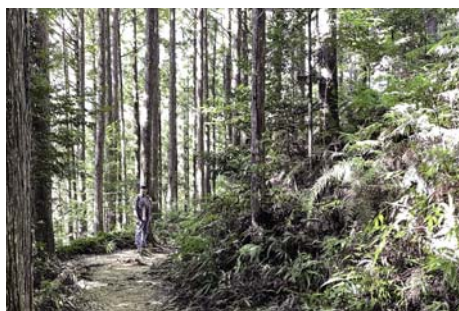
Located on Honshu Island, Wakayama Prefecture borders the prefectures of Osaka, Mie, and Nara. We were drawn here by nature: hiking, interacting with forests, mar-

veling at mountains, and exploring shrines. The prefecture's name does justice to this sense of yearning for something different. Waka is a Japanese poem, and Yama means 'mountain', specifically the Kii Mountain Range. So, 'Wakayama' refers to the poetry of the mountains, literally and figuratively.

We eased ourselves out of the energetic tourist scene in Tokyo in stages, first in Osaka, where culinary bliss is always on the menu, and then in Nara, to engage with the 8th-century temples and shrines.

We finally arrived in Wakayama Prefecture with a return visit to Koyasan (<https://worldtraveler.travel/japan-imbibing-the-spirit-of-japan/>). We wandered the pathways of the Okunoin Cemetery, passing time-worn moss-covered gravestones amidst giant cedars that symbolize eternal life and immortality. The paths lead to the mausoleum of Kobo Daishi, the founder of Shingon Buddhism, who is believed to be resting in eternal meditation.

After spending the night at a Temple lodging, we continued south to Shirahama, which



means 'white beach'. Its crescent-shaped quartz-sand beach, hot springs, and spectacular land formations define this resort town. Sandanbeki is a dramatic, craggy, 50-meter (164-foot) cliff with postcard-perfect panoramas of the Pacific Ocean, crashing waves, striking rock colors, and a subterranean cave that served as a hideout for Pirate ships in days gone by.

A short walk away is the Senjojiki ('a thousand tatami mats') Rock Plateau. We joined a dozen others, including a newly married couple, scampering over the dramatic colored and layered rocks, engaging in the sound of the waves, and dreamily gazing out over the ocean as the sun started to set.

That evening, we took a bus to neighbouring Tanabe City for dinner at Konoha. We sat next to 80-year-old Atsushi Ichida and his elementary school friend, Isao Kinoshita, and shared stories and laughs. Ichida-san revealed the secrets of the long friendship that included 'honesty in conversation, enjoying drinks, and eating favorite foods together'. The fare at Konoha was harmoniously in sync, with an appetizer of Bai Gai (snails) followed by Horse Mackerel sashimi, Futomaki, deep-fried oyster, grilled Hokke (Mackerel), and delicious Oden (fish cake stew in a dashi broth).

After a morning stroll on the white beach, we took the bus to the Kumano Hongu Taisha Grand Shrine, about two hours away. This is one of the Kumano Sanzan, three sacred shrines serving as spiritual goals for devotees walking the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route.

We paid our respects at the Shrine and set out for Fushigami-ji, which is 3.2 kilometers (2 miles) away. The trail's rocky and earthen portions follow the mountain paths, often punctuated with steps made of rocks, earth, logs, and tree roots, to help pilgrims navigate the sometimes steep uphill and downhill. All the while, the trail passes through lush forest greenery in the perfect setting for Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, the Japanese practice of breathing in the essence and spirit of the trees. Apart from a few encounters with other trekkers, the silence of the forest was calming and tranquil, with occasional vistas of awe-inspiring distant mountain silhouettes and path-side red-bibbed Jizo statues.

Fushigami means 'kneeling in prayer' and refers to pilgrims who arrived and got their first glimpse of the Hongu Taisha Grand Shrine amidst the magical mountain landscape.

We headed back to the Shrine for another visit and then to the nearby Oyunohara Torii, the biggest torii gate in the world. Torii gates mark the transition from the everyday world to the sacred, and Oyunohara also marks the location of the original Grand Shrine before seasonal floods necessitated a move to higher ground.

Three onsen (hot spring) towns cater to the needs of pilgrims. Kawayu Onsen, where we stayed, literally means 'hot water river' and refers to the bubbling Ota River. When a hole is dug into the riverside gravel, scalding hot water mixes with a cold underground stream to provide a soothing onsen experience. Our ryokan, the Omuraya, had its own indoor onsen, which offered comforting relaxation before dinner.

Before breakfast the following day, we met other onsen aficionados: a troop of Japanese macaques, a few Tombis (Japanese Black Kites), and Yellow Wagtails.

We took the local bus to Shingu and the Kumano Hayatama Grand Shrine, the 2nd of the three sacred shrines dedicated to the deity of moving water and part of the Shinto cult of nature.

And to complete the trilogy of shrines, we journeyed on to 'Tuna Town'.

Katsuura is famous for its fishing port, where tuna caught in the Kumano-nada Sea are landed. Takehara, a tiny restaurant on the main street, is the go-to place to eat Tuna Teishoku. This set menu includes savory marinated tuna, crunchy pickles, flavorful miso soup, freshly steamed rice, and large, melt-in-the-mouth chunks of tuna sashimi.

So sated, we spent the afternoon near the town of Nachikatsuura.

Nachi-no-Taki is Japan's highest waterfall, with a drop of 133 meters (617 feet). In ancient times, the waterfall's sight, sound, and spray became a place to worship Hiro

Gongen, the Shinto deity who resides in the waterfall. And with the waters emanating from a protected primeval forest, Nachi is part of the 'Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range', a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Beautiful visuals of the waterfall accompany visitors as they ascend a series of stone steps toward the three-story Pagoda. Memorable views include the site of the vermilion-colored Pagoda against the scenery of the verdant Kii Mountains and the Nachi waterfall. Incredible views can also be captured from the third story of the Pagoda.

After more stone steps and ascending pathways, visitors arrive at the Kumano Nachi Taisha Shrine, the 3rd of the three sacred shrines representing the cult of nature. Its location was determined when Yatagarasu, a mythical three-legged crow, perched here while guiding Jimmu, the first emperor, to Nara. The mountains, forest, waterfall, and spectacular scenery evoke Wakayama's calm and spiritual world.

That evening at Minshuku Wakatake, a hot-spring guesthouse near the train station in Katsuura, we enjoyed a delicious multi-course, locally sourced dinner and a sake tasting with Hanai-san, the friendly owner.

On our last morning, we watched the fishermen and their families tend and repair their nets on the waterfront against the backdrop of fishing boats, islands, the ocean, and the mountains. We popped into the Nigiwai ('bustling') Market, full of restaurants, souvenir shops, and seafood stalls, and then headed back to the train station to re-enter the 'urban and energetic' world of Tokyo.

Our time in Wakayama was a mindful experience. We interacted with nature, connected with the essence of the forest (shinrin-yoku), trekked, chatted with locals, breathed fresh air, ate delicious local food, and got up close and personal with the poetry of the mountains. Our souvenir was the privilege of experiencing Wakayama's spiritual world and bringing these memories home with us. ■

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Portugal for Delights and Discoveries

Article and photography by Lisa TE Sonne

The “Age of Discovery” that changed the world was launched from Portugal with explorers heading out from the most southwestern part of Europe. Now, 500 years later, “the age of discoveries” seems to be about going to Portugal not from it. All kinds of people are making their own discoveries in this small EU democracy that’s one sixth the size of France, but that sends visitors home with a big bag of memories.

This land of river cities, lovely weather, vineyards, and 1,800 kilometers of coast (from old fishing villages to iconic surfing spots) keeps ranking high in the charts of safest countries, best health care, best places to retire, and more. Portugal offers modern tourist infrastructure, natural wonders, and the fascinating vestiges of an historical past — the Visigoths, Moors, and Romans all called it home at one time.

My husband and I have loved making our personal “discoveries” during three visits to Portugal in the last two years, exploring different regions. Like many travelers, we like to weave in the quirky and unusual with the mainstays, and some serendipity with planning. Lisbon and Porto are well worth visiting, but here are some of our stand-out memories that might inspire you to make your own discoveries elsewhere:

Waking up in a medieval castle in Óbidos during a chocolate festival.

This charming city is sometimes called the City of Queens, because the walled settlement and the castle were given by King D. Afonso II to his wife in 1210 and was owned by many subsequent Queens. Today, the castle is the Pousada Castelo de Óbidos, an historic hotel. Our visit was timed deliciously (for my tastes) to partake in the International Chocolate

Festival in Óbidos. We sampled many wares, and enjoyed the live music, large chocolate sculptures, and a parade winding through the maze of narrow streets of beguiling shops and white homes painted with yellow or blue trim. Walking atop the encircling medieval wall around the whole festal village, we burned some chocolate calories and fueled our imaginations.

Toasting “Happy Birthday” with champagne to Fado singer Florreia Calota.

While visiting Coimbra, we attended a moving concert of Fado music, the traditional soul tunes of Portugal in a beautiful former 14th century chapel on the site of a medieval Jewish Synagogue. After the last applause, we stayed behind in The Cultural House aCapella’s remarkable setting to say obrigada (thank you from a female). Calota and her musicians invited us and some lingering local music students to stay longer and celebrate her birthday, which began at the stroke of midnight. We were embraced by impromptu sing-alongs and mutual good wishes that go beyond translation.



This was a delightful, unexpected way to end a day that had included chatting with students in their traditional black gown uniforms (one of many Happy Potter touches that JK Rowling incorporated in her writing while living in Portugal.) These caped students were bustling about one of the oldest continuing universities in the world. Originally chartered in 1290, Coimbra University's highlights include the Joanne Library and the "Exam" room where, for hundreds of years, students presented their orals in a room worthy of being a museum.

Hanging out with Gandhi, Bart Simpson, and Queen Elizabeth (who was about to have tea).

Everything in "Sand City" — from the Dali Lama to Salvador Dali — was made of sand. This unexpectedly charming attraction is in Lagoa, on the southern coastline of Portugal's famed Algarve area. Billed as the largest sculptural Sand Park in the world, it showcases the work of over 60 artists and is full of iconic world sights, from Angkor Wat to the Pyramids of both Egypt and Central America, as well as many animals and famous people in history and pop culture. We had already greatly enjoyed walking many of the sandy beaches of Portugal's extensive gorgeous coastline — from nature reserves to tourist beach resort meccas. This walk-around exhibition Park, though, was a creative use of sand we hadn't seen before!

Learning about a city retrieving a secret history of survival.

Before the Spanish Inquisition, Portugal was known to have the most tolerant policies for Jewish people in Europe. Then, in the 15th century, all the Moors and Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. The remote town of Belmont became a secret haven for Jews who were willing to practice Catholic rites in public and continue to honor Jewish rituals privately. Over the centuries, the descendants of those Jews passed down many traditions, but they lost the knowledge of why they were doing them. As an example, they made unleavened bread around Easter, without knowing anymore that it was an integral part of the Jewish holiday Passover, which occurs around the same time.

In the 20th century, anthropologists made discoveries to help illuminate the hidden history. The town now embraces its Jewish roots, with a modern museum that illustrates how an endangered culture found ways to stay alive

enough to be revived, centuries later. Belmont also now has signs on many of the houses explaining which Jews lived there during the Inquisition and what happened to them.

Answering the knock on the door every morning to receive freshly baked bread and honey.

Our rental host in Monsanto made the deliveries, and we ate in our modern kitchen with big boulders protruding inside. In the Beira Interior region of Portugal, the picturesque hilly town has old homes literally built around boulders. Outside our doorway, we wandered up (very up) cobbled walkways, then dirt paths, past other boulder homes and through mist and fog to seek the ruins of an ancient castle. Along the way, a cat found us and led us up the path. When we reached a fork, the fog was thickening and we weren't sure which way to go, but the cat was. We trusted the beautiful creature and made it to the top. Then, having done her job, the cat abandoned us when she saw the only other two people in the castle's courtyard. But, of course she did... they had food.

Being physically reminded that life is short (and good).

The murals and columns and walls in the "Chapel of Bones" are completely adorned by the bones and skulls of monks. Above the entrance to the chapel in the large city of Évora is a Latin inscription that translates as, "We bones that are here, for you we wait." Three Franciscan friars came up with this long-lasting, macabre idea in the 17th century as a way to remind people of the temporary nature of life on earth.

Fortunately, outside the chapel bones and doors, Évora has plenty of reminders that life is good. The medieval, walled city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and it has been voted a European Capital of Culture for 2027, which means it will be showing off even more of its good in the future. Many travelers enjoy seeing part of the Roman Temple (misnamed The Temple of Diana) not far from the gothic Cathedral of Evora started in the 12th century. To escape a Spring rain, we ducked into the Watch Museum, a more amusing way to contemplate the passage of time.

Making a U-turn after passing a sign we translated as "cheese museum."

The arrow pointed in the direction of a long, bumpy road that seemed to lead nowhere. When we finally arrived at a little village, we drove up and down the streets until we found the unimposing museum. The woman who collected our entrance fee locked the front door behind us and proceeded to give us a remarkable tour. We were the only ones there.

When she brought us a platter of delicious Portuguese cheeses, we thought that was the end of this unscheduled interlude, but when we asked what else she recommended we see in Portugal, she encouraged us to jump in her car to visit an "unusual" place that is difficult to find.

The site, once called Hotel Serra de Pena or Termas de Águas Radium, used to be a famous hotel and spa where the rich and famous sat in radium baths for — wait for it — their health. It was an opulent, lavish destination until WW II, when it was revealed that radium is not healthy. Now, the site is a ghostly fairy-tale ruin amidst lovely nature and is occasionally used by movie directors as a location for filming.

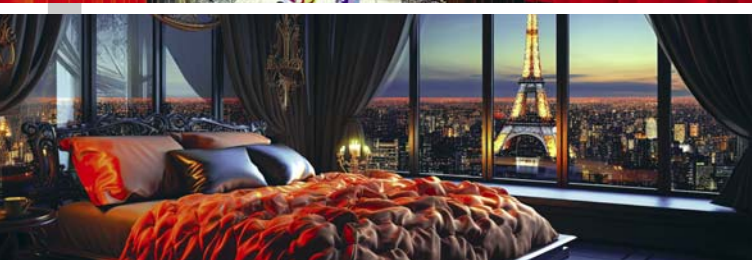
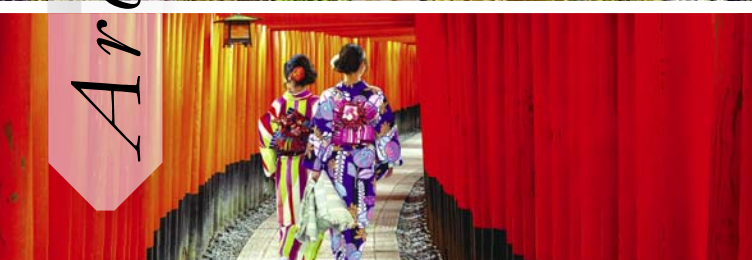
Seeing the sparkling lights of Lisbon from the windows of a converted hilltop windmill.

Portugal has a diverse range of converted windmills that can be rented through Airbnb, with some of them very reasonable in price. Ours was only a walk and a ferry ride across the Tagus River to the dynamic vibrant neighborhoods of Lisbon, which we had enjoyed in previous trips. This most recent journey, however, had been full of exploring the south of Portugal, and my husband found the perfect place for us to pause and transition from active travel to heading back home to busy lives.

Our two-night stay in the three-story former windmill came with a vast yard of fruit orchards and four tree house platforms in old olive trees. We sat high in the branches with gentle breezes, some lovely wildlife, picnic food, and soothing views. It was also a relaxing setting for reviews. We talked of our memorable times so far and of future places to visit in Portugal for our own personal "age of discoveries" to continue. ■

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What's New in Utah

100 years of film in Utah

As the trend of “set-jetting” – where travellers visit destinations featured in movies and TV shows – continues to influence the travel industry, Utah. America’s Film Set® will celebrate 100 years of film in 2024. Robert Redford may be widely known for developing Utah’s Sundance Mountain Resort and Sundance Film Festival, held annually in January in Park City, but it was Utah’s Parry Brothers who shot the first film in Cedar City, UT in 1924. Utah will mark the anniversary with a year-long exhibition at the State Capitol in Salt Lake City, monthly special events ranging from the annual Thelma & Louise Marathon in Moab, UT to Governor Cox inviting Kevin Bacon back to Utah County for the 40th anniversary of Footloose (#BaconToPayson), and the introduction of a film trail with inaugural historical markers placed across the state for visitors to follow.

Goulding’s Lodge celebrates centennial in Monument Valley

Few travellers to Utah’s Monument Valley visit the area without taking a tour or staying overnight with Goulding’s Lodge – celebrating its 100th year in 2024. In the early 1920s, Harry Goulding and his wife, Leone (nicknamed “Mike”), set up a trading post in Monument Valley, conducting business with the local Navajo people. When the Great Depression hit, the Gouldings are credited with attracting Hollywood to film in the region, bringing much-needed revenue. Their legacy lives on at Goulding’s Lodge, as the property continues to host film crews and visitors from all over the world who, to this day, come to experience the power of the landscape and history through Navajo-led tours of Monument Valley.

Utah family shares Indigenous culture through food

Located in historic downtown Provo, 45 minutes south of Salt Lake City, the family-owned and operated Black Sheep Café serves contemporary Southwestern Native American cuisine. Founded by sisters, Bleu Adams and Jovanna Mason, with their brother Chef Mark Mason, Black Sheep Café blends modern technique with traditional Navajo, Pueblo and Hopi influences. The siblings grew up on a Navajo reservation, where they learned about cooking as young children. They use local ingredients like Utah honey and traditionally grown and prepared blue cornmeal and flour, to make their award-winning dishes from scratch. From Navajo Tacos and Green Chile Stew, to Cactus Pear Lemonade and Orange-Habanero Crème Brûlée, Black Sheep Café is an important leader in Utah’s dining scene, sharing their Indigenous culture through food. ■

WWW.VISITUTAH.COM



Plan your trip to Castilla-La Mancha based around its wines

Food and wine tourism

Like the universally-known Miguel de Cervantes, famous novelist of Spanish literature, poet and playwright, you will be able to explore landscapes of windmills and vineyards just as the protagonist of his well-known work *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* did. As well as its wines, you won't be able to resist trying Manchegan gastronomy and its local cuisine, which will delight you with its wonderful flavours such as salpicón (salad medley), migas (fried breadcrumbs), duelos y quebrantos (scrambled eggs with chorizo) and the famous Manchego cheese, ideal accompaniment to a glass of young and fruity red wine.

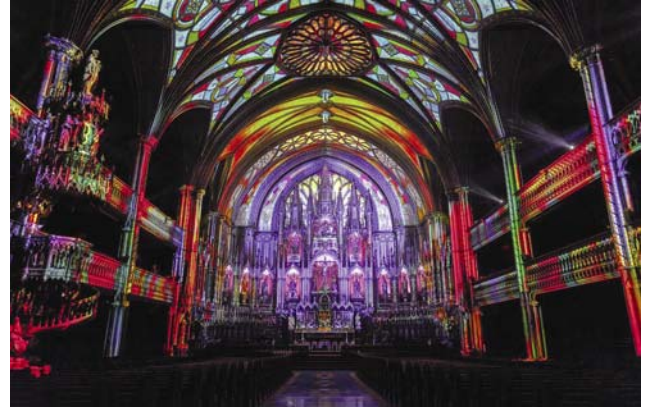
Castilla-La Mancha, much more than wine

Plan all the activities and wine tourism experiences you can enjoy in Castilla-La Mancha based on the dates you travel and with whom. You can combine your trip with other plans related to culture or nature with friends, a partner or family, at any time of the year. If you are travelling with children, you can learn about the culture of wine with the whole family by smelling and tasting the different varieties of grapes, or by taking walks on footpaths, or even by bike, enjoying more sensory experiences during the harvest season.

With your partner

A plan for couples will be perfect for wine lovers, since you will find wine tourism activities ranging from visits to wineries, wine tastings, as well as the best pairing with the region's delicious gastronomy. If you're travelling with friends, find the designated dates for traditional events in each municipality related to wine or traditional La Mancha cuisine, such as the Harvest Festival, a celebration where the grapes are pressed to offer the first mosto (freshly crushed grape juice) to the Virgen de las Viñas. (Virgin of the Vines). ■

[HTTPS://WWW.SPAIN.INFO/](https://www.spain.info/)



The Amazing AURA Experience An ethereal spectacle of light and sound

by Susan Campbell

The stunning structure of Notre-Dame Basilica towering over the old port sector of Montreal always tops the list for visiting tourists. It's one of the most visited monuments in North America. The grand French-inspired Gothic Revival interior never fails to impress and uplift, and its magnificent pipe organ and intricately carved staircase are one of a kind. This church is also beloved and frequently visited by locals as well, always a coveted venue for the faithful, services still take place there, and it's a favored spot for VIP events like weddings and funerals. In fact, this is where Celine Dion got married to Rene Angélil. But now there's an even better reason to visit this historic attraction, it's called "The AURA Experience".

I'd been meaning to go and see this futuristic light and sound spectacle offered within the church in the summer but decided that it might be just the cure for winter blahs to go last February instead. I was right. I took my mother with me, who also needed a boost in that cold, barren season, and we found it to be the ideal spirit soothing outing. Initially, I was a little worried that the spectacle might be too loud and jarring for my 87-year-old mom, and the laser lights and 3D-effects might be too high-tech and overwhelming. But it wasn't. The show, though indeed dramatic, was well balanced in sound and easy on the senses and very moving as well. I caught my mom tearing up more than once from the overall majesty of the orchestral music and artistic experience of this award-winning show.

Photography or video is not allowed during the performance, but you have some time inside the church to take pictures of the illuminated stations of the cross 30 minutes before the show begins. You can also combine the night experience with a guided day tour of the basilica with a duo-ticket at a reduced cost for both. All tickets are available in advance and online only. ■

WWW.AURABASILIQUEMONTREAL.COM/EN



Shop Italy, in Italy!

Italy is poised to become a leading destination for shopping tourism, with a surge in shopping venues, rising tourist spending, and a growing number of dedicated projects. By 2025, the country is set to boast nearly 100 outlet villages and department stores, comprising 28 outlet villages and 71 department stores. This development positions Italy as a prime choice for tourists seeking shopping vacations, both domestic and international. Since 2003, Italy has seen the establishment of 24 outlet villages, averaging more than one opening annually. Notably, plans are underway for the restyling of a center in Rome in 2024 and the opening of a new venue in Sardinia in 2025.

In terms of shopping streets, Milan's Via Montenapoleone has ascended to second place globally in retail value per square meter. This underscores Italy's allure as a premier shopping destination. In 2023, Italy attracted 2.1 million tourists specifically for shopping vacations, indicating a growing interest in its retail offerings.

Ivana Jelinic, President and CEO of the Italian National Tourist Board (ENIT), highlights the symbiotic relationship between tourism and shopping, emphasizing the opportunity to showcase the breadth of Made in Italy products. She stresses the importance of aligning tourism offerings with Italy's cultural identity and leveraging integrated packages to promote the Italian lifestyle. Jelinic underscores the strategic significance of shopping-related tourism for Italian economic development, advocating for

policies that enhance access to shopping circuits, improve infrastructure, and foster collaborations with global brands. Targeted marketing initiatives, tax incentives, and industry partnerships are identified as key drivers of shopping tourism, with the introduction of Tax Free Shopping services expected to further boost inbound flows.

A study by the Italian National Tourist Board focusing on the Canadian and U.S. markets reveals Rome, Milan, Naples, Venice, and Florence as the top cities associated with shopping among North American tourists. Additionally, smaller centers like Bologna and Genoa have garnered interest. The survey underscores the strong inclination of North American visitors to purchase Italian products, particularly gastronomy and fashion items, with 91% expressing a willingness to buy. This highlights the significant potential for North American tourists to contribute to Italy's shopping tourism sector.

Overall, Italy's strategic focus on shopping tourism, coupled with efforts to enhance visitor experiences and promote local products, positions the country as a leader in the global retail landscape. By capitalizing on its cultural heritage and fostering collaboration across sectors, Italy is poised to realize the economic benefits of a thriving shopping tourism industry. ■

WWW.ITALIA.IT



Inaugural Edition of Maltabiennale.art 2024 Officially Opens

The inaugural edition of maltabiennale.art 2024 officially opened, inviting the art lovers the world over to come to Malta and join in this rich and diverse celebration of contemporary art and heritage running until May 31, 2024. Bringing together over 100 acclaimed international and local artists, the biennale will unfold across 20 esteemed heritage sites in Malta and Gozo, promising a tapestry of unique artistic visions, where each painting, sculpture, video installation, and more is set to breathe new life into these historically significant locations.

The central theme of maltabiennale.art "white sea olive groves" will play out within the biennale's Main Pavilion, an artistic exploration that comes to life across many locations and through four intertwined sub-themes: *Can You Sea?: The Mediterranean as a Political Body*; *The Counterpower of Piracy*; *Decolonising Malta*; *Polyphony Is Us*; and *The Matri-archive of the Mediterranean*. Each sub-theme provides a canvas for diverse perspectives, all of which collectively strive to challenge preconceptions about the role of art in society, explore how contemporary art can shed new light on our heritage, and offer new perspectives into Maltese and Mediterranean identity. The Main Pavillion's carefully curated journey sees artworks which both contrast with and complement one another, creating a multi-spectrum experience for visitors that is as thought-provoking as it is emotionally engaging.

In Valletta, artworks grace the Grand Master's Palace, MUZA, the National Museum of Archaeology, Tal-Pilar church, Main Guard, National Library, Fort St. Elmo, Underground Valletta, and Auberge d'Aragon. The Three Cities host exhibits at Dock 1, The Armoury, Fort St. Angelo, the Inquisitor's Palace, and Villa Portelli in Kalkara. Gozo features installations in various sites within The Citadella, including Gozo Cultural Centre and the Grain Silos, as well as at Ġgantija temples.

For the full schedule of exhibitions, events, artists' details, and locations, visit the official website and become a part of this extraordinary arts and culture experience. The journey begins at

MALABIENNALE.ART ■



Tauck to Launch New Journeys in Colombia Next Year

Tauck has announced its first-ever tour of Colombia, with an in-depth nine-day exploration of the South American country set to launch next year. Also new for 2025 is the company's first-ever Tauck Bridges family travel adventure in Japan.

Tauck's new "Colombia: South America's Eternal Spring" begins with a two-night stay at the Four Seasons in Bogotá, followed by a three-night stay at the Medellín Marriott in Medellín and a subsequent three-night stay at the five-star Sofitel Legend Santa Clara in Cartagena. Guests' time in Bogotá is highlighted by a visit to the Gold Museum, containing the world's largest collection of gold artifacts (including many pre-Columbian pieces), and a guided tour of the Botero Museum, dedicated to the work of noted political critic, artist and sculptor Fernando Botero. The following day, guests travel by train to Zipaquirá to visit the Salt Cathedral, a working church carved from subterranean salt some 600 feet underground.

After flying to Medellín, guests will enjoy a tasting of Colombian coffee before visiting the Normandia Equestrian Center to learn about the region's renowned Paso Fino horses. Guests will also learn about Colombia's emergence from its troubled past when they visit Comuna 13, a vibrant and colorful community that was once one of Colombia's most notorious neighborhoods. Tauck's exploration of Colombia continues in Cartagena with a walking tour of Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas (the largest fortress in South America), a visit to a local music school, and tours of San Pedro Claver Cathedral and the city's popular Getsmani neighborhood. The itinerary concludes with a sunset cruise and reception along Cartagena Bay, followed by a farewell dinner at a local restaurant. Tauck will operate 12 departures of the new Colombia tour in 2025, and included in the price are two on-tour flights, 20 meals, gratuities to all local guides, hotel staff and restaurant servers, all sightseeing and other activities, airport transfers, luggage handling, taxes and more. ■

[HTTPS://WWW.TAUCK.COM/](https://www.tauck.com/)



Explore the Nakasendo Trail's More Remote Post Towns on New Self-Guided Walking Tour from Oku Japan

The newly launched Nakasendo Minoji itinerary visits beautifully preserved Edo Period post towns along the trail's Mino Road.

Kyoto-based adventure operator Oku Japan, which offers a wide range of guided and self-guided walking & trekking itineraries, has just unveiled the newest addition to its line-up: a four-day Nakasendo Minoji self-guided walking tour.

Starting on the Mino Road, or Minoji, which is located further west than Oku's classic Nakasendō Trail-based tours, in what was formerly known as Mino Province (present-day Gifu Prefecture), guests will enjoy hikes of two to seven hours in duration over the course of four days, traversing some of the trail's more remote post towns, namely Okute and Oi in the mountains, and then on to Magome, perched on a steep slope, followed by Tsumago, one of the country's best-preserved post towns. The journey will conclude in Narai, one of the most prosperous towns in its time, located in the famed Kiso Valley.

"Our goal with this new self-guided itinerary is to highlight a part of the Nakasendo that is far less travelled, less well-known, which we enrich further with cultural immersion through our fureai initiative," says Hiroshi Kawaguchi, Oku Japan's General Manager. "However, the Kiso Road is synonymous with the Nakasendo itself, so we wanted to ensure we included parts of the classic route too – offering the best of both worlds."

Mino has a history of pottery-making that dates back 1,300 years, and ceramics from this region (mino ware) account for around 50% of all Japanese pottery still produced today. Though far more remote than the post towns located in the Kiso Valley, the towns nestled in the mountains here were extremely prosperous during the Edo period, and so important strategically that the shogun made sure that they were well defended.

Highlights of the area include a visit to Oni-iwa Park, known for its massive granite boulders that line the river, and the Biwa-toge Pass, which contains one of Japan's longest ishidatami stone-paved paths and many historical landmarks. ■

[HTTP://WWW.OKUJAPAN.COM/](http://www.okujapan.com/)



TreadRight and The Travel Corporation Releases 2024 MAKE TRAVEL MATTER® Checklist to Encourage Sustainable Travel

Assisting travellers to become more responsible guests for every journey

The TreadRight Foundation, a joint initiative between The Travel Corporation's (TTC, 40 award-winning brands), releases their 2024 MAKE TRAVEL MATTER® Checklist. Recognizing the importance for travellers to travel sustainably, the not-for-profit foundation and TTC have updated their checklist as an informative way to help guests become more responsible travellers as well as to protect and make a positive impact on the planet, its people, and wildlife.

The checklist covers four main recommendations including "Planning and Packing" such as bringing a reusable bottle, locating water refill stations, and downloading the Tap app to find water anywhere. The second recommendation is "Getting Around," focused on minimizing the carbon footprint of transportation choices with the tip of trying out a local bike share program. Also, the checklist provides guidance on choosing businesses such as hotels, airlines or tour operators based on those who have a commitment to responsible travel through initiatives such as a sustainability strategy with measurable goals, or a Climate Action Plan as a roadmap to reduce emissions. For example, The Travel Corporation releases an Annual Impact Report which shares progress on their sustainability goals aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thirdly, with the 'Sleeping and Eating' recommendation, guests are encouraged to choose accommodations which have recycling, waste and water conservation programs, and use renewable energy. The last recommendation consists of "Experiences that Matter" which focuses on supporting experiences and businesses that empower communities and protect wildlife, including ethical shopping and not supporting illegal wildlife trade by avoiding any purchase of wildlife products. ■

Learn more about TreadRight's sustainable travel initiatives at:

[HTTPS://WWW.TREADRIGHT.ORG/TRAVEL](https://www.treadright.org/travel)
[HTTPS://TTC.COM/](https://ttc.com/)



Exodus Adventure Travels Kicks Off 50th Anniversary Year

Exodus Adventure Travels, the international, award-winning leader in adventure travel, is celebrating 50 years of epic adventures with special savings on its guided group trips.

50 Years of Industry Leadership

Exodus Adventure Travels was started in 1974 with a heart-warming story of two friends, John Gillies and David Burlinson, who took an overland truck to the Minaret of Jam in Afghanistan, deep in the heart of the Hindu Kush. Soon after they expanded their efforts to other adventurous trips to Kathmandu in Nepal and other destinations.

These two passionate travellers were able to turn their sense of adventure and discovery into a career, and Exodus was born. By the 1990s, along with being the first travel company to take an overland truck into China, Exodus expanded its product offering, adding cycling adventures to its portfolio.

In the 2000s, Exodus' trips reached almost every corner of the globe. Throughout various mergers and acquisitions, Exodus remained true to its brand of providing extraordinary experiences supported by knowledgeable local guides and travel professionals. In 2021, Exodus became part of Travelopia, which today is the world's largest collection of experiential travel brands.

Looking to the Future: Commitment to People, Places, and The Planet

Exodus Adventure Travels understands that the future of travel is based on the well-being of people, places, and the planet. As leaders in the adventure travel industry, Exodus' goal is to improve life through travel in the places that it visits, the people it meets, and on the planet that its travelers explore.

The organization's trips help customers to experience the real joy of a country by traveling in small groups, off the beaten track, to

avoid and reduce some of tourism's most serious impacts on nature. It gives back to communities by staying in locally owned accommodation and employing local guides, avoids waste generation, and has a stringent animal welfare policy. Exodus Adventure Travels measures the carbon footprint of all its trips and contributes towards nature regeneration through a commitment to rewild 100 square metres per passenger.

Through its foundation, Exodus Adventure Travels aims to improve lives through travel by investing in the regeneration and conservation of the natural world. The Exodus Travels Foundation focuses on three main themes of grassroots community building, uplifting women, and wildlife, biodiversity & regeneration. ■

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Though this product was designed for taking naps at a work desk, it's also ideal for travel! Set it up on your airplane meal tray to snooze in comfort, the ultra-soft, stable structure is ergonomically designed to properly support your head and neck. It's light, and the strap fits over your luggage handle for hands-free portability, too.

Visit:

<https://mantasleep.com/products/manta-nap-pillow>



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"Ouchies" can be inevitable when on the go, but you can be prepared with these handy TSA-approved first aid kits. They include all essentials you might need while traveling, from burn relief to bandages. They come in many different sizes from 44 to 270 pieces, and the compact water-resistant cases come in many different colors and patterns.

Visit: www.keepingfirstaid.com/



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Remain frizz-free wherever you go with this four-piece essential hair care travel pack from Pure Brazilian- touted as the best hair smoothing system on the market. The lightweight anti-frizz serum provides instant shine and guards against styling damage while the deep conditioning masque protects hair cuticles. The set also contains salt-free, anti-frizz shampoo and conditioner that protects hair color.

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Morocco Tagine



Peru: Ceviche



Spain: Paella



Thailand: Pad Thai



USA: Southern Fried Chicken



Vietnam: Pho



Exploring Türkiye's finest long-distance cycling routes

Are you an avid cyclist looking for an adventure? Look no further than Türkiye, where short and long-distance bike routes offer a unique way to explore the country's natural beauty, history, food, arts and culture. The routes include camping and glamping areas, as well as bike-friendly hotels that offer bike cleaning and repair services in secure parking areas. Plus, a wide range of hotels and hostels have national and international eco-labels to make your trip even more comfortable.

EuroVelo 8: The 'UNESCO Route' from Bergama to Ephesus

The first stop on this route is at the forty-fifth kilometre, which leads to the Ancient City of Pergamon. This UNESCO World Heritage site can be accessed through Türkiye's İzmir's Dikili Port. The route passes through stunning locations in İzmir, such as İzmir Bird Paradise, Karşıyaka, Alsancak, Seferihisar, Sığacık, Urla, and Alaçatı, before concluding in the ancient city of Ephesus, which is also a UNESCO World Heritage site. On this 500-kilometre long-distance route, you can stop in numerous villages and holiday resorts, observe flamingos while passing through the Gediz Delta, and enjoy breathtaking views of the Aegean Sea from the bike lane that runs through the city centre. You can also visit historic sites in two ancient cities on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

'Thrace Route' from Edirne to İstanbul

You can start your tour in Thrace from Edirne, a region noted for its natural beauty, delicious food, vineyards, legendary wines and friendly people. The city, the second capital of the Ottoman Empire, features historical structures such as inns, baths, bridges, and palaces and is the heart of the Thrace region. The Selimiye Mosque, built by Architect (Mimar) Sinan and included on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2011. After Edirne, you can continue to Kırklareli via lush forest roads. In addition to the İğneada National Park, which has floodplain

forests, swamps, freshwater lakes and coastal dunes, the highlights of this picturesque city include stellar examples of 19th-century Ottoman civil architecture. İstanbul, the vivid and vibrant metropolis with its ancient history and monuments, is the final stop on your bike journey.

Anatolian Route' from İstanbul to Kayseri

Ride from İstanbul, the world's crossroads, to Anatolia's heart. From the European side of İstanbul, the ferry transports you to the Anatolian side, with stunning views of the Bosphorus. As you bid farewell to İstanbul's evocative silhouette, Kocaeli, Sakarya and Eskişehir welcome you, one after the other. The historical Odunpazarı district in Eskişehir draws attention due to its cultural richness and various museums. With its picturesque traditional houses, narrow streets, mosques, fountains and small squares, the district centre was added to Türkiye's UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List in 2012. In Nevşehir, you are greeted by scenic Cappadocia, one of the world's most fascinating geographical regions. You can see the distinctive Fairy Chimneys throughout the region – and one of the most thrilling ways to discover these natural formations is from a hot air balloon. Kayseri, one of Anatolia's most historic cities, is the final stop on this route, and it will captivate you, particularly with its legendary traditional cuisine.

The Eurasian Route: The Route of the Empire

Another option for long-distance cycling in Türkiye is the Eurasian Road (Via Eurasia), a long-distance culture and trekking route. The route enters Türkiye from Edirne and heads south, passing through İstanbul and Bursa. Starting from Beykoz, known for its lush groves, you can cycle through Poyrazköy and Anadol.

[HTTPS://GOTURKIYE.COM](https://goturkiye.com)



Türkiye closes 2023 with record-breaking tourism figures

Türkiye, one of the world's leading tourism destinations, achieved record-breaking growth in 2023 by welcoming 56.7 million international visitors, marking a 10 per cent increase year-on-year. According to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the country's tourism revenue also rose to \$54.3 billion, a 17 per cent increase from the previous year.

In 2023, Türkiye was one of Europe's most sought-after destinations for culture, art, gastronomy, cycling, religious tourism, as well as sea, sand, and sun holidays. Building upon this success, Türkiye aims to attract 60 million tourists and generate \$60 billion in tourism income in 2024. With a focus on market diversity, Türkiye will continue its efforts in existing markets while targeting new markets in the coming years.

Leading the Way in Sustainable Tourism

Behind Türkiye's tourism success lies a strategic and forward-thinking approach that prioritizes creating an inviting environment for visitors. The country has implemented responsible and sustainable policies, transforming the tourism sector into a more resilient and inclusive industry.

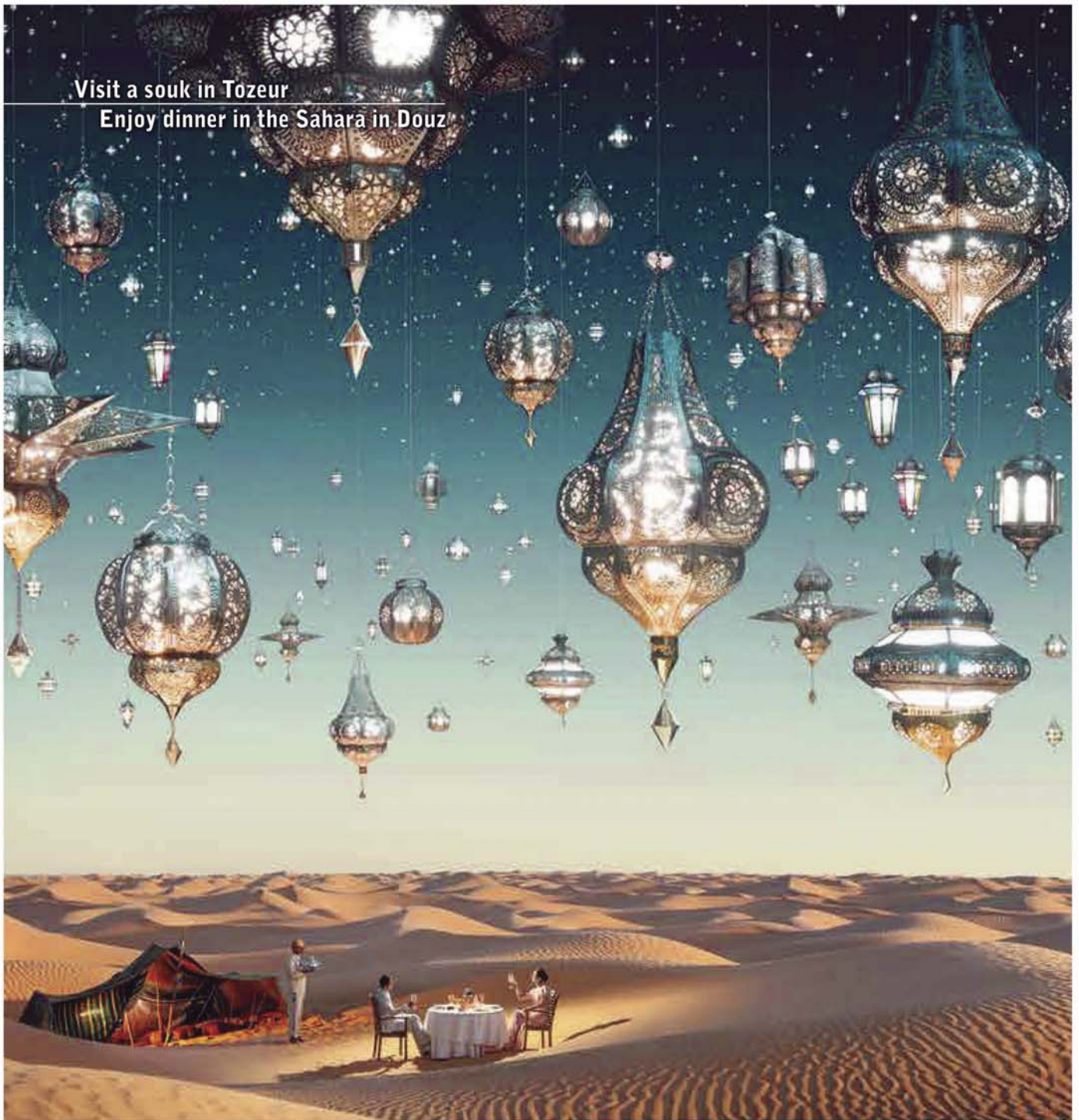
In 2022, Türkiye became the first country in the world to sign an agreement with the "Global Sustainable Tourism Council" (GSTC) at a government level. The expectations of the Council are now required across the country's sector. The Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program, resulting from this cooperation, recognizes and rewards practitioners of sustainable tourism, enhancing trust and credibility among visitors. The program offers diverse and sustainable experiences, including eco-friendly accommodations, cycling, and trekking, aiming to foster a deeper connection between Türkiye's heritage and its visitors.

Türkiye: A Year-Round, Versatile Destination

Renowned for its unique geographical location, surrounded by beautiful seas on three sides, and rich historical heritage, Türkiye stands out as a year-round and versatile travel paradise. The country takes bold steps to showcase its tourism assets to the world, attracting visitors with its diverse offerings, such as city escapes, sports activities, international events, and festivals. ■

[HTTPS://GOTURKIYE.COM](https://goturkiye.com)

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INSPIRING
Tunisia

Why You'll Want to Add Japan to Your Travel Bucket List!



Japan has recently been recognized as the best destination in the world to visit. Here are eight reasons why it should be on everyone's travel bucket list.

1. Clean and Safe

Japan is renowned as one of the safest countries in the world -as well as one of the cleanest. It is difficult to even find garbage bins in public because of the way the Japanese respect their surroundings, cleaning up their own trash and taking it home. The Japanese principle of *mottainai* means to not be wasteful, and this is entrenched and deeply felt in their culture.

2. Nature

Opportunities to get out of the city and experience nature are extraordinary. Since Japanese beliefs are rooted in respect for nature, there are vast and diverse trail networks for hiking through forests and ancient villages and along coastlines, climbing mountains, cycling between islands, and diving in

pristine waters. Within cities, immaculate zen gardens and hillsides draped in floral profusions delight and inspire all who visit them.

3. Accommodations

There are always new hotels opening in Tokyo, from high-end brands to high-tech robotic. For those who want to experience traditional comforts, Japan's unique *ryokans* enable visitors to experience Japan's legendary past. Overnight stays in zen temples or farm stays in rural villages enable immersion into different sides of Japanese culture and provide insight into a bygone era.

4. Cuisine

Japanese cuisine is diverse, seasonal, regional and ubiquitous, from the greatest constellation of Michelin stars to *izakayas*, local markets, and convenience stores, culinary treasures abound. Beyond sushi, each prefecture boasts its own *wagyu* beef, each region has its own ramen, and Japanese fruits are renowned for their fairytale perfection.

5. Temples, Shrines & Castles

Japan is one of those unique destinations in which ancient sites remain as living and functional spaces whose maintenance is a sacred cultural pursuit. Temples, shrines and castles with quintessentially unique architecture date back centuries and even millennia. They carry the history and spirit of a nation, and are the intrigue of the world.

6. Sumo and Sports

Sumo wrestling is Japan's national sport, but it is more than a sport; it is full of Shinto rituals that fascinate visitors enamoured by the spectacle. Judo, *kyūdō* (Japanese archery), karate, aikido, and kendo (the way of the sword) are all Japanese martial arts that attract visitors to watch or even find a *dojo* in which to learn. Baseball is Japan's most popular sport for both spectating and participating. You haven't been to a baseball game until you've been to one in Japan!

7. Arts

Art is an intrinsic part of Japanese culture, and there are ample opportunities for visitors to not only visit the innumerable art galleries (from traditional to avant garde) but also to participate in crafts such as *ikebana* (flower arranging), pottery, woodblock printing, origami, folding fan making, green tea workshops, and even *kogatana* (small blade) swordsmithing. These cultural activities are highly enriching and make great souvenirs to bring home.

8. Transportation

Public transportation across Japan is the envy of the world. Trains depart on time. They are clean, comfortable and efficient. The *shinkansen* (bullet train) can whisk you from one end of the country to the other in the blink of an eye, and the number of trains departing each day between major cities accommodates every schedule. Rail passes make it easy, and signage is in English, so commuting by train is an effortless part of any travel itinerary. ■

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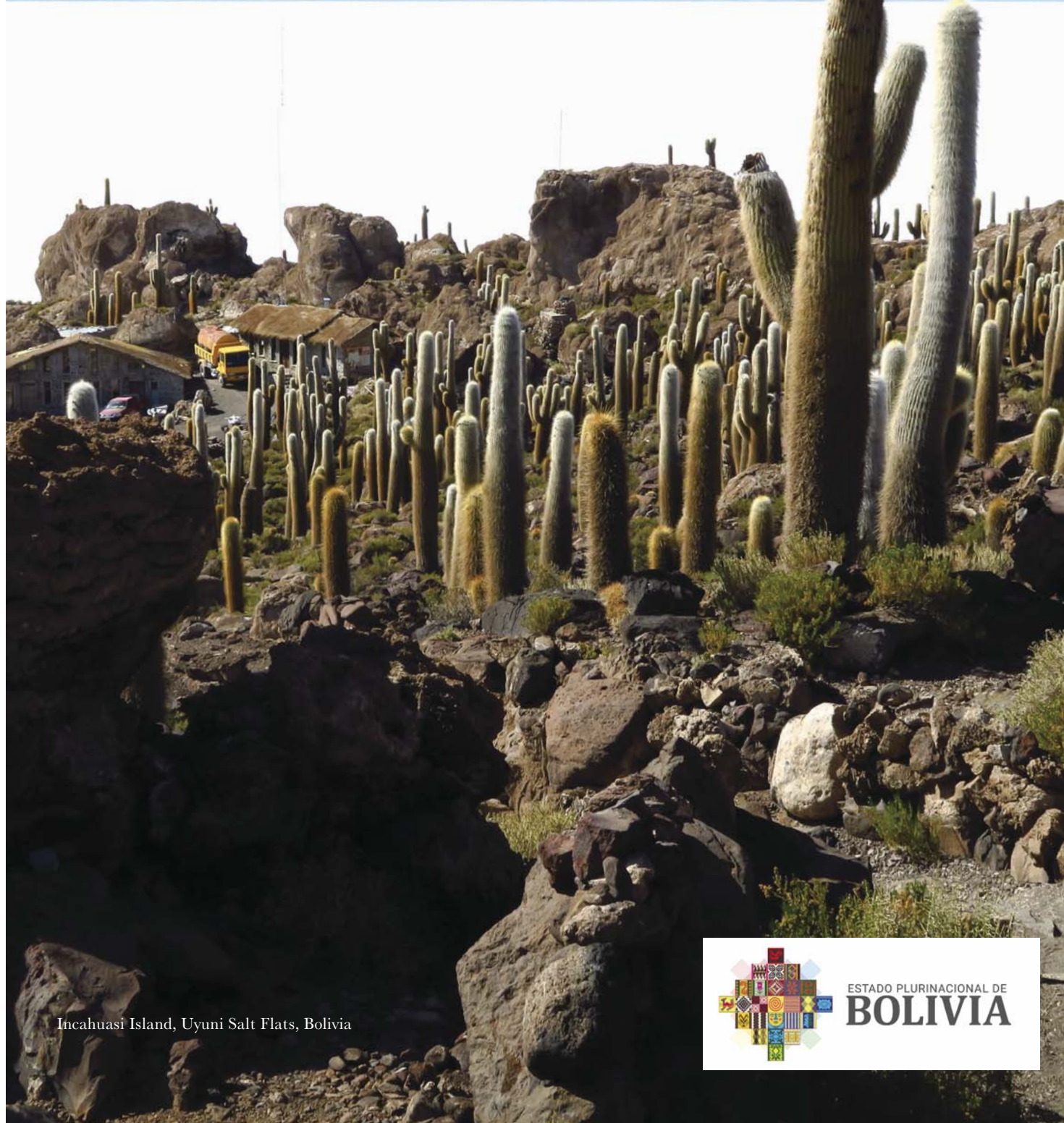
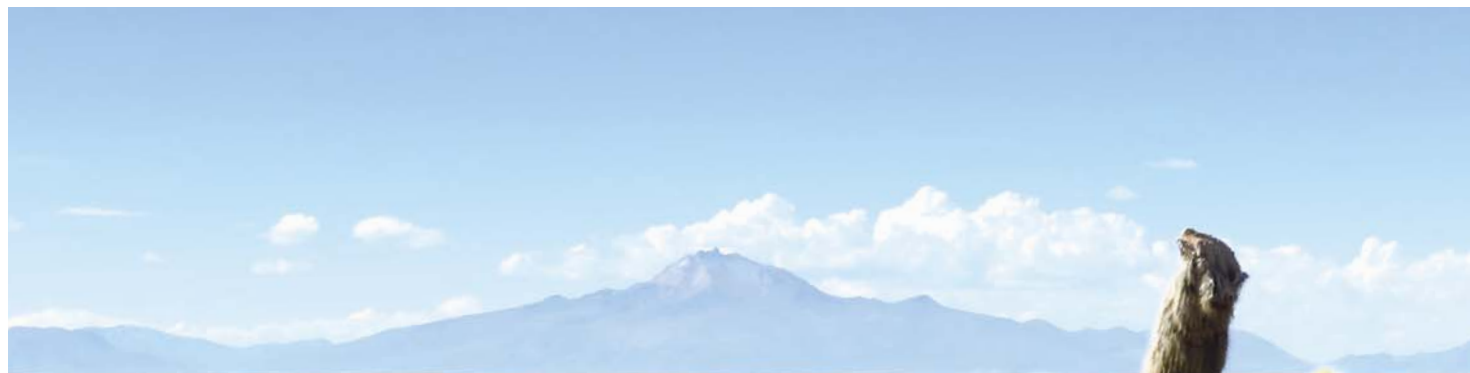
Kawachi Fujien Wisteria Garden



Breakfast in Yamagata



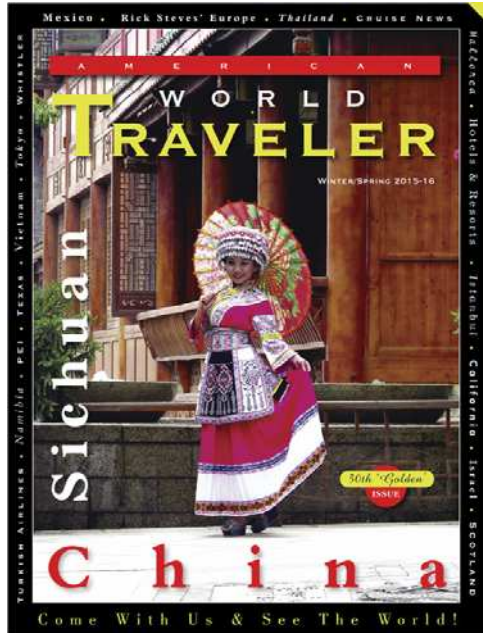
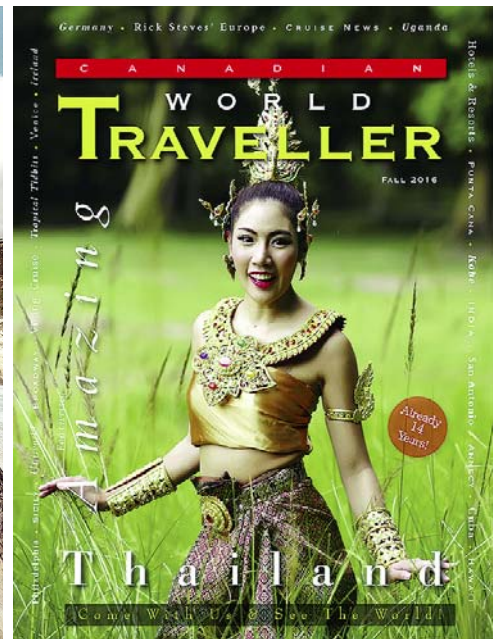
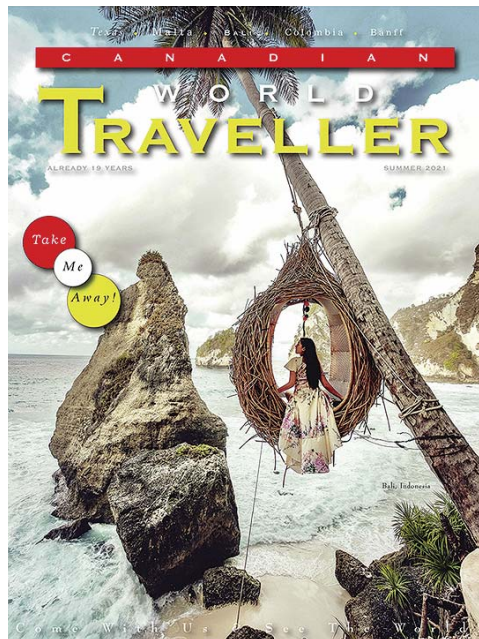
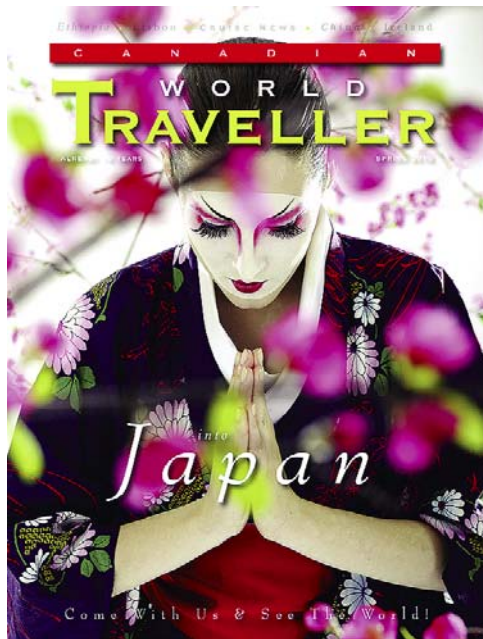
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Incahuasi Island, Uyuni Salt Flats, Bolivia



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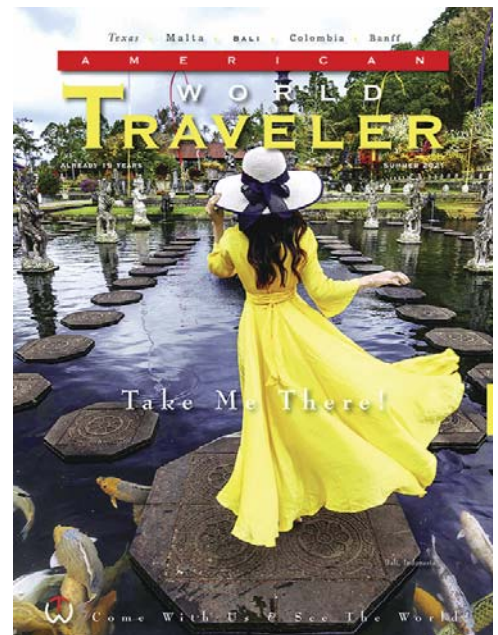
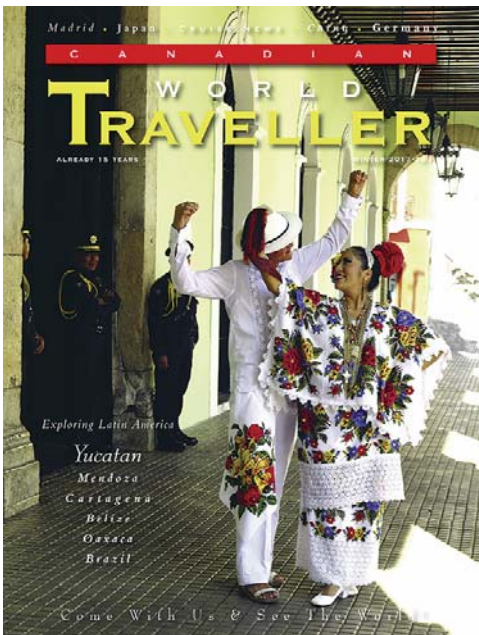
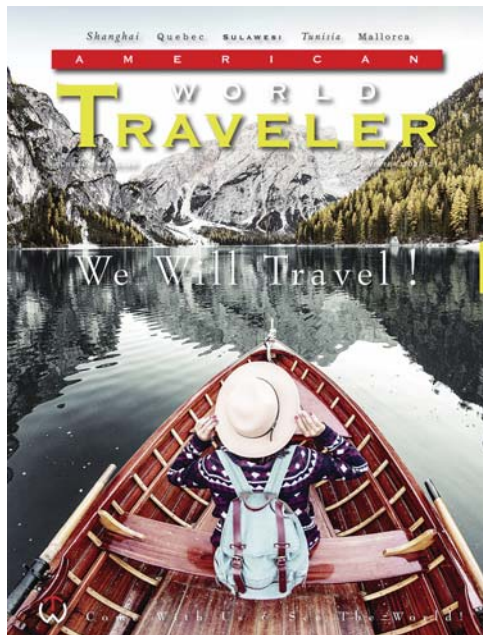
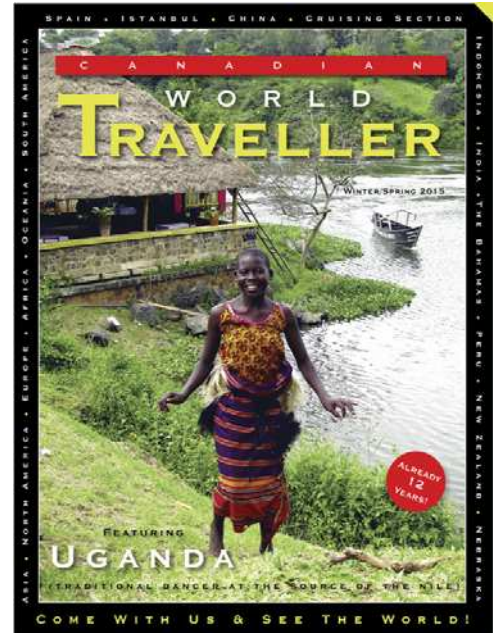
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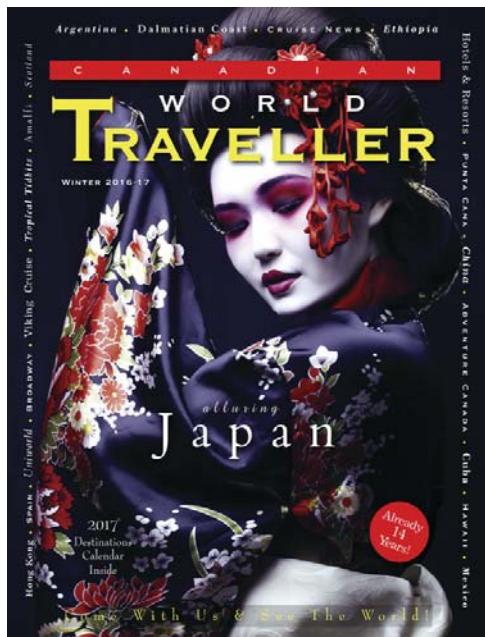
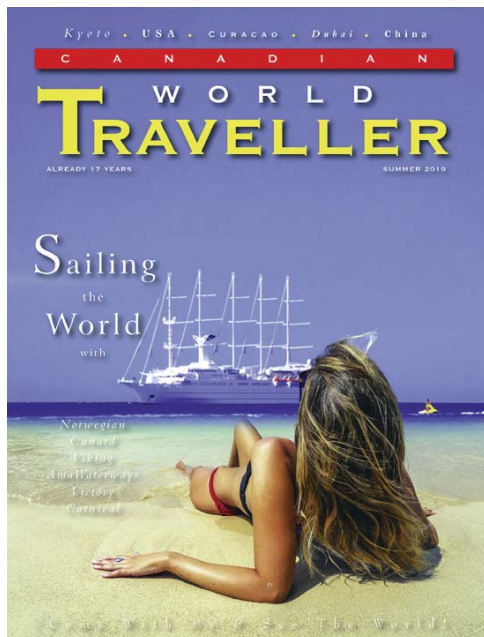
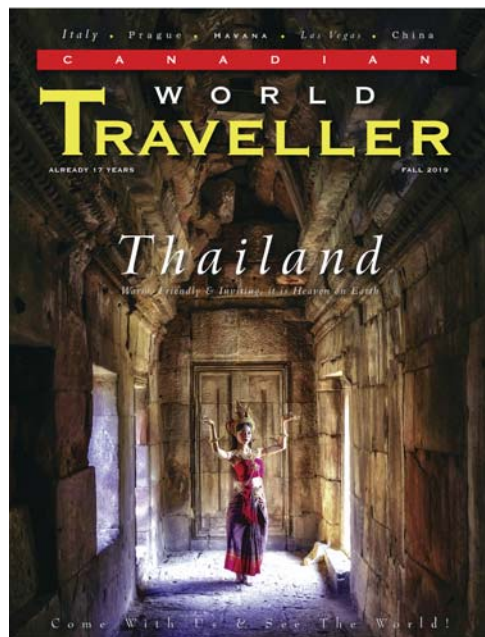
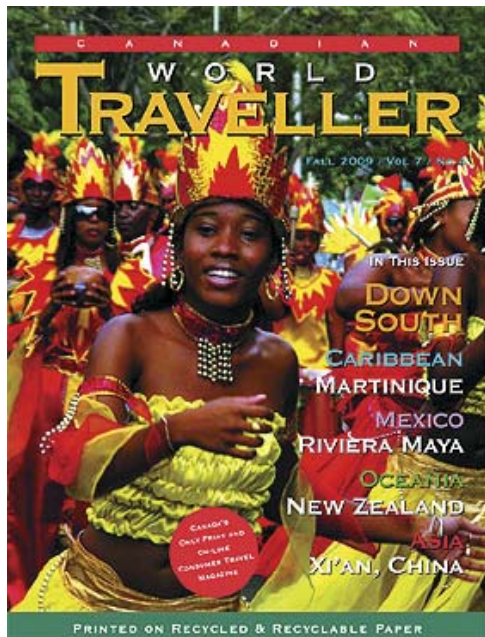
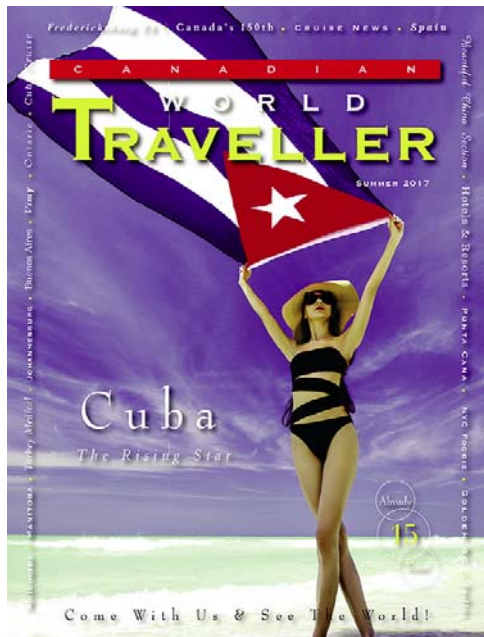
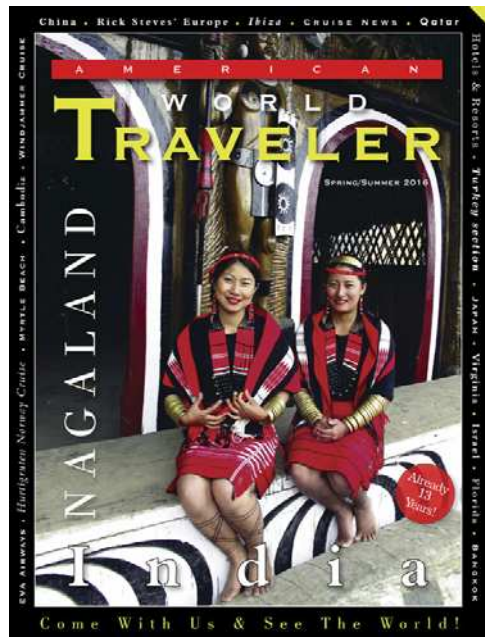
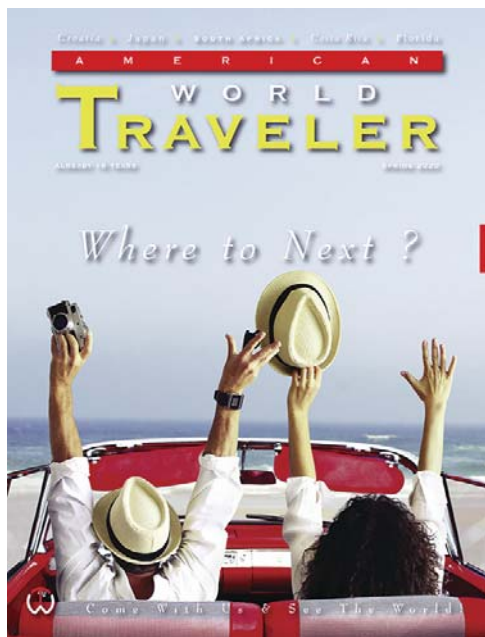
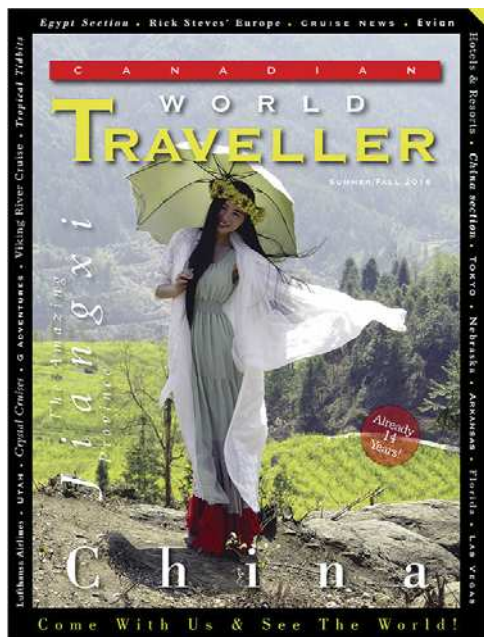
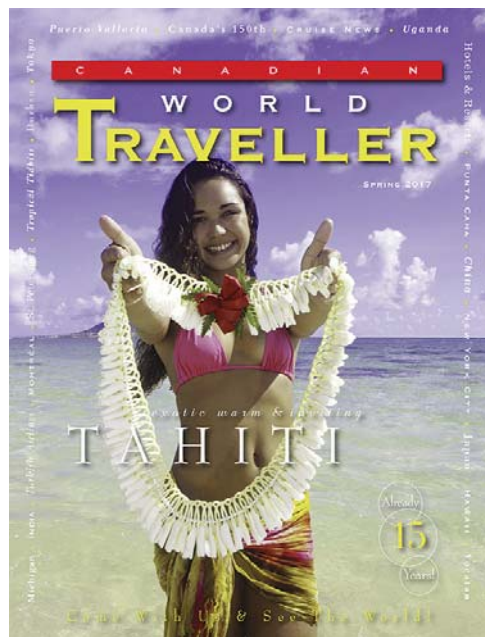
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Campspot: Revolutionizing the Camping Experience

by Olivia Liveng

In a world where the great outdoors beckons more than ever, Campspot has emerged as a trailblazer in the camping industry. Founded with a vision to streamline the camping experience, Campspot has successfully married technology with the timeless allure of nature. This innovative company offers a comprehensive online booking system that simplifies the process of finding and reserving the perfect camping spot.

The genesis of Campspot can be traced back to a simple yet pervasive problem: the hassle of booking a campsite. Traditional methods were often cumbersome, involving lengthy phone calls, unclear availability, and a lack of campground information. Recognizing the need for a more efficient system, Campspot was born out of the desire to make camping more accessible and enjoyable for everyone.

At its core, Campspot is a user-friendly online platform that lists thousands of campgrounds across North America. Campspot's extensive database caters to various camping preferences, from rustic tent sites to luxury RV parks. What sets Campspot apart is its commitment to providing real-time availability and guaranteed reservations. This eliminates the uncertainty accompanying campsite booking, ensuring campers can secure their preferred spot without any last-minute surprises.

One of the most notable features of Campspot is its search functionality. Users can filter campgrounds based on specific criteria such as location, amenities, site types, and activities. Whether you're looking for a pet-friendly park near a beach or a secluded spot with hiking trails, Campspot's

intuitive interface makes it easy to find a campground that matches your needs.

Beyond its practical booking features, Campspot also fosters a sense of community among campers. The platform includes reviews and ratings from fellow campers, offering valuable insights into the camping experience at different locations. This community-driven aspect not only aids in decision-making but also contributes to a shared camping culture focused on adventure, relaxation, and making memories.

In addition to serving individual campers, Campspot provides a robust solution for campground owners and managers. The platform includes management software that streamlines operations such as reservation management, pricing, and inventory control. This improves the efficiency of campground management and enhances the overall customer experience.

Campspot's impact on the camping industry cannot be overstated. The company has simplified the booking process to make camping more accessible to a broader audience. It's particularly appealing to a new generation of campers who prioritize convenience and are accustomed to managing their travel plans online.

Looking to the future, Campspot shows no signs of slowing down. The company continues to expand its campground offerings and enhance its platform with new features. In doing so, Campspot remains at the forefront of a camping revolution that embraces the wonders of the great outdoors while harnessing the power of technology.

In conclusion, Campspot represents a significant leap forward in the camping world. For those yearning to explore the great outdoors, it offers a gateway to countless adventures under the stars. With its blend of technology, convenience, and community, Campspot is not just a booking platform; it's a catalyst for unforgettable camping experiences. ■

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Mad About Madrid

Article and photography by Nicholas Kontis

The people of Madrid, who are known as Madrilenos, use a poetic phrase to describe their city: “De Madrid al cielo” translates to “From Madrid to the sky.” It’s easy to see why travelers fall in love with the Spanish capital. Art, history, and gastronomy collide to give the city a heavenly ambiance. Nothing personifies the passionate, artistic soul of the city like the seductive flamenco dance.

The thrilling metropolis flaunts styles for every taste.

Barrio de Salamanca

The city’s most exclusive quarter is Barrio de Salamanca. Broad boulevards with ornate 19th-century facades shelter a refined lifestyle. Tree-lined Calle de Serrano, Calle Ortega y Gasset, Calle de Goya and Calle de Velasquez are some of the classiest streets in

Madrid, home to high-end couture, boutique shopping, jewelry stores and gastro tapas bars.

El Retiro Park

Madrid is one of the greenest cities in the world. Covering nearly 300 acres, El Retiro Park is its heart and soul. In the 19th century, the acreage was reserved for select Spanish royalty. Today, it resembles New York’s Central Park as the hub of the grand metropolis with its bicyclists and runners, meandering Madrillenos and vagabond visitors. Sights include the Crystal Palace, Retiro Lake (with its Alfonso XII monument), dazzling fountains, a fragrant rose garden, memorials to Spanish heroes and writers, gazebos and open-air cafes for socializing.

Golden Triangle of Art

When I asked a Madrilleno friend how much

time I should spend in the city, he replied: “You could spend weeks just visiting Madrid’s three top museums. It has one of the highest concentrations of art on Earth.” The renowned EL Prado, the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum and the Reina Sofia Museum form the Golden Triangle of Art. The collection at the Prado alone flaunts more than 7,500 Spanish and European paintings. Displaying work from the Renaissance and Baroque periods through the 19th century, it exhibits more than 1,000 sculptures alone.

Fabulous Flamenco

Flamenco, the most passionate of Spanish dances, originated in the province of Andalusia in southern Spain — but Madrid is a wonderful place to experience it. In the Salamanca district, at Tabloa Flamenco, a fierce and seductive evening of dancing and singing is presented through gastronomy, music and art by the stately Flamenco de Leones troupe in an intimate dinner and show.

Barrio de Las Letras

The Barrio de las Letras is the city’s library quarter. Many significant literary figures lived in the streets between the Paseo del Prado and the Plaza de Santa Ana during Madrid’s Golden Age. Cervantes, Quevedo and Lope de Vega were among those who passed through. Today its pedestrian streets and eclectic shops share the lively street scene with cafes and beer halls.

Rosewood Villa Magna

The Rosewood Villa Magna hotel occupies a prime location in the heart of Madrid. The luxurious property, with 154 residential units, stands in a coveted place on the grand, tree-lined Paseo de la Castellana. The Rosewood offers guests a chic, elegant solace from the bustle of the outside world. Guests can enjoy high-quality massages and facials at the Sense spa. A Finnish sauna, jacuzzi and steam room enhance the experience. Executive chef Jesús Sanchez helms the Michelin-rated Amos Restaurant. ■

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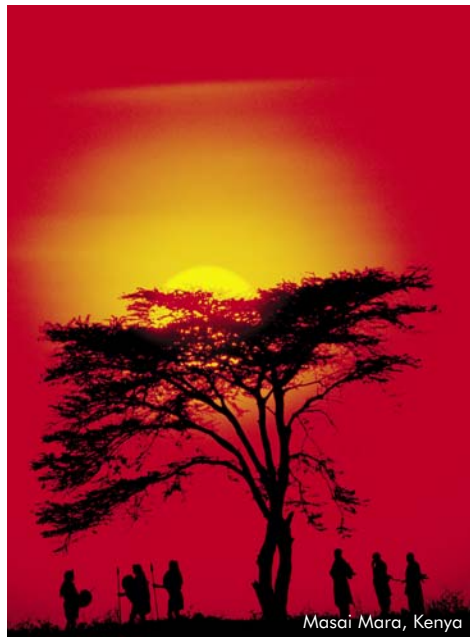
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Peruvian Family



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Rice Fields, Ubud, Indonesia



Dim Sum, Hong Kong



Skiing, the French Alps



Breezin' along with the Southern Wind

Ishigaki and Taketomi, Japan

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

Shimano Tabemonoya Paikaji translates as 'restaurant on the island of the southern wind'. The name is tied to the location in the bustling downtown area of Ishigaki, on Ishigakijima, one of the Yaeyama Islands that have been mythically associated with the southern wind in Okinawa Prefecture. And it's a go-to destination for island hoppers, culture lovers, and foodies!

After checking in to the centrally-located Hotel Miyahira, we immediately immersed ourselves in Okinawa culinary bliss with an afternoon 'tsumami' or snack. Tuna, salmon, and Buri (Yellowtail) sashimi was the prelude to Ishigaki Beef Tataki (thinly sliced and slightly seared), accompanied by Shikuwasa, an Okinawan drink of local sour-lime mixed with

Awamori (an Okinawan distilled drink with 30%-40% alcohol content).

With taste buds aroused, we had dinner at Shimano Tabemonoya, a traditional wood-crafted Izakaya near the central market. The first dish of octopus and cucumber in kimchi sauce was so good that we ordered it again for dessert! But the other outstanding dishes included squid Ink fried rice, and goya champuru: green bitter melon, tofu, egg, and spam (the canned meat product that has become part of Okinawan culture).

And on another evening, this time at Marusa Honten, we munched on umibudo, crunchy, salty sea grapes dipped in ponzu sauce, and

mozuku tempura, battered and deep-fried Okinawan seaweed. So tasty!

However, gastronomy was only one of the star attractions we experienced.

As nature lovers and photographers, we wanted meaningful interactions with the island, and Banna Park, a large forested area about 20 minutes from the city, was a great place to start. On a nighttime owl prowling with a local guide, we spotted Ryukyu Scops Owls, a Brown Hawk Owl, and Malayan Night Herons. And the next day, driving off the beaten track through scenic mountain landscapes, marshes, farmer's fields, and the stunning scenery around Kabira Bay, we shared memorable moments with a colorful crew of Crested Serpent Eagles, a ghostly white-faced Black-shouldered Kite, Purple Herons, Red-footed snipes, Yellow Wagtails, Golden Plovers, and a 'trilling' encounter with a Whistling Green Pigeon.

Not to be outdone, we took the 15-minute ferry to Taketomi Island on our third day. Many daytrippers rent bicycles to explore the beaches, but we opted to walk, and in doing so, we discovered curious cows, a friendly bearded Billy Goat, a selection of vibrant flowers, and a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

We visited Kondoi Beach and Kaiji Beach, looking for the famous star-shaped grains of sand and taking photos of Black Herons, White Egrets, and the rugged coastal scenery.

Then we wandered through the traditional village where age-old stone walls delineate the properties, and mythical lion-dogs, called Shisa, reside on the red-tile roofs of the small houses to safeguard the home and family against evil and misfortune.

The mythical spirit followed us back to Ishigaki Island, where we explored the Gongendo Shrine and Torinji Temple, dating to 1614, and protected by scowling Nio Guardians and the wrathful glare of Shisa.

Aside from food, culture, history, nature, and photography, travelers visit Ishigaki for the beaches, diving, snorkeling, and surfing. We loved our time on Ishigaki and Taketomi and plan to return. ■

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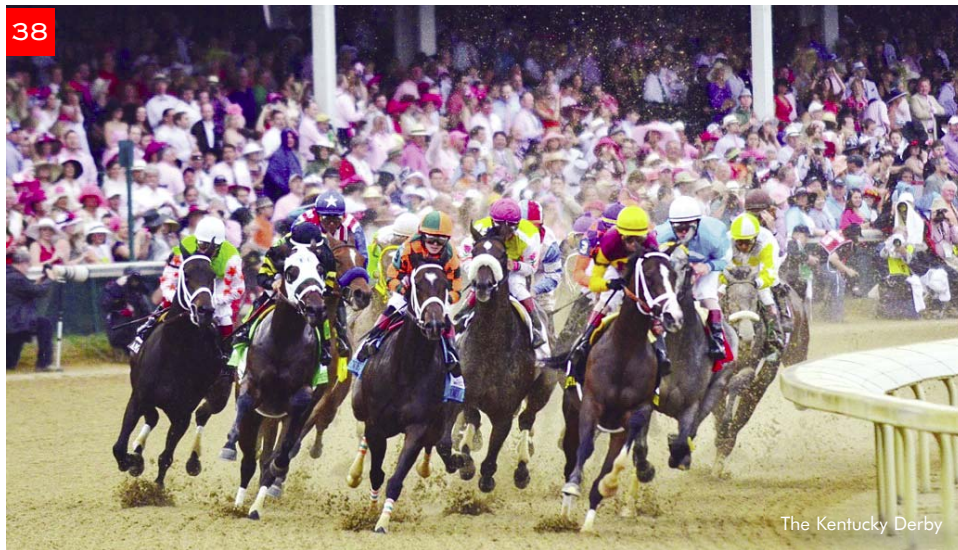
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Add These Southern States to Your Travel Bucket List

With so much charm and beauty, there is no time to waste! Start scratching places off your travel bucket list with our guide to the coolest places to visit in the South.

North Carolina

Visitors can embark on the "Mountains to Sea Trail" for a remarkable exploration, inviting them to hike or paddle trails that crisscross the entire state. Stretching from the majestic peaks of the Appalachian Mountains to the serene coast of the Outer Banks, this trail showcases the incredible diversity of North Carolina's landscapes. Whether navigating forested trails, meandering through the rolling hills of the Piedmont, or paddling along tranquil waterways and coastal marshes, adventurers can immerse themselves in the state's natural beauty, encounter unique wildlife, and embrace the warmth of local communities. Whether you seek a challenging trek or a leisurely stroll, the "Mountain to Sea Trail" offers a truly inclusive experience, allowing visitors from around the world to discover the heart and soul of North Carolina at their own pace.

Missouri

For sports lovers, 2024 should definitely include a visit to Kansas City! The Kansas City Current women's soccer team will be playing

inside their brand-new stadium, CPKC Stadium, starting in spring 2024. CPKC is the world's first sports stadium purpose-built for a professional women's team. The riverfront stadium will be right on the bank of the Missouri River with easy access to many restaurants, bars and entertainment venues. Kansas City's free public streetcar will run to the stadium, allowing easier access. Inside the stadium visitors can get a taste of local cuisine, including Kansas City's most famous offering – barbecue.

Alabama

Whether it's trying mouth-watering barbecue, staying in boutique hotels or getting active while exploring one of the 22 state parks, Alabama has unique accommodations and experiences for every "New Year" Resolution! Head to Montgomery and dive into history by visiting the Rosa Parks Museum, the Dexter Parsonage Museum, and the Alabama State Capitol or get in touch with your adventurous side by visiting the new Whitewater Park. Or dive into the local food scene with Southern classics like BBQ, fried green tomatoes, and shrimp and grits in Birmingham, aka "The Dinner Table of the South". Additionally, don't miss out on the vibrant music scene, especially in cities like Muscle Shoals, less than a two-hour drive from Nashville and Memphis.

Kentucky

The Kentucky Derby is on most people's bucket list every year. However, this year's Derby marks the 150th "Run for the Roses" and Kentucky is ready to celebrate. In fact, the celebration started 150 days before Derby Day with a "150 to 150" kickoff party at the Kentucky Derby Museum in Louisville. There will be many more festivities in the months and weeks leading up to the race, so make sure you don't miss out on the party.

West Virginia

The 57-foot cascade of Blackwater Falls is named for its tannin-darkened water, which is caused by fallen hemlock and red spruce needles. Blackwater Falls is also among the most photographed venues in the state. Blackwater Falls State Park has several viewing platforms that allow visitors to enjoy scenic views year-round and allow you to get those incredible photos that make this area so popular.

Tennessee

Stay in Suite 1986 at Dollywood's DreamMore Resort Adored with lavish décor and personal touches, music icon Dolly Parton's personalized motorcoach, Suite 1986, offers an immersive journey into Parton's life with exclusive accommodations, culinary delights and dedicated concierge in the Smoky Mountains. Learn more here.

South Carolina

It might seem unlikely that a national park could be undiscovered in any way, and yet Congaree National Park is certainly a hidden gem. It's one of the least visited national parks in the country, yet it is home to the largest intact expanse of old growth bottomland hardwood forest in the southeast. Each May, visitors may even see the dance of the fireflies, where they will synchronize their flash for an amazing, natural light phenomenon.

Mississippi

Planning a Mississippi vacation has never been easier. In addition to the Hospitality State's many great hotels and amazing restaurants, visitors can explore a growing list of virtual tours illustrating blues history. Blues fans can take a web-based tour of the genre's legacy through the Delta Blues Museum's online resources. Mississippi travelers are invited to review exhibits at the museum or enjoy virtual field trips that highlight the history of the blues.

But that's not all... the South offers a variety of unique experiences that are sure to make this is the year you check everything off your travel bucket list! ■

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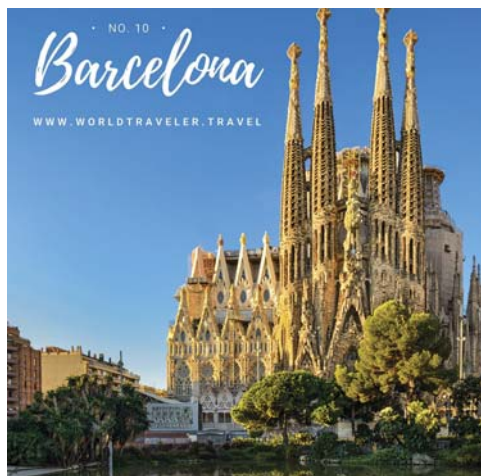
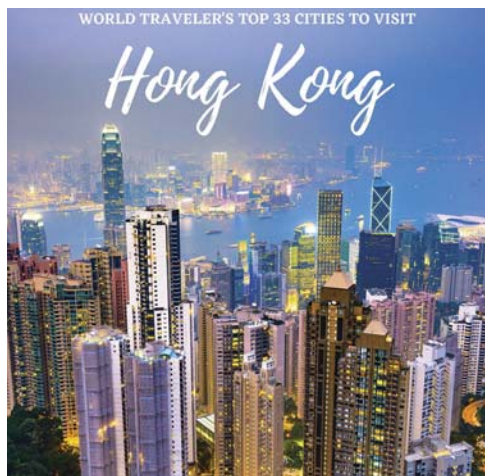
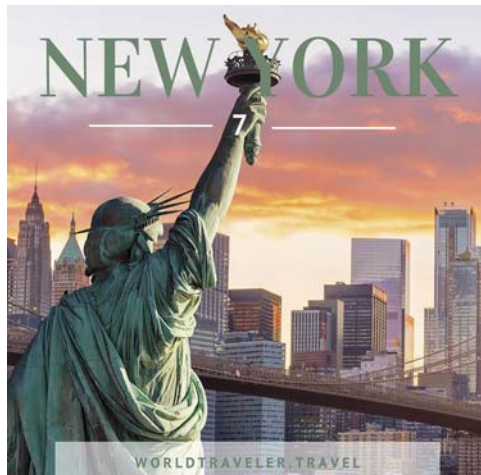
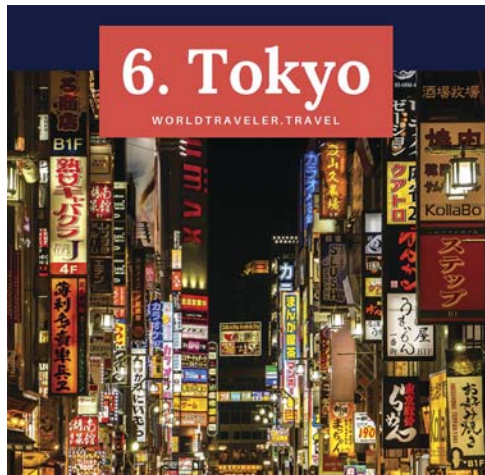
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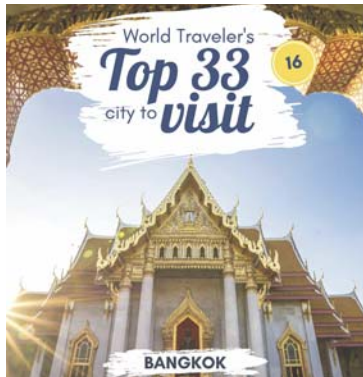
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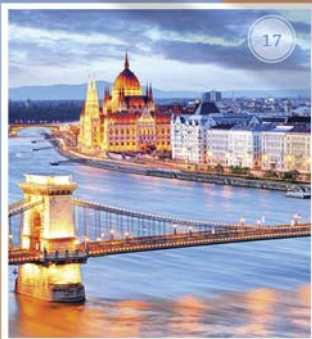
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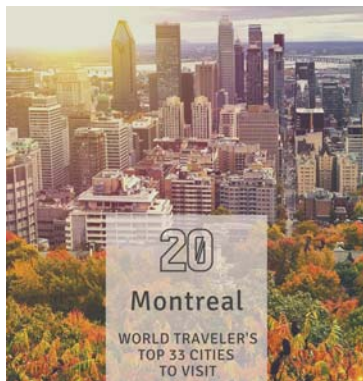
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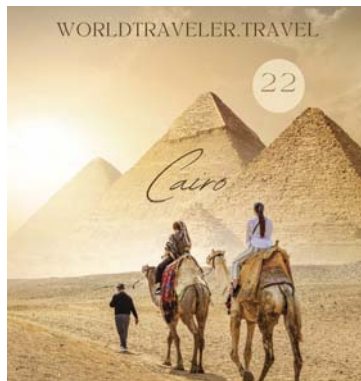
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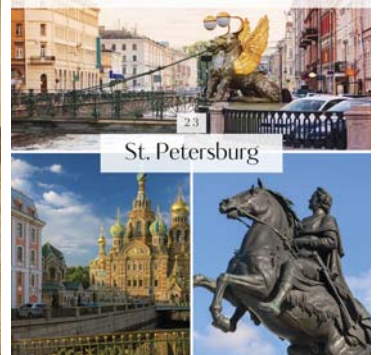
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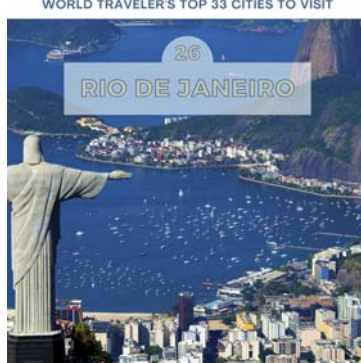
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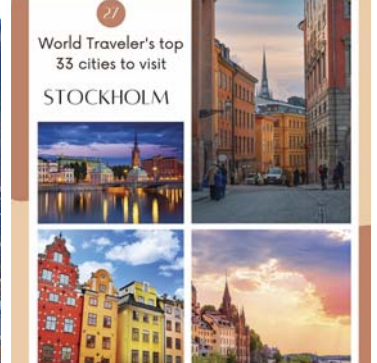
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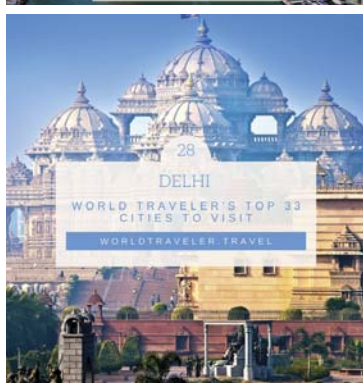
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MEXICO CITY





Germany's Old Towns with UNESCO World Heritage Status

Often, it is "only" individual buildings in a historic town that UNESCO declares a World Heritage Site. In the case of Lübeck, Goslar, Regensburg, Stralsund and Wismar, on the other hand, the entire Old Town has been recognised. And rightly so!

Lübeck: gabled houses, Nobel Prize winners and marzipan

Before the euro, everyone held the image of the Holsten Gate in their hands instead, as it adorned the 50-Mark note. Such an honour is not lightly awarded. In fact, the late-Gothic building is considered to be one of the most famous German architectural monuments. With its thick walls it once protected the Old Town, surrounded by the river Trave and Elbe-Lübeck canal. At around 100 hectares, this is one of the largest German monuments on the UNESCO World Heritage List. As you walk past the gabled houses of this Hanseatic city, you'll discover idyllic courtyards and passageways such as the Füchtingshof, or Glandorps Gang. Literature fans can pay a visit to the Günter Grass-Haus,

as well as the Buddenbrookhaus, dedicated to Thomas Mann. Third on the list of Lübeck's Nobel Prize winners is former German Chancellor Willy Brandt, who also richly deserves his memorial. The Niederegger House is considered a place of pilgrimage for marzipan lovers.

Goslar: good things come in threes

The UNESCO World Heritage Site on the north-western edge of the Harz Mountains includes not only the Goslar Old Town and the Upper Harz Water Management System, but also the Rammelsberg ore mine – the only one in the world to have been in continuous operation for over 1,000 years. You can find information about this site at its museum, visitor galleries and events. Nearby Goslar, which has prospered from its ore, also offers some captivating events, including the Old Town Festival. Its 1,500 half-timbered houses form a great backdrop even without any event going on, and the setting is further enhanced by the Town Hall (the Hall of Homage is definitely worth seeing) and

remains of the town walls. The Imperial Palace was making history for almost 250 years, especially in the Romanesque Great Imperial Hall, Germany's largest, oldest and at the same time best-preserved secular building of the 11th century.

Regensburg: journey into the Middle Ages

Its 12th century Stone Bridge is considered a miracle of medieval engineering: it spans 300 metres across the Danube, and connects the Stadtamhof district with the Old Town. There, the towers of St. Peter's Cathedral rise high into the sky, and a prison complete with a torture chamber has been preserved in the Reichstag Museum within the historic Old Town Hall. There is plenty to see here, with Germany's largest collection of medieval sites: the Patrician Towers of wealthy families, Thurn und Taxis Palace, winding alleyways, delightful courtyards and the multimedia museum, the "House of Bavarian History", which opened in 2019 and covers the period from 1800 to the present. This student city is always lively – its high density of pubs is quite legendary! But even without alcohol, a boat trip to the Kelheim Hall of Liberation or to the Valhalla can be intoxicating.

Wismar and Stralsund: brick Gothic architecture on the Baltic Sea

These are the Hanseatic cities, located on the Baltic coast of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern – and their Old Towns were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2002: Wismar and Stralsund have a lot in common. And yet at the same time also have their own individual character. Wismar's 100 by 100 metre market square, for example, is one of the largest in northern Germany. The buildings that make up its Town Hall are truly outstanding, as are the "Alter Schwede" community centre and the "Wismarer Wasserkunst" pavilion. In the really beautiful "Schabbellhaus" you can learn a lot about the town's history – and the "European Route of Brick Gothic". Stralsund is also on this route. Its harbour island is home to around 500 historic buildings, many of them gabled houses, and some of them brick churches. Above all, the 104-metre tower of St. Mary's Church shapes the city's skyline – a city which also appeals to fish lovers. For one, it is considered the birthplace of the Bismarck Herring, and it is also home to the magnificent Ozeaneum. ■

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10 Great Reasons to Visit Dubai in 2024

If you thought you knew Dubai, think again. This year, this dynamic city will offer even more reasons to top your holiday list. In 2024, Dubai will welcome more stunning hotels, host more action-packed events and family-friendly activities, and offer fabulous culinary adventures filled with authentic Emirati cuisine, international street food, and Michelin-starred dining delights. There will be thrills galore with exhilarating indoor and outdoor adventures, as well as aerial and underwater excursions. Discover the top reasons why Dubai should top your travel list in 2024.

1. Hotels for all kinds of travellers

Dubai is home to a wide selection of hotels catering to all types of travellers. Two stand-outs are Bab Al Shams Desert Resort, designed to resemble a fortified Arab village and located deep in the Dubai desert, and 25Hours, a boutique city hotel renowned for its local artwork and recent addition of Cinema Akil, a platform showcasing quality



independent films from around the world. Additionally, options such as W Dubai - Mina Seyahi, an adults-only beachfront playground with spectacular views across the Arabian Gulf, and NH Collection Dubai The Palm, known for its vegan-friendly rooms and various sustainability initiatives, provide excellent stays in the emirate.

2. Take in Dubai's skyline from the most Instagrammable locations

Sky Views Dubai at Address Sky View takes city sightseeing to new heights. Adventure-seekers can take on the Edge Walk and Sky Glass experiences on the 52nd and 53rd floors, or ride the breathtaking glass Sky Slide from floor to floor outside the tower while revelling in panoramic views of the city. Dubai Frame holds the title of the world's largest picture frame, provides spectacular views of 'old' Dubai and Dubai Creek on one side, and 'new' Dubai and its myriad landmarks on the other. AURA Skypool is suspended 200 metres in the air, and is the highest 360-degree infinity pool in the world. Guests can swim in the sky while soaking in stunning panoramic views of the city's iconic skyline, Palm Jumeirah, and the Arabian Gulf.

3. Iconic architecture

Dubai is known for architectural marvels such as Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, the iconic sail-shaped Burj Al Arab, and the impressive Dubai Frame. Visitors can delve into history at Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, and witness futuristic innovation at the Museum of the Future.

4. Unwind at beautiful beaches

Dubai boasts several public beaches including Kite Beach, a standout destination for sun-seekers, food enthusiasts, kite surfers, and all manner of watersports lovers. Sunset Beach, also known as Umm Suqeim Beach, provides tranquil ambience, stunning views of Burj Al Arab, and is one of the best places to watch the sun sink below the horizon. Furthermore, The Beach at JBR is one of the most popular beaches in the city and with its promenade filled with shops, restaurants and outdoor markets it is ideal for seaside lounging any time of day. Its extensive coastline offers visitors a chance to try parasailing, kitesurfing, sailing, jetskiing, kayaking, and more. Whether you're seeking high-flying adventures or serene water-based activities, Dubai's beaches cater to various interests and provide ample opportunities for fun and exploration.

5. Ultimate Shopping Destination

Often referred to as a shopper's paradise, Dubai boasts a multitude of malls, including mega destinations such as Dubai Mall, the largest mall in the world, and the entertainment-packed Mall of the Emirates, to a serene shopping experience at Dubai Hills Mall, or discounted designer goods at The Outlet Village in Jebel Ali for bargain lovers, Dubai ensures options tailored to every taste and budget.

A trip to Dubai is never complete without a visit to its Gold Souk, Spice Souk, and Textile Souk, where you can haggle for exquisite jewellery, saffron, or authentic Arabian fabrics. For custom-designed jewellery, consider exploring the Gold and Diamond Park, a quieter alternative to the bustling Gold Souk.

6. Authentic local experiences

For visitors eager to explore the desert, the Platinum Heritage Desert Safari is a top choice. Recognised by the World Travel Awards, this premium tour offers authentic Emirati cuisine, conservation guides, falconry shows, cultural performances, and wildlife drives in vintage Land Rovers. Guests can also explore Sonara Camp, which is just a 40 minute drive from Downtown Dubai. Hatta – 90 minutes by car from the city center – boasts a 700-kilometre mountain range loved by photographers, nature enthusiasts, and adventurers. Hatta's rugged landscapes, wadis (valleys), and farms set the stage for





extensive hiking trails, mountain bike adventures, and kayaking at Hatta Dam.

7. Gastronomy

With more than 13,000 eateries representing 200 nationalities, Dubai offers an eclectic menu of culinary experiences. During the city's annual culinary festival, Dubai Food Festival, which takes place from 19 April to 12 May this year, visitors can explore a variety of flavours and cuisines – from live cooking shows to street food and affordable set menus during Dubai Restaurant Week. The city is home to 90 Michelin-recognised restaurants covering 23 cuisine types. Enjoy a progressive underwater fine-dining experience at acclaimed seafood restaurant Ossiano inspired by the ocean with floor-to-ceiling views into a huge aquarium.; opt for some Japanese sharing plates at local favourite

and MICHELIN Guide Bib Gourmand recipient, 3Fils; or experience an immersive modern-Indian culinary journey at Trèsind Studio, among many more.

8. Perfect escape for couples

Dubai is the ideal destination for romantic celebrations, with enchanting resorts, sandy beaches, and unique dining experiences. The award-winning Pierchic offers sumptuous modern Mediterranean fare in a sophisticated 'overwater dining' setting where the serene waters of the Arabian Gulf dovetail views of Burj Al Arab. Additionally, couples can enjoy a romantic luxury getaway at Anantara The Palm with rooms overlooking lagoon-inspired pools, or opt for villas that open onto the beach, experience a hot air balloon ride for a stunning sunrise over the desert, or head to the MICHELIN-starred Ossiano for a memorable evening while being surrounded by a floor-to-ceiling aquarium - also ideal for a proposal for those looking to pop the question, as guests can choose to display a personalised message through a diver!

9. Bucket list adventures await

Dubai offers a plethora of bucket list experiences tailored to diverse tastes. Guests can watch the sunset from Burj Al Arab's observation deck, take a heart-pounding leap with Skydive Dubai, or relax and unwind during a



getaway in the dunes of Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve's Al Maha Resort and Spa. The city covers it all.

10. World-class golf

In addition to being a hub for prestigious golfing competitions, Dubai offers enthusiasts the opportunity to refine their skills on different courses. Notable options include The Montgomerie Golf Club, The Els Club, Dubai Hills Golf Club and Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club – the city's second-oldest course having opened its doors in 1993. Topgolf Dubai also provides a fun interactive golf experience for all ages, with live music and dining. ■

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New from Australia



Australia unveils the latest experiences from around the country that promise to enchant, educate, and excite travelers wanting to discover the land down under. From the wonders of nature to the magic of cuisine, Australia's latest offerings are a testament to its endless diversity and appeal.

New Ultimate Hawkesbury experience Hawkesbury, New South Wales

Discover the Hawkesbury River's majesty with Wild Luxury's Ultimate Hawkesbury Pearler's Package. The luxurious two-night experience includes a stay at eco-retreat Calabash Bay Lodge, and a bespoke tour of the region's oldest oyster farm and only pearl producer. Slip into serenity at Calabash Bay Lodge riverfront lodge, with a bottle of Oakridge sparkling on arrival, and a three-course private chef meal. Fill the days exploring the Hawkesbury's waterways with exclusive use of the lodge's guest boat, plus kayaks and canoes Taste freshly shucked oysters on the half-day pearl and oyster experience at Broken Bay Pearl Farm, departing from the Lodge's pontoon. Travelers can learn about the river's history, an oyster's lifecycle from seafood to pearl production, and the origins of Australia's extraordinary native Akoya pearl. An hour's drive from Sydney/Warrane, guests can add a chauffeured Tesla or seaplane transfers from Sydney.

[HTTPS://WWW.WILDLUXURY.CO](https://www.wildluxury.co)



World Traveler Spring 2024

Lethal adventures jet ski tours Karratha, Western Australia

Dive into the crystal waters of Dampier Archipelago islands, off the Western Australian coast, with Lethal Adventures' jet ski tours, and the exhilarating new half-day Archipelago Explorer Tour. Launching from Karratha and led by passionate skipper, Leith Rowe, encounter sea turtles, dugongs, and seabirds, with the chance to spot seasonal humpback whales. Cruise through the sheltered waters of Hampton Harbour; exploring Sam's Island, the bustling port and salt export facilities, and hear old tales as you discover Pirate Cove. A two-hour flight or 16-hour road trip from Perth/Boorloo, and a three-hour drive south of Port Hedland, Karratha is the gateway to some of Western Australia's most renowned natural wonders including the Staircase to the Moon and Karijini and Chichester National Park.

[HTTPS://LETHALADVENTURES.AU](https://lethaladventures.au)

Murran Art Hub - Geelong, Victoria

Connect with First Nations creatives and entrepreneurs at Geelong's Murran, a new dynamic retail store, gallery, and arts hub showcasing and selling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned products. Drawing on over 80,000 years of agricultural practices, and historical ceremonies, Murran's retail store, gallery, and business spaces have been created to elevate and celebrate the economic participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People while authentically sharing and celebrating their culture with visitors. Just over an hour's drive from Melbourne/Narrm's city centre in Geelong, Murran is a unique enterprise empowering First Nations businesses and a great place for curious travellers to learn more about this ancient culture. Grab a coffee and seat at the co-working space, take a peek at the stunning Indigenous artworks, or shop around at the Murran store for your own piece of Indigenous heritage. ■

[HTTPS://MURREN.COM.AU](https://murren.com.au)



Love Knows No Bounds: Celebrate Like Everyday is St. Valentine's Day in Croatia's Most Romantic Cities

Croatia, celebrated for its captivating landscapes and rich history, invites couples and lovers to indulge in romance like everyday is Valentine's Day. Emphasizing the romantic hideaways that dot the country, Croatia beckons you to celebrate love in some of its most alluring cities.

Featured Romantic Cities:

Rovinj:

Romantic Seascapes and Old-World Charm

On the Istrian peninsula, Rovinj charms with its old-world allure, narrow cobblestone streets, and pastel-colored buildings. With panoramic views of the Adriatic, it provides an idyllic setting for a romantic getaway. Couples can explore the artistic Grisia Street, visit St. Euphemia's Basilica, and indulge in local cuisine at romantic seaside restaurants.

Zadar: Sunset Serenades and Adriatic View

Nestled on the Dalmatian coast, Zadar seamlessly blends ancient history with contemporary charm. Couples can wander through its charming streets, savor breathtaking sunsets by the sea organ, and embark on a romantic adventure through its historical sites, such as the Roman Forum and St. Donatus Church.

Trogir: Ancient Elegance on the Dalmatian Coast

Situated on the mainland just north of Split, Trogir stands as a timeless gem with its UNESCO World Heritage-listed Old Town. Romantic cobblestone streets wind through an architectural marvel that showcases a rich tapestry of Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque influences. Couples can immerse themselves in the medieval ambiance as they explore historic sites such as the Cathedral of St. Lawrence, a stunning example of Croatian sacral architecture.

Dubrovnik: The City of Love and History

Dubbed the "Pearl of the Adriatic," Dubrovnik is a UNESCO World Heritage Site with well-preserved medieval architecture. Lovebirds and history enthusiasts can delve into the city's romantic past through the themed tours titled "Tracing Love Through the Ages." ■

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Tropical Tidbits

by Sue C Travel

Winter might be waning, but that doesn't mean you should stop planning tropical getaways. Now is the best time to save on shoulder season rates and lower airfares. So, here are some ideas to jump start your spring escape plans with a few out-of-the-box activities to enrich your fun in the sun holiday...

Time to Revisit Puerto Rico

If you love Piña Coladas as much as I do, this is a great time to head to the island of their origin as the heavenly tropical libation is celebrating its 70th anniversary this year. First concocted in 1954, you can still visit the Caribe where it was born at the Caribe

Hilton hotel where they are sure to have special events around its birthday. Cheers! Also, a must visit there is the exciting new Disitrito T-Mobile complex that brings a modern Vegas-style vibe to the Puerto Rico Convention Center area. The multimedia multisensory urban park is full of dining, music, and activities like indoor ziplines, game arcades, giant video walls and they host cool cultural events. Hip entertainment now also takes place at the new Coca Cola Music Hall there, too.

But I have my sights set on a visit to neighboring Vieques Island there this year. I'm eager to see the wild horses and to try a clear-bottomed kayak night tour in their "bio

bay." There are only five bodies of water on the planet that boast "bioluminescence" where tiny organisms light up the water into neon blue traces at night. Puerto Rico has three of them, and Vieques has the brightest one in the world according to Guinness Records. For more reasons to visit or revisit Puerto Rico right now, see:

www.discoverpuertorico.com

'Love is Blind' Sets Sight on Cap Cana

If you're a fan of the reality TV series "Love is Blind," you'll get an intimate insider peek at this swanky adults-only resort called TRS Turquesa in the Dominican Republic. They



Carib Hotel Pina Colada



Bio Bay Puerto Rico



Turquesa Hotel Cap Cana



shot many scenes of its sixth season there. This stand-alone escape is part of the Palladium Hotel group's massive Cap Cana community which consists of three other family-friendly all-inclusives sprawling along beautiful Bavaro Beach. Just like the reality TV celebs, you too can be wrapped in a romantic cocoon of elite amenities replete with butlers, swim-out suites, special dinner clubs, gourmet dining, 24/7 room service, private pools, and VIP beach access. But better yet, if you're seeking to get out for some nightlife and a wider range of dining options you have access to over 40 food and beverage outlets located in all of their other resorts within the gated village with free golf shuttle service, too! It's all part of their signature Infinite Indulgence® program designed to give guests the absolute best of all worlds.

Visit: www.palladiumhotelgroup.com



Go Prehistoric in Puerto Plata

This area of the Dominican Republic produces the world's best quality, and clearest amber. You can learn all about it at their unique Amber Museum. And once you locate it tucked away in the charming colonial village there, you might find their sign reminds you of something else, namely Jurassic Park! The design is intentional because the opening scenes of the original movie were shot there, and the fascinating specimens of million-year-old insects petrified in clear resin rocks inspired the movie's theme. You'll see lots of them there, and lots of fine jewelry and art pieces made from Dominican amber can be purchased all around Puerto Plata, too. Also prehistoric is their activity of 'cascading' through the pristine nature of the protected region of Damajagua. Enjoy exhilarating guided adventures through rugged caverns, secret natural pools, and multiple rushing waterfalls to traverse the primal jungles as the ancients once did.

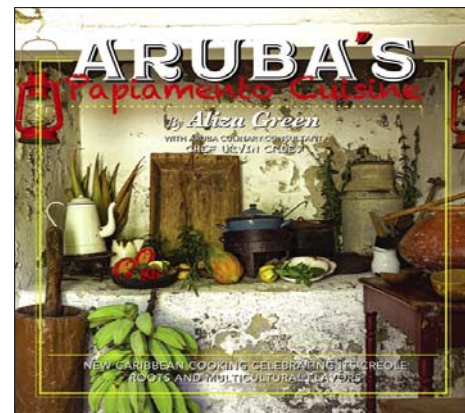
For more Puerto Plata pleasures, visit: www.godominicanrepublic.com/destinations/puerto-plata

The Lovely Loras Return to Aruba

I've had the great joy to see some of these gorgeous parrots in their natural habitat on the island of Bonaire, but sadly, though they are also endemic to Aruba, they've been extinct on that island for 70 years. (Due to manmade issues.) But now they are back! Locally known as the Lora, these yellow-shouldered amazon parrots have been reintroduced to the protected area of Arikok National Park through the Species Conservation & Reintroduction Program run by the Aruba National Park Foundation. Over two-dozen birds that were illegally smuggled on the island to be sold as pets were confiscated by the foundation and carefully rehabilitated to be able to survive on their own in the wild. And they are thriving! There is also a national awareness campaign to educate the public on the importance of protecting the Lora, and to help monitor their progress, they have set up



Photo: Patrick Peña - Aruba Parrot project



a way to report sightings. If you see one while on island, contact FPNA's Wildlife Hotline at +297 592 4476.

New Papiamento Cookbook in English

Papiamento, the native language of the Dutch Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao, is a hodgepodge of many tongues- Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Arawak Indian, and African dialects among them. So, as one might expect, Papiamento cuisine follows suit in its complexity, the culinary influences of the region are legion. And it's been difficult to unearth traditional island recipes handed down through the generations that are written up in English. (Or even written down at all, they are jealously guarded family secrets!) But not anymore. Aliza Green - chef, author, and world culinary tour guide has just released a wonderful resource in English called Aruba's Papiamento Cuisine. Working closely with the island's most legendary culinary talents, including master chef Urvin Croes owner of INFINI chef's table experience, and generously supported by locally produced award-winning Bodegas Papiamento Rum, the cookbook includes 120 beautifully illustrated recipes, insights from local taste creators, and even a bonus chapter of cocktail recipes. Look for it at island bookstores and participating restaurants.

See more of Aliza Green's work here: <https://alizagreen.com> ■



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 @suetravel

Cruise Travel

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This photo: Viking Expedition Ship in Antarctica

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PACIFIC SOUTH PACIFIC INDIAN SOUTHERN OCEAN

ADRIATIC AEGEAN MEDITERRANEAN CARIBBEAN BALTIC BLACK SOUTH-CHINA SEA



Sail The World!



CroisiEurope launches a Brand New Hotel Barge Cruise through Belgium

Europe's largest river cruise operator, CroisiEurope, has launched a brand new hotel barge cruise along Belgium's little-known waterways, taking in beautiful towns with a rich cultural heritage as well as a wide range of architectural and culinary discoveries. This is CroisiEurope's first hotel barge cruise itinerary outside of France.

The six-night cruise, which launches in April 2025, operates between Ghent and Halle and visits Bruges, Oudenaarde, Péronnes-Lez-Antoing, Mons, Strépy-Thieu and Brussels. The cruise takes place on the MS Raymonde which features just 11 en-suite outward facing cabins, restaurant, lounge bar, sun deck and relaxation area with Jacuzzi. And, with six crew members including a talented chef serving up a variety of mouth-watering dishes, guests are guaranteed a truly personalised service. ■

WWW.CROISIEUROPE.TRAVEL



Best in Alaska! ***UnCruise Adventures Clinches Four Prestigious Travel Awards***

UnCruise Adventures, a US-flagged leader in small-ship, expedition-style cruising, proudly owned and headquartered in Juneau, Alaska, is officially named "Best Small-Ship Expedition Line" by U.S. News & World Report and "Best in Alaska" in the Cruise Critic Editor's Picks' Awards. Additionally, two ships, the Wilderness Legacy

and the Wilderness Discoverer, occupy two top-five spaces in USA Today's annual "10Best" Best in Alaska category (the only company to have two ships listed in the top five). UnCruise Adventures is proud to show the strength of a family-owned, locally run business that provides services and experiences that mega ships can't offer. These accolades also highlight UnCruise Adventures' commitment to excellence and reinforce its standing as a premier choice in Alaska tourism. ■

[HTTPS://UNCRISE.COM](https://uncruise.com)



Journey Beyond Boundaries On Crystal's 2026 World Cruise

Crystal has recently announced the highly anticipated 2026 World Cruise onboard Crystal Serenity. Crystal's 2026 World Cruise is an extraordinary 135-day journey traveling to 72 destinations throughout 27 countries, promising unparalleled experiences and cultural exploration.

Departing from Los Angeles, on Jan. 11, 2026, Crystal Serenity will traverse the crystal-clear waters of the Pacific, unveiling the enchanting landscapes of the Marquesas Islands, Bora Bora's turquoise lagoons, and the lush greenery of New Zealand. From there, explore the iconic Sydney Opera House in Australia, and meander through the bustling streets of Hong Kong. Delve into the rich history of Mumbai and marvel at the architectural wonders of Dubai. From the sun-kissed beaches of Bali to the cultural tapestry of Athens, the voyage travels through the Mediterranean, including a stop in Monaco, just in time for the Grand Prix before concluding in the historic wonder of Rome on May 26. From wanderlust-inspired destinations and revived overland experiences to reimagined spaces, award-winning dining and one-of-a-kind service on board, the 2026 World Cruise promises a masterpiece of experiences like never before. ■ WWW.CRYSTALCRUISES.COM

Viking Announces First-of-Their-Kind China Voyages



Viking® has recently announced three new, first-of-their-kind itineraries that will provide guests with exclusive access to China in 2024. The new voyages range from 10 to 20 days and explore iconic cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Each itinerary also includes a domestic sailing of China's coast that highlights rarely-seen destinations and ports to which only Viking has access—something that has never before been offered for international visitors. The new voyages will operate from September to November on the Viking Yi Dun—formerly the Viking Sun—a sister ship featuring the same award-winning design and service as all other ocean ships in Viking's fleet.

New China Voyages:

Wonders of China, 20 days; Beijing roundtrip

This comprehensive 20-day cruisetour itinerary delivers China's main highlights. Guests can meet a Tibetan family at their home, walk on the Great Wall and see the Terra Cotta Warriors.

Classic China & the Coast

15 days; Beijing, Xian – Hong Kong (Shenzhen)

This voyage combines the experiences of Viking's 10-day China Discovery voyage with opportunity to see the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Terra Cotta Warriors and other iconic landmarks.

China Discovery, 10 days

Shanghai – Hong Kong (Shenzhen)

This 10-day itinerary allows guests to experience the Buddhist shrines of Zhoushan and the cliffs of Dongtou, follow the steps of 19th-century European diplomats on Gulangyu Island in Xiamen, or try Cantonese dim sum in Shenzhen. ■

WWW.VIKING.COM

Seabourn Unveils Top 10 Reasons to Experience the South Pacific in 2024 and 2025



Seabourn, a leader in ultra-luxury voyages and expedition travel, has unveiled the top 10 expedition experiences in the South Pacific during the 2024 and 2025 seasons on board Seabourn Pursuit. The line's new purpose-built expedition ship will visit some of the least-traveled islands and atolls in the world, with itineraries designed with no two experiences alike. The voyages will offer a number of unique experiences, including exploring unspoiled coral reefs with diverse fish populations, discovering relics of World War II action in the Pacific Theater and immersing in fascinating local communities that openly share their traditions and culture.

Seabourn's top 10 South Pacific experiences include the following:

1. Visit some of the most remote and fascinating locations on the planet.
2. Snorkel among some of the more pristine coral reefs in the world at the incredibly remote Ducie Island.
3. Be invited to witness the otherworldly Baining Fire Dance ritual under the jungle moon of Papua New Guinea.
4. Visit the mysterious and stunning Sawa-I-Lau Caves in the Yasawa Islands of Fiji.
5. Take the Zodiacs up the Sepik River to Kopar Village to encounter the people of East Sepik.
6. Come ashore at Kitava Island to learn from the Trobriand people about their unique culture.
7. Arrive at Bakawari Island in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea.
8. See the enigmatic archaeological site of Nan Madol on the island of Pohnpei.
9. Take a Zodiac through the Asewet River delta of West Papua, Indonesia.
10. Stand on the deck of Seabourn Pursuit as it sails into Chuuk Atoll. ■

WWW.SEABOURN.COM

Celebrity Cruises Announces Unique New Places and Elevated New Spaces for 2025-2026 Season



Features the inaugural season of Celebrity Xcel, year-round sailings in the Caribbean, new immersive itineraries throughout both Japan and Iceland, and more

Celebrity Cruises has announced its 2025-2026 season of sailings, its most ambitious ever with more than 800 sailings to over 290 destinations in 72 countries across 7 continents. The newly announced summer and winter program for the premium cruise line's fleet of 16 award-winning ships includes the debut Caribbean season for the highly anticipated fifth ship in the industry-transforming Edge Series, Celebrity Xcel, along with new ports in Europe; year-round offerings in the Caribbean; and new experiences in 29 cities with single and double overnights.

Highlights of the new 2025-2026 season include:

- Celebrity Xcel, the brand's newest and most innovative Edge Series ship, making her Caribbean debut with 7-night sailings from Fort Lauderdale;
- Year-round sailings from Miami to the Caribbean on guest favorite, Celebrity Beyond;
- Three new European ports to discover: Bar, Montenegro; Trondheim, Norway and Djupivogur, Iceland;
- Four brand-new itineraries circumnavigating Iceland on Celebrity Silhouette;
- Two new distinct, immersive Asia itineraries.

The Ultimate Asia Experience

With the resurgence of Asia, guests have the unique opportunity to explore must-see destinations and hidden treasures with overnight stays in 11 different cities in the region, paired with elevated offerings onboard Celebrity's two ships in the region Celebrity Millennium and Celebrity Solstice. ■

WWW.CELEBRITYCRUISES.COM

Farewell to Ocean Adventurer, Welcome Ocean Explorer!



The much-loved Ocean Adventurer, a longtime favourite among guests and crew, embarks on its last voyage with Quark Expeditions at the end of the Arctic 2024 season. Just as Quark Expeditions bids farewell to the time-honoured Ocean Adventurer, the polar operator welcomes a new vessel into the fleet: the stunningly beautiful Ocean Explorer.

The 138-passenger Ocean Explorer will set sail under the Quark Expeditions banner at the start of the Antarctic 2024/2025 season. "Going beyond in the polar regions requires the best expedition team operating the best ships," says Andrew White, President of Quark Expeditions. "And we've got both. Ocean Explorer is the perfect addition to our fleet—for adventure, for luxury, and for leading-edge technology, this purpose-built polar expedition ship truly delivers for our discerning polar explorers."

Ocean Explorer's state-of-the-art expedition technology elevates the polar experience in every way: extensive adventure capability for thrilling off-ship adventures, exceptional safety and sustainability features, plus outstanding interior space and comfort. With its distinctive X-Bow design and remarkable two-story forward lounge, Ocean Explorer sets a striking stage for unforgettable polar expeditions in the Arctic and Antarctic. ■

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Adventures Abound in the 'Aquarium of the World' with UnCruise Adventures in Baja California Sur

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

Having sailed dozens of times through all seven continents on both rivers and oceans, in all categories including mass-tourism ships, small luxury ships, expedition ships and even long-haul over-night ferries, our sailing with UnCruise Adventures was truly in a league of its own, like nothing else I had ever experienced!

I felt odd, out of place and wondering how this week would play-out but thought let's give it some time as we arrived onboard late at night being escorted by friendly crewmembers to our rooms and then onto supper.

Early on during the following day, I was enamoured. The scenery of the desert landscape itself was captivating, and I was pleas-

antly surprised with our enjoyment of the compact, clean cabin space that did not resemble anything else I had experienced but was perfect for the adventures to come. The crew was friendly, open, and always helpful and did everything to assist us with outings and prepared us for dives, hikes, rides, visits to towns and above all safety.

I was astounded by how faithful the clientele were, and in meeting with them on excursions and at supper, would find the majority were repeat guests, and even a couple that were on their 13th UnCruise sailing.

This sure sounds like a conclusion to this article but I cannot hold back. In the span of a week, we would kayak the still waters of the oceans' coves, dive and play with Sea Lion

pups, snorkel several times to see the abundance of marine life and tropical fish, take invigorating hikes to extraordinary vistas, ride with local guides on Mules and Burros to witness the beautiful and vast unpopulated Baja California desert scenery, take a small out-board motor ride to visit the returning of the majestic Grey Whales, explore the beautifully kept historic colonial towns, be greeted by a school of hundreds of little dolphins and see why this is a birders paradise, with an unbelievable amount of different shapes and size birds where just about everywhere.

Finally, by the end of the cruise, I would strongly agree that Baja California Sur is not only known as "aquarium of the world" but also that it is the "Galapagos of the north." Big shoes to fill and they did!



After meeting Captain Dan, the founder, CEO and a lifetime adventurer, his charismatic character shone through over and over throughout the week. He would smile, laugh, joke and through his deep resonating voice, always had great stories to tell and made his great passion for life, sailing and adventure quite obvious!

I would also find out how clever he was, as he designed the ship's Zodiac landing dock 'made to and later built to measure' on a bar-room napkin. I was impressed by this one-of-a-kind platform, unique to the ship, which worked like a charm getting guest and crew on and off safely, quickly, efficiently and without getting wet.

The Safari Voyager

With a maximum capacity of only sixty-six passengers, this would be the smallest ship I have ever sailed but I would find it was the perfect size for exploring out of the way places and allowed us to get close to shore for landings and our adventures. The Safari Voyager, although modest in exterior size, still had four guest floors including the main lounge, the dining room, a sundeck, and a departure platform floor.

My standard cabin was just about right, and with so much time on deck and on shore, there was little need for anything bigger. These accommodations were exceptionally clean, had plenty of storage spaces, a window for observation, and a comfortable bed to rest before another day of activities.

Gastronomy

I was pleasantly surprised to have such wonderful food on board. Head chef Mat and his crew served up plenty of delicious and nutritious dishes. The menu was varied and even had themed nights with international dishes. UnCruise sourced most of its ingredients from local farmers and fishers meaning everything was fresh and from the same day, this was clear in the quality of the servings. Guests always had options that usually included seafood, meat, or a vegetarian dish. Besides morning buffets, lunches and suppers were sit down meals that included wine, beer, and soft

drinks. Most memorable to me was an alfresco BBQ on a hot and sunny January day with still waters and beautiful and natural landscape as a backdrop.

Bonus day

Included with the cruise, most, if not all, passengers would land in San Jose del Cabos and spend the day at the well-appointed all-inclusive beach front Barceló hotel. This would be a fun and relaxing day to spend by the pool or the beach, to wine and dine or explore the historic old town. The following day, all guests would board luxury coaches through the dry and rugged landscape to reach La Paz to board and start the cruise adventure.

Excursions

With no sea days, we would have daily exciting excursions. To say the least, everyone of them were special and different from the other and all were exceptional in their nature. UnCruise has sailed this region for many years and knew exactly what to do and how best to keep all these special moments adventurous, fun, and safe. It would be very difficult to choose a favourite but what did stand out most was swimming with the Sea Lions, this was as colossal as my first game drive in Africa. Also memorable was snorkelling along the reefs, kayaking in the quiet bays, the whale watching excursion, visiting the colonial town of Loreto, the Mule ride with the locals and hiking up many different island peaks to get spectacular panoramic views of the land and sea. All-in-all, UnCruise presented us with the best of things to see, do and experience in Baja California Sur!

For a small cruise company, UnCruise Adventures sure punches above its weight. Everything went as planned and promised. It is no wonder they keep winning awards and have such a faithful guest following. Add to it great food, a very friendly and helpful staff, an extraordinary itinerary and you have the recipe for a lifetime of great memories with lots of wonderful travel stories to tell. ■

[HTTPS://UNCruise.COM](https://uncruise.com)





Photo: Variety Cruises

Unveiling Tahiti's Allure with Variety Cruises

Article and photography by Nicholas Kontis

When travelers conjure images of French Polynesia, not surprisingly, the first island to come to mind is not Tahiti but the supermodel island of Bora Bora, with its luxurious hotels like the Four Seasons Bora Bora, complete with expensive, over-the-water bungalows and unblemished panoramic views of omnipresent Mount Otemanu.

But there's more to this storied archipelago than Tahiti and Bora Bora. After short visits to these famous destinations, I was excited to join a seven-night sailing through the Society Islands with Variety Cruises, a Greek small-ship cruise line. Aboard the 164-foot (50-

meter) Panorama II, my wife and I had the opportunity to visit multiple off-the-beaten-path islands. With its 25 ocean-view cabins serving 49 guests and 16 crew, the twin-masted private yacht offered an immersive cultural voyage more than a beach holiday.

Variety's Society Islands sailings include seven- and 10-night cruises, both departing and returning to the capital of Papeete. We opted for the shorter cruise to Moorea, Huahine, Bora Bora, Taha'a and Raiatea. The longer voyage ventures further to the rarely-visited Tuamotu archipelago, stopping at Makatea, Rangiroa, and Tikehau.

We were greeted in Papeete by Panorama Captain Andreas Sifnotis, a Greek seafarer who has spent his life sailing to the world's far ends. The gregarious captain quickly reminded me of my name: St. Nicholas protects all sailors and ships, and with Saint Nicholas Day, December 6th, rapidly approaching, I should feel safe. Soon, I met more Greek crew members and Indonesian housekeeping and kitchen staff. All are friendly, asking me where I'm from while reminding me I'm in for an unforgettable excursion.

Sephora, the cruise director, is a native of Raiatea, which we will soon visit. The charming hospitality leader would serve as our entertainment guide and head of household



to 36 guests. Indeed, the ship is one big happy family, and the crew's passion and energy are infectious.

The voyage begins at 3 p.m. when passengers board the Panorama II and are given a flower lei and a tropical cocktail. After a welcome dinner of shredded veal shank with a mustard sauce of grilled salmon, we sail one hour from Tahiti, known as the "big sister island," to Moorea, the legendary Bali Hai island of James Michener's "South Pacific."

Islands Visited

Moorea

Most expedition cruises operate with a set plan. Following breakfast, there is a morning expedition, lunch aboard the ship, and an afternoon tour option. But an essential aspect of expedition cruising is to arrive with an open mind or at least a willingness to "be flexible." Due to weather conditions or wildlife sightings, the ship can easily change course. Each voyage is unique.

Moorea is the most inspiring backdrop in French Polynesia for many locals and visitors. The island is known for its turquoise lagoons, white sand beaches, and eight colossal jagged peaks.

The program for Moorea begins at 8:15 when tenders travel to shore for the dolphin excursion. We're joined by American marine biologist Dr. Michael Poole, who has lived in Moorea conducting research projects since 1987. Poole lends his expertise to explaining the geology of French Polynesia and the habits of whales and dolphins. The highlight occurs when pods of acrobatic spinner dolphins are displayed, twirling mid-air as if launched from cannons from the sea, spinning vertically and horizontally like ballerinas. An afternoon drive around the island in a 4x4 open-air safari vehicle was followed after dark by a 12-hour overnight trip to the island of Huahine.

Huahine

The Garden Island of Huahine is a tropical paradise island often overlooked on island-hopping trips. We arrive on a Sunday when—Sephora informs us—most shops will close at noon. We spend the morning on a guided 4x4 tour of ancient sacred sites. It is a cultural immersion in Polynesian geology, botany,

anthropology, archaeology, sociology, economy, history, and traditions. An afternoon boat trip to a motu (islet) for a traditional cooking class is followed by a snorkeling trip. In the evening, local musicians boarded the ship and performed Tahitian songs.

Bora Bora

Like Santorini in Greece, Bora Bora is French Polynesia's most visited island. The volcanic island is set in a radiant lagoon. Delve deeper into the seductive Shangri-la, and you'll find a robust marine life teeming with tropical fish. Variety guests spend the morning visiting four different snorkeling spots, petting stingrays, and watching eels slither by. The ship docks in the main town of Viatape, where shops, bars, and cafes are just steps away. Later, in the evening, the Variety hospitality team slices up a massive tuna for a sashimi appetizer.

Taha'a

One of Tahiti's best-kept secrets, the tranquil island of Taha'a produces 80 percent of the aromatic vanilla in French Polynesia. It is also acclaimed for its exquisite pearl production. We spend the morning at the Motu Pearl Farm, where experts from the family-run business explain the cultivation of Tahitian pearls, followed by a trip to the Ferme Bio Organic Vanilla Farm. Later in the day, we snorkel, letting the current guide us as we drift past colorful coral and schools of brightly-hued fish at the island's renowned coral garden.

Raiatea

Variety anchors at our fifth Society Island, historic Raiatea on a partially rainy day. Known as the "Sacred Island" and the second largest of the Society group, Raiatea was the second capital of French Polynesia and the home of Sephora, our passionate cruise director. She reminds us that Raiatea's Taputapuatea marae is the holiest place of worship for all Polynesians.

The day's activities include a trip down the Faaroa River, the only navigable stream in French Polynesia, on a motorized outrigger canoe, followed by a guided tour of the open-air Taputapuatea shrine—the only UNESCO World Heritage Site in French Polynesia. The motor yacht remains docked for the day at the island capital of Uturoa, where my wife shops for jewelry and I buy a few Polynesian shirts.



On Board

Each suite is designed with two single beds or one double. I found rooms easily manageable, but some guests found cabins and bathrooms restrictive. Three excellent meals are served daily in the upper-deck restaurant. A daily happy hour is held in the cozy communal entertainment living room from 5 to 7 p.m., followed by dinner. Snorkel gear is lent to passengers.

I ask Sephora about working with Variety and her passion for her homeland.

"Travelling with Variety on small ships allows me to establish a genuine connection with the visitors, sharing the authentic Polynesian experience with them," she says. "The world offers so many breathtaking landscapes, but something remains unique to this country: the generosity and the warm and welcoming smile of our people. Their joyfulness is like no other; their natural talent for music, dancing, and arts; their knowledge of the sea and environment—and finally, their ability to appreciate the smallest things in life."

"I think I would call myself an experience director more than a cruise director. We are selling more than just a floating hotel with entertainment. It is a whole life experience if you are ready to open your heart to this."

Long, pebbly white-sand beaches, flanked by crystal-clear waters with schools of multi-colored fish, are the norm on this traversing of a few of Tahiti's favorite islands. As irresistibly and equally attuned to close encounters with cultures, people, and marine animals, Variety Cruises' immersive sailing of Tahiti is an unrivaled experience. ■

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Lots to Love about the Discovery Princess West Coast Getaway

by Jennifer Merrick

“We chose this cruise because of the ship,” said Cindy, a fellow dinner companion, as we were sipping cocktails on the red carpet waiting to be ushered into 360: An Extraordinary Experience, a theatrical meal extravaganza. She went on to say that she and her husband had been on the Discovery Princess in Alaska this past summer and just loved it.

“So, it wouldn’t have mattered where the ship was going?” I asked.

“Not at all,” she said, and her husband nodded.

Really? Personally, the Four-Day West Coast Getaway appealed to us for a number of reasons, most importantly, an itinerary that included a full day in port in San Diego and Mexico. It never crossed my mind to think about the ship itself. But after being on the Discovery Princess, it would be a consideration in the future.

Built at the Fincantieri shipyard in Monfalcone, Italy, the Discovery Princess first set sail in 2022, and is the sixth and final newbuild in the cruise line’s Royal Class of ships. The 19-deck, 3,660-passenger ship lives up to her name with design and function

that combines elegance with modernity and luxury with accessibility.

The heart of the Discovery Princess is the three-deck high piazza, reached by dazzling glass and marble, spiral staircases or glass elevators. Besides its stunning design, the piazza serves its traditional Italian function by acting as the ship’s social hub. Live music has a ubiquitous presence throughout the ship, but especially here, where international performers entertain guests with music that ranges from classical violinists and jazz to lively mariachi bands and pop songs. Many of the restaurants connect to the piazza,



which offers a lively atmosphere to accompany the meals.

The pool area on decks 16 and 17 is also impressive, particularly the largeness of the two pools and movie screen, which projects hit films for the popular Movies Under the Stars events. But it can be quite busy, which is why we appreciated The Sanctuary, a tucked away adult-only space with its own pool, hot tub and lounging areas.

Technology also sets the Discovery Princess apart. At times, I thought we were in a futuristic movie, especially when the door to our cabin automatically opened as we approached it. And it's all connected to a quarter-sized medallion that arrived at our house weeks earlier. Combined with the app, it allowed us to breeze through the boarding process without standing in line, order food from anywhere in the boat, make reservations, locate other family members and navigate around the ship.

With the design and tech features, I could easily see why our dinner companion would choose the cruise based on the ship. However, personally, it could never be the only reason. The experiences that we enjoyed both aboard and on shore played an even bigger role in making our West Coast cruise such a memorable getaway, including the 360 Dinner Experience we were about to embark upon.

Indulging in the tastes, smells, sights and sounds of the Mediterranean

The invitation promised that we'd be escorted to a secret location on the ship, where we'd be transported to the Mediterranean through our senses. My curiosity was piqued. It wasn't long before we were led to a tucked-away room, which immediately came alive when blue lighting bathed the interior, and a violinist serenaded us.

Each course and each drink paired with it brought us to another locale in the Mediterranean. For instance, the scent of lemons wafted through the air at the same moment images of Italy's Amalfi Coast and its lemon groves surrounded us. With a wave of a hand, animated lemons danced on our

plates. Italian growers, whose families have been producing the fruit for centuries gave virtual commentaries, before the taste of a pasta appetizer with a lemony cream sauce delighted our taste buds. The paired wine brought us to Costa Brava, Spain, where the coastal waters aged the elixir under the sea. In similar fashion, we toured some of the most beautiful and delicious places in Spain, Italy and France, where we finished in Champagne, of course, and toasted our theatrical feast.

Watching sea lions frolicking on the rocks in La Jolla

Our San Diego shore excursion ushered us to San Diego's top sights and neighborhoods with a knowledgeable local guide. We awed at the art and architecture in Balboa Park, the nation's largest cultural park, and explored Old Town's historic buildings, cemetery and restaurants offering authentic Latino cuisine. But it was the sea lions who stole the show and our hearts on the outing. Located 25 minutes north of San Diego, La Jolla with its limestone cliffs, water caves and colorful murals is considered the 'Jewel of Southern California'. Walking down the stairs to the beach, we were greeted by a colony of sea lions lounging on rocks. Some were scratching their ears with a flipper, others were lifting their necks to catch the sun and one pair seemed to be playing a game of King of the Castle, jockeying for a prime position on the top of a choice rock. None seemed bothered by our presence, and there was no need for a zoom lens to catch it all on camera.

Detoxing with an Aroma Spa Seaweed Massage

"Detox or energizing wrap," I was asked at the beginning of my treatment at Lotus Spa. After the indulgences of our Mediterranean feast, I opted for the latter. The 90-minute therapy consisted of an exfoliating scrub, and a seaweed wrap followed by a heavenly massage. Detoxing never felt so good. The seaweed massage was one of dozens of services available from a menu that included acupuncture, facials, salt stone therapy and nail and hair services.

Retoxing at a Caymus Winemaker dinner

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Instrumental in bringing California's wine to the attention of the world, the renowned Caymus Vineyard has recently partnered with Princess in the curation of a winemaker's dinner. This exquisite dining experience pairs each course with a Caymus wine personally selected by owner and winemaker, Chuck Wagner. Our sommelier was passionate about the wine he was sharing and took us through each tasting and pairing in this intimate and indulgent dinner.

Marveling at La Bufadora

Ensenada, Mexico, a coastal city 90 miles south of San Diego, was our second port of call. We enjoyed our time ashore here buying jewelry and crafts at a local market and touring Riviera del Pacifico, a glamorous hotel of a bygone era. Movie stars like Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz used to party here and its Bar Andaluz claims to have invented the margarita. But the highlight was La Bufadora, a blow hole which sprayed out 100-foot gushes of salty water. Caused by the tidewater being forced through a narrow opening, this unusual natural phenomenon has been astounding spectators over many millennia. Its origin, according to local folklore, was a whale who became trapped and blew water to attract attention, but she was never rescued and turned to stone.

Meeting Captain Alex on the bridge

A bridge tour was an eye-opener on the behind-the-scenes workings of the cruise. Like something you might imagine at NASA, multiple screens displayed real-time data and charts while the bridge team watched both the information coming in on the displays and the surrounding waters through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Captain Alessandro Genzo, or Captain Alex as he referred to himself, oversaw it all. He told us that there were only two ships he's loved over his many years at sea.

"And Discovery Princess is one of them." ■

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Another Viking Masterpiece Aboard the Polaris to the End of the World!

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

With one small step out of the Zodiac, I would complete my goal to step upon all seven continents. I took a moment to take it in, noticing the two active Fin Whales behind us, the three lazy seals sleeping in the snow and a host of penguins buzzing all around, then we made our first of many Viking excursion landings. Oh what a feeling! It was magical, memorable, and perfect.

Having read and seen many interpretations of explorers visiting this hostile land, we would venture in their footsteps but this time in the warmth, comfort, luxury, and safety of the Viking Polaris. The staff made it all so seamless, guiding us every step of the way, making sure we were adequately bundled up with warm clothing and that our life jackets were properly fitted. Every excursion from our state room was well coordinated and we were comfortable at every step.

This comfort was exemplified by our comfortable state room, but the question arose anyway: could anything go wrong? The answer is, absolutely. After all, we were in one of the harshest places on earth. Antarctica is very well known for having extreme weather with low temperatures and fierce winds, and the Drake Passage has some of the roughest waters on earth. Having said all that, Viking has done a wonderful job of keeping guests and crew safe, sheltered, and in good spirits. As Viking will always say 'Exploring the World in Comfort,' and we could not agree any more.

In this part II of our Viking Antarctica Explorer itinerary cruise, we will focus on the remarkable Polaris, the magnificent landscape, and exciting landings.

Excursions

As a Viking promises on every one of their cruises, there is an excursion in every port of call, but in our case, it was weather permitting. As I would later find out from a staff member, we were extremely fortunate to have had only one excursion cancelled, due to packed ice along the shore. Otherwise, Viking knew exactly the best places for Zodiac landings to visit and explore. On our first landing, we would find an abandoned scientific station. The cabin, which looked comfortable enough to house many researchers, was still extremely rustic as compared to our posh Viking Polaris accommodations. Later in the week, we visited a large penguin colony and then hiked along guided routes to discover the surroundings and wildlife, enjoy panoramic vistas and the magnificence of Antarctica. My favorite excursion was on a beautiful sunny day with blue skies and a light breeze, where we would be



delighted at the sight of Penguins swimming so gracefully in the water then waddle their way along the rocky shores. It was fascinating, and yet humbling how we were so out of place and yet these little creatures could survive and thrive in such harsh conditions.

Staterooms

Our accommodations were a spacious Nordic Penthouse stateroom that had ample room to walk around and a carnivorous amount of storage that easily held our two checked and two carry-on bags. The washrooms, as in all Viking ships, were immaculately clean, ultra efficient, perfectly lit, well thought out and handsomely designed and came with maybe the best part for such a cruise, heated floors.

All staterooms on the *Polaris* are outward facing where there are no interior cabins. One noticeable difference on the *Polaris* to our other Viking River and ocean ship staterooms was that there were no verandas. Instead, there was a floor to ceiling window that had the large top window roll down horizontally offering plenty of fresh ocean breezes and offered much more daylight and magnificent views of our surroundings. This design delivered lots of extra interior living space that would normally be lost to the veranda.

The *Polaris* and public spaces

The *Polaris*, like its identical sister ship the *Octants*, is where art and science harmoniously come together. They are both stunningly beautiful and incredibly sophisticated at the same time. It seems like every section of the ship was thoughtfully planned out, masterfully built, and richly decorated.

With only 189 staterooms and a capacity of 378 guests, the *Polaris* feels more like a large luxury yacht than a full-size cruise ship. On our cruise, we found more space per passenger than any other ship we have ever sailed on. There were rarely any line-ups and we navigated around the ship with ease. Elegant Nordic design dominates the interior of the *Polaris*, and it emulates Viking's other ships, whether it be the Longships (rivers) or the ocean vessels, with the same relaxing look and feel. We found many locations on different decks that passengers could choose to lay back and relax, like the 'Living Room', the 'Explorers' Lounge' and the 'Library'. Other

public treasures include: 'Aquavit Terrace,' the 'Finse Terrace' the 'Hide' for late-night drinks, the Aula where meetings and lectures took place and the Nordic Spa and Fitness Center.

Cuisine

Sailing and gastronomy go hand-in-hand and diets do not always do well on cruises, but we did not hold back, and we would indulge a bit of everything that the talented chefs on-board served. The dining options included buffets, sit down service and in-room dining. Our favourite was the World Café, where we had a cornucopia of choices including a sushi bar and a grill. Manfredi's Italian Restaurant was easily booked by reservation, and Mamsen's was open for breakfast and for delicious afternoon snacks. On top of these choices there were selected wines, beer and soft drinks included in our stateroom fare.

The Hanger

The piece de resistance of the *Polaris* is the Hanger. This space redefines expedition cruising, as in addition to the usual equipment like Zodiacs and kayaks, the Hanger houses some fascinating modern equipment. If you can imagine, there are two state of the art submarines and two Special Operation Boats (SOB). These vessels are more than toys; they are also used for ongoing research where they can gather samples for scientific research on the health of the environment, including the infiltration of plastics in the far reaches of the world. Rides on both the Special Operation Boats and in the submarine were once-in-a-lifetime experiences for most passengers.

Impeccable is the best word to describe the service of the dedicated Viking staff. Time and time again, on our many cruises over the years with this company, we have always been treated to the same incredible attention to detail that is consistent with the wonderful Viking experience. On this cruise it was a repeat, every request was handled smoothly, and we were completely pampered by an attentive and smiling staff. Add to it, sailing on the best expedition ship ever built and an amazing out of this world destination and we have another Viking masterpiece! ■

WWW.VIKING.COM





How to Pack for a Quark Expeditions Fly/Cruise to Antarctica (with a checked bag limit of 15 kg)

by Judi Cohen

An Antarctic Fly/Cruise expedition is worth considering, because it enables travelers to skip the two-day crossing. You can instead fly between Punta Arenas, Chile to King George Island, South Shetland Islands in just two hours!

But...there's only one catch; the charter flights with DAP Airlines have a reduced check-in luggage allowance of 15 kg, and 5kg for carry on articles. Due to the small size of the aircraft, and the short gravel runway on King George Island, the weight limits are not negotiable. Furthermore you cannot pay for additional luggage. Everything additional would need to remain in Punta Arenas.

Before a recent Fly/Cruise with Quark Expeditions (who offer 8 and 10-day condensed Fly/Cruise Antarctic expeditions), just the thought of packing for an expedition cruise was daunting, never mind the additional challenge of strict weight restrictions. (I also planned to stay in Santiago, Chile for a few days post-cruise, with temperatures over 30 degrees Celsius, which made light packing even more difficult.) This time was different, but this was a challenge I accepted.

In this article, I will share my packing tips for you if you're considering an Antarctic Fly/Cruise.

The packing list provided by Quark Expeditions was a great place to start, however, to get below 15 kg of checked luggage I had to be more selective, and I only ended up taking some of the items suggested.

Some essential items are provided for you!

Before you worry about how you're going to fit everything, make sure you understand what will be given to you! For example, Quark Expeditions provides each passenger with a waterproof hooded parka with a zip-out puffy jacket. These are yours to keep after the expedition, so there is no need to bring your own warm jacket or puffy!





Likewise, a hair dryer, water flask, hiking poles and tall, insulated rubber boots were also provided by Quark for the duration of the expedition. You will likely not need your own hiking boots, and that alone will save one kg at least. So, make sure you understand what you will get from the expedition operator, or you may end up over packing.

Don't skip on the layers

While you may be tempted to leave some layers behind, I would recommend you bring high quality merino wool long underwear and long sleeve merino wool tops to act as a base layer. (On my last expedition, I only took one of each since merino wool does not smell and I wore them for 5 days of the expedition.)

A mid layer of fleece or merino wool top and bottom over the base layer is also essential.

Waterproof pants must also make it on to your packing list. I recommend North Face or Arcteryx with zippers to pull the pants over the

rubber boots for Zodiac excursions. Quite often you will have wet landings where you leave the Zodiac in water just below your knee.

Take a variety of gloves, socks, and hats

A pair of merino wool glove liners, with sensor pads on the fingers to take pictures, along with a pair of waterproof gloves are a must. Take an extra pair of each since they do get quite wet on the Zodiac excursions. Depending on when you travel, the weather can be quite warm, around 2-6 degrees Celsius – so you may be able to wear glove liners only.

Bring a couple of pairs of wool socks to wear inside your rubber boots to keep your feet warm during Zodiac excursions and hikes.

Having 2-3 hats can be advantageous. I would recommend taking a basic wool winter hat, a ball cap for sunny warm days, and a very warm fur lined hat with ear flaps for the coldest days. A couple of neck warmers (buffs) to pull over your face to protect you from the wind and water is a good idea.

Account for laundry service

If laundry service is available on your ship, there is no need to overdo the number of undergarments you bring. A couple of T-shirts and casual pants to wear on the ship for dinner and lectures is sufficient.

Assume dress will be casual

Most travelers wear their warm layers of clothing on the ship and are casual, so they can easily access the deck if whales or other wildlife are present. There is no need to bring fancy or dressy clothing for dinners or evening time.

Items you probably will need on board

You'll probably want to bring a pair of Blundstones-style boots to wear on the plane and ship, and a pair of non-slip running shoes.

A bathing suit is essential, if your ship has hot tubs, or you're adventurous enough to do a 'polar plunge'. (The Quark expedition has hot tubs on the outside deck and offers a polar plunge for the heartiest of souls.)

Be sure to pack a pair of good, polarized sunglasses, and an eyeglass strap to keep your glasses secure.

A waterproof knapsack will come in handy. (I used this as my carry-on for the plane and to use on the Zodiacs to keep my camera equipment, iPhone and extra hats and gloves dry). A smaller dry sac is also a practical alternative.

Pack plugs, converters, chargers, a battery backup for your phone or camera. Many guests and staff had elaborate camera equipment with long lenses and tri-pods. A Quark photographer is onboard and shares photos and videos with passengers following the expedition, so if you can't take all of your equipment, you will still be able to enjoy the memories afterwards.

Optional items if you have the space in your bags

If you still have a bit of space in your bag, you can also consider some cozy wool Glerup slippers with rubber soles for relaxing onboard, and binoculars to make wildlife spotting even better.

Don't pack your entire medicine chest, as there is a doctor and medical center on board. While there are no stores or hospitals in the Antarctic, if your ship has medical resources (like Quarks ship do) you will not need to bring medicines for seasickness. On the Quark ship, there is also a great little shop onboard Ocean Adventurer with an assortment of pharmaceutical products, and expedition gear in case you forget something.

Clothing for warm weather post-expedition touring

I brought a separate collapsible bag for my summer gear and left it in a secure storage area with Quark Expeditions at the Dreams Hotel in Punta Arenas. Doing so, lightened my load and allowed me to bring only what I needed for the Antarctic.

Yes, you can!

While I wasn't sure initially if I could stay under the 15 kg limit for my checked bag and 5 kg limit for my knapsack, I am happy to let you know that I had everything I needed for my Antarctic Fly/Cruise with the specified weight limits. I cannot think of anything I wished I brought with me, but didn't, nor did I bring extra clothing that I did not use. ■

WWW.QUARKEXPEDITIONS.COM





Around Newfoundland by Ship with Adventure Canada

Article and photography by Nicholas Kontis

Many television viewers, I suspect, might credit a German shepherd for what they know about Canada's most easterly and isolated province.

In the Canadian police drama "Hudson & Rex," a detective and his canine partner solve crimes in and around picturesque St. John's, capital of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Through six seasons (including 2024), their cop work has taken them to all corners of Newfoundland, the world's 16th-largest island; to adjacent Labrador, a sparsely populated fragment of the North American mainland; and even to the French territory of St.-Pierre-et-Miquelon, anchored just offshore Newfoundland in the Atlantic Ocean.

Not surprisingly, the real Newfoundland is very different than the one you might see on your TV screen. Locals affectionately call it "The Rock" and pronounce its name as "Noof'n-lund." It's larger than many nations, including the United Kingdom and New Zealand. The maritime province is constantly windy. A quarter of the island's population (about 110,000 people) live in greater St. John's — which like most island settlements, is built along the shore. It can be a long way by road from St. John's to other towns, and the original European-descended colonists found they preferred boats for getting around.

Those who came before

Sea was my choice as well. One rare, sunny October day, when the wind was barely blowing, I boarded the MS Ocean Endeavour for a two-week expedition cruise around the island of Newfoundland. I couldn't imagine a better way to explore.

We departed from and returned to St. John's. On board were 167 guests (80 percent of them Canadians), 103 crew, and 39 expedition team members: our guides, as it were. They were mostly Canadian High Arctic experts from Toronto-based Adventure

Canada, who also meander the Northwest Passage on other High Arctic small-ship expeditions.

We followed in the path of earlier explorers like Leif Eriksen, who 500 years before Columbus led a Norse-Icelandic journey to far-eastern Canada. Seeing massive rocks but no grass, they concluded the land would be useless for agriculture. When Italian John Cabot arrived in 1497, he noted the abundance of cod and the ease of casting baskets into the sea for plentiful harvests of the salty fish. That inspired fishing settlements. By the early 1800s, a forestry industry was thriving; many locals today have ancestors who worked in island sawmills.

Our expedition lecturers shared background like this each morning and again before dinner each evening. "You're in for a real treat," Endeavour leader Scott McDougall told us on the first day. "Few places can boast the stark, wild beauty and warm hospitality found in Newfoundland."

Our host for the journey was Newfoundland native Dennis Minty, an eco-guide, photographer and naturalist since 2002. Tony Oxford, another native son, served as "cultural educator"; the onetime mayor of tiny Cox's Cove composed his own music for nightly jam sessions and enthralled us with daily talks on dozens of subjects. An example was his description of the island's unique, Gaelic-affected English dialect. Should someone (such as Oxford himself) offer the greeting "Whadda y'at?" he said, the proper response is: "This is it!"

It was a real treat to have Chief Mi'sel Joe, the hereditary and spiritual leader of the Mi'kmaq people of Newfoundland and Labrador on board. Joe is a master storyteller and the author of numerous literary works about his people. He and co-author Shiela O'Neill, a distant relative, taught us about Aboriginal culture. "It's so important that we tell our own story, because nobody else is going to do it," Chief Joe emphasized.

Highlights of the voyage

Our first stop was at Terra Nova ("New World") National Park. Tourism is restoring a



degree of life to the remote fishing village of Conche, which like many other communities was decimated by a 1992 Canadian government moratorium on cod fishing. A short hike from the settlement of 250 people leads to a restored lighthouse and a waterfall, as well as the Glass Hole, a stunning granite cavern with a jagged window on the Atlantic. We were thrilled when locals served us a meal in their community hall, complete with song and dance.

L'Anse aux Meadows is the only confirmed archeological site of Norse settlement on the North American continent. A UNESCO World Heritage site, it dates from the 11th century but was only excavated in the 1960s. Daily reenactments of ancient life are offered among the remains of eight buildings, built of sod over wooden frames. More than 800 Viking objects, including Iron and Bronze Age artifacts, have been unearthed here at the northernmost tip of Newfoundland island.

On the Labrador mainland, we made a lone stop at Red's Cay, a former Basque whaling port. The local museum showcases the wreck of a whaling boat more than 400 years old, along with tools and navigational instruments. We lunched at the Whalers Restaurant, which served some of the best fish and chips I've ever had.

Gros Morne National Park is another UNESCO site, acclaimed for its unique geology and population of moose. It is crowned by The Tablelands, Newfoundland's second-highest elevation, which appear desert-like but also contain a forested area. Woody Point, an alluring town in the heart of the park, has many historical waterfront buildings.

Cox's Cove, Tony Oxford's village, is another significant fishing and lodging community. We hiked to a waterfall and plunged into the frigid water at its foot for (in my case a very quick dip. Later in the day at the abandoned settlement of Brake's Cove, I went kayaking while my fellow expeditioners enjoyed a beach barbecue of mussels, fish and local beer.

On an educational stopover at Chief Joe's Miawpukek First Nation on the Conne River,



we enjoyed a visit to the Ta'n etl-Mawita'mk Community Center. Here Mi'kmaq elders told us about their history, and young people performed traditional songs and dances.

Our final stopover before returning to St. John's was the charming island of St. Pierre. To this day, the domain remains distinctly French, a self-governing overseas territory of France. As such, we had to produce our passports.

In particular, I was pleased to pay a small premium to join 10 other guests in sea-kayaking expeditions. Led by guides Barb and Cathy, we glided through pristine bays and past picturesque shorelines, viewing landscapes and settlements by the sea.

Weather permitting

"Go with the flow while we attempt to stick to a set itinerary," recommended Scott McDougall, our expedition leader. "That's not always the case," he warned. "It means that no two journeys will ever be the same."

Ultimately, weather plays a leading role in expedition sailings. During evening briefings, the first matter of the coming day is how the weather will be. While not as unpredictable as in polar regions, Newfoundland weather can quickly change from sun to thunderstorms. Heavy winds might be in the forecast at your next destination, canceling a scheduled stop. Changes in plans mean that each individual experience will never be duplicated.

How one adapts to change will affect the outcome of any expedition. On this October cruise, inclement weather nearly caused us to miss a stop at picturesque Francois. Yet the Endeavour's relatively small size, with a capacity of under 200 passengers, made it possible to navigate a new course. Zodiac craft transported guests to shore, giving us a rare opportunity to experience a choppy ride on big waves in a rough sea.

Travelers, not tourists

Adventure Canada is the exclusive polar provider of the Explorers Club, founded in 1904. Notable explorers and scientists may be among the passengers on any expedition.

Expedition cruising is one of the fastest-growing sectors in travel. Sustainable, responsible travel, and an interest in protecting the environment, are no longer just buzzwords. With a commitment to regenerative tourism, Adventure Canada's Newfoundland Circumnavigation teaches about the rich tapestry of cultures while treading lightly on lands, preserving flora and fauna. New routes are on the minds of cruise lines and on



travelers' radar, making off-the-beaten-path Newfoundland ripe for greater exploration.

Adventure Canada is a small-ship expedition cruise line. Unforgettable encounters shepherded by a stellar expedition team who showcase their expertise in culture, history, indigenous people, photography, geology, marine biology, flora, fauna and music. Many are native Newfoundlanders who bring their culture on board.

Refurbished in 2015, the well-appointed Ocean Endeavour offers comfort and stability similar to newer ships. Our 13-day circumnavigation of Newfoundland covered 1,225 nautical miles and 150 hours at sea. We learned a fascinating history while lightly treading its pristine land.

Travel changes us like nothing else. As Dennis Minty told guests in an early lecture: "The tourist arrives at a destination perhaps seeking familiarity, a McDonald's or maybe an all-inclusive hotel. You all came on this expedition with an open mind and a thirst to learn because you're travelers. You want to venture off the beaten path, eat and drink with locals, and immerse yourself in the culture and land."

Indeed, I came to celebrate this unique land's people, sights, sounds and folklore. Keeping it local, I channeled Tony Oxford's greeting, "Whadda y'at?" and, of course, my reply, "This is it." ■

WWW.ADVENTURECANADA.COM
NEWFOUNDLANDANDLABRADOR.COM





Dual-brand Homewood Suites & Tru by Hilton in Albany, NY

by Michael Cohen

Alban is a 400-year-old city on the banks of the Hudson River and the capital of the State of New York.

From museums and historic sites in downtown Albany, to scenic views and outdoor adventures in the Helderberg Hilltowns, Albany County boasts a variety of must-see attractions. Tour top landmarks, explore the rich landscape or visit one of the world-class museums for a trip that is beyond conventional.

This 192 room dual-branded Homewood Suites and Tru by Hilton opened in 2018. It features two separate areas designed for each brand, unique public spaces designed to promote social connectivity, a 24-hour fitness center, an indoor pool, outdoor grills, sport courts and an airport shuttle. The hotel offers a meeting room and a business centre. The different lobby and dining spaces are extremely large and offer all of the comforts of home and more. There is 24 hour complimentary coffee and tea in the Tru by Hilton lobby.

Our room had a kitchen, stovetop, fridge, dishwasher, microwave, coffee maker and all of the necessary dishes and cutlery. There were two televisions, two queen sized beds in the master and a safe (always a must for us) as well as a pullout couch in the spacious large living room area.

I was beyond impressed with the complimentary hot and cold morning breakfast, from the neat pancake machine to the array of bagels, English muffins, cereals, yogurts and hot and cold drinks. Next to the front desk there is a small market to purchase refreshments and light bites.

A huge plus for this property is its location: virtually in the parking lot of the fabulous Crossgates Mall, the largest shopping, dining and entertainment destination in New York's Capital Region. The center is anchored by Macy's, JC Penney, Dick's Sporting Goods, Primark and Best Buy, while offering more than 180 retail shops. ■



WWW.HILTON.COM
WWW.ALBANY.ORG



The Londoner Hotel

Nestled amidst the bustling energy of Leicester Square, The Londoner Hotel stands as a sanctuary of tranquility and sophistication, offering discerning travelers relaxation and indulgence. As a cultural capital, foodie haven, and shopping oasis, it's no wonder US traveler numbers are steadily inching back to record highs.

Here are reasons why The Londoner is the perfect choice for a city break holiday:

Suite Dreams: 350 rooms and suites harmoniously blend residential charm and London class. Each is individually designed, with spacious living areas, separate bedrooms, objets d'art, and magnificent views.

Residence Access: As a guest, the suite keys open the door to three beautifully designed spaces to socialize, dine, and relax for residents only.

The Retreat: Access to the pool, gym, superfood clinic, full-service salon, yoga classes, and priority access to daily curated experiences.

VIP Packages: Elevate the experience with thoughtfully curated packages designed for exploration or relaxation, which include West End premieres, luxury shopping access, customized wellness and medicinal programming, and more.

Food and Beverage: Savor culinary masterpieces at the six concept eateries and bars, indulge in artisanal cocktails, or experience private dining in the comfort of your suite.

Personalized Service & Events: Whether it's arranging bespoke experiences tailored to your preferences or indulging in exquisite amenities, the team is committed to making each stay truly unforgettable.

Prime Location: Conveniently situated near popular attractions including Covent Garden and West End theatres, offering the perfect blend of tranquility and accessibility. ■

WWW.THELONDONER.COM



Midtown Manhattan's Algonquin Hotel

by Randy Mink

A fixture in midtown Manhattan since 1902, the Algonquin Hotel Times Square, Autograph Collection is a revered landmark with a tale to tell. Its storied past revolves around a group of literary luminaries who met there daily for long lunches in the 1920s.

Tucked away on a quiet block of West 44th Street, within easy walking distance of Broadway theaters and Rockefeller Center, the 181-room hotel is inextricably linked to the Algonquin Round Table, a jocular band of writers, illustrators, journalists and show business folks who showed up to socialize and trade barbs. Among its members: Robert Benchley, James Thurber, Dorothy Parker, Edna Ferber, playwright George S. Kaufman and Harpo Marx of the Marx Brothers. They convened at a 15-seat round table amid the

clubby, chandeliered splendor of the Rose Room, a restaurant that no longer exists.

An oil painting of Round Table regulars graces the lobby's Blue Bar Restaurant and Lounge, today's gathering place for hotel guests.

While I have to admit that I'm not familiar with the works of many of those literary giants, I think I woke up just a little bit smarter after a good night's sleep in my fourth-floor suite. And while the word "cozy" may seem out of place in describing anything in midtown Manhattan, I immediately developed fuzzy feelings for this historic hotel. The resident cat probably had something to do with it.

Most people walking past the hotel probably don't notice the kitty sleeping by the window. But if they stop to read the sign, they'll learn

about the Algonquin's cat while being advised, "Cat Napping. Please do not tap on the glass."

As the sign explains, the hotel cat during the 1920s was Billy. Two days after he died in 1933, a stray cat wandered into the building and was named Rusty. Believing the name was too common for such a fine property, actor John Barrymore, a hotel resident, renamed the pet Hamlet in honor of his greatest stage role. Over the years there have been eight Hamlets and three Matildas (the name for female cats). Hamlet VIII began his residency in September 2017.

Two mornings I saw the ginger-colored feline ambassador roaming the lobby/bar. He didn't seem to be afraid of people; it was easy to get close enough for pictures.

Distinguished by white, Corinthian-crowned columns, the Blue Bar extends from the street entrance to an area with bookshelves, a grand piano, and, as a nod to the past, a round table suitable for large groups.

My suite, Room 406, featured a lounge couch, a small dining table, 60- and 48-inch flat-screen TVs, antique-style telephones and a collection of New York-centric books, including one about the Algonquin Round Table. Fresh flowers gussied up the entrance-way, living area, bedroom and bathroom (notable for its pretty teal sink).

Wandering around one night, I came upon guest room doors bearing quotable witticisms from Round Table wordsmiths. Adorning the hallways are framed cartoons and vintage covers from the New Yorker magazine (whose co-founder and editor-in-chief, Harold Ross, was part of the Round Table).

One door had this Robert Benchley quip: "It took me fifteen years to discover I had no talent for writing, but I couldn't give it up because by that time I was too famous." ■

WWW.ALGONQUINHOTEL.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



Feel the Season at KAI Ito!

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

Hoshino Resort's 23 KAI hot spring (onsen) properties celebrate the changing seasons, showcase local crafts, and honor guests with attention to detail, stellar customer service, and locally sourced, beautifully presented, delicious food.

Ito is a hot spring town on the eastern coast of the Izu Peninsula in Shizuoka Prefecture. It's about a 90-minute train ride from Tokyo, during which passengers can enjoy a build-up to the scenery in store: the mountains and the ocean.

From Ito Station, turn right toward the giant Tengu Mask over the souvenir shop, and then walk 10 minutes further to KAI Ito. Beside the outside entrance, staff are ready to greet guests and escort them to the lobby for a relaxed check-in experience. Our room had 2 beds with views of the Garden (where we could see colorful Koi fish swimming in the pond below), the outdoor swimming pool, and

the mountains beyond. The room was designed for comfort. A deep bathtub made of ancient cypress could be filled with hot spring water to luxuriate in privacy. The large tatami living room highlighted local art on the walls and Shoji (sliding doors) that mirrored 'Momiji', or colored Japanese maple leaves of the autumn season.

A recurrent nature theme in the hotel is the Camellia Japonica Flower, the official flower of Ito City. One of the hands-on activities for hotel guests is making oil from the Camellia seeds and then collecting the precious droplets in a small bottle as a souvenir. Oil for cosmetic or edible purposes can be purchased in the craft/gift shop.

The KAI Ito onsen produces warm feelings of contentment, literally! The hot water pools overlook tranquil garden-rock scenery in the separate men's and women's areas.

After an indulgent bath, we fulfilled the invitation to 'Enjoy the taste of the mountains and the ocean' with an exceptional nine-course meal. Umami highlights included peanut tofu with mustard miso, scallops and picked flying fish roe, grated yam wheat with Belvedere fruit, dried fig and green vegetables with sesame miso, Japanese lobster sashimi, and grilled abalone. Then the Sankai Nabe (Mountain and Ocean Hot Pot) arrived: Half a savory vegetable broth with Japanese Beef and the other half a sumptuous red broth of vegetables, shrimp, and Red Snapper.

The taste experience continued the following day with breakfast, where the featured dish was Namerou: Aji (Horse Mackerel) mixed with ginger, miso, and green onion on a bed of rice, with local seaweed, egg, and wasabi rice crackers. When you pour soup stock over the rice, the dish is called "Ochazuke" ('submerged in tea'), and it's so good!

Mr. Takahiro Kubo, General Manager, suggested that "Canadian and American visitors should come to Izu and feel the seasons". KAI Ito proved it was the perfect place to do this with wonder, relaxation, comfort, and culinary contentment. ■

HOSHINORESORTS.COM





Four Season Resort Bora Bora

The Ultimate Bucket List Destination

Article and photography by Nicholas Kontis

There are 118 islands in French Polynesia, yet only one of them finds a place on every traveler's bucket list.

Bora Bora is a place so nice, you've got to say it twice. South Pacific author James Michener called it the most mesmerizing island in the world. Indeed, visiting Bora Bora is like living in a dream. Its marine palette of cobalt, turquoise and sapphire is unrivaled in any sea.

So it comes as no surprise, really, that Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora rests right at the top of any bucket-list resort compilation. Indeed, in its 2023 Awards of Excellence, "Luxury Travel Advisor" named the property the "Best Luxury Beach Hotel Worldwide." In other words: There's no real competition.

The over-water suites have a magnetic draw. There are 108 of these thatched bungalows,

as well as seven beachfront villa estates of two and three bedrooms. As the Four Seasons rests on its private motu, or islet, everyone has a spellbinding vista of mystical Mount Otemanu rising in the near distance.

Every bungalow has a private balcony and a large soaking tub overlooking the waters of the South Pacific. Each accommodation features traditional teak furnishings, local artwork, a flat-screen TV, a bar and a Nespresso machine. And every day, before breakfast, I could wake up and plunge into the warm waters of the lagoon outside my bungalow.

All dining options are exceptional. Arii Moana is the open-air Mediterranean option. Blending the cultural traditions of Asia, Vaimiti is my personal favorite, with a locale that provides eye-popping sunsets. (The crispy pork belly is to die for.) Breakfast is served at Tere

Nui, overlooking the lagoon and Mount Otemanu. On Mondays, Tere Nui hosts a Polynesian dance show, giving guests another glimpse into Polynesian culture.

Beneath its cathedral roof, Te Mahana Spa pampers and revitalizes guests with traditional Polynesian treatments. The verdant lagoon views are remarkable, no moreso than in a couples' suite in a bungalow — with a glass floor allowing a tranquil view of fish swimming below.

The resort caters not only to couples on romantic getaways but also to families. "We are seeing more and more families joining us, especially over the holiday season," confirmed general manager Romain Chanet.

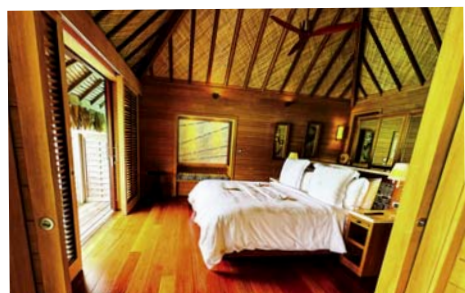
For those who want to do nothing at all, Four Seasons has you covered. But there are activities enough to fill every hour of every day. Water sports include paddleboarding, kayaking, and snorkeling — in two lagoons or directly from your bungalow — as well as a popular jet-ski tour. There's an open-air fitness room open 24 hours, for those who like to pump iron at 3 a.m. There's an exclusive Kids Club for 4 to 12-year-olds. Daily shuttles transport guests to off-property shopping or sightseeing, and a daily lunch shuttle visits the Bora Bora Beach Club.

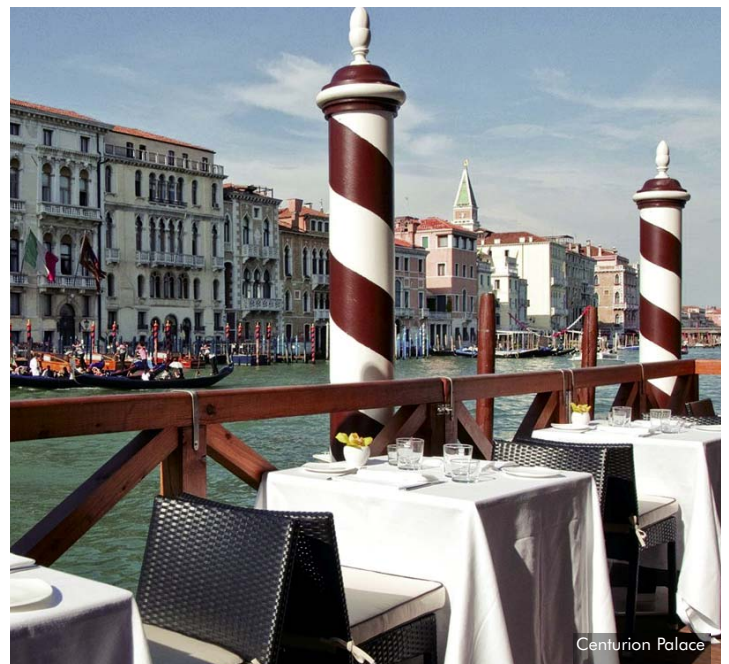
But once you've arrived on your private Polynesian motu, you won't ever have to leave — at least, not until your French visa expires. Four Seasons guests are picked up at the Bora Bora airport and taken by boat to the island, a 15-minute voyage. Most American guests arrive directly from Los Angeles, San Francisco or Seattle on nonstop nine-hour flights.

Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora redefines the word "relaxing." It exceeds all expectations of a private island resort. The serene setting — over-water villas, accented by impeccably manicured grounds, before one of the most stunning backdrops on the planet — lends a refined superiority that I've seen nowhere else in my far-flung travels.

I'm left to contemplate only one remaining question: Why didn't I stay longer? ■

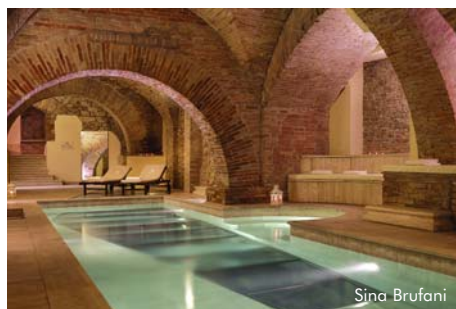
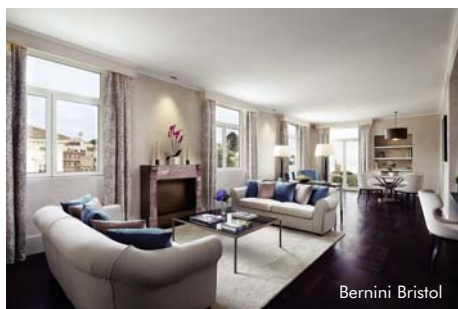
WWW.FOURSEASONS.COM





Traveling Slowly by Train is the Ultimate Way to Experience Italy

by Olivia Liveng



Having journeyed to Italy numerous times, each visit unfurling its own unique cultural, historical, and—of course—gastronomical—experiences, I found myself yearning for something different—a return to the old-school way of exploring, where the journey itself is as enriching as the destinations. This time, I sought to embrace the concept of slow travel, to immerse myself deeply in the essence of Italy, not just as a tourist but as a traveler intent on savoring every moment, every flavor, and every sunset with unbridled appreciation.

With this spirit, I embarked on a grand tour, not just any tour, but a luxurious voyage aboard the legendary Arlecchino train, complemented by stays at the illustrious Sina Hotels. This journey harked back to a bygone era of glamour and leisure, where the pace was slower, and the experiences were savored, promising an intimate exploration of Italy's grandeur through its cities and the storied halls of Sina Hotels.

Embarking on this Italian journey, the allure was not just in traversing the picturesque landscapes but in diving deep into the lap of luxury, history, and gastronomy offered by the iconic Arlecchino train and the illustrious Sina Hotels. This narrative unfolds not as a mere recounting of travel but as a personal diary, chronicling an intimate exploration of Italy's grandeur.

The Arlecchino Train: A Revival of Glamour

Boarding the Arlecchino felt like stepping onto a movie set from the 1960s, where every detail, from the polished wood paneling to the sumptuous fabrics, was a nod to a bygone era of glamour. The journey between cities became a highlight, with landscapes that shifted from rolling vineyards to ancient cityscapes, all viewed from the luxurious comfort of the train's interiors. Dining aboard was an event with courses that mirrored the passing regions, each dish narrating the story of its origin through taste and presentation.

Rome: The Eternal City at Sina Bernini Bristol

My first stop, Rome, was marked by the grandiosity of the Sina Bernini Bristol.



Villa Medici

Situated in the city's pulsating heart, the hotel is a monument to luxury, standing proudly by the Piazza Barberini. Its storied history, spanning 150 years, was palpable in the opulent decor and the attentive service that made every moment spent there special. My room offered a breathtaking vista of Rome, a canvas of history and modernity. Dining at Il Vizio, the hotel's rooftop haven, provided a symphony of flavors and an unparalleled view of the Eternal City, making each meal a memorable part of my Roman holiday.

Perugia: Unveiling History at Sina Brufani

As the Arlecchino glided into the heart of Umbria, the historic Sina Brufani in Perugia awaited. With a legacy stretching over 140 years, this hotel is a treasure chest of stories, nestled atop a hill and offering sweeping views spanning the medieval city and the green heart of Italy. The interiors were a seamless blend of antique charm and modern luxury, with rooms that felt like private sanctuaries of elegance. The highlight was undoubtedly the swimming pool, set over ancient ruins visible through a glass floor, offering a literal swim through history. And even though Italy's March weather isn't always synonymous with swimming.

Florence:

A Renaissance Dream at Sina Villa Medici

Florence greeted me with the refined beauty of the Sina Villa Medici. This hotel, encased in a 19th-century palace, is a testament to the Renaissance spirit that permeates the city. The gardens, a lush retreat in the urban landscape, were the perfect backdrop for evenings spent dining al fresco at Harry's Bar The Garden, where the culinary masterpieces served were rivaled only by the artistic ones adorning the city. The Sina Villa Medici was not just a place to stay; it was a portal to the past, offering a slice of Florentine life that was both luxurious and steeped in history.

Venice:

Modern Majesty at Sina Centurion Palace

The decision to extend my journey to Venice brought me to the doorstep of the Sina Centurion Palace. Overlooking the Grand Canal, this hotel is a bold statement of con-



Villa Medici

temporary design set against the historical canvas of Venice. Each room was a fusion of modern chic and traditional luxury, with views capturing Venetian life's essence. Dining at the hotel was a journey through Venice's culinary heritage, with innovative dishes that paid homage to the city's rich gastronomic legacy. The Centurion Palace was more than a hotel; it was an experience blending the old and new in a city that defies time.

Culinary Experiences and Beyond

The culinary journey across these destinations was a highlight, with each Sina Hotel offering a unique perspective on Italy's diverse flavors. From the rooftop elegance of Il Vizio in Rome to the serene gardens of Harry's Bar in Florence, and the innovative cuisine of Venice's Sina Centurion Palace, every meal was a discovery and intimate means of better digesting Italy's steeped culture—quite literally. The ingredients, the preparation, and the presentation were all testament to Italy's deep-rooted culinary traditions and the innovative spirit that continues to evolve them.

Coming From An Italy Afficiando—This Is The Way To Experience Italy

This Italian voyage, from the historic corridors of the Arlecchino train to the luxurious embrace of Sina Hotels, was a narrative of discovery, luxury, and unparalleled hospitality. Each hotel opened up its city to me, not just as a place to visit but as a world to inhabit, if only for a short while. They were not merely places to rest but sanctuaries that offered a deeper connection to Italy's rich history, culture, and gastronomy. As I reflect on this journey, I realize it was not just a passage through Italy but an invitation into the heart of its beauty, a beauty that persists in the walls of its hotels, the landscapes outside my window, and the flavors that danced upon my palate. This was not merely travel; it was an experience woven into the essence of Italian splendor, leaving indelible marks on my memory and a yearning to return. ■

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Centurion Palace

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



1886 Crescent Hotel & Spa

Historic landmark in the Arkansas Ozarks

by Randy Mink

Like the artsy mountain village of Eureka Springs itself, the 1886 Crescent Hotel & Spa has a personality that borders on the quirky side.

This historic hilltop “castle in the air,” once billed as the “premier resort hotel of the Ozarks,” originally catered to the “carriage set.” Its affluent guests enjoyed afternoon teas, dances in the ballroom, and sports like tennis, shuffleboard and bowling.

Many of today’s guests come to soak in the genteel, yesteryear vibe. Others come for supernatural encounters, as the Crescent has been called “America’s Most Haunted Hotel.” Indeed, since its inception in 1886, the majestic limestone building has played host to inexplorable phenomena. Countless guests have reported apparitions and unexplained noises,

like the nurse with her gurney wandering the halls and the boy bouncing his ball in the dead of night.

Talk about a hotel with character. What fun it is roaming the warped floors of the dim, high-ceilinged corridors. Guests encounter cock-eyed door frames, scratched woodwork, peeling paint, chipped plaster and old-fashioned radiators. Each room has its own configuration.

While I didn’t witness anything creepy, I did wonder why, on stays a year apart, I got assigned both times to Room 219. (And I was a bit nervous being next to 218, or Michael’s Room, the most paranormally active—and most requested—room.) My furniture included a rocking chair, a beautiful armoire and a blemished dresser that looked like it had been

there for decades. One wall consisted of exposed brick and mortar. The mattress, pillows and plush towels were comparable to those found in any fine hotel. Other amenities included a refrigerator, coffeemaker and television. The bathroom sparkled, though the tub and sink were down a few steps from the toilet-in-the-closet near my bed.

My spacious balcony afforded views of the garden, vast woodlands and St. Elizabeth of Hungary Catholic Church. The fourth-floor pizzeria and cocktail bar also have outdoor perches that showcase the Ozarks’ splendor.

Breakfast is served in the Crystal Dining Room, the former ballroom, a cavernous space with walnut walls and crystal chandeliers. For dinner it becomes La Cena, an Italian restaurant.

In the lobby, you may find Jasper, a black cat with white chest and paws, perhaps by the vintage organ. He is one in a long line of resident cats.

For recreation, guests enjoy the outdoor pool, yard games, hatchet throwing and BB gun shooting.

On nightly ghost tours, you learn about businessman Norman Baker, who bought the building in 1937 and turned it into a cancer hospital, a clinic touted as a place “Where Sick Folks Get Well.” But the shady “doctor,” who claimed to have the cure for cancer, was convicted of fraud and the hospital closed in 1940.

The eerie tour’s last stop is the “morgue,” an area that long ago served as the hotel’s kitchen and later the hospital’s autopsy room. On display are the autopsy table and walk-in cooler where Baker kept cadavers and body parts. Shelves contain jars of human tissue, medical specimens (perhaps tumors) discovered in 2019 during an archaeological dig on the hotel grounds. They apparently had been surgically removed from patients.

The ghost tour is a must for any Eureka Springs visitor wishing to learn the secrets behind the Crescent Hotel’s grand facade. ■

WWW.CRESCENT-HOTEL.COM





Central Spain's Parador de Cuenca

by Randy Mink

For soaking up the heritage and romance of Spain almost by osmosis, nothing beats staying overnight in one of the country's government-owned paradores. Many of the parador network's 90-plus hostleries occupy former castles, palaces, fortresses and other types of historic buildings. They're a big hit with North Americans seeking out Old World flavor.

Both for its prime location and historical ambience, the 63-room Parador de Cuenca, once the monastery of San Pablo, makes an ideal home base in the enchanting city of Cuenca (see related article on page 8). Set on a rocky outcrop high above the Huecar River, the hotel affords postcard-perfect views of ancient buildings clinging to the cliffs across the gorge. Just steps from the entrance lies photogenic San Pablo Bridge, the gorge-spanning

walkway that leads to the Ciudad Alta (Old City).

A destination in itself, Parador de Cuenca was built in the 16th century by the Dominican order. The monastery was converted into a university in the 1800s and later served as a hospital, school and military headquarters.

One of the hotel's most striking features is the beautiful cloister that wraps around an open-air courtyard where you can enjoy a drink on a summer evening. The arcades, graced with semi-circular arches, beamed ceilings and black-and-white-tile floors, are accented with antiques, including wooden chests and a grandfather clock.

Also impressive is the restaurant's coffered wooden ceiling. Once a chapel where monks

prayed, the vaulted room is a heavenly place for breakfast. At the buffet we feasted on fresh fruits, meats, cheeses, yogurt and artisan breads. A fan of baked goods, I filled up on mini brioches with chocolate chips, shortbread cookies made by nuns from a local convent and Manchego flowers (or flores manchegas), a raised, flower-shaped pastry of fried dough dusted with sugar and cinnamon.

From the a la carte menu we could order piping-hot churros or eggs any style, but both days I went for migas, a humble dish that became a favorite of mine while traveling in Spain. A satisfying comfort food, migas combines fried crumbs from stale bread (soaked in water to get moist), olive oil, garlic, paprika (coloring it orange) and bits of chorizo. The crispy concoction is usually topped with a fried egg.

Paradores are known for purveying the best in Spanish gastronomy, and the restaurant's dinner menu features many dishes with traditional recipes from Spain's Castilla-La Mancha region. Entrees include shoulder of suckling lamb, Manchego-style roasted lamb with rosemary sauce, and baked cod with Manchego ratatouille and saffron sauce.

The word Manchego, known to North Americans as the name of a prized, semi-hard sheep's milk cheese, also refers to the La Mancha region. The parador's menu offers a selection of Manchego cheeses.

Like the dining hall, the bar evokes the spirit of the old monastery. Just look up at the lovely religious ceiling frescoes framed by ornate plasterwork.

Across the road are the tennis courts and outdoor swimming pool.

The high-ceilinged guest rooms at Parador de Cuenca are tastefully appointed. My third-floor nest had a desk, TV, refrigerator and individual temperature controls. Red-tile floors and carved wooden doors lent a rustic look. In both the bedroom and bathroom, windows let in fresh air, allowing me to hear crowing roosters at the farmstead across the river. ■

WWW.PARADORES.ES





Hilton Head Health Resort

by Jennifer Merrick

“Was there a wellness Kool-Aid that everyone was drinking?” I wondered on my first day at Hilton Head Health (HHH), an all-inclusive wellness resort on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina. Every guest I talked to had been here multiple times.

“Twelve times,” said Linda from Chicago.

“Seven times,” said Pat from Vancouver Island. And they were raving about it. “This place saved my life,” Pat declared and went on to say that when she first came to HHH seven years ago, she had weighed over 300 pounds.

By adopting the philosophy and strategies that were imparted during her initial one-month stay, she lost half her weight and now returns annually to maintain healthy habits, keep up motivation and catch up with her newfound friends.

For others like Linda, weight loss was secondary, and they came to take a break from their hectic lifestyles and focus on their well-being in a nonjudgmental and community atmosphere.

At first, I was slightly taken aback by the gushing. But after my four-day stay here, I was planning my return visit, too.

What makes this place so special?

Sumptuous healthy food: No food group was off-limits and with rich soups, salads, seafood, pasta, meat and vegetarian options on the menu, I was always satisfied, despite the low-calorie count. “The focus is on whole foods,” said Chef T, when he was showcasing one of his cooking demonstrations for guests. “We even use butter and cream, just in moderation.”

The chef’s dinner, hosted once a week, was a culinary experience not to be missed. Our meal included multiple courses: smoked corn chowder with lobster, roasted zucchini, sirloin filet with mushroom sauce and cheesecake for dessert. All for 600 calories. “It’s wizardry magic,” declared one guest at the end.

Dizzying variety of activities: On Monday alone I counted 28 different programming options: core presentations that instructed guests on eating and fitness strategies to take home; classic fitness classes, including circuit training, Zumba, TRX strength, aquafit and yoga; and specialized conditioning classes such as hula hoop, drums alive, isometrics and shoulder mobility.

On top of that were the wellness offerings, like meditation, massage, mindfulness classes, and a life balance assessment, which were part of the ReNew Retreat. Anne, who facilitated the assessment, explained that this program was designed as a way for people to check out of their busy lives and refill their tanks. This struck a chord for me, and I appreciated her insights on a gentle and moderate approach to lifestyle changes.

Serene island property: Part of the resort’s exceptionality is the locale itself on Hilton Head Island. The 30-room Sweetgrass Inn and its two- and three-bedroom villas are surrounded by lush subtropical vegetation. Their walking paths are fringed by both moss-draped oak trees and tropical palms and flowers. Streams and lagoons traverse the grounds, and long-legged wading birds stand motionless waiting for their prey. Amenities include the full-service Indigo Spa, sauna, an outdoor pool and hot tub. And then there’s the proximity to the beach. Numerous scheduled activities include yoga, kayaking, nature-sighting outings and beach walks.

Listening to the lapping of the waves as we strolled on the sand that stretched endlessly, while the sky changed colors with the setting sun, I drank in the view. And the wellness Kool-Aid, too. ■

WWW.HHHEALTH.COM





Stay and Play at Club Med Quebec Charlevoix

by Jennifer Merrick

The aim in life is to be happy. The place to be happy is here. And the time to be happy is now.

This was the simple philosophy of Gerard Blitz, who founded Club Med in 1950. He envisioned the community atmosphere of an Olympic village where different nationalities could play sports during the day and dance together at night. Club Med has grown to encompass over 80 clubs during its 74 years. Club Med Quebec Charlevoix is one of its newest offerings and the only all-inclusive mountain resort in North America. Its modern

décor, sumptuous cuisine and upscale amenities are a far cry from the tents on the beach of the first Club Med. But still today you'll find guests of all ages from around the world enjoying outdoor activities in a stunning natural setting and reveling in cocktails and live entertainment when the sun sets.

A very happy place indeed, and here's what made me happiest.

Location: Wherever we were at the resort, the views mesmerized us. Looking to the south,

our jaws dropped at the sight of the mighty Saint Lawrence River. It's at this point, about 60 miles west of Quebec City, where the saltwater meets the fresh, and at 16 miles across, it looks more like a sea. The floating ice floes and constantly changing light put on a show that we never tired of. To the north were the mountains, rising to the clouds. At over 2500 feet, it's the highest vertical drop east of the Rockies.

Rooms and Amenities: Club Med's 302 rooms and 25 suites are thoughtfully designed with contemporary design, plush beds, and full amenities. Facilities at the resort included a large indoor pool, fitness center, yoga room, and a large spa, where skilled masseuses and estheticians offered a menu of services. The pampering also included a sauna and outdoor hot tub.

Cuisine: More a food hall experience than a buffet, the main restaurant, Le Marche, has multiple stations set up that serve up well-presented places of locally inspired and sourced dishes. Le Chalet has food available outside of mealtimes and its lodge-style layout with full bar service is ideal for chilling anytime of day.

Activities: All-inclusive at Club Med also applies to almost everything you do, and the list went far beyond the usual resort offerings of aquafit and yoga. Skiing or snowboarding? All stays come with lift passes and the slopes are at your doorstep. Don't know how to ski? Professional all-day lessons are also included. Kids have their own lessons and children's programming that will have them performing on stage, trying out circus moves and having the time of their lives. But even adults can indulge their inner child with classes like juggling and trapeze. Our favorite activities, though, were the guided snowshoe outings. With a knowledgeable local guide, our small group tramped the trails at the base of the mountain through the maple woods and historic homestead buildings on the Le Forestier hike. And the next day we were whisked up on the gondola to walk the trails at the peak of the mountain on the Le Bouton hike. Taking in the 360-degree panoramic view of this extraordinary landscape, we were all in our happy place. ■

WWW.CLUBMED.CA/D/CANADA/QUEBEC





Bright Horizons in Bonaire Divi Flamingo Beach Resort & Casino

by Susan Campbell

Historically known as being a diver's paradise, the delightful little Dutch Caribbean Island of Bonaire has been making big strides in expanding their offerings and terrestrial attractions to draw many different types of travelers now. And Divi Flamingo Beach Resort, one of the island's first hotels, has not only been changing with the times, but sometimes leading the charge!

I've enjoyed watching this establishment grow, refresh, and reinvent itself continually since my first stay there over 15 years ago. And regardless of whatever transformation they have gone through, it has always retained its original colorful charm and warm and welcoming vibe. It always feels like home. And I love the

location of this resort, literally steps from the downtown core of Bonaire's adorable little capital of Kralendijk and fronting its own house reef full of magnificent marine life mere steps from the shore. Their on-site outfit Divi Dive Bonaire is a 5-star PADI operation, and when I finally decide to become certified, I can't think of a better place to do so. They have a modern fleet of six dive boats, but shore diving there is also a breeze, and night diving is also popular. It's also an excellent place to snorkel, and their dive shop has equipment rental.

There are 129 rooms in all, some with full kitchens, and some overlooking the sea where you can spot colorful fish right from your balcony. They offer both all-inclusive and EU plans, and all guests will enjoy their all-oceanfront selection of dining rooms, snack spots, and bars. There is also a small casino on site. The latest round of improvements includes redesigning their two pools and adding Jacuzzis and refreshing and upgrading all the rooms and exteriors in the oceanfront wing and studio suite wings, and they plan to finish renovating the remaining pool view room wing by this summer. They've also added a convenient new dive pier and totally renovated

their signature Chibi Chibi and pureocean dining spots, both great places to catch stunning sunsets over the sea.

This resort is also ideal for families. They have a children's playground, and their little beach has calm surf and leads to sensational shallow snorkeling around a manmade pier. And children under 12 stay free! (One child per paying adult on the all-inclusive plan.) For adults, there is also a day spa and fitness center, weekly activities like yoga, and happy hours at their "pureocean" beachside, which features live music throughout the week. Divi Dive also offers a unique, hands-on PADI Reef Renewal Diver Distinctive Specialty Course to teach divers how to help rebuild the reefs. In fact, they are participating in a Reef Renewal program right in front of the resort where they are building their own coral garden using artificial "trees". Volunteers are always welcome to help, or you can adopt your own coral with a donation. ■

WWW.DIVIRESORTS.COM





Harbour Village Beach Club

Barefoot Luxury in Bonaire

by Susan Campbell

I've been writing about Dutch Caribbean Bonaire for over 20 years. So, I was aware that Harbour Village Beach Club offered a distinct departure from other resorts on the island. Flanked by a bevy of bobbing boats in a protected harbor, it caters to visiting yachts and sailing vessels as it's directly attached to the 64-slip marina. But until a recent stay there, I had no idea how much more it had to offer travelers of every ilk.

Though the attached lighthouse is independently run as a stand-alone dining spot, the hotel theme from the marina point of view remains very nautical. The waterfront entrance to the lobby is super seafarer friendly. In fact, those renting slips on the hotel dock, yet opt to sleep on their own vessels, still have access to the resort's beach club amenities. (More on those later.) And the accommodations on the marine front wing are cosmopolitan and modern, offering guests a comfortable respite from

living at sea for a spell. But if you approach this resort from the land-based entrance as we did, it's a whole different world.

Just past the elite gated security entrance off the parking lot, you'll find the vibe far more colonial than "beach clubby". The beachfront selection of mustard yellow dwellings is a village ensconced in brilliant blooms and lush foliage with bubbling fountains popping up along cobblestone paths. We were blown away by the opulence of our two-bedroom beachfront Premium Suite. It exudes old world luxury at every turn. Overstuffed easy chairs, mahogany cabinets and antiques, marble bathrooms with deep soaking clawfoot tubs, four-poster beds... yet there were ample modern amenities too like rain showers, flat screen TVs, stunning art, Nespresso machines, stainless-steel dishwashers, and a well-equipped kitchen. It also has a small courtyard balcony, but I preferred the spacious seafront lanai with

a double hammock and multiple outdoor living areas that led to their private beach. And what a beach! It's a quarter mile of soft, alabaster sand cresting impossibly clear aqua waters, and I discovered snorkeling heaven on both ends. And I love the fact I can revisit those fishy friends from afar via their cool underwater reef cam. (See it here on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=_728Dd7SIFU)

They also have their own watersports centre offering complimentary kayaks and paddleboards, and their dive operator Great Adventures Bonaire is a first class PADI affair as well. Other beach club amenities include two pools, and the one at their deluxe spa has a waterfall. On site dining day and night is to be had at La Balandra Restaurant & Bar that resembles an antique Spanish galleon. (Even if you're not staying at the resort, have dinner there as the food and service is fabulous. Ask for a table by the underwater lights to watch huge fish feeding for additional entertainment.) They also have a few stand-alone grand villas available ideal for large families, or small groups on extended stays. And some are available for purchase. I could live here! So, if you're seeking the ultimate in barefoot luxury on Bonaire, this is the place to be. ■

WWW.HARBOURVILLAGE.COM



The High Sierra: Divine Road Tripping in Tuolumne County, California

Article and photography by Jennifer Merrick



The Sierra should be called the Range of Light—the most divinely beautiful of all the mountain chains I have ever seen,” wrote renowned naturalist, John Muir, in 1868. These mountains, which span 400 kilometers along the eastern edge of California, captured Muir’s heart, and he championed the region, leading to the creation of Yosemite National Park.

As a lover of road trips and mountains, exploring Tuolumne County and the High Sierra was indeed ‘divinely beautiful’, and it stole my heart on an all-too-short getaway. Starting from San Francisco, I white-knuckled it on the busy freeways, as cars sped in and out of traffic. But after an hour, my grip relaxed. The scenery changed and the views of a sea of cars morphed into a rural landscape dotted with almond farms. Next, an out-of-the-world landscape of red clay hills arose out of nowhere before the road led me into the mountains. The towering pines and granite rock formations that greeted me would be my enchanting company throughout my road trip that included these heavenly moments:

Horseback Riding with Aspen Meadows in Stanislaus National Forest

Everyone’s heard of Yosemite, but lesser known is the nearby federally protected Stanislaus National Forest. Spanning almost 900,000 acres, its alpine landscape features wildflowered meadows, glacial lakes and granite peaks. Hiking on its 185 miles of developed trails, pitching a tent at one of 52 campgrounds or pulling over at its panoramic viewpoints are popular ways to enjoy Stanislaus. But if you’re looking for an adventure to remember, I suggest a trail ride excursion at Aspen Meadow Pack Station.

Our cowboy guide was passionate about the mountain wilderness that surrounded us, and he regaled us with stories of his horseback adventures and the geology and history of the Sierra. The surefooted horses carried us through the Aspen meadow plateau to the ridge, where we were treated to panoramic views of the canyon stretching out to Yosemite.

Sipping Cider at Indigency Reserve

The 160-acre sprawling property with its picnic tables and antique farming relics among



Photo: Tuolumne County

the pines and apple orchards was as much of an attraction as the cider itself. “Everything is made here,” said Rebecca as she poured a flight of cider samples. The first glass smelled of apples and tasted like traditional cider, but others were unexpectedly creative concoctions made from the 52 varieties of apples grown there. “They’re magicians,” she said. Also magical were the property’s features, like the hiking trails that led to an historic mine, Phoenix Lake and a miniature gnome garden.

Breakfasting with a View at Alicia’s Sugar Shack

Not only were the scones delicious and the coffee rich at this popular roadside bakery, but just across the way was a panoramic view to accompany them.

Frolicking at Pinecrest Lake

A favourite local summer destination, this deep blue glacial lake edged by granite and pines, has been attracting generations of families for decades. The view was Norman Rockwellish with families swimming, boating or just lounging on the beach, melting ice cream in hand. More active vacationers can hike the 6.3-mile trails around the lake. This was my intention but a quarter of the way in, I found a bench perched high on the granite slab ridge and was more than content to bask in the sunshine and take in the view of the lake, mountains and the frolickers enjoying it all.

Moseying Down Main Street, Sonora

Sonora is one of the gold-rush towns in the region that sprung up during the booming decades in the mid-1800s. Today, its historic buildings house original boutiques, eateries, artisan workshops and craft breweries. A favorite stop was Emberz, for its wood-oven pizzas and selection of Californian wines.

Living the History of the Gold Rush Era at Columbia State Historic Park

I felt as though I was walking through a western movie set, but this historic town was the real deal. Between 1850 and 1870 over a billion dollars of gold in today’s standards was mined in the area, and towns sprung up to support the industry. Most became ghost towns and disappeared, but Columbia was preserved and turned into a remarkable living history site, where you can stroll its stage-coach-only-streets and explore its churches, schoolhouse, firehouse, barbershop, iron-smith and other buildings.

Exploring the Mountain Town of Twain Harte

Named after authors Mark Twain and Bret Harte, this mountain town is touristy in the best of ways with ice cream stands, mini-golf and restaurants with outdoor seating. The

double dipped fried chicken sandwich paired with an ice-cold brew at the Rock of Twain Harte, one of the town’s most popular hangouts, was an ideal ending to a day of mountain activities.

Driving the Sonora Pass

My ears popped, as I switchbacked up the mountain, trying hard to focus on the center of the road in front of me and not to the side, where no guard rails edged a rocky precipice that dropped down into deep valleys. But it was worth the sweaty palms.

The Sonora Highway, also known as Highway 108, passed through the Sierra Nevada Mountains at 9,623 feet and was a spectacularly scenic drive. Technically, the drive should have taken about two hours, but all the look-out points enroute doubled the time. The Donell Vista at 6000 feet in Stanislaus National Forest was a particularly exceptional pitstop with its panoramic views of the forested canyon and the reservoir shimmering like an emerald at the bottom.

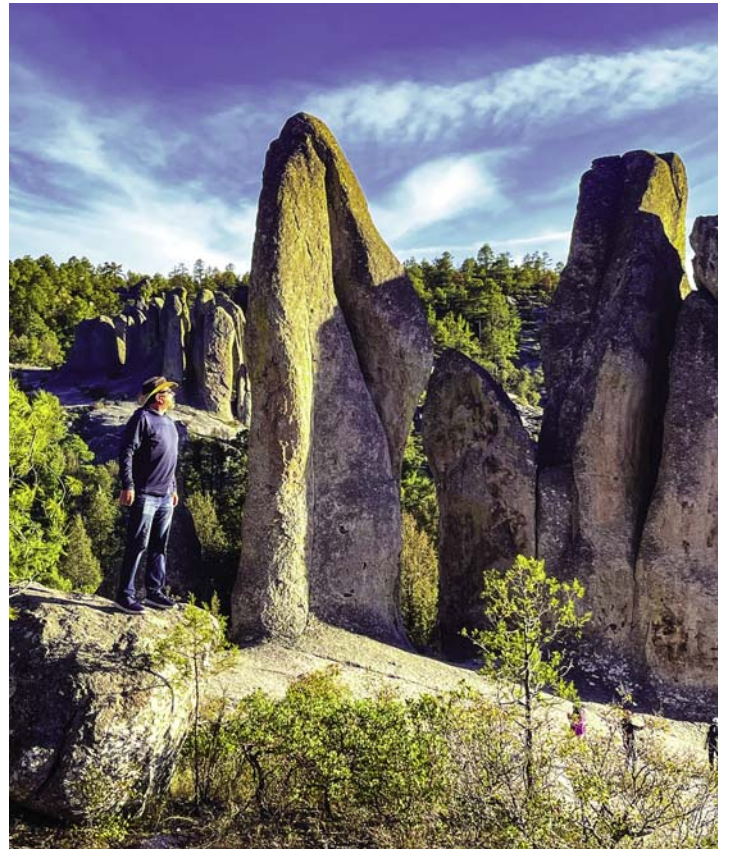
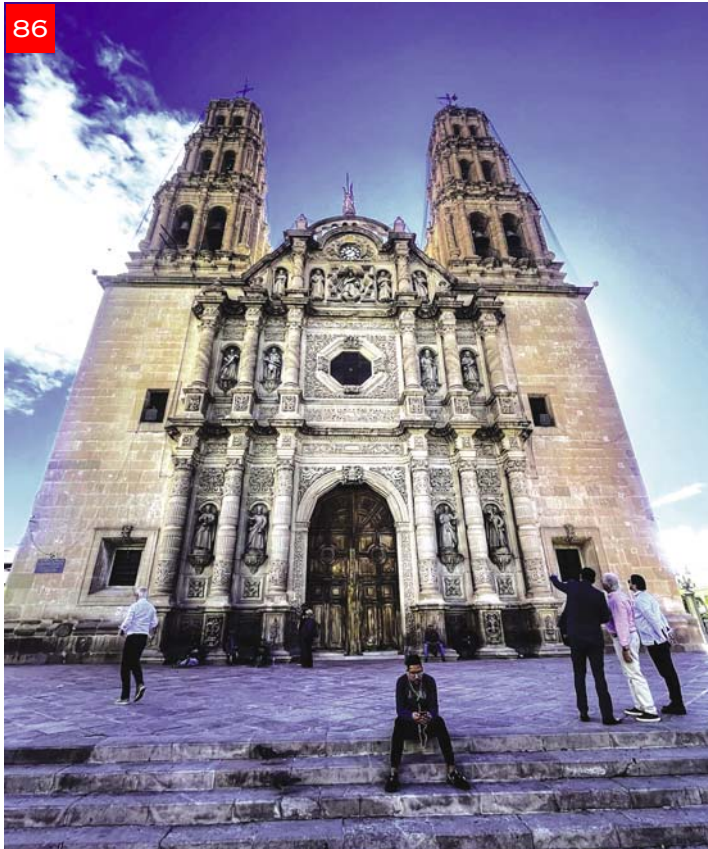
Other stops weren’t signposted but just begged for photographs like the Dardanelles, alien-like rock formations that edged the highway, created by a series of horizontal volcanic layers jutting out from granite.

For a lover of mountains and road trips, you couldn’t get much better than this drive in Tuolumne County. Simply divine.

If you go: It’s approximately a two-hour drive from either San Francisco or Sacramento airport. My accommodation at the Black Oak Casino Resort was an ideal base to explore the region and had large, comfortable suites with jacuzzi tubs and amenities that included outdoor pool, fitness center, arcade and even a bowling alley. ■

WWW.VISITTUOLUMNE.COM





Ay! Chihuahua! A Visit to a Very Different Mexico

Article and photography by Nicholas Kontis



Mexico is much more than its beaches. Indeed, each of its 32 states is unique. Canadian and American travelers who have “done” Cancun and Puerto Vallarta may want to abandon their tourist radar to visit Mexico’s largest state, historic Chihuahua, which itself is roughly as large as the entire United Kingdom.

Blanketed by the desolate Chihuahuan Desert, dissected by the magnificent Copper Canyon, Chihuahua is the heart and soul of Mexico, with a culture all its own.

The canyon is a marvel in itself. The total length of its six separate chasms is four times that of Arizona’s Grand Canyon. They are best seen on one of the world’s most amazing train journeys, the El Chepe Express aboard Chihuahua Pacific Railways. Traveling from Los Mochis, in the Pacific coastal state of Sinaloa, the iron horse ascends 2,300 meters (about 7,500 feet) to the town of Creel before descending slightly to the state capital of Chihuahua city.

Pancho Villa’s footsteps

I’ve traveled that unforgettable route before. So on my last visit, I flew into the gateway city of about 1 million people. As my flight arrived, I wondered if Clint Eastwood might have filmed a “Spaghetti Western” or two in the desert here, instead of Italy and Spain.

In the indigenous Nahuatl language, chihuahua means “between two waters,” as it lies at the convergence of the Chuisar and Sacramento rivers. I explored its colonial center, museums and churches, and joined locals eating, drinking, and dancing as we waited for a desert sunset at the Plaza de Armas.

Surrounded by mountains, the multifaceted metropolis is deep in Mexican history. The old city was founded in 1709 by Don Antonio Deza y Ulloa. It is surrounded by beautiful colonial architecture, including the Spanish Baroque-style Cathedral of Chihuahua; construction began in 1725 but wasn’t completed until 1792. The captivating 19th-century Government Palace is also located in the city’s heart. The Casa Chihuahua Heritage Center in the former Federal Palace contains a shrine to Miguel Hidalgo, known as the Father of the Mexican State.



Perhaps the most popular tourist site is the Historical Museum of the Mexican Revolution in the former home of the iconic General Francisco (Pancho) Villa. The notorious revolutionary leader took a liking to the property, purchased it in 1911, and maintained it as a residence named “Quinta Luz” after his wife, Doña Luz Corral. Today, a personal museum of Villa’s intense life includes his office, paintings, rifles, and a bullet-ridden 1915 Dodge 30-35.

Outside the city

The “state spirit” of Chihuahua is sotol, a beverage made not from agave, like tequila and mezcal, but from the desert shrub Dasylirion wheeleri, or desert spoon. I learned about the bulbous plant — which bears a striking resemblance to the onion or garlic — during a visit to the Oro de Coyame distillery in Aldama, outside Chihuahua City. Already 12 years old before its harvest, it produces a 35 to 55-grade alcohol, with smokey notes similar to mezcal.

One of Mexico’s lesser-known cultures is that of the Mennonites. The Mennonite Museum in Cuautemoc, two hours’ drive north of Chihuahua city, replicates a typical home of this Christian denomination, which settled here between the First and Second World Wars. Escaping persecution in Russia, the Mennonites traveled from Europe to the Great Plains of Canada and the United States in the late 1800s, then continued south into Chihuahua around 1920. This century-old site displays many items from Russia, Germany and Holland, including children’s toys, work and dress clothes, sewing machines, buggies and farming tools. Today there are an estimated 110,000 Mennonites in Mexico, with more than half of them in Chihuahua.

The Copper Canyon

The gateway town to the Copper Canyon is Creel. Life runs at a snail’s pace in this most visited station on the Chihuahua-Pacific railway route. Along the main street, numerous shops sell crafts from the native Tarahumara people, including palm baskets, drums, bracelets and earrings, belts, bows, and even violins.

Lodging options are highlighted by the Hotel

El Mirador. It’s a spectacular splurge but well worth it. Perched on a cliffside overhanging the canyon, the Mirador features 70 rustic rooms and suites, all with wood-beamed ceilings and fireplaces, and a balcony restaurant that serves delicious three-course menus. I left my curtains open to be awakened by a multi-colored sunrise.

Not surprisingly, adventure tourism is big here. Outfitters lead hiking excursions into the ravines, horseback riding, mountain biking, climbing and rappelling. My time was limited, but I enjoyed visiting the Copper Canyon Adventure Park, which claims its Ziprider is the longest zipline in the world. At 2,554 meters (8,379 feet) long, incorporating two suspension bridges and a vertical drop of 250 meters (820 feet), it is certainly daunting. A series of seven rides crisscross the canyon at speeds of up to 80 miles per hour. Many visitors consider it a sufficient thrill to ride a 60-passenger cable car over a section of the canyon with sweeping views. The park also has a climbing wall, a mini-golf course, a restaurant, and a bar with a glass floor.

Other highlights include the wildly wind-sculpted Valley of the Monks, Frogs and Mushrooms, peculiar natural formations which manifest in unique figures. Arareko Lake is enjoyed for its crystal-clear water reflecting the landscape of a pine-oak forest. The native people offer rental cabins and row boats for hire. The Jesuit Mission of San Ignacio de Arareko dates from the 17th century.

El Chepe Express

I find solace in train travel. It gives an entirely new perspective on your surroundings. The 9½-hour El Chepe Express, from Creel to the Pacific in Los Mochis, carries 350 to 400 passengers a day in one of the world’s most spectacular railway excursions. A marvel in engineering, the journey cuts through tunnels, bridges, waterfalls, mountains, diverse vegetation, canyons and the Raramuri valley. Like plane travel, El Chepe has three classes of service: first-class (including a meal), executive and tourist class. Your itinerary allows three stopovers, the length of each of which you must plan in advance. ■

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Jordan Offers Colorful Slices of the Middle East

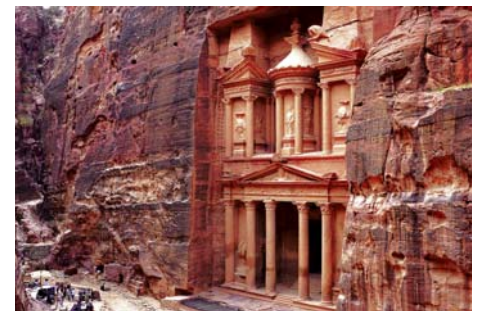
by Randy Mink

Sometimes it's the simple things you remember most. One of the fondest memories of my recent small-group trip to Jordan with Goway Travel was an impromptu picnic lunch at a little clifftop park in Wadi Musa, a scrappy town clinging to hills outside the ruins of Petra, the country's most famous tourist attraction.

On the way to the unassuming roadside park, our driver—named Aladdin—let off our guide, Michel Safar, who ran into Jupiter Falafel while we waited in the mini bus. He brought out grease-stained sacks of piping-hot falafel—those tasty deep-fried balls of ground chickpeas—along with drinks, plastic tubs of hummus and fluffy pita bread straight

from the oven. The order also included shawarma, the Middle Eastern street food standby of meat and chopped vegetables wrapped in pita.

There we were, enjoying a typical Jordanian lunch while feasting on panoramas of the rumpled, wind-eroded mountains that cloak



the ancient city of Petra, where we had spent the morning. Stray cats eager for food scraps kept us company. A peaceful setting indeed.

Tourists Feel Safe and Secure in Jordan

In a region of the world rife with conflict, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan itself has been an oasis of calm and stability for decades. During our six-night trip, we felt safe and rarely brought up the Israel-Hamas war. Watching reports on my hotel TV in Jordan, I didn't feel any closer to the fighting in Gaza than I did watching the news at home, despite our obvious proximity to the Israel border.

To no one's surprise, tourism to the Middle East is suffering. In many cases we had hotel and tourist restaurants to ourselves. At high-way rest stops, our bus often was alone in the parking lot.

Toronto-based Goway Travel and other tour operators are still offering trips to the region, often combining Jordan with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other countries. In dreaming about your next international trip, don't automatically dismiss this fascinating part of the world. It's a captivating mix of Arab culture, mesmerizing desert scenery and world-class archaeological sites.

"Jordan is an ideal destination for globetrotters who seek culture, history and hospitality," says Moira Smith, vice president, Africa and Asia, Goway Travel. "Despite the tourism slowdown, Jordan is safe, open and welcoming. It is a great time to visit with fewer crowds."

Like neighboring Israel, Jordan is compact, so the main tourist sites are not more than a few hours apart. The infrastructure is excellent, hotels are up to Western standards and the Jordanian people are among the most hospitable anywhere. English is widely understood, and many signs are in both English and Arabic.

These are some of the trip highlights:

Petra: A World Wonder

Petra, in southern Jordan, ranks among the greatest monuments of antiquity. Hidden for centuries from prying eyes, the "lost city" was known only to nomadic Bedouin tribes until

discovered in 1812 by a young Swiss explorer. Carved from reddish sandstone outcroppings tucked within a series of rugged gorges, Petra—particularly the towering Hellenistic facade of the Treasury—commonly appears on travel posters and guidebook covers. The Rose Red City, as it's called, is the "rock" star of Jordan tourism.

Before the Romans took Petra in 106 A.D., it was the capital of the Nabataeans, an industrious Arab people who traded in silk, spices, frankincense and myrrh. Clambering up stony trails or leisurely walking the valley floor, tourists encounter cave-like tombs, an amphitheater, and remains of temples and a Byzantine church.

Movie goers recognize the iconic Treasury from the final sequence in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Outside Petra's gates, shops with names like *Indiana Jones Super Market* peddle Indiana Jones hats and whips, along with Nabataean-style pottery, colorful caftans and other souvenirs.

It's about a 20-minute walk from Petra's entrance gate to the Siq, a chasm that leads to the Treasury. Upon your emergence from the shadowy, sheer-sided passageway, the sight of the sun-splashed masterpiece is simply magical. Decorated with Corinthian columns, friezes and figures sculpted from the cliff face, the Treasury (really a tomb) is crowned by a funerary urn, which, according to local legend, contains a pharaoh's treasure.

Wadi Rum: Romancing the Desert Sands

South of Petra, another Hollywood classic, *Lawrence of Arabia*, was partly filmed in Wadi Rum, a vast desert area with rippling expanses of deep-pink sand interrupted by craggy monoliths. British Colonel T.E. Lawrence and King Faisal based their headquarters there during the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Turks in World War I. The dreamy, surreal landscape continues to color my best memories of Jordan.

Splitting up into 4x4 vehicles with seating in the truck bed, our Goway group enjoyed a two-hour ride through the sand, making stops to examine petroglyphs, see camels, have tea in a Bedouin-style tent and hike up one of the crags. Visitors also can opt for a guided camel trek.



At night we bedded down in relative luxury at Sun City, one of several Wadi Rum tourist encampments equipped with modern conveniences. Cabins, built on plank platforms and covered in fabric resembling Bedouin goat-hair tents, feature a comfortable bed and a bathroom with flush toilet and shower. In the dining hall, a geodesic-domed building, we filled our plates at a dinner buffet offering slow-cooked lamb and chicken, fried fish, roasted potatoes, rice, salads, breads, and a dessert table with Middle Eastern pastries.

Life is Good at the Dead Sea

After touring archaeological sites and Christian shrines heavy on history, tourists welcome the chance to relax at one of the deluxe resorts fronting the Dead Sea's eastern shore. At 1,312 feet below sea level, the super-salty body of water (actually a lake) is the lowest spot on earth.

Goway accommodated us in the 5-star Movenpick Resort & Spa Dead Sea, perhaps the most beautiful hotel in the whole country. The main building, a stunning example of desert castle-style architecture, is opulently furnished with antiques, artwork and Arabic motifs. Many of the 358 guest rooms are housed in a two-story village complex lushly landscaped with palms, bougainvillea, citrus and olive trees, waterfalls and fountains.

Nothing lives in the Dead Sea because it's 10 times saltier than the ocean. The high mineral content makes it virtually impossible to sink, so you can pose for a picture in the buoyant water while effortlessly floating on your back. Just don't get water in your eyes—it will be sheer agony.

see following page





A therapeutic mud bath is the other must-do. From pots of oily black mud gathered from the sea floor, dig in and slather your wet body, face included, with mud. Wait 15 minutes for it to dry a bit, then go into the water and wash it off—but not before having your picture taken. Afterwards your skin will feel smooth, tingly and refreshed. Dead Sea resorts offer a variety of spa treatments and therapies using products derived from the briny water.

Going Back to Roman Times at Jerash

The extensive archaeological site of Jerash, less than an hour north of the capital city of Amman, is one of the best-preserved Greco-Roman provincial towns in the world. Landmarks include Hadrian's Arch, built in 129 A.D. to commemorate the visit of Roman Emperor Hadrian; the Temples of Zeus and Artemis; Byzantine churches; two theaters; and the Hippodrome, an arena that hosted chariot races and other sports. On the colonnaded flagstone street, where some of the original 500 columns have been reassembled, we walked on ruts made by chariot wheels.

Amman Bubbles With Excitement

More than one-third of Jordan's people live in this dynamic city of four million, a metropolis of blocky white limestone buildings sprawled across 20-some hills. Nicknamed the White City, it is the best place in Jordan to immerse yourself in Middle Eastern culture.

Though my favorite experiences were sampling street life in the Old City's traditional souks, I liked being based in the fashionable Shmeisani district, away from the fray. Our Goway group stayed at the 66-room Al Qasr Metropole Hotel on a leafy residential street a short walk from the Hilton, Westin and other

familiar brands. We could shop in the neighborhood's state-of-the-art Carrefours supermarket and quash any feelings of homesickness at places like McDonald's, Starbucks and KFC.

The congested shopping streets of the Old City, or downtown, huddle below the Citadel, an open-air museum that preserves ruins dating back to Amman's beginnings. Logically, our city sightseeing started at this quiet hilltop sanctuary, which offered great views as we drifted between the Temple of Hercules, Byzantine church, Umayyad Palace complex and Jordan Archaeological Museum. After the Citadel, we descended the hill and visited the magnificent Roman Theatre, built in the second century when Amman was the Roman city of Philadelphia.

Shopping and Dining in the Old City

Stacked with merchandise from floor to ceiling and festooned with goods dangling above the sidewalk, downtown's hole-in-the-wall shops deal in everything from cheap shoes to span-gled "belly dancing" outfits.

Merchants purvey mosaic artwork, gold and silver jewelry, handwoven rugs and cushions, embroidered folk dresses and the red-and-white-checked headdress (keffiyeh) commonly worn by men in Jordan and other parts of the Arab world. There are shiny brass tea sets, Bedouin robes and daggers, and artistically designed glass vessels filled with colored sand depicting desert scenes complete with camels.

Food vendors attend to mounds of tomatoes, dates, figs and dried apricots. Open sacks brim with teas, spices and nuts. Baskets and crates hold oranges, papayas and pomegranates.

For lunch downtown, the place to go is Hashem, Amman's most famous falafel restaurant. Besides dipping our pita bread and crispy balls of falafel in a creamy hummus infused with olive oil and lemon juice, we enjoyed the french fries and vegetable plate that come with a standard order.

For dessert, we stopped at Habibah, a tiny shop turning out fresh hot knafeh, a filo-crust-ed sweet cheese soaked in honey and topped

with pistachio bits, eaten with a plastic spoon from a paper plate. We found space to sit outside the bakery, mingling with the locals savoring this Middle Eastern treat.

On the Road

For me, half the fun of visiting Jordan was looking out the bus window at the passing parade of Middle Eastern life. One morning we might see shepherds with a flock of sheep or boys leading a herd of camels. In godforsaken desert settings we drove by simple homes with laundry drying on rooftop clotheslines and donkeys or goats in the yard. Olive trees dotted many of the desolate landscapes.

In the fertile Jordan River Valley, near the Dead Sea, we passed groves of date palms and citrus trees, banana plantations, and greenhouses growing tomatoes. Passing through small villages, I had the urge to hop out and take pictures of the roadside vendors hawking potatoes, oranges, and giant cabbages and cauliflowers from their trucks. In some towns it seemed as if the businesses were mainly automotive garages with piles of tires out front.

Goway Delivers a Quality Experience

I couldn't have been happier with the arrangements made by Amman-based Karma House, Goway Travel's partner on the ground in Jordan. Our driver, our guide and the meet-and-greet staffers who eased us through the Amman airport were real pros and obviously enjoyed showing us their country. Thanks to the seamless arrangements, everything went smoothly, with no bumps in the road.

Goway customizes trips to more than 100 destinations around the globe. Suggested Jordan itineraries include the 5-day "Taste of Jordan: Dead Sea, Petra, Wadi Rum & More," 6-day "Authentic Jordan" and new 9-day "Jordan Odyssey." Also new: the 12-day "Best of Jordan and Saudi Arabia." For those with three weeks to spare, there is the 20-day "Ancient Wonders of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia."

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