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Welcome to World Traveler



In this issue, we start our worldwide tour in amazing Thailand as we explore the four corners of this warm, friendly and inviting country before heading to Vietnam for 'An Aqua Expedition on The Mekong'. While there we visit the wonderful ancient town of Hoi An. Continuing in Asia, we venture to Indonesia to discover Java's colourful city Jodipan and see why it is also called 'Rainbow Village'. Next we head to China to see the 'Huangshan Gems' in Xidi and Hongcun and explore why they 'Attract Artists and Poets'. Our final Asian destination is way far to the east as we take a cruise aboard the beautiful Seabourn Ovation and find adventures around the Arabian Peninsula.

So close to Europe, we head to the historic, beautiful and ever popular city of Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. We then head to the nearby country of Hungary to sail with Avalon's newest ship the 'Envision' on the mighty Danube River. To the east we go to its neighbour and find 'Time Stands Still in Chernobyl' and how this place is becoming a growing tourist destination. In Italy, we participate in the annual cycling race all the

while discovering magnificent cities, charming towns, quaint villages and the beautiful countryside. Yet another cruise in Europe, this one with 'Barge Lady Cruises' and find it is a wonderful way of seeing Europe on an intimate and slow moving barge. Finally, we find ourselves in Denmark and experience the best things to do in Copenhagen.

To the new world we go, starting in New York where we find out why "Feinstein's/54 Below" is Broadway's Premiere Supper Club. Our final cruise of this worldwide tour finds us on the incredible Harmony of the Seas and find out why it is 'A cruise ship unlike others'. While in the Caribbean we find ourselves in Cuba to 'Celebrating Havana's 500th!' birthday and then venture to the wonderful Viñales Valley to see why it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. In Cancun, we indulge in the annual fun festival of the 'Day of the Dead' before we end of our tour by tasting some of the best culinary delights in Las Vegas.

Happy travels!



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

THIS IS EGO

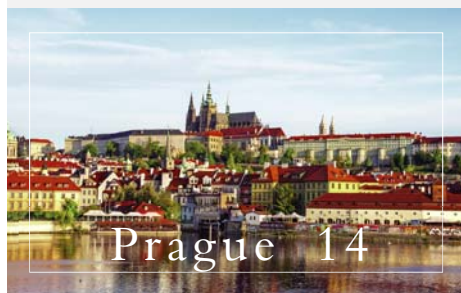


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Destinations



(short informative travel pieces)

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



Captivating Thailand

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

How could I have missed Thailand for so long? 61st country on my travel list and within days it immediately jumped to one of my top favourites. Two weeks might sound like enough time to see and experience this land, but I found that I have barely started discovering amazing Thailand instead.

This tour would only wet my whistle. I would get glimpses of the immense possibilities that can be had here. In this journey, we would visit the main and well visited destinations: Bangkok, Pattaya, Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Phuket. These places are enough to bring travelers back for a lifetime but there is so much more still to be discovered.

Off and running

Day one, jet-lagged and all we set out to see was a small part of what makes this worldly city so dynamic. The morning heat, humidity and strong rays of the sun were exhausting. So what to do? We would head on a boat ride on the Chao Phraya River, also known as the 'River of Kings'. To the locals, boat travel is like a taxi ride and these boats with car size out board motors moved with thundering sounds and high speeds! The breeze was surely welcome and the sites were exciting as we would get an amazing seaside view of Bangkok.

Our stops would include two breathtaking temples, the fascinating Royal Barge Museum, the Taling Chan floating market, and a cruise on the quite residential 'klongs' (canals).

Temple of Dawn

Shimmering in the daylight and sparkling by night, the Wat Arun is mesmerizing and I stood in the direct sun, speechless and breathless. Aside from the view, the architecture is something to behold, with intricate designs and minute details that could keep a tourist looking around for hours.

The temple is considered one of the most beautiful temples in Thailand, and if not the world. The spire of the temple is one of Bangkok's most famous landmarks and is 70 metres high and decorated with tiny pieces of coloured glass and porcelain in special patterns. This temple would only be the start of many-many more outstanding sights we would visit in the following weeks.



Royal Barges

This museum is unlike any other I have visited. Lots of artwork but no Picasso. Instead, it featured incredible barges made of fine teak wood and covered with gold leaf. This was surely for royalty. On this day all the most important ships were under the roofed dock and like a kid I would inspect them one by one.

The Krabi Prab Muang Marn Barge is a sight to see, with its figurehead of an uncrowned monkey warrior with white body, and the entire thing is decorated with golden lacquer and glass. The Asura Vayuphak Barge also has some details that are outstanding and so opulent. The figurehead, an ogre-faced bird, is amazing, with face, hands and feet in a deep indigo, the front is purple, and the back is green. The hull is black and is quite imposing.

Floating market

The most well-known floating market that people would see in travel shows was an hour away, but the Bangkok Taling Chan floating market was a great place to visit and see how the locals purchase delicacies. Interacting with the friendly merchants was a delight and they were more than happy to be photographed while going on with their daily routines.

The market cannot be missed, as all the wooden boats moored along the riverbank form an intricate maze filled with odors and sights to whet every appetite. There were huge prawns, blue crabs and fish, as well as some others preparing local favourite Som Tum.

By midday the restaurants are full and most tables in the central area are occupied, but you can take the food with you or patient and wait for a table. Either option is great as you are eating delicious and freshly made food!

Wat Suthat

An unbelievable temple, the Wat Suhat was so impressive and I was struck by the beauty of the complex and the many statues and artwork that adorned this historic Buddhist shrine. It was originally built to house a huge 25-foot tall Buddha statue, and is surrounded on the outer wall with more than 150 gilded Buddha images.

The statues are coupled with the doors to the cloister in the middle of each of the four walls,

which are also gilded with quite colorful scenes from the Ramakien. It was a great visit and the opulence of these landmarks continued.

Pattaya

In contrast to the hustle and bustle of Bangkok, Pattaya is better known as a vacation destination. Situated by the sea, it is a popular place for its beaches, entertainment and now its major attractions.

Khao Chi Chan Buddha Mountain

You will see the buses before you see the mountain. That says it all. This mountain is a popular attraction by foreigners. Of all the things I have seen, this one really ranks up there. Surrounded by an exceptional natural beauty, this magnificent monument takes your breath away. Using a laser, the figure of Buddha was drawn onto the side of Khao Chi Chan, then gold was used to fill in the sculpture. Awe inspiring.

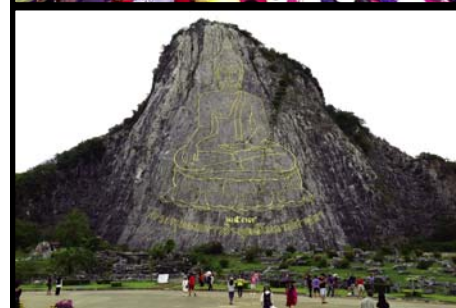
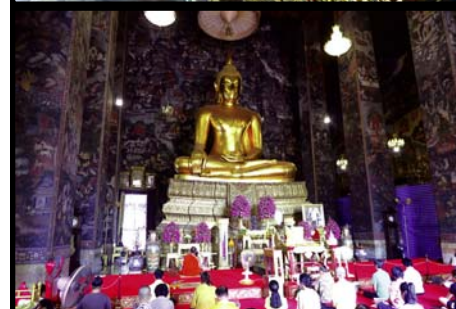
Sanctuary of Truth

Like a scene from Game of Thrones, this all wood building captivates you from first glance. As we stood on top of a hill, and while making our way down, we would continuously take pictures. Truly a unique structure, it calls to you to get closer and finally come inside.

The building is 105 meters high, covering a vast area and is filled with contemporary Visionary art based on traditional religious themes. Initiated by Thai businessman Lek Viriyaphan in 1981, his idea was simple - to show that all religions lead to the only one Truth. Decoration in the sanctuary highlights religious philosophies and teaches people to avoid evil intentions and pursue good deeds in their lives

Bang Lamung Street

This street sure has a lot of energy. With scantily dressed ladies and go-go bars it could be mistaken for being seedy, but people of all ages and kinds come here for meals and drinks. We would visit an open air bar with a live band. The Thai players banged out amazing western music and were a delight with a beer or two. With many food options, there is something for everyone. Spicy, salty, seafood and steak – enjoy the meal and stay for the people watching. Walking here is a must for any true world traveler. >>>





Tiffany's Show Pattaya

This show is a page right of Vegas, but the twist is the performers were all men in drag. This amazing polished and glitzy show was well choreographed, directed, with plenty of song and dance and fun for all. To my amazement, the drag queens would immediately exit the show hall and greet the guests outside for handshakes and photographs. Equally amazing, these boys looked, spoke and acted just like women, and they even have a name – the legendary Lady Boys. These fascinating and artistic performers captivate audiences with their flawless female impersonations. This show offers their audiences an evening of polished entertainment for the whole family.

Chiang Rai

Our next point of discovery would bring us way up north, a stone's throw from Laos and Myanmar, here would visit the city known for the amazing White, Black and Blue temples. Each is a unique location and the temples are a must see, but there are other activities that beckon a visitor as well. The city hosts a Night Bazaar that offers locals and visitors shopping and food by night.

Their Jazz Festival is also becoming a destination for music lovers. For those who like boats, and a riverside that remains mostly undeveloped, tourists can enjoy the beauty of the Mae Kok, by hiring a long-tail boat to take in the scenery along the two riverbanks.

Night Bazaar

This is no ordinary night market, for kilometers on both sides of a busy street merchants sell just about anything you could carry in a hand bag. To my dismay, I had forgotten all my underwear and socks in the last hotel, but within minutes I replenished my stock to last me the rest of the trip. The best parts of it all were the helpful smiling merchants that made the shopping under the stars so pleasurable and fun.



White Temple

The Wat Rong Khun (White Temple) brilliantly stood out in the morning sun, with its unique 'Kanok' architecture. Although you could not tell, this relatively new construction is already a major draw in Chiang Rai. I was humbled by its grandeur. The white plaster exteriors represent the purity of Buddha with the glass symbolizing his wisdom. The building is actually a contemporary, albeit unconventional, art exhibit in the style of a Buddhist temple.

Black House

Unmistakably, Baan dum (Black House) is more of a museum than a temple and a master piece of the artist Tawan Daschanee. Visitors will marvel at the extravagant artwork, buildings and grounds.

Now it is part art studio, part museum, part home, Baan Dam, is an eclectic mix of traditional northern Thai buildings mixed with some outlandish modern designs in a thought-provoking combination of surreal and the sombre. Though not for everyone, it is worth a visit.

Blue temple

This structure it is a recent temple and has become a hot spot for both locals and tourists. In contrast to the White and Black temples, filled with shock, awe and some disturbing elements, the Blue Temple is much more of a calm, reflective space. Both the artwork and the structure have a contemporary and modern feel, and its vibrant sapphire blue color has a mesmerizing effect. You can easily spend hours looking at the intricate paintings all over the ceiling and walls.

Golden Triangle and Hall of Opium

We reached the infamous Golden Triangle that is at the cross-roads of Thailand, Burma and Laos. This area is best known for the illicit opium trade and from up on a hill we would get a view of three countries separated by two



ivers and a peninsula. I was amazed, I had finally seen the place of what was to me a fictional area.

For a special history lesson, visiting the Hall of Opium takes visitors down the dark road of opium. Inside the space is a combination of multimedia and exhibition aimed at educating people about opium, and offers a pretty unflinching look at the history of the Golden Triangle, the origin of opium, the opium war, the battle against opium and poppy growing, as well as rehabilitation of the people affected.

Chiang Mai

If this tour of discovery wasn't not fascinating enough, the city and region of Chiang Mai would prove amongst the best of the best this trip had to offer. Here would visit and befriend Elephants, engage in the morning rituals with two hundred Buddhist monks and visit one of the most spectacular monasteries I have ever had the privilege of visiting.

Gentle Giants

A half day spent at the Patara Elephant Farm would prove to be not only humbling but also enlightening. As we first reached the camp, we would encounter two young calves; one only days old nursing on her mother. In our time here, we would learn about the behaviours of these gentle giants and the struggles of the staff to protect their natural habitat. We would thoroughly immerse ourselves by feeding them bananas, walk with them to the waterfalls, giving them refreshing baths and finally ride on them bareback. Sadly, the visit ended far too soon and we would have to say goodbye to our new Thai friends.

Daily Alms collection

Waking up at the brake of dawn is not something I usually do, but I was in Thailand and this day we would start by meeting the monks for the daily alms. I was astounded by the





sheer numbers. Some two hundred monks, most of them young and dressed in traditional saffron coloured robes would come down from their monasteries, form lines and very quietly accept rice and other foods for their one and only daily meal. Truly another unique spiritual experience!

Wat Phra That Doi Suthep

Still in the early hours of the morning, with very few tourists, we would almost have this mountain top complex to ourselves. From here, we would have a wonderful panoramic view of the whole city. The historic temples and monastery were magnificent sites to behold. I knew once again I was experiencing some of the best this exotic country had to offer. I was not only a world away from home in distance; I was a world away in culture and philosophy. Too our delight we would join in as a priest held ceremonial prayer and blessed all those in his shrine.

Considered one of the most sacred temples in the country, visitors can walk up the 309 steps as an offering, or take a tram. However you get there, remember to remove your shoes upon entering.

The perfect tea

Being a tea lover, I would look forward to our visit to the Monsoon Tea house. The founder/owner and Swedish expat was on a mission to produce the best possible tea, but that was not the major goal, as he wanted to collect teas from wild trees. Yes, tea is from a tree and not a bush he explained, and Thailand is the origin of these plants and the gift to the world. Most commercial teas come from a plantation where the forest is cut down to make way for endless rows of low lying plants. Instead Monsoon only sells forest grown tea that is in harmony with its surrounding. This whole process means the tea is in limited quantities and comes from far out of the way places. The result: these teas are organic,



forest friendly and simply put, the best tea I have ever tasted. So good that they are found in high-end hotels and restaurants. My only discomfort with this whole affair is I only bought two bags to bring home and once finished will have to travel back to Thailand to purchase more.

Oasis Spa

A busy day in an already charged tour no doubt takes a toll on the body and requires the magical hands of a masseuse to sooth the body and relax the mind. All through this trip I would take every opportunity of getting one and the price was always right. Anywhere from simple leg and shoulder message to full body treatments, I was in the perfect country for this. Having never had a Thai massage, I learnt quickly it was not the most relaxing but was somewhat like a wrestling match. The end result is the knots and muscle strains would be worked out and I would have soreness but also felt problems were corrected. Our visit to the Oasis Spa would prove to be one of the best places to rejuvenate tired muscle. My two-hour session was heavenly. Their location, in a beautiful building with modern facilities, sweet smelling perfumed air, water fountains and relaxing hot tea set the stage for a memorable and lasting experience.

Phuket

The visit to Chiang Mai heightened the senses and I figured the rest of the trip would be to slowly chill out. This is partly true. Phuket is known for just that. Our last few days would bring us some R&R at the wonderful Anantara Layan Phuket Resort, some lively entertainment in the ever popular Patong beach district and an unforgettable catamaran ride through the Andaman Islands.

Anchors away

Life just could not get any better, or so I thought. Then we embarked on a brand new one million dollar luxury catamaran and



sailed away through pristine waters. The bright blue sky, hot, humid air cooled by a sea breeze, fresh and delicious sea food, refreshing water sports all with the back drop of the hidden gems in the Andaman Islands made this an epic experience! The scenery was breathtaking, miles upon miles of wonderful rock formations jolting out of the waters, golden secluded beaches. So exotic was this region that they filmed a James Bond movie here and thus we visited the islands by that same name.

Hotels

Thailand's tourist infrastructure is well set up and has hotels to meet every budget. Our stays in the many different hotels and regions were amongst some of the best hotels in Thailand. From the amazing and well-appointed high-rises in Bangkok to charming and historic boutique hotels to opulent beach side resorts, we were pampered all the way. See our Thai hotel reviews on pages 58 and 59 of this issue.

Thai Cuisine

If you are a fan of the fast food versions of Thai food, you will be absolutely blown away by the real thing. Usually spicy, always good, Thai cuisine is also always fresh, healthy and diverse. One can always find something new to taste. Rice, noodles and seafood are staples and for food lovers, make sure that you enjoy the national treasures, including Guay Teow (Noodle Soup)

Tom Yum Goong (Spicy Shrimp Soup), Som Tam (Spicy Green Papaya Salad) and Yam Pla Dook Foo (Fried Catfish with Green Mango Salad). You will never be the same.

Thailand is truly one of a kind! You may find similarities here and there in other countries but nothing can bring them all together like this extremely friendly, culturally rich and diverse mystical land. ■

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Celebrating Havana's 500th!

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

It's been 500 years since the city, originally known as San Cristobal de La Habana, was founded by the Spanish on November 16, 1519. On a recent visit, equipped with a camera, a pair of good walking shoes, a very minimal knowledge of Spanish and lots of energy, I set out to get lost on the main streets, back streets, Plazas and markets that make the historic core of this photogenic city so intriguing, mesmerizing, captivating and fun. The goal was to reacquaint myself with Havana after an absence of five years, as well as see for myself how the city was preparing for the big birthday bash.

No matter how hard you try, it's pretty hard to get lost in Havana. The Atlantic Ocean forms the northern border of the city, and the Malecón, the ocean-side esplanade, roadway and seawall, stretches along the coast for 8 km (5 miles) from the mouth of Havana harbour to the western district of Vedado. Even when I got turned around on tiny side streets I would ask directions in English and a smiling response in Spanish would follow, often with the person walking, chatting and laughing with me for a block or two to set me back on the right course.

But I also came to the realization that trying to get lost in Havana can actually become pleasantly addictive. I discovered vibrant fruit and vegetable markets sporting colorful paintings on the walls of Cuban heroes such as Camilo Cienfuegos and Che Guevara. I walked by two rough-looking butchers, gruffly cutting and sorting meat in an open air stall. I hesitated before asking if it was alright to take a photo but they stopped, smiled and told me to go ahead. I wandered into small art galleries and chatted with the owners about the local artists they were showcasing. I passed by





street parking lots filled with shiny classic cars from the 1940's and 1950's, and I roamed through residential streets adorned with imaginative street art.

And just about everywhere there were signs indicating that the restoration of a nearby building was part of a city renaissance, initiated by the occasion of Havana's 500th birthday. In fact, at FITCuba, the annual tourism conference that took place in Havana this year, Manuel Marrero Cruz, the Minister of Tourism enthusiastically declared that, "The 500th Anniversary of Havana is no longer November 16. It's every day of 2019", and we learned that some 4500 projects fall under the umbrella of the big birthday celebration.

The person responsible, not only for re-invigorating the city and tourism but also for re-energizing the inhabitants, the Habaneros, is Eusebio Leal, the City Historian and visionary. He was quoted as saying, "It's important for people to not just see Cuba as a country of

beaches and palm trees. Behind the beautiful image of a tropical paradise, there is a rich cultural history, which should be portrayed to visitors". But Leal didn't want to create sterile city blocks of restored buildings. His goal was to create a robust relationship between the goal of preserving culture and history, and the daily lives of residents who work, shop, play, and raise their families in the city. Leal noted the pride that Habaneros were feeling toward the restoration; "Almost like magic, there has been a rebirth of historic Havana together with activities for children, youth and adults".

On the Malecón, new modern structures have been built alongside buildings, some over 100 years old that have been ravaged by humans, time and weather. And as part of the 500th Anniversary, visitors can interact with fascinating works of art, originally installed for the 13th Havana Biennial Art Exhibition. Now the Malecón experience includes crashing waves, memorable sunsets and rows of fishermen standing on the seawall as well as Roberto Fabelo's sculpture of the 'Turtle Man', called "Put a Good Face on it", Xavier Mascaro's series of powerful iron figures, called "Guardians", Rafael Miranda San Juan's delicate "Iron Statue of a Woman's Head and Shoulders", along with many more paintings, sculptures, sketches and exhibits that instill a sense of wonder and enhance the appreciation of Havana's history, culture, creativity and beauty.

Leaving the Malecón, Paseo del Prado passes right through art exhibits and alongside street murals. This tree-lined promenade is in the middle of a boulevard with stunning buildings from the early 20th century on either side with some notable modern exceptions. The Hotel Biscuit, built in 1911 no longer exists, but in its place is the new 5 star Iberostar Packard Hotel with a very classy retro-themed façade and interior.

The promenade continues to Central Park, home to the historic Hotel Inglaterra, which is next to the lavish, neo-Baroque architecture of the Gran Teatro de la Habana, which in turn sits beside El Capitolio, the Cuban legislative building. Across the street is the new 5 star Manzana Kempinski Hotel, one of the 500th Anniversary projects, occupying a fully restored building from 1917. And next door is Iberostar's 5 star Parque Central Hotel with

the Rooftop pool and bar also serving as possibly the best vantage point in the city to take in the history and beauty of the Central Park area.

The dome of El Capitolio resembles the U.S. Capital in Washington D.C. but that's where the similarities end. The two bronze doors of the building relate the history of Cuba and under the dome is the impressive Statue of the Republic, sculpted by Angelo Zanelli. It appears as a young woman dressed in a tunic with a helmet, shield and lance, ready to defend the people's right to establish their own government. It's the 3rd largest bronze statue in the world at 17 meters (56 feet) high and weighing 49 tons. The plan is to unveil the restored statue for the 500th Anniversary.

Walking around Havana is a safe experience. Certainly when Renaldo Garcia Zapata, the President of the Government of Havana spoke at the tourism conference, he began by talking about safety in light of the festivities planned throughout the city in the months ahead. Zapata also emphasized the charm of the city's green parks and the five historic Plazas. He noted that Plaza Vieja, with its eclectic mix of buildings and architecture from centuries past, was actually the Number One visitor attraction in all of Cuba.

On our last evening, we went to see the show at the famous Tropicana Club. For fans of the "I Love Lucy" television show, this is Ricky Ricardo's club, gone wild. The dancing, music and extravagant costumes are amazing and seemingly emphasize that you're in a very special destination like no other.

When I asked a millennial-aged store keeper what Havana's birthday meant to him, he said "we want to show that we're an active part of this world and that the world is welcome to come and celebrate with us".

Havana's 500th birthday has been a catalyst in reinvigorating the city and re-energizing the spirit of its residents, and of tourism in general. This birthday is not the end of an era, but the beginning of making this already amazing city – and country- even more of a must-see destination. ■

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Prague the Great!

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

This would be my third time in the Czech Republic in three different decades, and it would prove to be the best visit yet. I would start and end my week of discovery in Prague and for the first time venture out to visit the wonderful countryside and smaller Czech cities. In this first of two articles, we will focus on this proud and handsome city.

Backpacking in the eighties, I would just stay in Prague, which had a very different feel and vibe, and there was not much to speak about. It was the era of socialism, the city looked

grey even when the sun shined, with not much emphasis placed on tourism and there did not seem to have a pulse. The citizens were not nearly as open and outgoing as today, so much so that I cut my visit short.

I would return in 2007, this time with my family and in stark contrast, Prague was magically transformed and alive. This being my teenage children's first time to Europe, they absolutely loved the experience. We hit the main attractions and historical sites and we all had a memorable trip.

Third time is the charm! I would explore the best of this worldly city has to offer as well as the out of the way and less visited districts.

Vinohrady district

First impressions mean a lot, and from the airport, we would be whisked through this bustling metropolis into an amazing part of the city and to the doors of the beautiful Le Palais Art Hotel Prague.

There are so many details about this 5-star, magnificent mansion. The staff were at our





WT Photo Library

beck and call, and I was most impressed with the wait staff who remembered our favourite nightcap drinks every night. The rooms were immaculate and crisp from the very attentive and top-notch housekeeping team. Although it was a long walk to the central part of Prague, there is close access to public transportation and the surrounding neighbourhood was filled with interesting shops and restaurants.

Our first outing would be a walking visit to the charming and opulent Vinohrady district. In the past, this area had vineyards, but has transformed into an upscale district with Art Deco homes and beautiful parks. There are so many positives and attractive options that it has become a hub for young professionals. We enjoyed the abundance of coffee shops and the Jirak farmers' markets.

Tower Park Prague

This is an unmistakable Prague landmark, as



it is the tallest structure in the city. The city's architecture and uniqueness is on full display from the observation deck. Though we did not stay in the OneRoom Hotel in the tower, we did enjoy a wonderful meal from way up in their high-end restaurant. Truly an unforgettable memory from Prague.

The Art District

Prague has become a significant location for art and culture, and the city has created a myriad of spaces for connoisseurs. The DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, for example, is a repurposed factory building that finds itself in one of Prague's trendiest districts. As a tourist, we could only enjoy a fraction of the DOX's offerings - a fine exhibition of current international and Czech art. There are also many forums to discuss current topics, public events, film screenings, and interactive workshops. A true home of ideas.

The National Gallery is also housed in a repurposed facility. Built in 1928 and originally intended for the organisation of trade fairs, the Trade Fair Palace was the biggest building of its kind in the world back then. We toured their unique collection of Czech and foreign arts.

The Hill

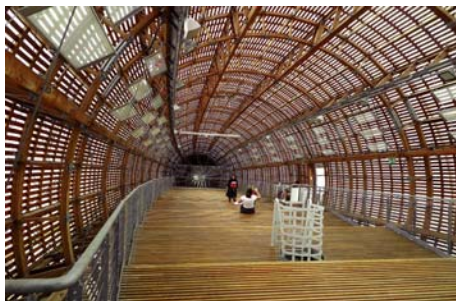
Petrin Hill is the hot spot for local families and visitors as it contains popular tourist attractions and is covered with a beautiful natural setting.

The most eye-catching is the Petřín lookout tower, a 210-foot tall steel-framework tower built in 1891 that slightly resembles Paris' Eiffel Tower. What a treat to see another great view of the city and nearby parks.

The Štefánik's Observatory is an astronomical observatory founded 1928 and named after a famous Slovak astronomer named Milan Rastislav Štefánik. In modern days, the observatory specializes bringing astronomy and related natural sciences to the public. We had a great tour and I learned many new things.

Prague sights

After a wonderful tour of the other parts of the Czech Republic we would finish off in Prague



by visiting the ever popular and most frequented Prague attractions: Our stay would be at a wonderful boutique Hotel Klárov, which was perfectly located within walking distance to the best of Prague. The staff was cheerful and attentive and my suite was clean, comfortable and nicely decorated.

At the Charles Bridge, a seven century old historic bridge that crosses the Vltava river there are 30 baroque statues on it that blends well with the gothic styling of the bridge. It is like a walk through history with the movers and shakers of the area's past. It is impressive.

Prague Castle is one of the largest castles in the world. It was a treat to wander around its courtyards, museums and gardens. You could see bits and pieces of the overwhelming beauty of this seat of Czech kings and presidents for a thousand years. To top it off, there is the immense St. Vitus Cathedral, one of the most beautiful in all of Europe – and that is saying something as I have visited many!

One of my favorite spaces in the entire city is in the main town square, the Astronomical mechanical Clock or Orloj, dates back to 1410. Somewhere around 1490, the calendar dial was added and the clock facade was decorated with gothic sculptures.

Having been fortunate enough to be in Prague two previous times, seeing a modern day renaissance on this visit I could only conclude that this amazing city has come onto its own! Bringing all its past painful struggles, historic treasures, embracing an open market economy and a member of the European Union, Prague is now set for a bright and prosperous future. ■

WWW.CZECHTOURISM.COM



Around The World (in 22 pages)



Hội An, Vietnam - The Ancient Town

by Gregory Caltabanis

Hội An, commonly known as Vietnam's Ancient Town, is located on the central coast of the country and is rife with canals due to its past as a major port-city between the 15th and 19th centuries. The city's rich architecture largely stems from this connection, as reflected by the Japanese Covered Bridge. This bridge was first built in the 1590s by the Japanese community and intended to link Hội An to their Chinese counterparts for trading purposes. The bridge and its original Japanese design remain intact today, and are emblematic of Hội An. All in all, it's well worth a visit.

French and Chinese influence can also be seen in the city via the various colonial buildings and classic temples. In many ways, Hội An is among the most diverse cities in South East Asia and draws upon various cultures as seen in their food, traditions and architecture.

WWW.VIETNAM.TRAVEL



Jodipan, Indonesia Java's Rainbow Village

by Gregory Caltabanis

Travelling through Malang, Indonesia and stumbling upon Jodipan could be quite the experience for any traveller. This riverside village was initially on the point of extinction due to increased levels of crime and sub-standard living conditions. In fact, it was even identified as one of the 11 most run-down villages in the country. A group of students from the Muhammadiyah University of Malang, however, noticed the town's potential and decided it could use some colour.

Collaborating with a group of local painters, the students completely reinvigorated the village and added spice to an otherwise desolate place in the summer of 2016. Today, Jodipan is a touristic hub in Java putting its dark past behind it, supporting the local economy in the process.

Jodipan, itself, is split into two places, one on either side of the Brantas River. The two villages are joined by an iconic yellow bridge overlooking the town. If you hadn't thought of it already, the bridge is prime real estate for all you photo aficionados as both towns are visible from this vantage point.

Inside the painted walls and under the multi-coloured umbrellas, you will find local merchants selling their hand-crafted goods as well as carefully-constructed murals with traditional Javanese figures such as wayang. It's also not uncommon for locals to live there!

WWW.INDONESIA.TRAVEL



CHINA TOURISM INTRODUCES NEW BRAND LOGO

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

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



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SCOTTEVEST PACK WINDBREAKER FOR WOMEN

This line of lightweight travel wear has always been popular with male adventurers, but now there's a 19 Pocket Pack Windbreaker that's more foxy than boxy created specifically for women. It has all the excellent attributes of the originals, but offers a sleeker, more stylish fit and has so many secret stash spots that you'll never need to carry a purse!

Visit: www.scottevest.com





Santa Monica Hooded Dress

KOY RESORT

As a travel lover, I usually shop for practical yet fashionable pieces that I can easily mix and match throughout my trips. One of my favourite pieces that I often bring with me is my Santa Monica Hooded Dress from Koy Resort. The material is so light and soft and the dress is so comfortable. It looks very cute with white sneakers and a cross body bag but I’ve also worn it on the beach after a swim. What I truly admire and support about this brand is how they are passionate about giving back to our planet and people by partnering up with non-profit organizations. Koy Resort is truly your go-to store if you are looking for a conscious brand that offers effortless pieces inspired from travel, exploration, nature, cultures, art and music around the world*.

Visit: www.koyresort.com



MALVADOS SANDALS REVIEW

One of my favourite things about summer is to be able to match my outfits with cute sandals and open toe shoes. In Montreal, hot summer days can easily go up to 40 degrees and wearing anything else on your feet is, according to me, real torture! This year, I stocked up with many different models of Malvados sandals and I was so happy with what I received. Known as “flip flops and sandals that take you everywhere from beach to festival”, they can be worn for any occasion and at any time of the day, either casually or dressed up for a night out. The golden-pink colour of the Icon Azalea reptile (cognac colour) is one of my favourite pair. It’s extremely fashionable and compliments every outfit so perfectly, the colour matches with everything. The Icon Taylor Plush (Juno colour) is by far my favourite pair of sandals. It has the nicest velvet turquoise colour strap and truly is “the life of the party”. Every time I wear them, I get compliments and asked where my sandals are from. Very unique and so comfortable, I will definitely be ordering more soon.

Visit: www.malvados.com

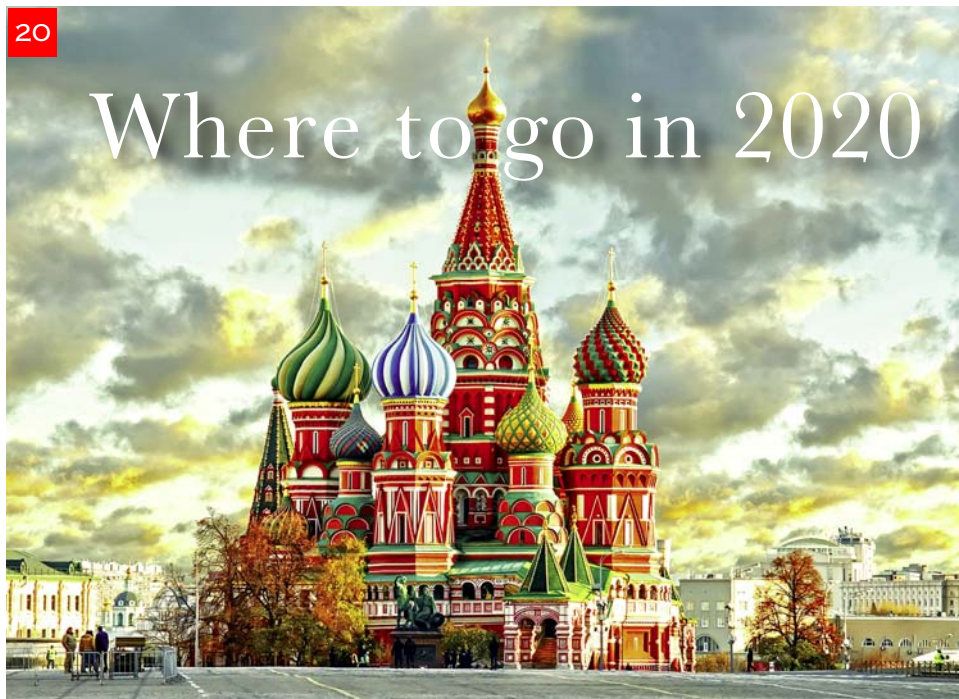


TRAVELPRO

In business, there is a saying that ‘the competition never sleeps’. Well if Travelpro is the competition, they have raised the bar with their Crew VersaPack luggage line. Starting from the bottom up, the eight wheels spin freely in all direction and without any effort this bag just goes, and I mean that if you give it any forward motion it will keep on going on its own. Lightweight, sturdy and sized for the overhead compartment, this expandable beauty has more pockets and compartments than a luxury SUV including a side pocket that accommodates a portable battery charger with its own port in the back. However, la pièce de résistance is the ‘Zip in Organizer,” a removable garment compartment where in a matter of seconds you can add in a section the size of the bag that will keep your shirts, pants and dresses wrinkle free. Also available are laundry organizers and packing cubes to keep things in sections for those on-the-go trips. The conclusion we came to from our latest trip using this amazing carry on is: this is the best piece of luggage we have ever used. Kudos to Travelpro!

Visit: www.travelpro.ca

Where to go in 2020



Each year, Intrepid Group—a collection of small-group adventure travel brands, Intrepid Travel, Peregrine Adventures, Urban Adventures and a not-for-profit, The Intrepid Foundation—collates a list of Where To Go destinations, crafted by its product managers and on-the-ground staff in more than 40 global offices. In 2020, its list of must-see destinations is heavily influenced by social and political interest, which piques travellers' curiosity, plus an increased interest in the world's undiscovered regions. According to the business, expect to see significant growth in countries that have a tie to American politics as the country prepares for another election—whether Russia, Cuba or Washington D.C.—and lesser-known destinations that are poised for tourism, like the Quadra Island in Canada or Benin in West Africa.

Chernobyl, Ukraine

Ground zero of the most catastrophic nuclear accident in history, Ukraine's Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, is drawing travellers' attention and surging tourism in the country to an all-time high. As a result of the growing interest in visiting Chernobyl and Ukraine, Intrepid Travel launched a brand-new, dedicated Highlights of Ukraine tour, which begins departing in May 2020. Led by a local leader,

the eight-day tour offers travellers an in-depth look into a place that holds huge historical significance, providing education beyond what a textbook or historical literature can offer.

Russia

Peregrine Adventures' new 12-day Russia in Depth tour where travellers will learn from a local leader about the country's political and social history steeped in its culture. Start with an unconventional tour to the Novodevichy Convent and Cemetery in Moscow where some of the greatest minds in Russia are buried, have lunch in Tolstoy's mansion made from his family recipe and follow his journey at the "last station." Relive the last days of the Romanovs in Yekaterinburg, toast to the great continent of Euro-Asia while stepping on the two at the same time, uncover the mystery around Grigory Rasputin in a charming private museum and learn about the true Siberia through the life and story of a local artist in Tobolsk.

Haida Gwaii Islands, Canada

For the first time, the world's largest adventure travel company launched a limited-edition Haida Gwaii Islands Expedition, departing June 30, 2020 so travellers can hear the First Peoples' stories of challenge and triumph during Canada's National Indigenous Peoples Month. Led by a local leader making the remote islands more accessible, visit traditional Haida villages that live in harmony with the pristine wilderness in Naikoon Provincial Park, and learn about the Haida nation with visits to coastal villages, including sharing conversations over home-cooked meals with fresh fish and locally-inspired dishes.



Sri Lanka

Despite the horrific Easter attacks, Lonely Planet kept Sri Lanka as its top country to visit in 2019. To support the country's rebound into 2020, Intrepid Travel is encouraging travellers to forge their own understanding of the Asian island, proving the country's resilience and strength. On its brand-new 14-day Sri Lanka Expedition: Village and Tea Treks tour, travellers will head into Sri Lanka's central mountainous area, Knuckles Range, which was recently declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, trek through tea plantations, jungles and rice paddy fields, hike Adam's Peak at sunrise, explore Kandy and spend some time relaxing on the coast.

Toronto, Canada

With the rise in tourism, Urban Adventures is reminding travellers that at each street corner, visitors will feel like they're visiting a different country, bringing to life Toronto's inclusivity and acceptance. On Urban Adventures' New York Times Journeys – Cool Toronto: Queen St. W. tour, travel through Queen St. W., voted one of the coolest neighborhoods in the world, to learn about the stories behind street art, including the brand-new Kawhi Leonard mural dubbing him the "King of the North" in Regent Park. On the Urban Adventures Kensington Market & Chinatown tour, head into China Town, where Chinese and Canadian influence collide into an array of shops, vendor stalls and markets – including a stop at Rol San, where Serge Ibaka, the NBA's MVP of 2019, was spotted after Toronto Raptors win.

Glen Coe, Scotland

Three decades ago, J.K. Rowling began writing the famed Harry Potter series, drawing inspiration from many European destinations, including Scotland's cemeteries and dramatic landscapes. To commemorate Harry Potter's 30th anniversary and the growth in Scotland's tourism, Intrepid Travel launched its first Scotland-only tour, Highlights of Scotland 10 day tour, which spends a night in Glen Coe, so travellers can see in person what inspired J.K. Rowling and enjoy the mountainous views and remote charm.

Israel

In the first half of 2019, the Israel Ministry of Tourism recorded a total of 1.9 million international travellers, compared to 1.75 million in 2018. Given the demand for the country in 2019 and the preparation for extended



growth into another year, Intrepid Travel is encouraging travellers to learn about the country's history and most famous sights while providing insight into the country's contrasting neighbor, Palestine, on an immersive nine-day food tour that bridges the cultural gap in both countries through culinary exploration.

Japan

Newly upgraded for 2020, Intrepid Travel's Japan: Hike, Bike & Kayak active tour, allows travellers to experience Tokyo - prepped and primed for its second Olympics - while also escaping the crowds to experience the small, charming villages outside the bustling cities. Walk the Nakasendo highway that connects the quintessential Edo-era post towns, follow the footsteps of the pilgrims on the sacred Kumano Kodo, cycle to the inland sea islands on the picturesque Shimanami Kaido and kayak on the inland sea while not missing out the glorious ancient capital of Kyoto and the gourmet food in Osaka.

Fortin Nogueyra, Argentina

Known for Tango, soccer and the Andes Mountains, there's another reason for travellers to flock to Argentina in 2020: To witness a total solar eclipse, a rare celestial event that occurs only when a new moon crosses the sun, in the beautiful barren desert. Given the success of its Solar Eclipse tour last year--which sold-out two years prior to departure because of eclipse-chasers, prompting the business to open more spaces on the tours--Intrepid Travel is continuing its Solar Eclipse tour range, with eight-, 11- and 13-day tours in Argentina, each departing in early December 2020.

Washington D.C.

Given the demand for Washington tours during the 2016 election, Urban Adventures expects similar interest during this year's election; in 2020, the company is highlighting its Urban Adventures' American Politics & Debate on Capitol Hill tour, which travels to the iconic U.S. Capitol Building, the Supreme Court and Library of Congress, while offering a chance to debate and learn from a local leader, who lived in the city during both elections.

Montenegro

Adventure tour operator Intrepid Travel has noted a 24% increase in global bookings to Montenegro over the last year. For those eager to experience both the coastal beauty of the Adriatic destination and the country's historic charms on land, Intrepid Travel is introducing a brand new 8-day sailing tour of Montenegro that will begin departing in 2020 - an affordable option for those not willing to splurge on the superyachts that will call Portonovi home.

Quadra Island, Canada

To view these stunning whales in the wild,

Intrepid Travel is launching a new eight-day Discovery Islands & Orca Camp Expedition in 2020, with two departures on July 7 and September 8. Travellers will witness the mammals breaching while they paddle on the Johnstone Strait, hear their calls with underwater microphones on a zodiac experience, and see the Discovery Passage in style with waterfront lodging on Quadra Island and a unique orca glamping experience, with safari-style tents, hot tubs and a native-style sauna.

Benin, West Africa

The world's largest adventure company, Intrepid Travel, has launched a brand-new 11-day Benin, Togo & Ghana Expedition to cater to the increased interest in West Africa tourism. On the tour, visitors will travel from Ouidah, Lome and Togoville, where voodoo still forms an important part of everyday life, and on to the museums of Accra and pristine shores of Anomabo Beach. For those who want to dive further into the often misunderstood religion, travellers can join the January 10, 2020 departure that coincides with the 27th annual Voodoo Festival of Benin. ■



About Intrepid Travel

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

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Viñales, Pinar del Rio, Cuba

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

A day trip to Viñales in Pinar del Rio, deserves a place on the top ten list of things to see and do in Cuba. From Havana, the 2 ½ hour drive west provides a window into rural Cuba where farmers ride horses, oxen pull wooden carts, and Barrigona Palm trees, also known as Big Belly Palms, dot the countryside.

But as you get closer to the Province of Pinar del Rio (named after the Pine Trees along the (River) Rio Guamá), the scenery intensifies. The red earth, the green vegetation, the Karst mountains (the Sierra do los Órganos), and small limestone hills known as mogotes, combine to form a magical landscape, so much so that UNESCO declared the Viñales Valley a World Heritage site in 1999.

And one of the most impressive panoramas of this photogenic scenery can be captured from the viewing platform just outside the Hotel Los Jazmines, a visually stunning, pink painted property.

With tobacco being the main cash crop in this area, a visit to Casa del Vaguero reveals how tobacco leaves are dried. Just look for the building with a sign that says "Ojo...no fumar!", basically, 'pay attention to this...no smoking'. There is also a restaurant/souvenir shop on the premises where cigar-rolling demonstrations take place. One of the wall murals painted by local artists and entitled 'The Magic of Dreaming', celebrates the harmony between the people who work the land, and nature, with depictions of singing snails, colorful birds, musical instruments, mountains and tobacco leaves.



Down the road a short distance is the limestone Ceuva del Indio (Indian Cave), in which the Guanajatabey people lived many centuries ago. Today it's a tourist attraction where visitors wander, duck and squeeze their way through lit passageways in the cave before arriving at the boat dock. Then they travel a short distance by boat on the San Juan River as a guide points out imaginative shapes in the stalactites, stalagmites and on the cave roof and walls (a seahorse, a human skull etc.).

But probably the most famous attraction in this area is the Mural de la Prehistoria which occupies the entire side of a mountain at 80 meters high and 120 meters in length. The mural portrays the life of the first Cuba inhabitants, featuring giant snails, human figures and dinosaurs, and was completed in four years by Leovigildo González Morillo, a follower of Mexican artist Diego Rivera.

And then there is the town of Viñales itself. We stopped for refreshments at the Hotel Central Viñales and ended up falling in love with the town's main street of one-story wooden houses, restaurants and shops, as well as the beautiful small church, the Iglesia del Sagrado Corazon de Jesus, in the equally small town square.

A visit to Viñales can be a full day trip or a multi-day retreat. For travelers looking to escape from the larger cities and the beach crowds, this makes for a perfect getaway. ■

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Local Suggestions by an Expat in Denmark

by Olivia Balsinger

I moved to Denmark for love and stayed because of my infatuation with this tiny Scandinavian nation repeatedly named "The Happiest Country on Earth." When I first moved, I indulged in my fair share of touristic activities: I took a selfie at the Little Mermaid statue, I gallivanted down Strøget (the city center's walking street) and I ate a smørrebrød (open-faced) sandwich on the harbor banks, the quaint and colorful Nyhavn houses providing a scenic background. After all the quintessential touristic experiences, it was time to start exploring like a local - and now I have that inside scoop for your next trip to Denmark.

My first piece of advice would be to rent a bicycle - it's not just a stereotype that Danes move everywhere on two wheels. In fact, Copenhagen has more bikes than people and is one of the few cities that has dedicated biking highways.

Once you are equipped with your new ride, my next piece of advice is to leave Copenhagen's center and explore the outer neighborhoods where you'll begin to understand that the capital is dynamic and international with a mélange of cultures. The neighborhood of Nørrebro is particularly famous for the diversity in cuisines - kebab shops and the smell of fresh curries intrigue senses as you wander around secondhand vintage shops and boutiques sporting Danish fashion. One Nørrebro restaurant that lovers of spice will adore is Kiin Kiin - Copenhagen's first Michelin-awarded Asian gourmet restaurant and the only Thai restaurant outside Thailand with a Michelin star.

Another lesser-known Copenhagen neighborhood is Østerbro, known primarily for its sprawling green space and luxury. What many tourists don't realize, however, is that Østerbro is also a paradise for relation, with one of the largest parks in the city and the

chance to glimpse into local life. There is nothing like packing a picnic and watching the flocks of geese at eastern Copenhagen's picturesque chain of lakes. The neighborhood is also home to Denmark's only three-Michelin-starred restaurant, Geranium, which stylistically transforms local ingredients into pieces of Nordic artwork, redefining the typical Danish cuisine. However, if typical is what you are looking for, Grisens is the place to spot locals indulging in the greasy yet mouth-watering Hue Bøfsandwich, or Danish gravy burger. Arteries may temporarily clog, but a burger drowning in onions and double sauce with a side of "Danish Nachos" (chips drenched in homemade gravy) is certainly a local experience.

Perhaps my greatest realization living in Denmark is that it lives up to its "happiest country in the world" stereotype, but not for the reason's first time tourists may think. It is a dynamic country that has melded timeless Danish traditions with a multicultural modern twist. And once you visit like a local, you'll soon experience that happiness too. ■

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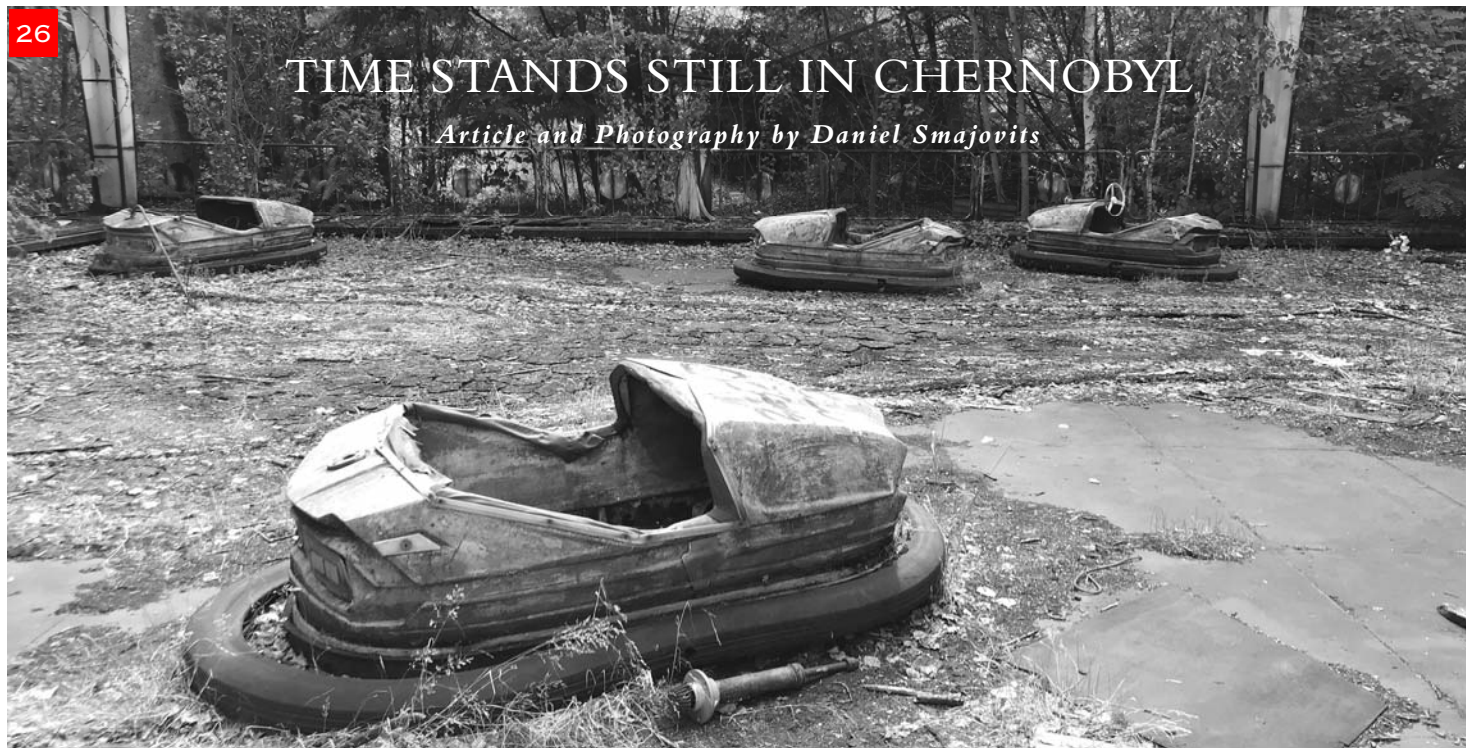
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TIME STANDS STILL IN CHERNOBYL

Article and Photography by Daniel Smajovits



An eerie silence lingers in the air of Pripyat, Ukraine. Thirty-three years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, it's seemingly impossible to imagine this was once a bustling city, home to 50,000 men, women and children.

Located approximately two hours north of Kiev, the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is perhaps one of the world's most fascinating destinations, where visitors can set foot in a place where time has stood still since 1986.

Our visit was facilitated by ChernobylWel, one of the pioneers in Chernobyl tourism. Established by journalist Dominik Orfanus, the company has been running daily trips from Kiev to Chernobyl since 2008. Over the course of a 12-hour day, guests are given the opportunity to experience the area through the eyes of a journalist, as well as with humility and respect for both the disaster and aftermath.

With safety the primary concern, the Ukrainian government mandates that all guests wear a dosimeter that tracks accumulated radiation exposure throughout the day.



Additionally, ChernobylWel provides guests with a personal Geiger counter which constantly measures radiation levels in the vicinity. Overall, on a one-day trip, guests are exposed to a cumulative amount of radiation that is equivalent to a flight from Montreal to Vancouver, while Geiger measures creep up only slightly from the original levels in Kiev. Experienced guides will point out numerous "hot zones" that read dangerously high levels of radiation and control access to these areas, further ensuring safety. Furthermore, all guests go through multiple radiation checks to ensure there is no lingering dust on their person.

All trips begin with an early morning pick up in Kiev to ensure that visitors have the chance to see all the unique sites in the area. While the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant provides the namesake for the region, today, the Exclusion Zone is a living monument to the Soviet Union, replete with original propaganda, signs, symbols and the only remaining Vladimir Lenin statue in the country. Guests also have the chance to visit one of two Duga Radar Stations in the world. The radar station, which is 135 meters tall and 300 meters wide, was built independent of the plant and was a key component of the Soviet missile defense system during the Cold War.

For some, the highlight of the visit is the town of Pripyat itself, including the abandoned amusement park with the iconic Ferris Wheel or the kindergarten with the decaying dolls, schoolbooks and chalk board with a 33-year old lesson. For others, it's the actual site of the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant, which to everyone's surprise, is still a hub of activity. Towering

above the plant is a newly built containment dome. The dome, an engineering feat in itself as it was the largest movable structure ever built, has a lifespan of 100 years. Underneath the shimmering dome are robots which continue the cleanup inside the reactor. Estimates for the area to be fully de-contaminated range from centuries to 20,000 years.

Whether your interest is in modern history or the macabre, a visit to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is still one of the most unique trips any tourist can take and a must-see, should your travels take you to Ukraine.

The Ukrainian Government limits travel into to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and all tourists must be accompanied by a registered tour guide. Over the years, the number of visitors has steadily increased, recently ballooning by 30 percent due to the very accurate HBO documentary on the disaster. Due to the limited number of daily visitors, it is best to reserve your tour well in advance. ■

WWW.CHERNOBYLWEL.COM



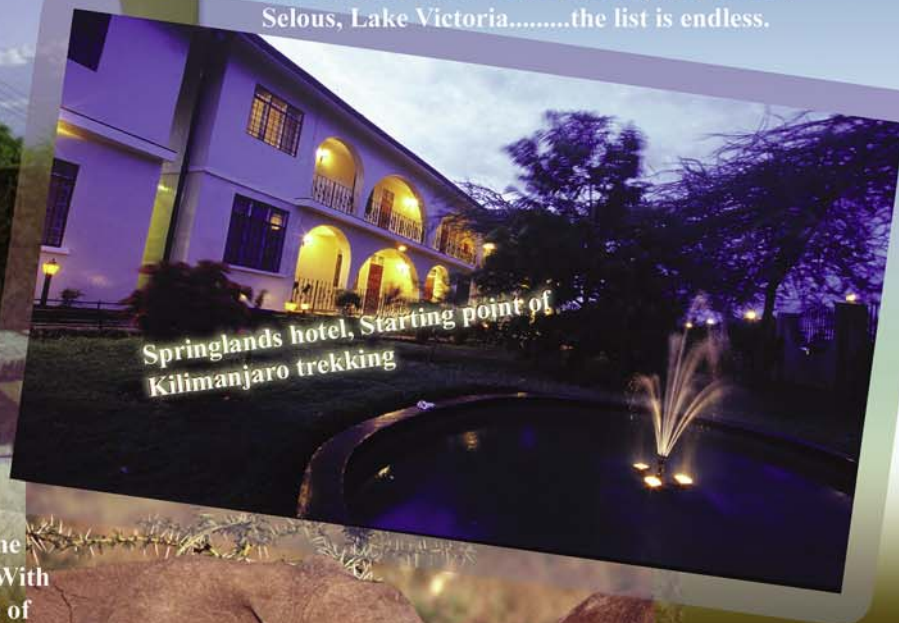


ZARA TANZANIA ADVENTURES

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

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

Mt. Kilimanjaro, The Springlands hotel view



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Feinstein's/54 Below is Broadway's Premiere Supper Club

by Alexandra Cohen

Die-hard Broadway fans have undoubtedly already heard of Feinstein's/54 Below, Broadway's premiere Supper Club. At the peak of Times Square, this fantastic establishment offers performances by the best talent that Broadway has to offer, in a setting quite reminiscent of a speakeasy, where you can enjoy performances in a more relaxed environment, alongside food and drink offerings.

In June of 2012, the club opened under the name 54 Below. The space underwent a complete reinvention by multiple Tony Award-winning producers Tom Viertel, Marc Routh, Richard Frankel and Steve Baruch (*Hairspray*, *The Producers*), who brought together Broadway's and New York's most creative artists and designers as well as top food and hospitality professionals. On September 17, 2015, through a creative partnership with Michael Feinstein, 54 Below was renamed Feinstein's/54 Below.

Feinstein's/54 Below features up to three shows nightly as well as a late night lounge. Accommodating 134 people in the main dining room, with all tables no more than 24 feet from the stage, the facilities include the capability to broadcast and record audio and video. A quick YouTube search will allow you to witness some of their incredible past productions.

When I went to Feinstein's/54 Below for the first time, I took in a performance entitled "All Together Now: Celebrating Broadway's Best Group Numbers". Music came from a variety of musicals, both old and new, including *Company*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Heathers*, and *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

Performers included those known for their work in recent and current productions, including *School of Rock*, *Kinky Boots*, *Aladdin*, *Pretty Woman*, *Frozen*, *Beetlejuice*, *Be More Chill*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Book of Mormon*, *Mean Girls* and more.

There are many reasons to travel to New York City, but one most unique to the city's soul is the extensive list of amazing Broadway musicals found at the heart of Times Square. One that did not stay long enough, but I had the chance to see was *The Cher Show* which closed in August. We saw it at the Neil Simon Theatre. There is good news. It will be revived on tour starting in Rochester, NY in October 2020.

The *Cher Show* chronicles the evolution of Cher's career from young elementary school outcast, to half of a comedy duo, to the diva she is known to be today. Cher's story is one so complex and empowering that one woman alone cannot tell it - Cher is therefore portrayed by not one but three women who play her at different stages of her life. As the eldest, Star Cher, Stephanie J. Block (*Falsettos*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*), is an absolute standout. Block, a Broadway veteran, commands the stage with gravitas. It is easy to see why she finally won her first Tony Award for this role earlier this summer. Playing the youngest, Babe Cher, is Micaela Diamond, making an incredible Broadway debut at age 19. Diamond sings and dances her way through the score of Cher classics with ease, making it clear that she will soon become a staple on the Broadway stage. Rounding out the trio is Teal Wicks (*Wicked*, *Finding Neverland*), who holds her own as Lady Cher, who many of you grew to love as half of Sonny and Cher. ■

www.54below.com



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Celebrate Day of the Dead in Cancun

by Michele Peterson

No doubt you've seen the colorful skeletons, decorative altars and skulls (calaveras) in myriad forms in Mexican markets and souvenir shops, and maybe you might have wondered why this preoccupation with death is so popular and prevalent in the culture. And for those not in the know, the 'walking dead' costumes and the thought of spending time in cemeteries might appear macabre, even a tad scary. But this time-honored tradition of communicating with the departed when it's believed that the portals open between the worlds is not intended to be morbid. In fact, quite the opposite. It is a time of celebrating not death, so much as life, and the lives that have been, and the connection between families that continue to exist even after their physical entity has expired. The tradition of celebrating the dead and trying to connect with them dates back to the ancient Mayans.



To learn more about these rituals and the symbolism of these traditions, and taste the delicious authentic food involved in the ceremonies, why not celebrate Dia de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) and Hanal Pixan (Mayan Food of Souls) at Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancun this year? Participating in this traditional holiday which takes place November 1st and 2nd each year, will help you understand why Mexican families, friends and communities create altars and decorate cemeteries to welcome the return of the souls of their ancestors.

Set beachfront in Cancun's Zona Hotelera, the Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancun offers several ways for visitors to participate in these important cultural celebrations. Guests can sample traditional Day of the Dead foods, witness the creation of altars and enjoy special tours to authentic Mayan ceremonies. Some of these experiences are available through Alltournative, a tour company that features sustainable tours to the Tres Reyes community near Cancun. Participants can tour a variety of decorated family altars, witness traditional Mayan dance performances and experience an authentic Hanal Pixan ceremony performed by shamans in a sacred cenote.

And of course, you'll be staying in high style on a beautiful private beach. Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancun is set on one of region's most swimmable white sand

beaches and features an expansive outdoor swimming pool, a newly expanded KidZ Club and a full-service spa complete with a Hydrotherapy Circuit complete with aromatherapy steam room, multi-jet showers, ice room, polar pools and several Mayan-themed spa treatments. For memorable fine-dining, opt for an evening of Mexican cuisine at their stylish La Joya restaurant where traditional mariachi players serenade along with a spectacular light and sound show. The high-tech show draws on Mexican motifs, traditions and history for inspiration. Upgrade to the Grand Club Unlimited Experience for VIP butler service, access to the exclusive lounge as well as all-inclusive meals and beverages and Grand Club Junior or Master Suite accommodation with premium ocean front views. ■

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Going Further With *Turkish Airlines*

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

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

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

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

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

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

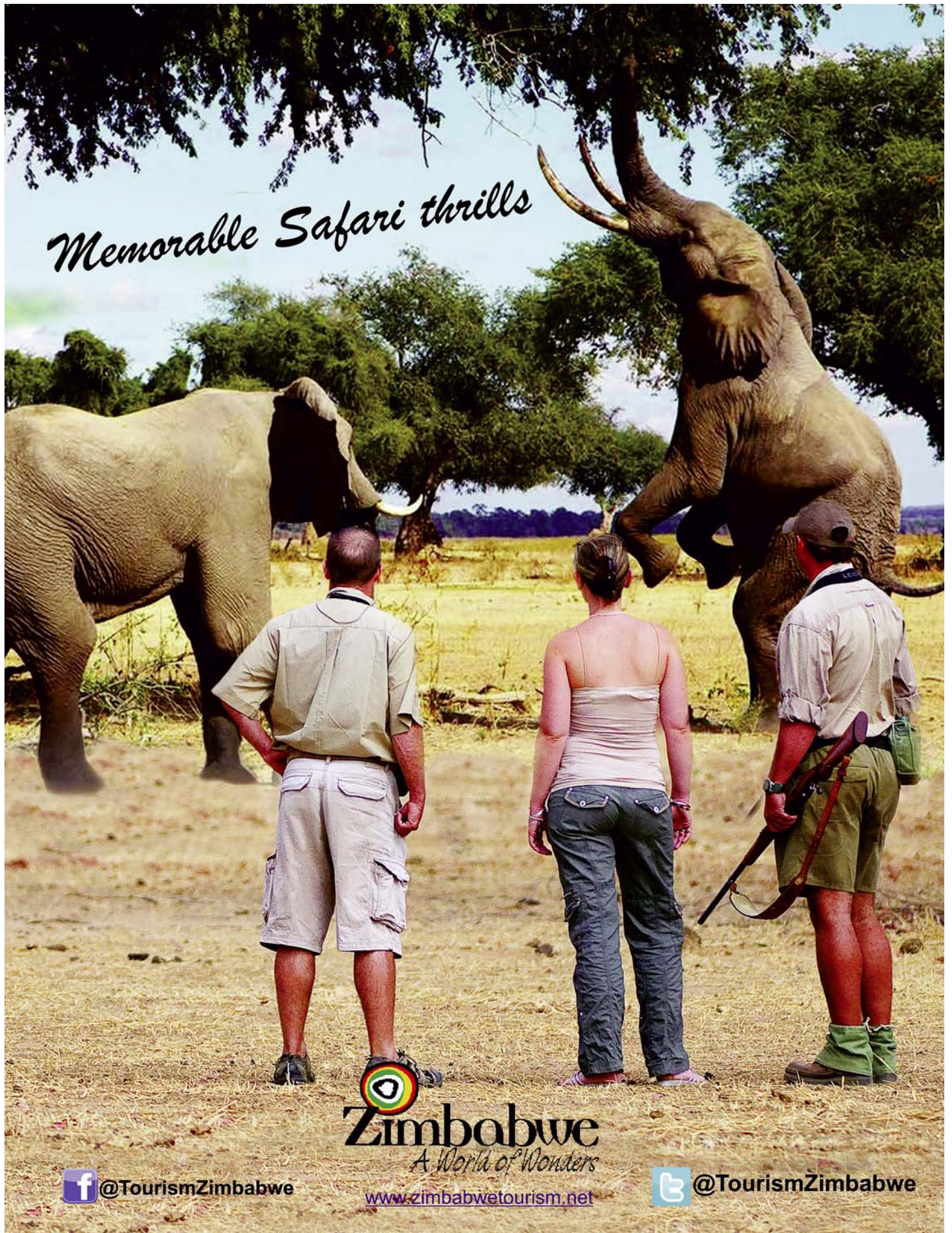
Comfort Class is Turkish Airlines' premium economy section is highlighted by slightly larger seats configured in two-by-three-by-two rows, a large video screen and entertainment system with an iPod outlet and a laptop power outlet for each seat.

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

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The Top 5 Countries with Must-Try European Christmas Market Treats



France

On Insight Vacations' Alpine Christmas Markets journey, step directly into a fairy tale as you explore the Christmas capital of Europe, Strasbourg, and discover France's oldest Christmas market. Strasbourg's Christmas market dates back to 1570 and has expanded over 400 years, with 300 stalls available to explore today. Because of its geographical location in the Alsace region, Strasbourg's cuisine mixes French and German culinary traditions. At the market, look out for Flammkeuche or Tarte Flambée which is a wood fired pizza made with crème fraîche, bacon, onions, sausages or sauerkraut. Bite sized biscuits called Bredele are made in Alsace during the festive season and include a variety of different spices like anis, fennel, ginger, nutmeg, cloves, cardamom, hot red pepper and others. Spaetzel is another regional delight with German origins which in Strasbourg uses pasta made with fresh eggs and tastes like the most indulgent and rich macaroni salad when you order it with crème fraîche and cheese. Add "lardon" to your noodles and you experience a better than bacon-filled noodle salad. Finish your foodie adventure with Mannele, a brioche shaped like tiny people which represent Saint Nicholas, full of raisins or chocolate. Alternatively, sample Kügelhopf – a bundt cake made around the Christmas season filled with raisins and dusted with powdered sugar.

Czech Republic

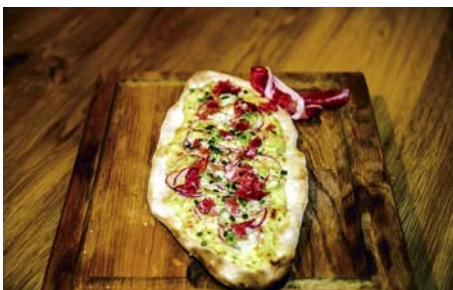
At Prague's Christmas Market, you'll find a most colourful sight set against a Gothic skyline. As you travel with Insight Vacations and your Local Expert, a unique Insight Experience includes meeting a local stallholder to savour regional delights. Try a steaming mug of Svařák, traditional mulled wine, full of cinnamon, cloves and sliced oranges, along with the local Trdelník pastry. The pastry is made from rolled dough wrapped around a stick and grilled, with a mouth-watering sugar and walnut mix topping. You'll typically smell "Prague Ham" in the market before you come across the smoked, boneless ham roasting over a flame

There's no better way to experience festive and Deliciously Authentic Dining than exploring Europe's most beautiful Christmas markets. Insight Vacations, the worldwide leader in premium escorted journeys, takes travellers to Europe during the winter season to discover the Christmas wonderlands and savour Yuletide classic treats on seven magical journeys as part of its 2019-2020 Seasons collection. Join in on the holiday cheer and experience festive wonderlands by taking your taste buds on a foodie experience ride through Europe's fairy-tale Christmas markets.

Poland

Located on the main market square and the Old Town's center, Krakow's Christmas Market is rooted in the city's tradition and history. Historically, local traders would sell Christmas trees, decorations and ingredients for the 12 traditional Polish dishes served on Christmas eve for what is known as the "Wigilia meal." The evening starts with the

sharing of an Oplatek wafer, offering good fortune for the year ahead. Afterwards, each of the 12 dishes are served in memory of the Twelve Apostles and include meat-free items like: red borscht (beet soup) with mushroom dumplings, cabbage with split peas, rice stuffed cabbage rolls, carp fried or baked in aspic, poppy seed cake, Polish gingerbread, traditional wheat-flower and honey dessert, and more. At the market, you'll find yourself in a perfect maze of medieval streets immersed in the festive spirit as you shop for traditional Christmas decorations, gifts, toys and deliciously authentic treats. Bring your appetite as the market is full of grilled meat and try a typical Polish appetizer called Smalec. It's a unique spread made of lard and many different spices, served on top of a hot slice of fresh bread and topped with sausage, bacon or fried onions and mouth-watering Polish pickles. Explore the central feature of the main market square, Cloth Hall, and take in the magic on Insight Vacations' Christmas Markets of Poland, Prague and Germany journey.





which is an EU-branded delicacy, known throughout Europe. The influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on Prague's Christmas markets shines through via Langoš – a Hungarian flatbread topped with cheese, garlic and ketchup that will delight your palate. Experience the magic on Insight Vacations' Christmas Markets of Poland, Prague and Germany journey.

Russia

Whether you're looking to experience unique and traditional treats like Blini-Style Crepes with Caviar, Piroshki (stuffed buns with meat), Kulebyake (Russian salmon pie), and Sbiten (a hot and spicy honey-based winter drink) or simply looking to pick up cultural items to bring back home like Khohloma toys and Russian gingerbread, Moscow's Christmas market is the perfect stop. The entire city joins in on the celebration of the season and Moscow's districts each bring their own influence to the Christmas market at Red Square. Expect to find sensational street shows, traditional cooking classes and fun for the children with fairground rides found in the middle of the market. If you're heading to St. Petersburg, don't miss the favourites on Moskovskaya Square, Pionerskaya Square, as well as Gatchina Palace, where four generations of the Romanov family lived. Visitors should expect impromptu concerts and grottoes, alongside gingerbread, toys and traditional Christmas dinners including an incredible variety of dishes like roast goose with apples, stuffed pig's head, pies and pierogis, along with desserts: Kolyadki (Russian Christmas cookies with curd cheese), Pampushky (Ukrainian doughnuts stuffed with jam) and so much more. Experience the magic on Insight Vacations' Easy Pace Russia with Christmas Markets journey.

Germany

Find the weihnachtszauber (Christmas magic) in Berlin with over 80 Christmas markets to choose from. Gendarmenmarkt is said to be the most magical square during Christmas with the most famous Christmas market and one of the most beautiful. Appearing like a small city full of tents with over 1,000 fairy lights, look for German

treats like Kartoffelpuffer, similar to a potato pancake, or Käsespätzle which is similar to mac and cheese. Instead of macaroni, it's served with egg noodles, slathered in Emmentaler cheese and fried onions. In some parts of Germany, you can even find Stecklerfish which is fish on sticks or smoked eel and salmon. At the end of your Christmas market adventure, you'll enjoy a Celebration Dinner including deliciously authentic German cuisine and wine at a local family-run restaurant. In Dresden, on Insight's Christmas Markets of Poland, Prague and Germany journey, you can find Christollen, a traditional German cake eaten during Christmas. Dresden Stollen is the most famous and can be found at the local Christmas market, Streizelmarkt. Only 150 bakers make the "official" Stollen, distin-



guished by a special seal representing King Augustus II the Strong. ■

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Tropical Tidbits

by Sue C Travel



Visit Bahamas to Help the Bahamas

As I sat down to write this edition's column, I'd just been discussing with my Caribbean tribe of how fortunate we were to have such a quiet hurricane season this year. Then bam! Along came Dorion.

No doubt you've already seen the apocalyptic aftermath left behind on Grand Bahama and the Abaco Islands, so I won't dwell on the destruction. But I do want to tell you how best to help, and why the Bahamas should still be on your go-to list this winter season.

One way to help of course is through donations to well-vetted organizations that will make sure the funds go to where they are needed most. The Caribbean Tourism Organization is one such organization that I highly recommend:

www.gofundme.com/hurricane-relief-fund-cto.



But regardless of what you might have heard or seen on the news, you should NOT assume that the entire Bahamas is a no-go region right now. The Common Wealth of the Bahamas is comprised of 700 islands (though many uninhabited) covering 100,000 square miles of ocean. And though some of the northern region was badly damaged, much of the archipelago was not, including New Providence Island where Nassau and Paradise Island are located and host the bulk of the big, beautiful resorts. Most of the awesome Out Islands were also virtually untouched like Eleuthera where you can swim with pigs, or Bimini famous for its pods of wild dolphins close to shore, and Inagua, known for its abundant wildlife and excellent birding. And all the islands offer blindingly white sand beaches and stunning aqua waters, truly paradise for those seeking a winter escape.

The Bahamas really need your tourist dollars right now to help rebuild the affected regions. So right now, the best way you can help the Bahamas is to simply to visit the rest of the Bahamas. These islands are all interconnected like one big family, so when you help one, you help them all.

Visit: www.bahamas.com

Chefs to the Rescue?

After every natural disaster the first responders and unexpected heroes get a lot of the attention, but there's a group of dedicated volunteers that get boots on the ground fast after hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and fires that could use a big shout out too. Chefs! The World Central Kitchen Relief Team has served more than 8 million meals to feed victims of natural disasters all over the world, and they were first on the ground in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, and now in Marsh Harbour in the Abacos- setting up their portable camp to feed thousands of hungry people free of charge as quickly as possible. Headed by famous Chef Jose Andres, the thousands of volunteer chefs and workers give their time to the needy during dire conditions, but they also need our help to keep going. Show them you appreciate their work by donating at:

www.wck.org



Photo: Lyndah Wells



Curacao North Sea Jazz Festival Attracts Big Stars!

Mark your calendar for next fall to head to Curacao's North Sea Jazz Festival for an open-air concert on the charming Dutch Caribbean island of Curacao. This year's gala three-day festival over Labor Day weekend attracted big names like Mariah Carey, Adam Levine's Maroon Five, Black-Eyed Peas, Pitbull and classic stars like Gladys Knight, Earth Wind & Fire, Kenny G, and so many more. The annual festival also gives back to the community – run by Fundashon Bon Intenson and produced by Mojo Concerts- the proceeds are donated to local charities.

Visit: www.curacaonorthseajazz.com

New Hotel & Resort News

It's been a busy year for AMResorts with the all kinds of new openings all over the



Caribbean and Mexico, and now is the time to book ahead for great opening specials.

Open now:

Now® Emerald Cancun made its debut in the famous Hotel Zone region in June 2019, on a beautiful beach as a new family-friendly all-inclusive featuring their signature brand of Unlimited Luxury® with 427 rooms and a gorgeous spa by Pevonia®. There's something for everyone including adults-only areas, a dedicated Core Zone teens club and an Explorer's Club for kids.

Opening soon:



Sunscape® Akumal Beach Resort will open October 1st, 2019 in the lush jungle and sea region of Riviera Maya with the Unlimited-Fun® for the whole family.

Dreams Acapulco Resort & Spa will open November 1st, 2019 with 605 rooms on stunning Icacos Beach near the Acapulco Golf Club with Unlimited-Luxury® for all-inclusive family fun.

Another AMResort will open on Nov. 1st, 2019 in Mexico as well- Dreams Vista Cancun Resort & Spa brings the Unlimited-



Luxury® concept to the exclusive gated community of Puerto del Mar with 232 new rooms adjacent to Puerto Cancun Golf Club.

In Curacao, a Dreams® brand resort will take over the property of the Curacao Marriott by December 2019. Dreams Curacao Resort Spa & Casino will turn the legendary Marriott hotel into a family-friendly all-inclusive with Unlimited Luxury® in 336 rooms on a beautiful beach close to the colorful capital of Willemstad.

For more information on all new AMResorts openings visit: www.amresorts.com.

The Birthplace of the Pina Colada is Back!

Puerto Rico Caribe Hilton has reopened after a \$150 million restoration just in time to celebrate its 70th birthday and as the Hilton brand marks its 100th anniversary in 2019. The iconic hotel is the birthplace of the delicious Pina Colada cocktail and was the favored hotspot of famous visiting celebs and the jet-setting elite in its heyday. It is now ready to welcome guests to enjoy a brand-new deluxe and modern oceanfront experience close to the colorful, exciting and historic capital of San Juan.

Visit: www.caribehilton.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 @suectravel

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This Photo: RCI - Harmony of the Seas

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PACIFIC SOUTH PACIFIC INDIAN SOUTHERN OCEAN

ADRIATIC AEGEAN MEDITERRANEAN CARIBBEAN BALTIC BLACK SOUTH-CHINA SEA



Sail The World!



Hurtigruten Introduces Three New Hybrid Powered Cruise Ships

Hurtigruten, the world leader in exploration travel, will begin refurbishing three of their cruise ships for advanced upgrades over the next few years. Equipped with battery packs and other green technology, each ship will operate year-round expedition cruises

along the Norwegian coast from 2021 on yet-to-be-disclosed itineraries.

This means Hurtigruten, which recently introduced the world's first hybrid electric-powered expedition cruise ship, MS Roald Amundsen, will soon add another three hybrid powered ships to what is already considered the greenest fleet of cruise ships in the world. ■

WWW.HURTIGRUTEN.COM

Ponant Plans to Acquire Paul Gauguin Cruises



Ponant has announced its plan to acquire Paul Gauguin Cruises, the renowned specialist in sailings to exotic ports in French Polynesia and the South Pacific. Like Ponant, Paul Gauguin combines exceptional itineraries with luxury hotel services and fine cuisine to create memorable experiences at sea. ■

[HTTPS://EN.PONANT.COM](https://en.ponant.com)

Four Holland America Line Ships Set To Explore South America And Antarctica



Holland America Line's Amsterdam, Koningsdam, Volendam and Zaandam head to South America and Antarctica in 2019–2020. From September 2019 through April 2020, the four ships offer cruises ranging from 14 to 48 days that cover the colorful cultures and stunning scenery of these vast continents.

Highlights include Zaandam's full season of cruising, Koningsdam's 48-day Voyage of the Americas, the longest itinerary of the season; Amsterdam's 35-day Incan Empires; and Volendam's 30-day Amazon Explorer. ■

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G Adventures Introduces the New Reina Silvia Voyager Yacht for Immersive Comfort Touring in the Galápagos

G Adventures has recently introduces a sixth yacht to its fleet of vessels for touring the Galápagos Islands, with 2020 departures. The custom-built catamaran will be among the most comfortable passenger touring vessels of its size in the Galápagos, and will reflect the company's commitment to responsible tourism.

The 103-foot Reina Silvia Voyager catamaran will cruise the Galápagos Islands as a high-end touring vessel, accommodating up to 16 passengers in 10 cabins on two decks. Eight of those cabins are designed for twin/double stays, and two are dedicated to solo travellers who prefer their own space at a good value. Eight rooms offer private balconies, while all rooms have panoramic windows for optimal ocean viewing, plus bright, contemporary furnishings, artwork by local naturalist photographers, and energy-saving LED lighting.

Landings and exploration of the region's remote ports and wild, rocky coasts will be accessible to guests, thanks to the Reina Silvia Voyager's nine on-board kayaks and two zodiacs for guests' guided use. Wetsuits and snorkeling gear will also be freely available for passengers' enjoyment, as will beach towels and hairdryers. ■

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In 2020, AmaWaterways will offer new opportunities for travelers to explore the historical landmarks, breathtaking sceneries and culinary delights along some of the most beautiful rivers in Europe with the addition of three new itineraries, including:

- A seven-night Magna on the Danube itinerary specifically designed for the revolutionary AmaMagna, which made her anticipated debut in 2019. This beautifully curated itiner-

Three New Itineraries, Including Sailings on the Revolutionary AmaMagna

ary will indulge guests' passion for awe-inspiring architecture, timeless music, stunning landscapes and culinary excellence. Unique aspects of this itinerary include daytime cruising through the Danube Bend, an included excursion at Schönbrunn Palace and Gardens in Vienna and an exclusive wine festival in Spitz, Austria (pictured right). In addition, AmaMagna will offer four departures to the lower Danube sailing between Budapest, Hungary and Giurgiu, Romania with a land program extension to Bucharest and Istanbul.

- A seven-night Treasures of the Main & Rhine itinerary on board AmaDante and the new AmaSiena sailing from Nuremberg to Amsterdam taking guests through storybook scenery and iconic landmarks as well as through the locks of Main-Danube Canal. This new itinerary will be perfectly packaged with an optional three-night pre-cruise land program in Prague, the "Golden City of a Hundred Spires."

- A Vineyards of the Rhine & Moselle itinerary on board AmaDante and AmaSiena sailing from Amsterdam to Luxembourg. Guests can add a two-night stay in Amsterdam before embarking on a seven-night cruise through the UNESCO-designated Rhine and vineyard-clad Moselle valleys. Other scenic stops include the charming villages of Rüdesheim, Cochem and Berncastel before ending the cruise with an optional three-night extension in Paris, the "City of Lights."

WWW.AMAWATERWAYS.COM



Viking Will Attempt to Set Guinness World Record with Ultimate World Cruise

245-Day Roundtrip Cruise from London is the Longest-Ever Continuous Passenger Cruise

Viking's Ultimate World Cruise offers an eight-month journey, allowing guests to explore Scandinavia, the Caribbean and destinations throughout South America before calling on the remote tropical islands of the South Pacific. Viking Sun will then continue its journey along the coast of Australia and through Asia before returning to the Mediterranean and Europe.

Viking guests have embarked on the new Ultimate World Cruise itinerary, a 245-day journey spanning six continents, 51 countries and 111 ports. Sailing from London on Viking's award-winning 930-guest Viking Sun®, the longest-ever continuous cruise will fully circumnavigate the globe bringing guests to some of the world's most legendary cities, iconic landmarks and far-flung destinations, before returning to London in May 2020. In beginning this journey, Viking will attempt to set the GUINNESS WORLD RECORD for the "longest continuous passenger cruise;" upon the return of Viking Sun to London next year, an official GUINNESS WORLD RECORD Adjudicator will confirm the successful attempt with a certificate presentation.

Like all Viking itineraries, Ultimate World Cruise guests will enjoy an included excursion in each port of call and free unlimited Wi-Fi; they also receive Business Class airfare and all gratuities and service fees, along with an extensive list of added-value inclusions in their cruise fare. The Viking Way of exploration offers additional, optional excursions that provide insight into Local Life, Working World and offer Privileged Access® visits to cultural institutions. Overnight stays in 23 cities allow guests to delve deeper into destinations; and Viking's Culture Curriculum® offers additional enrichment on board with regional entertainment and lectures, as well as learning opportunities as part of the Viking Resident Historian® program. Full details on the Ultimate World Cruise can be found on Viking's website.

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Adventuring Around Arabia Aboard Seabourn Ovation

by Olivia Balsinger

It was only 5:04 am, yet that drastic Arabian sun was eager to heat the stark and rugged landscape of Muscat, Oman's capital port city. Still jetlagged, I had meandered to the 10th floor of the Seabourn Ovation, the refined ship that would be my home for 21 days as we snaked around the Arabian Peninsula, beginning in Dubai and culminating in Athens, Greece on the "Arabia and Antiquities" itinerary. Though I had previously traveled extensively through the more developed and glitzy Arabian Gulf cities, this journey continued to surprise and

enlighten me about the involved past and naturally stunning parts of this region.

I looked over the balcony. The sun began to illuminate the elegantly understated Muscat, graced on both sides by the arid Hajar mountains. An outlier to the stereotypically perceived flat landscape, in that moment I knew Muscat—like all the other stops on this journey - would be magical.

Though we enjoyed the luxurious, world-class treatment we experienced onboard the Ovation during our sea days in transit, the

highlight of this adventure around Arabia was exploring new lands on port days, enjoying the ship's varied excursions. The following are highlights of our port adventures with Seabourn.

Dubai and Sir Bani Yas Island, UAE

Our journey began in Dubai, the glitzy capital of the United Arab Emirates. Home to some of the world's most dramatic buildings and constantly at the height of innovation, my boyfriend and I spent our day getting lost in the chaos and glitz. We saw the world's



first indoor ski slope, climbed to the highest floor of the 282-meter high Burj Khalifa and walked along the Corniche Deira, the picturesque seaside promenade. In the early evening we headed to the cruise terminal to begin our journey, sailing away from the and towards one of the UAE's natural phenomenon, Sir Bani Yas Island.

In total contrast to our chaotic day in Dubai, our first port Sir Bani Yas Island was calm, vastly different than any "beach destination" I've ever visited. We arrived to onshore melodies and glasses of sangria delivered by Seabourn white gloved waiters and waitresses. After toasting in the sun for a bit, it was time to embark on our tour to explore the more remote areas of the island past the beachfront and hopefully spot wildlife. With the insight of a local and knowledgeable guide, we were given an introduction to the island's history. We learned that about 7,000 years ago The Bani Yas tribe left the island desolate - there were no trees or freshwater sources on the island and the shorelines were barren. When the UAE's founder, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, spontaneously visited the island, he transformed it into a sanctuary for endangered animals from Arabia, Africa and beyond. One stop on the tour we found particularly fascinating was the Falcon Hunting Point, where we learned about the history of this fierce bird and how they have shaped hunting in the UAE. The tour gave us interesting perspective into the history of Sir Bani Yas Island and how the past has shaped what it has turned into today.

Doha, Qatar

The next day we arrived in Doha, Qatar's capital and a land of innovation and where tradition greets modernity. From the world-class metropolis of Doha, brimming with museums, nightlife and unrivaled man-made architecture, to the natural phenomena in the deserts, Qatar maintains all aspects of its heritage while embracing the new world. And each of the optional Seabourn excursions served to showcase Qatar's complexities. One excursion that Seabourn guests could choose, for example, was entitled "Doha City Highlights," and included a panoramic drive along the

Corniche - the four-mile coastal route that stretches from the Museum of Islamic Arts to West Bay, a stop at the Pearl of Qatar - an artificial island that evokes the architecture of Venice - and shopping time in the labyrinth of alleyways that comprise the Standing Markets. We visited the Souq Waqif, one of the most traditional in the Middle East, to find pearl shops and nooks where men still gather to chat.

Salalah, Oman

Salalah is famous for its Arabian Sea beaches, fruit plantations and waters brimming with sea life. Though during our visit the area seemed extremely desert-like, with rolling desert dune and a strikingly dry heat, we learned from our tour guide, Mohammad, that the landscape completely changes come summer. The Khareef, an annual monsoon, transforms the desert terrain into a lush, green landscape, even creating seasonal waterfalls. We decided to embark on another Seabourn excursion today, "Sultanate Heritage: A UNESCO Partner Tour," in order to begin and understand the dynamic and fascinating history of the region. After leaving port we visited Al Balid, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and once a prosperous medieval-era port. We enjoyed free time exploring the well-preserved fort and also learning about its history—I was baffled to learn it was once one of the world's most important harbors for the export of frankincense.

After visiting these archaeological ruins, we drove to Taqa, another ancient center of the frankincense trade. Today the area is actually a populous fishing village renowned for its traditional white-stone houses and its historic castle. We walked around for a bit on our own before driving to Samhuram, located near the great lagoon of Khor Rouri Creek. This UNESCO World Heritage Site dates back to 3000 BC and vividly illustrates the heyday of Arabia's frankincense trade with the Far East and Greece.

Muscat, Oman

Muscat is famed for its intricate souk mazes, fresh seafood, stunning backdrops and that effusive Omani hospitality. We spent the

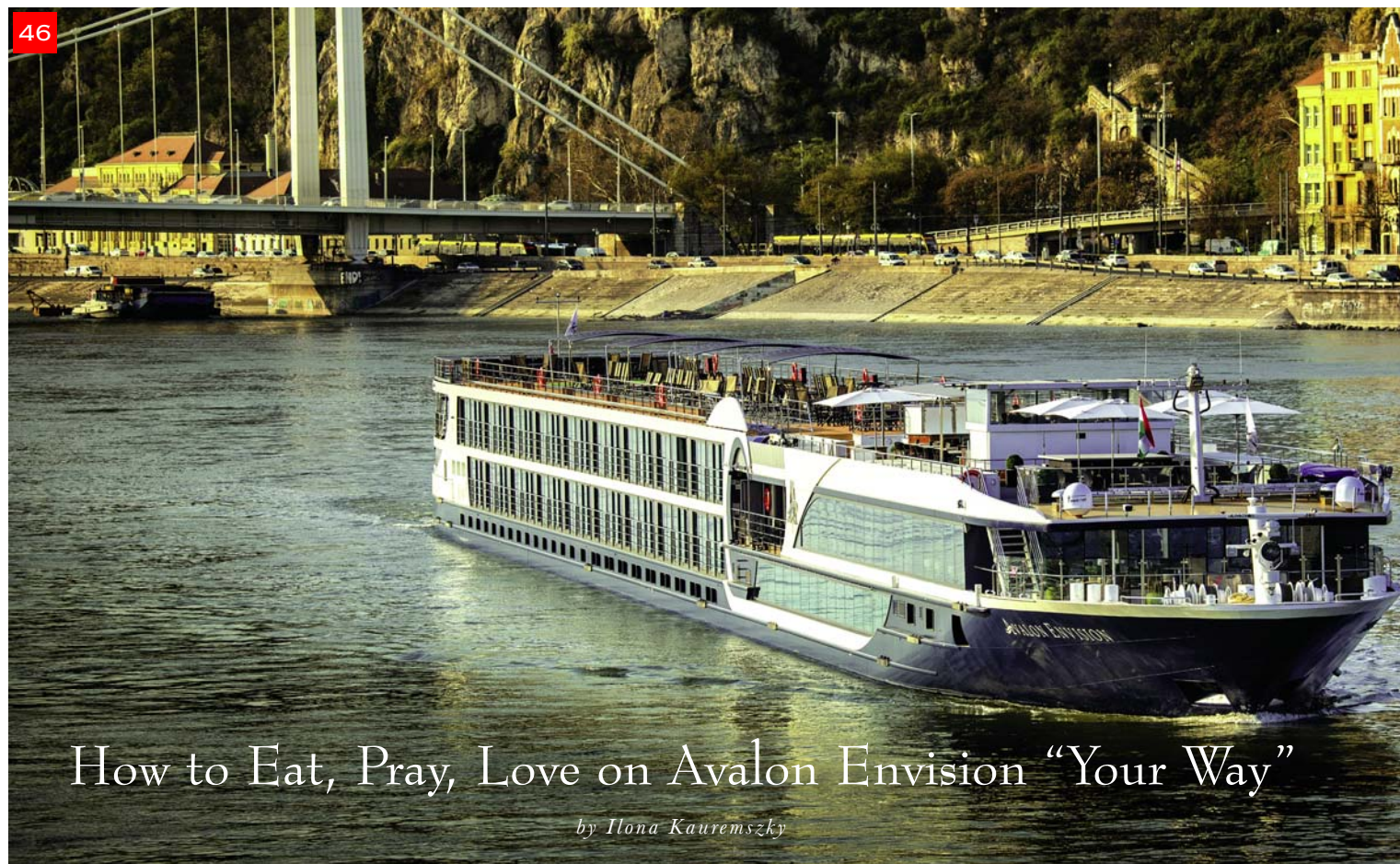
morning getting acquainted with Omanis at the local fish and vegetable market through Seabourn's "Shopping with the Chef" option excursion. The market, located at the end of the Corniche, is best to visit in the early morning hours, especially with both an English speaker who understands "market talk" and a local guide who can assist in translations.

Accompanying us was the Executive Chef of Seabourn Ovation, Jes Paskins, who led us around the market, negotiating prices for fish which we would actually be cooking onboard. It was a unique way to explore the Muscat food scene, battering with the Omani fishermen who were flaunting their "catch of the day." Between giant tuna, stingrays, baby sharks and a massive father shark, our senses were in overdrive in the best possible way. We ended up purchasing enough queen fish, king fish and tuna to feed our ship of 600 passengers. Next, our chef led us through the labyrinth of ceramics, jewelry, and spice scents that make up Muscat's Mutrah Souq. The Souq is an essential visit for both shoppers and people-watching enthusiasts. One of the oldest shopping centers on the Arabian Peninsula, it is nicknamed "the dark souk," referring to its especially winding and dim interior. Bargaining is the language of the souk stalls, though there is less wiggle room with jewelry. Spices such as frankincense, butter-solve wool pashminas and leather are some of the most popular items for purchase. It was here that we bought spices that Jes would be using in meals onboard, to give them a certain Arabian kick.

Seabourn is known worldwide as a top-tier cruise line, delivering that human touch on a state-of-the-art ship. Though one could spend days onboard the Ovation indulging in the unlimited champagne and caviar, enjoying the multiple restaurants and tanning poolside, what separates Seabourn from it's competitors are the engaging excursions in exotic ports around the world.

WWW.SEABOURN.COM





How to Eat, Pray, Love on Avalon Envision “Your Way”

by Ilona Kauremszky

There's a new Danube River cruise designed to meet the “Your Way” European river cruiser who likes action and notable experiences, healthy dining mixed with sustainability, and let's admit spacious suites with sweet views.

It's cruising your way with pre and post cruise package potential from Avalon Waterways.

On board their newest Danube River ship baby, you get all the above plus more. Award-winning best-selling author Elizabeth Gilbert of Eat, Pray, Love fame whose star power is worldwide is the inspiring Godmother behind the Avalon Envision.

This past spring in a star-studded christening ceremony over 100 of us including Liz's mom and dad and new sweetheart gathered on the

fabled Duna bank in Budapest to raise our fluted glasses of Hungary's finest Törley sparkling wine as Godmother Liz in a symbolic gesture cut the vessel's tethered cord unleashing the bottle in a christening ceremony like no other.

The new 443-foot long Avalon Envision which is Avalon Waterways 13th Suite Ship in Europe cruises on the Danube River making cruise holidays for 166-passengers.

Here's how to Eat, Pray, Love on Avalon Envision “Your Way”:

The Blessing

This is the official blessing for the Avalon Envision: “We come from the water, we are made of the water, we are drawn to the water. Our lives are rivers meant to be explored and

enjoyed. Let every curious soul who steps foot upon this vessel have a safe and blessed journey. May we all be changed for the better by what we discover along this river. And may this boat herself know that she is loved and revered, and that we are grateful to her for her strength and beauty. Onward! I christen thee the Avalon Envision.”

Sweet Views

The possibilities are as wide open as the views. On board Avalon Envision which joins the fleet of Avalon's other Suite ships it's all about the views. A view in every Suite stateroom. The dining room has a view, the Panorama Lounge has a view. Yes, the Envision is all about the vision.

For the ultimate ceremonial sail as Liz did enjoy a glass of your favourite tippie from the





Bar and head to the Observation Lounge for epic views of Budapest.

Action

Head to the new Adventure Centre and meet your new Avalon Adventure Host onboard all European cruises. Love how the ship has an array of outdoor items to share with guests like bikes, Nordic walking sticks, binoculars and even FitBits. Whether cruisers are looking for a kayaking excursion or want to participate in a complimentary fitness class on the Sky Deck, Avalon's new Adventure Host makes it happen.

Notable experiences: Avalon Choice

Avalon Waterways invites guests to dive into new experiences each day with Avalon Choice, a new sightseeing tour program

available in three sightseeing styles. There's the Classic tour excursion allowing guests to dive into the history and the heritage of local destinations with local guides. The Discovery excursions are new on the Danube River and offer inspiring interactive activities from cooking classes to painting workshops among other activities. For adrenaline-pumping, high impact fun, cruisers edge toward the Active excursions another new addition on the Danube River. These outdoor activities can involve guided jogging tours, biking, paddling and hiking.

To channel a Liz Gilbert vibe onboard the Avalon Envision, why not consider signing up for some Active excursions as Liz did. In Budapest head to the back hills of Buda for eye-opening cave tours or pick up a paddle and kayak on a Danube stretch of quiet nature-rich scenery with family and loved ones.

Inspired Dining

Avalon Fresh is about healthy cuisine options at every meal. Enjoy inspired dining menu items care of a dynamic culinary duo from Vienna known as the Wrenkh Brothers who have teamed up with Avalon to spread their favourite vegetarian cooking among other soulful healthy options.

Plus there's a nod to Mother Earth. When you cruise on the Avalon Envision you'll see its void of plastic accoutrement like stir sticks and straws. These plastics have been replaced by paper plus wait staff use fabric gloves in this company-wide effort to eliminate all single use plastics.

Flexible Dining

Avalon's FlexDining® program gives guests the dining choices they crave including the onboard dining experience. For alfresco dining, head to the Sky Grill, a favourite open-air lunch spot. The Panorama Bistro offers seating perfect for couples or those who like more one on one time with their cruise bestie. Plus dinner time is flexible anytime between 7 and 8:30 pm. The Panorama Bistro, open for light dinners, has gone to self-serve style with no reservations required -- perfect for when the ship is in port and for those passengers who wish to explore ashore in the evening.

Panorama Suites with sweet views

47

It's easy to dream big in these Panorama Suites. With the industry's only Open-Air Balcony each bed faces the ever-changing scenery on two full decks of every ship.

Picture wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling windows that open 11-feet wide in Europe. For Eat, Pray, Love moments why not linger inside your Panorama Suite, cuddle up with your sweetie and watch the world go by as your toes poke out from under your Egyptian super-combed cotton linen and European-style duvet.

I like the bathrobes and slippers with nightly turn-down service too. These added touches help get you into the Zen side of relaxation as you get comfortable and tuck in for the evening.

Sweeten the amenities

These Panorama Suites with their Open-Air Balconies now have a choice of four mattress styles of firmness plus the staterooms have big showers to afford more space as you shower using L'Occitane bath products, the ship's exclusive toiletry line from France. For digital-device-loving guests find USB ports in every stateroom.

Every Suite ship also has 16 bicycles for guests interested in self-guided cycling excursions. The crew can even provide a complimentary picnic.

Floating Arts

The Avalon Envision welcomes travellers onboard with rich gray, gold and violet décor inspired by Dutch interior designer Liane van Leeuwen, original art in common areas by Dutch artist Eelco Maan and cabin paintings by another Dutch artist, Sofie Fisher.

For Eat, Pray, Love time, head to the Club Lounge with the views. Now grab a cappuccino and find a cozy spot. It's time to sink into your world and reflect on all the good things that have come your way.

With Avalon Waterways the possibilities are as wide open as the views. ■

WWW.AVALONWATERWAYS.COM





An Aqua Expedition on The Mekong

by Lisa TE Sonne

“Breathe in deeply. Now breathe out slowly, and open your eyes.”

I lifted my lids and saw a shining palace with swooping curved eaves of gold on a riverbank. We had just ended a sunrise meditation and what I was seeing was not a left-over visualization, but a reality with the softening urban haziness. We were cruising on the Mekong River and were easing by the city of Phnom Penh in Cambodia, with its stretches of high-rises and historic scenes.

I was sitting on a bamboo mat on a polished wooden deck, at the back of what's called a “floating boutique hotel” named the Aqua Mekong, probably the most luxurious tourist vessel on the river. At a table nearby, tea, coffee, fresh juice, and a vibrant bowl of tropical fruits waited including the dramatic Dragon Fruit and sumptuous papayas.

Only a few of the 20 passengers choose to start the day this way. Others may have been out on their verandah day beds, peeking at the morning through the floor-to-ceiling windows from their king-sized beds,

taking a rain shower in their private bathrooms, wandering through the library, or still sleeping off a fun night. For all of us, memory-making awaited.

In the past few days, I had kayaked past Zebu (Brahmin cows) and taken a skiff to a floating market with fruits on the boat masts for advertising. I had been blessed by a Buddhist monk in a temple that was once a prison, and eaten a tarantula and scorpion at an exotic cocktail hour onboard. I saw how tilapia fish are farmed and how silk is made and woven. I also ate well and enjoyed diverse conversations with guides



Photo: Lisa TE Sonne



Photo: Lisa TE Sonne



Photo: Lisa TE Sonne

and passengers and locales.

Our mothership on the Mekong, which can translate as “Mother of the Waters,” carried us from Vietnam to the capital of Cambodia. The journey included jasmine scents in the hallways, about a 1-1 crew-to-passenger ratio with kindly, attentive staff, and amenities including a spa, library, well-stocked bar, movie room with reclining lounge chairs, and dipping pool.

We were ferried to changing shores in sun-protected skiffs to explore markets, monasteries, and museums, and to meander in villages by bike or foot - all with guides we knew from our boat. When we returned to the mothership, we were given cool, lemon-grass scented cloths, fresh juice from watermelon or other fruits, and we took off our shoes so the staff could wash them before the next outing. Our air-conditioned suites were cleaned three times a day, and overnight laundry was free.

This kind of nurturing, privileged travel mitigated the heat and humidity that characterizes that geography, as well as helped when visiting a part of the world whose past history is painfully blistered by war (the “American War,” aka the Vietnam War) and cruel regimes (the brutal Khmer Rouge that decimated an entire generation of educated people). Tourism and sharing smiles with locals sometimes seemed surreal in a present that is a mixture of resiliency - both struggle and success. Choices of what to do on shore in Phnom Penh included touring the gardens and jewels of the Royal Palace, roaming the National Museum with its great collection of Khmer Art from the magnificent temples built a 1,000 years earlier, or visiting and shooting a gun at an infamous “killing field,” where thousands had been shot by their own government.

“Expedition”

Weather loves to remind travelers that true travel is not a controlled amusement park ride. If you want an inkling of understanding what it is like to live in the place you are visiting, changes in weather can be a gift. And if you are traveling the Aqua way, you

can return to the boat and take a nice warm rain shower, or simply dry off after your short foray.

During our journey, thunderstorms waited until the outdoor “Unicorn Dance” performance finished before the sky cried. Another day, when we climbed up for sweeping views of lush rice fields and valleys we had time for about five photos before the raindrops pushed us inside, then rain deluged down while we watched inside as monks made jasmine leis.

The time we did get wet was while our skiff was speeding back to our floating sanctuary, and the water dropped like little fists, pummeling the skiff from raw clouds. The crew quickly handed out rugged raincoats with big hoods. That was when I remembered that the cruise company was called Aqua Expeditions (not Aqua VR or Aqua Ride) as it transported us, as comfortably as possible, through places more remote than many travelers think to go.

For the Mekong, Aqua Expeditions offers 3-, 4-, and 7-night trips. Some go upriver and others downriver. Some are in the “high season” when you can go further north on the fuller waterways and even venture into the famed Tonle Sap Lake, with more than a million floating homes and businesses. Many people opt to take extra days before or after the cruise to enjoy the natural beauties of Hanoi Bay in Vietnam or to explore Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the largest spiritual building on the planet. My cruise was upriver for four days during the transition from low season to high season.

Great food is one of the signatures of Aqua Expedition travel – whether it’s on the Mekong or on their Amazon cruises in South America. Soon they will also be offering their culinary and cruising best in Indonesia. The delicious food provides a bonding for the variety of passengers.

English was the common language for the nine nationalities among our small group of passengers, including between the young married couple- she was from France and

he was from Singapore. Friendships were quickly formed. A single 75-year-old woman on board never sat alone, as she was adopted by others and she adopted them. A single woman approaching 30 got lively international advice on her love life and the “ex” back home. Others bonded in beer debates- local brews on the trip vs. local brews at home.

We had two birthdays on board and each was celebrated with personalized cakes and singing. It was clear this was a wonderful travel venue to go with a friend, a group of friends, a romantic partner, or even solo.

English was also the common language between the guides and crew who were Cambodian and Vietnamese. Having guides from the actual countries made the lectures and informal chats more compelling, as we learned about their countries’ people, places, and hopes in this fascinating period of history, as both Cambodia and Vietnam try to balance autonomy and allies, China and the Western world, cultural independence and economic interdependence.

Looking back, I loved the color and cacophony of the markets – people living their lives selling incredible fruits, live reptiles, and all kinds of seafood, but never begging or asking for anything from us.

I also recall a quieter time when I went out on my balcony, wet from a refreshing rain shower in my private bathroom, laid down on the wide lounge chair, and looked through the glass wall as little islands of lotus plants floated in the river current. I closed my eyes and felt the warm breezes and listened to the gentle, mesmerizing lapping of the Mekong River against our boutique boat.

I felt like I was moving through history – and a dream – at the same time. ■

WWW.AQUAEXPEDITIONS.COM



Harmony of the Seas

A cruise ship unlike others

by Glenn J. Nashen



Planning to Cruise

Whether you've cruised a dozen or more times, like me, or it's your very first trip at sea, it takes a fair amount of planning to make sure that you meet your cruise vacation goals and expectations. Once you've got your basics like who you'll travel with, what time of the year you're travelling, what's your budget and which region of the world you'd like to see, drill down deeper and consider ports of call, on-board activities and ship amenities. Having cruised the Caribbean many times I was less interested in picking ports this time and focused on which ship would take me there. I thought it would be fun to vacation on the largest cruise ship in the world and build an experience that Nikki, my teenage daughter,

and I could share. This helped me easily choose Royal Caribbean International's Oasis-class vessel, the Harmony of the Seas.

First Impressions

Launched in 2015 this daunting cruise ship was sure to create a lasting impression. Would it be way too large with an unbelievable 6800 passengers and 2200 crew, or would we literally be swept away in the vast array of amenities, activities and dining options? We hoped for the latter and as we approached Port Everglades cruise terminal in Fort Lauderdale goose bumps began forming as we set our sights on this absolutely massive and majestic vessel that dwarfed other ships that we had previously traveled on.

My goodness, I thought. Boarding will take all day. We were pleasantly shocked that RCI thought things out for us and through predetermined boarding times and well laid out line distribution we swiftly passed through security points and check-in and baggage drop off quicker than a short haul commute at your local airport. Greeters already had our photos from our online registration and welcomed us by name. This was great, and we were still on dry land!

As you step on board you are immediately overtaken by sight and sound and the perception that you've entered another dimension. How could this be a ship? We've just entered the enormous Royal Promenade, something akin to a magnificent Las Vegas hotel concourse, with upscale, glitzy shops, restaurants,



bars, live music and performers with smiling faces. We stopped, stared incredulously all around us, eyes and jaw wide open. Unreal! This was going to be one incredible week!

Unique Neighbourhoods

Royal Caribbean's Oasis-class ships are designed around neighbourhood themes which lend themselves toward the grandeur of these floating mega-resorts. There are seven neighbourhoods in all including the Royal Promenade, with its futuristic Bionic Bar, where guests sit in wonderment watching the robotic arms prepare mixed drinks that have been ordered on an iPad. There are no human bartenders or servers here.

Central Park is unlike any area we had previously seen on a ship. This natural greenspace, surrounded by inside balconies, has over 10,000 plants and trees, a meandering cobblestone path with benches for relaxing in the garden setting or for people-watching, not to mention the upscale restaurants and shops.

The Boardwalk is a scene out of Coney Island with a full size merry-go-round, two rock climbing walls hanging off the back of the ship, the impressive Aqua Theatre, as well as 50s style diner, café, Mexican restaurant and gift shops.

The Sports Zone and pool area is action-packed with surf-style "Flow Riders", the zip-line, the Ultimate Abyss (a 10-storey drop in a darkened slide/tube that's not for the queasy), mini golf, toddler splash pad, beach-entry pool and so much more. Get there early each day and beat the crowds.

The Spa and Fitness Centre is the perfect spot to unwind or to work out in a luxurious, comfortable environment with quiet areas for lounging inside and out, healthy snack options and a tropical buffet restaurant. No kids in this neighbourhood. I enjoyed my daily recumbent exercise bike rides pedaling through Paris and the French countryside.

The Entertainment Place is the spot for theatre productions, casino fun, comedy and jazz clubs, art auctions and an unbelievable, world-class ice skating show. We were here almost every night for top-notch, fun shows.

Finally, the Youth Zone brings action and fun

to children of all ages including the teen disco, video arcade and wait, there's more! The waterslides rival the best water parks. Basketball and soccer... Outdoor movies... Steel drum bands... Poolside DJs... All-you-can-lick ice cream at the self-serve station... Dive shop... Very tasty (all-hours) pizza... Jogging track... The list of places to visit and things to do is seemingly endless.

And just a word on the shopping on board. It's phenomenal! From high end boutiques to bazaar-style low cost sales every day, all duty and tax free.

Off-Broadway style Entertainment

The larger the ship the bigger and better the shows. We've enjoyed smaller ships and their classy and intimate entertainment but there's no comparison with what Harmony had to offer in its big stage performance of Grease that rivaled any Broadway performance. The singing, dancing and acting were all outstanding. The staging and costumes were spectacular. The show was far from the typical Broadway review that cruise lines staged for decades. This was the real deal!

Even the second big theatre production, Columbus, The Musical, was beyond expectations - funny and entertaining. Really a smash hit. The two ice shows featured world-class figure skaters and ice dancers most of whom excelled in the Olympics or International competitions. We couldn't believe the talent, on a ship yet!

Action for All Ages

Thrill seeking adventurer or simply young at heart -- the Harmony's got you covered. Our strategy was to go right for the popular zipline as soon as we got onboard and avoid the lines. While the rookie cruisers walked about not knowing where to begin we quickly dumped our bags and headed straight for the sports deck. Great move as there was almost no one waiting and we did it twice. Now this was no ride of a lifetime but it did take us high atop the centre of the ship and over a scary nine open decks of inside balconies. Short and sweet, we got our thrills.

From there we didn't waste a moment and skedaddled to the Flow Rider, a powerful jet stream to simulate surfing. Nikki watched oth-

ers get up and splash down for about 30 minutes till it was her turn. The instructors were fun and patient and she had plenty of time to get up on her knees on the boogie board, sliding from side to side. Again, great, safe fun in the hot sun. Amazing video opp!

Dining Experiences to Suit All Tastes

Although cruise lines are focused on upselling their specialty restaurants, compete to sign up the most famous chefs, renowned brands and unique dining experiences, rest assured that the standard options are way more than, well, standard. The main dining rooms offer ample choices for all tastes at every meal. Sometimes dressy and usually casual. Of course, the buffet dining choices are also plentiful throughout the day and are easy options if you can't think about changing out of shorts and T-shirt.

We ate all dinners except one in the Silk Dining Room where our very personable server treated us like royalty, remembering our names, preferences, likes and dislikes. We tried a larger table with older couples and mostly preferred a table for two where we had ample time to relax and dine at our leisure, enjoying every glorious bite, and always ending with a slight of hand or other trick by the adoring wait staff.

We'll Be Back

With so much to do on this colossal vessel I've almost forgotten to mention how much fun we had in St. Maarten, Labadee and San Juan, great ports with much to see and do (but we'll save that for another time).

If you time it right the value of cruising is unbeatable, sometimes around \$100 a day. When you think about the cost of meals, activities and entertainment you'd be hard pressed to find a resort competitive with the cost of cruising. Such was the case on Harmony of the Seas. It was no wonder that the Next Cruise area on the Promenade Deck was always busy. With 15 cruises under my belt I am so ready to book the next. And it might be back here on the Harmony of the Seas! ■

WWW.ROYALCARIBBEAN.COM





Barging Through Europe with Barge Lady Cruises

by Olivia Balsinger

The canals of Europe are the continent's veins - snaking through remote, countryside areas where the river and surrounding nature reign. My first experience truly understanding this heavily unexplored part of a continent I call home was on a Barge Lady Cruise, aboard the dually luxurious and intimate Barge Rosa.

Like many travelers, I did my due diligence in researching the company before booking my trip. I learned that "The Barge Ladies" founded a special niche in barge cruising about 34 years ago. What I had initially presumed to be a small company actually has created memories for passengers on some 50 barges throughout 30 canals within eight different countries. The company's owner, Ellen

Sack, known as "The Barge Lady," has employed both her daughters and a knowledgeable staff to introduce the world to barge cruising.

Stephanie, the company's marketing maven and Ellen's daughter, explained how her family became involved in such niche cruising. "In 1984, my mother, Ellen Sack, was a retail travel agent in Chicago. In her personal travels, she met a man who told her that he had taken a former cargo barge out of dry dock, was sailing it along the all-but-abandoned manmade canal system in France, and was basically serving wine to his friends while doing so," said Sack. "He asked her if she thought she could help him introduce and sell the experience to the North American market, and, drawing on her personal Francophilia and professional connections, she said yes. She sold out his season for 1985 and one boat became two and two boats became 20 and as of 2019 Barge Lady Cruises represents 50 vessels and 75 itineraries!"

"Ellen is the Grande Dame of the barging industry; my sister currently runs the business on a day-to-day basis and I conceptualize, implement, and manage all things pertain-

ing to marketing, promotions, and media. Ultimately, Ellen had a vision of prestige for the barging industry, [my sister] elevated the business into the well-oiled machine it is today, and I evangelize about why barge cruising is the best way to see Europe no one has heard of."

What is a barge cruise?

While the prospect of seeing this Europe no one has heard of sounds enticing, I know know what you are thinking: What is a barge cruise exactly?

It is important to first understand that throughout Europe, there are an intricate series of antique waterways - canals and rivers - which were once utilized for transporting cargo. The barges, once pivotal in the transportation endeavors, have been refurbished into floating boutique hotels, offering top service, interesting sightseeing, and gourmet cuisine.

"Known as 'barges', this type of vessel carries only between two to 20 passengers," explained Sack. "A dedicated, English-speaking crew accommodates guests both onboard and ashore; a private Chef crafts





regional and seasonal cuisine; a Tour Guide coordinates onshore excursions; a Hostess performs daily tasks; and a Captain expertly pilots the barge from mooring to mooring. Leisurely in pace and intimate in ambiance, almost all barges gently cruise approximately 50 miles over the course of a week at the canal speed limit of four miles per hour. The scenery is glorious, varying between pastoral vineyards, rustic farmlands, and verdant foliage. These factors differentiate barge cruising from any other type of boating or sailing as the experience is more intimate and personalized in terms of cultural access, culinary excellence, and authentic connections."

What Makes Barge Cruising Unique?

An entirely different experience than a gigantic cruising vessel or even a traditional river cruising ship, a barge cruise often holds between two and twenty passengers. This intimacy allows guests to not only bond with one another throughout meals and activities,



but also necessitates impeccably attentive service.

Many novice cruisers confuse barge cruises with river cruises for obvious reasons - both advertise themselves as small boats that can snake through Europe's rivers. So what is the difference? For one, barge cruising is often shorter - 6 days of sailing as opposed to the 7 to 21 nights of river cruises. While barge cruises sail down manmade canals and some rivers, river cruises exclusively stick to the latter. While barges only sail about 50 miles per day, river boats sail several hundreds of miles, often through multiple countries.

What is a typical day like onboard?

Before my voyage, I reached out to veteran barge cruise passengers for any pre-trip advice they could provide. One piece resonated above all else: "You will have the most delicious food at your fingertips the entire week. Eat lightly the week prior to boarding." Both me and my stomach were thankful for such poignant advice because the sheer amount of cuisine offered to guests was unlike any prior trip I'd been on.

Most all Barge Lady Cruises have a culinary and wine focus, beginning in the morning when guests wake up to the smell of fresh pastries from local bakers wafting into their cabins. A spread of yogurts, cheeses, fruits and cereals is also available for breakfast, as the barge slowly cruises down the canals, at

a speed of about four miles per hour.

By cruising at a slower speed than most guests walk, the barge becomes less a ship and more a moving hotel. Unlike a typical cruise, passengers have the freedom to roam off of the boat, exploring the stunning nature of the area by foot or on bike. The complimentary bicycle program was my favorite aspect of the barging experience, as I could leave the group for few hours and feel as though I was solo adventuring in villages that were reminiscent of the fairytale books I read as a child.

I would hope to build an appetite biking or walking, as lunch would also be a decadent spread of salads, quiches, local cheeses and main meat centered dishes, with a red or white expertly paired. Once satiated, there would be time to relax and enjoy the passing scenery before an afternoon tour. The tours would showcase a *mélange* of the cuisine and culture in the region. For example, one day I toured the medieval town of Nerac and its imposing chateau, where our group treaded in the footsteps of King of France Henry IV and Queen Margot. We then stopped at the Lapeyrate Estate for a tasting of their small batch Armagnac, further tying the area to its food and drink.

Dinner with the barge is always a colorful, gourmet occasion, with local ingredients being the forefront of the four-course menu. There is local cheese aplenty and wine is poured generously by the staff, precisely paired with each course. As Stephanie explained, "Dietary accommodations are handled with French flair; vegetarian, gluten-free, Paleo - having a private Chef who shops at local produce markets and purchases baked goods from tiny boulangeries and spends all day prepping and cooking means an extraordinary gourmet experience no matter what the dietary restriction."

The day ends as the stars begin to waltz across the sky, over the floating hotel. Stomachs full and feet tired, in mere hours the small of pastries will be wafting into passenger's rooms, as a new day meandering the canals with Barge Lady Cruises begins. ■

WWW.BARGELADYCRUISES.COM





SilverStar Resort

Staying and Playing in an Enchanted Mountain Village

Jennifer Merrick

"I'm in the pages of a fairy tale," I thought when I first set eyes on SilverStar Resort in Okanagan, British Columbia.

Soft powdered snow fell softly; its pure white hue contrasting against the colourful blue, purple and gold buildings of the compact village. Evergreens of all sizes were so covered with cotton-ball-like snow that the trees looked like ghosts. Young families, cool snowboarders and retired folks all mingled. Some carried their skis and others their coffees. But nobody was in a hurry. Best of all, as the resort was located half-way up the mountain, we were right in the middle of a peaked landscape with view after enchanting view of the Monashee mountain range.

Magical. But one can only gawk for so long. Now it was time to start playing in this snowy fairy land.

Ski

The sheer size of the ski terrain with four distinct mountain faces and 132 runs meant that slopes and the lifts are never crowded. Nordic skiing is top-notch with joint trail networks of Sovereign Lake Nordic Club and SilverStar Mountain resort offering over 105km of daily groomed trails. For thrill seekers, the back side of the mountain provides 1,900 acres of steep, black and double-black runs. What every skier appreciates is the champagne powder snow that the resort is famous for (a whopping 23 feet falls annually).

Stay

Hotels, lodges, condos and holiday homes are some of the numerous accommodation options available at SilverStar. We stayed at the Snowbird Lodge, a deluxe condo unit with full kitchen, fireplace and my fave feature -- a private hot tub. Amenities also included a 24-seat theatre, gymnasium, kid's playground and a ski-in/ski-out location in which you can step out of the door directly onto the slopes.

Celebrate

"We are so excited to host our second annual SEISMIC Spring Mountain Festival next March," said Chantelle Deacon, SilverStar's communication manager. The festival brings together sports, art, culture and community into one seismic 10-day event. 2020 will be bigger and better with competitive action on the slopes, as well as art, live music and tasting and dinner events throughout the village. A happily ever after ending to the 2020 season to be sure. ■

WWW.SKISILVERSTAR.COM



The Burrard Hotel

by Jessica Percy Campbell

Photos: Martin Tessler

With a SkyTrain stop never more than a few blocks away, Vancouver is an eco-conscious and pedestrian-friendly destination for both business and leisure travelers alike. Situated in the city's exciting West End, The Burrard is ideally located for exploring the city on foot. Fitness buffs will also rejoice at the complimentary Steve Nash gym passes and cruiser bikes supplied by the hotel.

Once a 1950's motor inn, the overall design stays true to its roots with retro neon signage and courtyard palm trees reminiscent of old Hollywood movies. The atmosphere is casual-cool, where guests can unwind in their delightful patio garden. Striking a balance between classic and contemporary, newly-renovated rooms are stylized with hipster chic décor and modern amenities.

Looking for nightlife? Granville's classic theaters and Yaletown's local pubs are steps away, and animal lovers will appreciate that this fun and funky hotel is pet-friendly, too. ■

WWW.THEBURRARD.COM





The Hotel Parque Central, Havana

by Steve Gillick

The best place in Havana to feel the pulse of the city is from the rooftop of the Hotel Parque Central. Guests can relax by the pool sipping a pretty good Mojito or Cuba Libre, or they can sit near the railing and tap their feet to the enthusiastic band offering tunes that range from “Chan Chan” to “Quizás, Quizás, Quizás”.

For those dreamily looking over that rooftop railing, they can see the new, luxury Hotel Manzana Kempinski next door or across Paseo de Prado, is the historic Hotel Inglaterra, next to the lavish neo-Baroque architecture of the Gran Teatro de la

Habana, which in turn is next to the great dome of El Capitolio, the Cuba legislative building that resembles the U.S. Capital building in Washington D.C.

Right in front of the Hotel Parque Central, is the actual Park. In 1905, the statue of Queen Isabella II of Spain was removed and in its place the city erected Cuba’s first statue celebrating the achievements of Jose Marti, the poet, writer and fighter for Cuban Independence.

And when guests look directly from the rooftop down to the street, they see a verita-

ble artist’s palette of pink, yellow, blue, red, and green classic 1950’s cars that have been converted to taxis.

While the rooftop is a popular retreat at the end of a busy day, it can also be a tranquil oasis, first thing in the cool morning air, when you’re alone taking photos of the spectacular scenery.

The 5-star Iberostar Hotel Parque Central is comfortable from the moment you enter. The Reception desk is smiling and friendly. The large, open lobby is filled with plants, couches, tables and chairs for drinks, snacks and meals or just catching up on your emails. A grand staircase leads to a second floor gallery of eye-catching contemporary art.

The main restaurant off the lobby serves tasty buffet style breakfasts and dinners with a good selection of Cuban and Internationally-inspired cuisine. Meals can also be enjoyed on the rooftop.

My hotel room was large and warmly decorated with a King bed and all the amenities that one would expect from a luxury property, including a small balcony.

Aside from the visual splendour in the immediate vicinity of the hotel, the location is perfect for those intent on discovering Havana by foot, bicycle or taxi. It’s only a 15 minute walk to the historic Plaza Vieja or to sit at the bar of La Bodeguita del Medio and quaff mojitos, as the likes of Ernest Hemmingway and Nat King Cole did in days gone by, and it’s about a 25 minute walk to the Malecon, the famous seaside boardwalk. But I will admit that returning to the hotel in a shiny 1948 Chevrolet, at the end of a busy day of exploring the streets of Havana, is a pretty cool way to return ‘home’. ■

WWW.IBEROSTAR.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



Banyan Tree Bangkok

by Michael Morcos

A warm smile greeted me and handed me my room key, having just arrived after two long flights, the room number did not make sense at first. I asked "52?" As in the 52nd floor, is that the top floor? I laughed to myself. 'No, there are a few more. To memory, this is a high as I have ever stayed and the first thing I did after entering the room was pull open the curtains and bam! I was higher than the birds. The site was incredible; Bangkok was wonderfully lit up for miles around, as far as the eye could see.



It was only then that I realized, I had a magnificent, beautifully decorated suite. Looking closer, I had an all-marble luxury washroom, a large sitting area by the window, a business desk, a large mini-bar section and a fine furnished bed and night table.

In my fatigue, I just knew this two-week trip would be an amazing experience, surely a great start!

The Banyan Tree Bangkok, as all the hotels I would visit on this tour would prove to be destinations on their own. Served on the lobby level in a tropical garden setting, the morning breakfast buffet was as opulent as one can find. The whole experience was so amazing and well done that it is hard to believe you were in a mega-city. Enjoying handmade sushi, steamed dumplings, and freshly squeezed tropical juices was divine and not something I was used to but an excellent way to start the day.

The opulence continued in the Saffron Sky Garden where we had drinks and ordered a selection of appetizers. We thought the food was delicious and the best part of being in the outdoor roof terrace area is that you can enjoy the magnificent. Likewise, both the Vertigo and Moon bar restaurant were lively and had a great vibe. ■



WWW.BANYANTREE.COM

Canadian World Traveller Fall 2019



Anantara Layan Phuket Resort

by Michael Morcos

If you ever have a need to run away and hide, this would be the place to go! The Anantara Layan resort, located in the earth-bound paradise of Phuket, is just the place to rejuvenate and recharge the mind, body and soul. That was exactly what I did at the spa, swimming pool, beach, gym and my decadent gated private-pool-villa.

Here is a summary of a perfect day in the sun at Anantara!



Wake up and take a dip in your very own private plunge pool, head for a healthy buffet breakfast, sit on the beach, go to the gym, have a wonderful tasty lite lunch, get a soothing message, have a drink (or two), read in your manicured lawn and garden villa, go for a ride to the vil-

lage to meet locals and then repeat the following day!

We did experience a few of the unique offerings at this magnificent retreat. We spent one afternoon taking Thai cooking class with the resident expert. We also had a fantastic two hour massage tailored to our needs by an experienced professional masseuse. Talk about a special day!

Needless to say the Anantara Layan Phuket Resort is one incredible place, one of the best beach resorts (maybe the best) I have ever stayed at and perfect in so many ways. The staff was genuinely happy to serve you. The resort's location, on a secluded part of the island with its richly decorated garden fountains and private beach offered a feeling of peace and harmony, while the beautiful villa was perfectly relaxing. ■



WWW.ANANTARA.COM/EN/LAYAN-PHUKET



137 Pillars House Chiang Mai

by Michael Morcos

Mystry solved! Over drinks, I would have finally figured out what was puzzling me since I first knew I would be staying at this resort. The hotel manager made it clear the oldest standing building on the grounds (the one we were in) had 137 Pillars and thus the name of this ever-charming hotel.

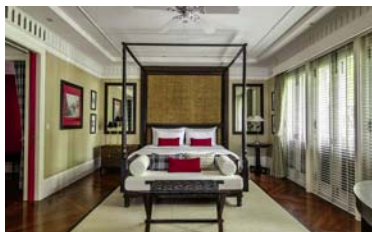
This property was built centered around the historic teak house of the British Borneo Company constructed in the late 19th century. It has a claim to fame as well, as it served as a residence for the son of Anna Leonowens, of *The King And I* fame! At the time, the builders created a property with a great attention to detail and it has been wonderfully restored, including the two restaurants and a bar, as well as a wonderful collection of historic photographs.



The first thoughts after arriving at the 137 Pillars was of tranquility but that changed to sadness and disbelief when I entered my room as I thought to myself, 'I only have two nights here, such a tragedy!' With so much to do in Chiang Mai and so little time I was to adore every waking moment in this handsome place.

My room was not short on anything, and in reality, it had it all in abundance, including richly decorated bedrooms, a large changing area and bathroom and the best of all would be found on opposite ends of the room.

To the front was a large wooden balcony with a comfortable seating area, a large (tropic size) overhead fan and a magnificent view of the grounds and manicured flower garden. I could sit there for hours with a book. To the back was another balcony with an outdoor private shower, which was so wonderful that it made me wonder if anybody actually needed the one inside. ■



WWW.137PILLARSCHIANGMAI.COM



137 Pillars Residences & Suites Bangkok

by Michael Morcos

On our last day in Thailand, we would stay at the 137 Pillars sister property to the one in Chiang Mai and when landing at the airport, I had a plan. Check in, change clothing and head out to see some sights and do some last minute shopping. My initiative was shattered. Right after checking in, my personal concierge brought me up to the private all suites floor. Leading me into my room, all bets were off. I was not going anywhere today. This suite was downright gorgeous!

Smiling from ear to ear, I was shown the rooms and all its many amenities including a smart phone that with a push of a button would have the services of just about anything I needed from the concierge and staff.

I twirled around the many different rooms trying to figure out what to do next, so much to love here. With an amazing well-decorated living room, comfortable bedroom, well-appointed bathroom that included a party size bathtub and to me, the best of all was the large balcony with breathtaking views of Bangkok.



Outside my room was yet another world to discover including the best roof top infinity pool I have ever swam in that gives a dazzling panoramic view of the city from three sides.

Set in the heart of one of the most fashionable areas of the city and is next to the massive, fun-filled EM-District shopping area. The best part is the night-time view from the pool and our balcony. Truly mesmerizing.



To conclude, the 137 Pillars Residences & Suites Bangkok is dangerous to Bangkok travelers. It seduces you and holds you captive. So much so you might not see much of this dynamic city, worse yet you might stay too long and miss your flight home. ■

WWW.137PILLARSBANGKOK.COM

A Trio of Budapest Hotels

by Ilona Kauremszky

Re-imagined Budapest Marriott Hotel lauds duo celebrations

One place to soak in the views and experience the bustling capital of Budapest is to book an overnight stay at the Budapest Marriott Hotel.

It helps that the Budapest capital and the iconic Marriott are both having their grand moments. Recently Budapest has acquired the title, "Best European Destination" with record breaking arrival numbers of visitors flocking to see venerable sites in the former Eastern bloc country.

On the other hand this 364-room property is also marking its own grand moments. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the building's opening and its 25th anniversary under the renowned Marriott brand.

Situated on the Pest side of the Danube River the Budapest Marriott Hotel provides guests with a great location for city sightseeing in a recently renovated venue that's big with the conference crowd and leisure guests who enjoy Marriott services and loyalty perks.

Ever since the Communistic sixties when this property debuted on the banks of the Duna steps away from the Hungarian Parliament and the Vigado Concert Hall, the hotel has been welcoming guests.

While the facade has retained that emblematic vintage look expect a new heightened sense of modern as you walk into the sleek sophisticated interiors. ■

WWW.MARRIOTT.COM/BUDAPEST



A Crown-worthy Sleepover at the New Kempinski Hotel Corvinus Budapest

Celebrations have not stopped at one Budapest luxury hotel.

The latest involves a yummy bevvie of the finest French champagne in the house. Happy Hour otherwise known as "Ignite the Night" here consists of a saber-toting champagne

swordsman ready to brandish a swooping arm to miraculously crack open a bottle by sabrage in one clean swoop.

"Egészségedre" (To your health as the English translation,) summons the experienced sommelier at Hotel Kempinski Corvinus Budapest.

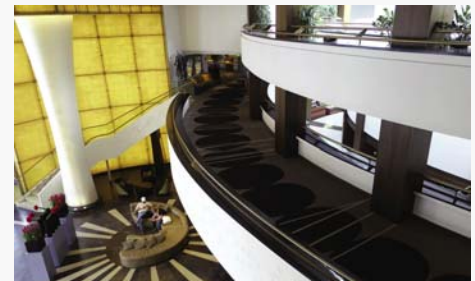
In 2017 the property which has 316 rooms and 35 suites and its mothership, Kempinski both celebrated grand fetes. For Budapest it was the 25th year celebration of its debut opening as the posh property in the heart of the Hungarian capital opened to huge fanfare in 1992. For Kempinski Hotels, well Europe's oldest luxury hotel group marked its 120th anniversary.

Now this past June the World Travel Awards

has honoured this leading hotel for the fifth time as Hungary's Leading Hotel.

Guests continue to clink their glasses.

The luxury hotel has completed a major room renovation, part of a 12 million Euro investment project. The new Kempinski Corvinus



One Budapest hotel has a soft spot for those who enjoy the finer things in life.

Look no further than the heavenly great Four Seasons Hotel Gresham Palace Budapest.

In 2004 the magnificent Art Nouveau property finally opened its doors on the banks of the Danube River after the completion of an intensive five year \$110-million restoration.

Considered one of the most outstanding examples of Art Nouveau in the world the original building was built in 1906 for the Gresham Life Assurance Company which was the U.K's largest life insurance firm in the late 1800s.

Before you wander through the stylized iron Peacock Gates you can see a gold adorned face of a distinguished chap on the hotel's facade. The golden boy is none other than the late Thomas Gresham who was a British Lord

and founder of the London Stock Exchange's predecessor, the Royal Exchange.

The chosen location held significant bragging rights too. In 1867 Emperor Franz Joseph it is said wore the Holy Crown of King Saint Stephen, who was Hungary's founder and sat on his horse by the bank of present day Széchenyi István tér and swung his coronation sword to declare Hungary as part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

Fast forward four decades. Gresham financiers built this jewel in the crown to show-off the company's power and wealth. No scrimping on details here. Lavish courtyard gates, ceramic porcelain tiles, stained-glass windows and spacious accommodations were used as guestrooms for an A-list of guests and later as the company's headquarters.

In the Golden Age of Budapest, the Gresham Palace became a cultural hub. Glitterati, thespians, academics and writers – everyone who's anyone lingered at the Gresham coffee

house, the Gresham-Venezia Cafe while nightly entertainment at the celebrated Podium Cabaret quickly rivaled other popular European cabarets.

Despite the hub's near destruction in World War 2, stories float on how the patrons continued to enjoy their coffee, conversing and reading as the bullets and bombings raged outside, showing a testament to the Hungarian temperament.

The Gresham which has survived two world wars, the Hungarian Revolution and the neglect endured under Communism has once again become the Belle of the Ball in the Pearl of the Danube.

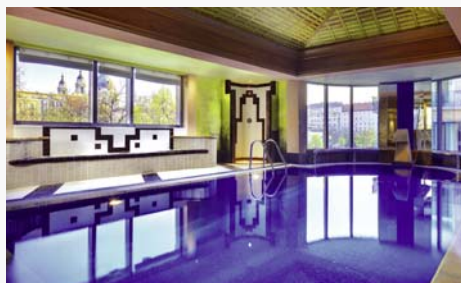
This year marks the 15th birthday to one of Europe's newest Grand Dames. Fittingly, anyone can feel like royalty. ■

WWW.FOURSEASONS.COM/BUDAPEST



redefines luxury with its residential style ambience. Find the latest technological requirements for the design-savvy, discerning traveler.

We stayed in the newly renovated Grand Deluxe Room on the fifth floor. The room had suite qualities to it from the range of amenities to the extra seating area and double closet space. Mornings began with either Mr. Nespresso a.k.a. the Nespresso coffeemaker or a cappuccino order for our java jolt. The



experience made you feel like you stepped into a refined setting as it is.

For more bragging rights, book an overnight stay at the Royal Suite Corvinus. You'll quickly see why this exclusive suite won this year's World Travel Awards as Hungary's Leading Hotel Suite. It's aptly named due to the provenance of the hotel's name, Corvinus. Named after one of Hungary's kings – King Matthias Corvinus. You can see the cathedral in Buda which bears his name too. Hungarians refer to King Matthias as "the just king" for his heroic acts of charity during his reign (1458-1490).

You don't have to go far to immerse in art and relaxation. This Kempinski location has its own unique art gallery specializing in modern Hungarian art.

On relaxation head to the Kempinski SPA. Guests can use the change room facility or arrive by bathrobe via a special elevator for

spa access. Once at the spa you can enjoy the heated pool with a built-in Jacuzzi wave system to help you swim your laps.

A modern interpretation of the regal things in life, the revived Kempinski Corvinus Budapest maintains its prize win with stiff hotel competition around all its corners. ■

WWW.KEMPINSKI.COM/EN/BUDAPEST/HOTEL-CORVINUS/



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



You're as good as gold at
Fairmont Royal York's reimagined Gold Floor
by Cherie DeLory

Opposite Union Station, the Fairmont Royal York is unquestionably Toronto's most conveniently situated address for out of town guests. And for staycation guests arriving on bicycles, I recommend the valet service. No sooner had I handed over my helmet and Raleigh to the bellhop I was stepping inside a gold embossed express elevator to the private Fairmont Gold lounge on the 18th floor. This is where my luxury "hotel within a hotel" experience begins. I was greeted at the reception area and shown to my Fairmont Gold one-bedroom suite, a sleek and spacious 540-square-foot residence with separate living area, personal bar with Nespresso machine, a four-piece spa bathroom with all-natural essential oil aromatherapy shower pods by SkinJay, and not one, but two 55-inch LCD HDTV screens.

The boutique Fairmont Gold suites, encompassing floors 12 through 18, and the lounge (formerly the Upper Canada Room ballroom) were remodelled by superstar Toronto designer Alexandra Champalimaud. It's part of a larger redesign project at the landmark Royal York, that celebrated its 90th anniversary in June with the reveal of the main lobby trans-

formation, accented by two new signature dining venues, Clockwork cocktail lounge and Reign Restaurant.

The grandness of this Chateausque-style hotel cannot be understated. Its handsome limestone exterior and unique sea-foam hued copper roof structure frames the Toronto skyline and offers an inviting reflection on our city's past and present. In its heyday, this Canadian Pacific Railway hotel was the tallest hotel in the British Commonwealth at 28 stories. The glamorous redesign infuses a modern polish, while staying true to the hotel's original 1920s Art Deco aesthetic.

Fairmont Gold guests are assigned a personal concierge to curate their stay. If you want a turn down service that includes chocolate on your pillow, no problem. I used the pool and steam room amenities and soaked up the atmosphere in the lounge. I enjoyed getting my hands on the vintage Jane Austen book collection in the lounge's library, and there's always tea and coffee available.

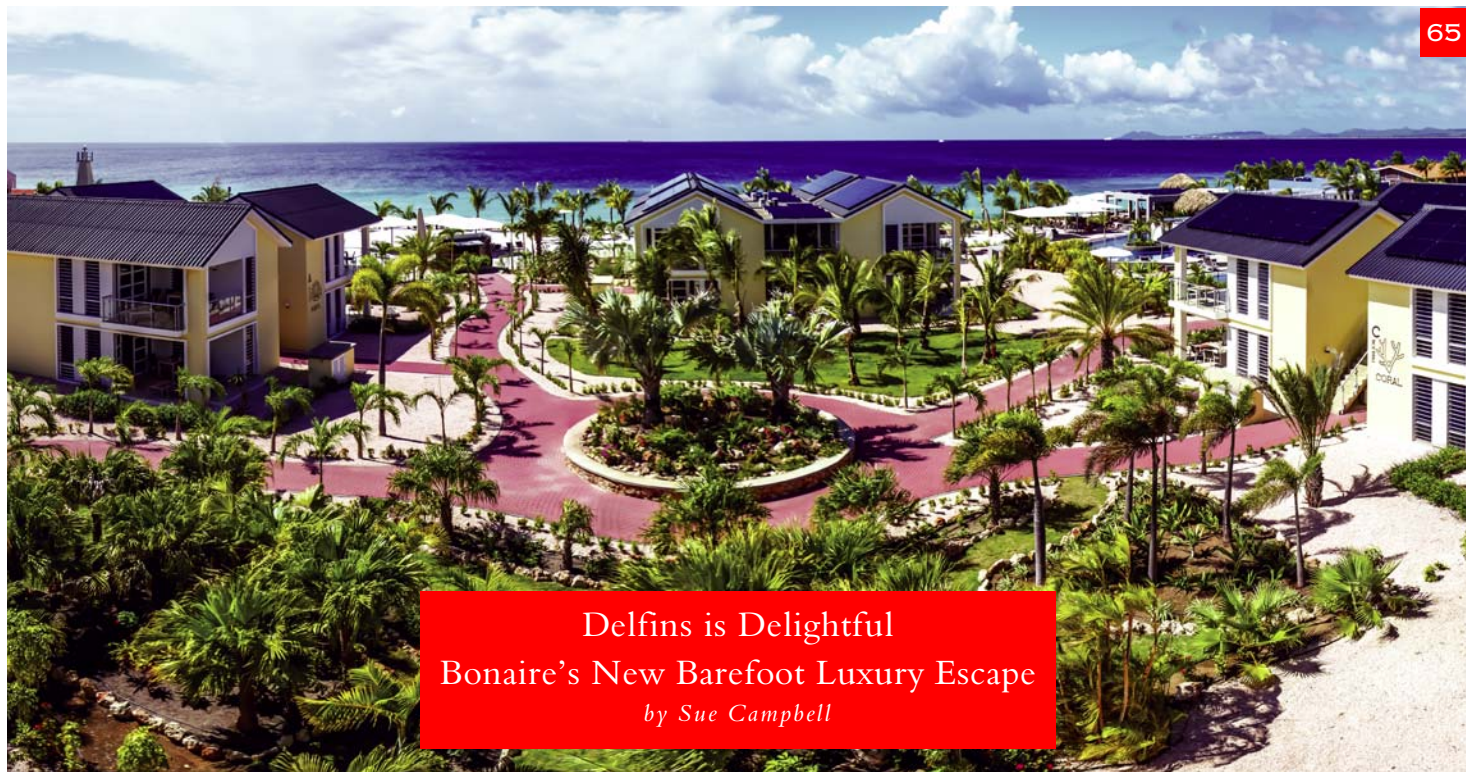
The lounge offers four generous dining experiences daily in the open gourmet kitchen, which overlooks the hotel's rooftop herb gar-

den and apiary. There's the deluxe continental breakfast, including smoothies and organic cold-pressed Green Glow juice, an afternoon dessert presentation with a selection of scones and cookies, and Hors d'oeuvres from 5:00pm to 7:00pm. During my stay the chef prepared salmon tartare in person. The night before they served oysters. Dessert is available from 8:00pm to 10:00pm. Tonight it was a decadent Tiramisu. An industrial Art Deco inspired Nespresso machine, fully stocked beverage fridge, and honour bar round out the service. Try Dillon's 14th In Line Gin, made with botanicals grown in the herb garden.

Between lolling in the lounge and trips to the Health Club, I explored the "city within a city", an expression that once described the palatial hotel, and it still holds. To think, it had its own CPR radio station on the top floor; No doubt broadcasting live into the glittering ballrooms and concert hall for lavish weddings and special events. From one golden era to the next, inside these walls it's easy to be treated like gold. ■

WWW.FAIRMONT.COM





Delfins is Delightful
Bonaire's New Barefoot Luxury Escape
by Sue Campbell

The little Dutch Caribbean island of Bonaire has long been known as a diver's paradise, so historically, most resorts were built to be no-nonsense, casual diver-focused stays. But now there's a more elevated choice. The new Delfins Beach Resort has managed to capture all the best things that Bonaire has to offer and wrapped it up in a delightful upscale package for those seeking a side of luxury along with their underwater enjoyment. And though they do have a top-notch dive shop and operator on site, you need not be an underwater enthusiast to thoroughly enjoy this property. There's plenty of topside pleasures as well.

Sprawling along some of the most stunning aqua waters you'll ever see, seriously- the bright turquoise out front looks like Mother Nature has been playing with photo filters- this resort offers something for everyone. From chic, compact studios and sleek one-and-two-bedroom apartments style rooms replete with kitchenettes, to stunning luxury villas that can sleep 6 or 8 people, they cater to all kinds of travellers. Romantics, families, solo guests, even corporate groups will all

find ideal accommodations there. And of course, divers will too, as there is fabulous shore diving right off their beach! No boat required. They have also partnered with the islands' premier kite-surfing school for those wishing to learn that exhilarating sport right on site.

For those who like to luxuriate in a pool environment, their wonderful water circuit snakes around deluxe cabana beds and a pool bar, and there is also a stand-alone children's pool. For sun worshippers, the brilliant white sandy strip out front provides plenty of hammocks, day beds, and lounges, and there's also great snorkeling right off their pier. And you might spot some wild dolphins passing by as they often do at this location; in fact, that was the inspiration behind the resort's name. ("Delfins" is Dutch for Dolphins.)

For light bites, there's a funky food truck, and a casual surfside bar/restaurant emporium that has some surprisingly trendy items like a flight of ceviche along with standard lunch fare like burgers. But the piece de resistance for dining there is their signature seaside

enclave called The Brass Boer.

Foodies in the know have been descending upon this spot as it's owned by Michelin Star winning Dutch Chef Jonnie Boer and his wife Thérèse- long time fans and frequent visitors to Bonaire. They are the co-owners of De Librij- touted as the very best restaurant in the Netherlands. This culinary powerhouse duo brought inspirations from their home restaurant and incorporated authentic local island flavors to offer up an incredibly unique gourmet experience. The menu is all about highly creative shareables, and the excellent wine list was personally curated by Thérèse herself.

But one of the best things about this entire resort complex is that no matter how upscale the offerings, the vibe is never overly formal. Delfins embraces the true spirit of Bonaire which has always been known as a lovely laid-back island that extends a warm and sunny welcome to all. ■

WWW.DELFINSBEACHRESORT.COM



St. Regis, Toronto

by Jennifer Merrick



Champagne: in victory one deserves it; in defeat one needs it. — Napoleon

The French emperor enjoyed his bubbly so much that his cavalry would open bottles on horseback, a difficult task to be sure. To accomplish this, a horseman would grab a sabre from his belt and slice through the neck of the bottle with one clean swipe.

And so began the art of sabrage, a tradition that continues to be carried out worldwide, and one that has been embraced by the St. Regis Hotel brand in its Evening Sabering Ritual. We were delighted to witness this ceremony at the St. Regis Hotel in Toronto, the first Canadian location for this illustrious brand.

"Our founding father, Jacob Astor, and his family would sabre a bottle of champagne to celebrate the end of the work day and welcome the beginning of the evening," explained the sommelier to the crowd gathered in the Astor Lounge. In the luxurious, yet comfortable, ambiance of the lounge with its

fireplace, sofas and marbled bar, we were more than ready for the evening to start.

After explaining the history of the sabrage and reading the Napoleon quote, the sommelier expertly slid the knife over the neck, severing the bottle cleanly with not a pop of the cork to be heard. Applause and cocktails followed, and we indulged in a Negroni Sbagliato, consisting of Campari, Sweet Vermouth and Champagne (which somehow tasted better sabred). Our evening at the St. Regis had officially kicked off.

The spacious suite (almost half of the hotel's 256 rooms are suites) echoed the rich comfort of the lounge with leather sofas, stately desk and marbled and crystal accents. The bathrooms were particularly blissful with an oversized tub, heated marble floors and a television embedded in the mirror.

Large windows looked out to Toronto's bustling downtown core, which was coming to life in the fading sun. The city lights shone brighter by the moment, beckoning us to explore.

The Regis location at Bay and Adelaide made it easy to do just that, as many of the city's most well-known attractions, including the Eaton Centre, CN Tower, Roger's Center and live theatre venues, were in walking distance. We checked out a newish addition to Toronto's culinary scene –Assembly Chef's Hall. This upscale food hub featured 18+ eateries, two bars and a coffee shop under one roof. So whatever cuisine you happen to be craving, there's a good chance of walking away satisfied. We certainly were with our brisket sandwich from Cherry Street BBQ and Shoyu Kotteri Tsukemen at Ramen Isshin.

Back at St. Regis, we took advantage of the sizable saltwater pool, which was perched up on the 32nd floor, offering commanding views of the city that stretched out to Lake Ontario. It was an indulgent end to a luxurious stay that was certainly worth toasting to. Now, where did I put that sabre? ■

WWW.STREGIS.COM





The Park MGM Las Vegas

by Alexandra Cohen

With its excellent central location on the Las Vegas Strip, Park MGM offers guests direct access to what is quickly becoming the city's premier entertainment district, featuring the T-Mobile Arena, The Park, and Park Theater, which mostly recently houses the residencies of both Lady Gaga and Janet Jackson.

Formerly known as the Monte Carlo Hotel, the Park MGM comprises two new distinct experiences: Park MGM, and a Las Vegas version of the renowned NoMad, a stand-alone 293-room hotel encompassing the tower's top four floors. There are many extraordinary dining experiences on site.

The Park MGM has 2,700 guestrooms and suites, intended to give off a residential feel. There are three distinctive guest suite types: Nighthawk, Nightingale and Skylark. The Peacock Hospitality Suite features 700 square feet of social and entertainment space with an adjoining guest room.



We stayed in a beautiful King bedroom and could not have been happier with the accommodations. Immediately upon entering the room, we noticed the residential feel, complete with a lovely and comfortable window seat overlooking the swimming pool complex. The fresh bathroom offered a spacious walk-in shower. There are bedside outlets for phones and computers, blackout shades, a laptop-sized electronic in-room safe, a hair dryer, a television with cable and movie service, high speed Wi-Fi, and both self-check-in and mobile check out. We would gladly return to this hotel for another stay. .

The pools at Park MGM offer a highly relaxing escape from the hustle and bustle of the Vegas Strip. There are three pools - the South, East, and North Pools - as well as 12 cabanas, lounge areas, multiple bars, and a spa. Poolside food and beverages can be delivered directly to your seat as you take in the sun. Twelve private cabanas serve up VIP treatment with deluxe amenities.

During our trip, we took the time to explore some of the other MGM properties in Las Vegas by spending some time at their pools.

The Aria Resort and Casino pool complex features the only ellipse-shaped pools in Las Vegas. For added privacy and amenities, guests can reserve one of a fleet of cabanas where Wi-Fi, shaded dining tables, and food and drink service are available. Visitors can also order poolside beverages and meals via

the Breeze Café and Pool Bar, which features a wide menu of dishes and drinks. It was truly a beautiful and relaxing way to spend the day. Of the 4,000 rooms, more than 100 at this resort are handicapped accessible.

The other MGM pool that we had the pleasure of experiencing during our trip was the Mandalay Beach and we were truly blown away by what this property had to offer. The Mandalay Beach features an 11-acre tropical water environment, featuring more than 2,700 tons of sand, a signature 1.6-million-gallon wave pool, a lazy river, four swimming pools, a jogging track, as well as private gazebos, cabanas and beach bungalows. The open-air Beach Bar & Grill serves up American cuisine, such as sandwiches, wraps, adult beverages, and other beach favorites. Over the summer, you can also take in a concert series held on its outdoor stages, which overlooks the wave pool. ■

WWW.PARKMGM.COM



Las Vegas Culinary Delights

by Alexandra Cohen



Mercato, which translates to “Kitchen of the Market.” Meet, fish, cheese, as well as other delicacies, can be purchased as is and cooked at home, or can be cooked in front of your eyes at each individual restaurant. Six different fresh counters are available for visitors.

Brunch at the Primrose

On our first day in Las Vegas, we had the pleasure of enjoying a delicious brunch at Primrose, found in the lobby of the Park MGM, with the option of outdoor seating with a view of the hotel’s pool complex. The talented culinary team uses fresh seafood and vegetables to highlight menu items. With a distinctively residential feel, the restaurant includes a series of cushioned seats, each with different patterns. While Primrose offers dinner selections as well, as we were quite impressed with their brunch offerings, including classics like three eggs any style but also featuring an eggs benedict topped with blue crab. Those interested in a boozy brunch can add on an all-you-can-drink option of mimosas or rosé.

Best Friend

Los Angeles culinary legend Roy Choi debuted his Koreatown-inspired restaurant, Best Friend, at the Park MGM. Having now experienced it myself, I can say that Best Friend is more than simply a tasty meal - it is a dining experience! The drink menu includes offerings of wine and sake, as well as both classic cocktails and 80s-inspired drinks, including the Fizzy Navel, which we very much enjoyed at the start of our meal. We also tasted what our waiter described as some of their most popular dishes, including the tasty kogi shirt-rib tacos, their mixed tempura appetizer, and the garlic jidori chicken BBQ, all of which was delicious. The menu, however, is diverse enough to satisfy any culinary preferences.

When in search of a holiday, there are not too many places higher on my list than Las Vegas. With more than 42 million visitors and nearly 24,000 conventions annually, this place has everything that a vacationer could possibly ask for: concerts, shows, sports, shopping, nightlife, golf courses, spas, adventure activities, luxury accommodations and fabulous dining experiences

Here are some recommendations:

Eataly Las Vegas

The dining highlight of Park MGM is without a doubt Eataly Las Vegas), a 40,000-square-foot culinary destination found at Park MGM’s main entrance. Eataly is a vibrant space that transports you to the streets of Italy, featuring unique food counters, bars, and cafes, all helmed by Executive Chef Nicole Brisson. A fascinating aspect of the Eataly experience is referred to as Cucina del





Primrose

Sake Rok

Sake Rok, located at The Park complex directly across the street from Park MGM, combines Japan's vibrant pop culture and fashion scene with over-the-top theatrics. A host calls out to people as they eat, joking around, encouraging them to down their sake bombs, and occasionally belting out a tune. The menu boasts a variety of playful Japanese favorites: we started off with some edamame before trying an appetizer order of beef satay, the volcano sushi roll and an order of the miso-glazed sea bass. For dessert, we tasted a unique dessert entitled "honey toast". Other newer menu items include pork belly, shrimp risotto and the ronin roll, which is a fried sushi roll.

Sadelle's at the Bellagio

The Bellagio recently welcomed Sadelle's, SoHo's popular vintage-style restaurant to the resort's list of dining experiences. The location overlooks the Bellagio Conservatory, which features an ever-changing set of artistic displays. Throughout the day and night, impressive presentations of hand-rolled bagels, lox towers, chopped salads, sandwiches and other favorites can be ordered. Mainstays from the original New York City location – such as the Spicy Fried Chicken with acacia honey and coleslaw – join new signature supper offerings created by the culinary team, including the Grilled Branzino with Meyer lemon and sesame spinach and a New York-style Ribeye with smothered onions. We very much enjoyed the tomato cream soup appetizer, as well as the tuna tartare, followed by the generously sized and flavorful garlic chicken. The restaurant is open for break-



Sadelle's

fast, lunch, and dinner Monday through Sunday from 6 a.m. – midnight.

TAO Las Vegas

Having previously experienced the restaurant TAO in New York City, we were thrilled to get a reservation at their 40,000 square foot restaurant, located at the Venetian-Resort-Hotel Casino. TAO opened in New York City in 2000 and has retained its status as a hot spot, attracting celebrities and sports figures alike. TAO Las Vegas, which debuted in 2005, is a multi-faceted and multi-story "Asian City", which houses a restaurant, banquet facilities, a lounge, a nightclub and a seasonal beach. During our visit, we tasted several appetizer offerings, including the spicy tuna tartare on crispy rice, the king crab California sushi roll and the lobster and shrimp spring roll paired with spicy pineapple sauce. Next, we had one of their signature dishes (and our personal favorite!), the Chilean sea bass satay with wok roasted asparagus and a miso glaze. TAO also offers an extensive menu of delicious specialty cocktails, including the TAO-tini, Lychee Martini as well as sake flights specifically designed to complement TAO's menu. For dessert, try their elaborate and large fortune cookie, which includes decadent milk chocolate and white chocolate mousse.

Hell's Kitchen

The world's first Gordon Ramsay Hell's Kitchen Restaurant is an experience like no other. Drawing inspiration from the global hit reality television show starring world-renowned Chef Gordon Ramsay, guests will feel like they really are on the studio set. Located in front of Caesars Palace, the restaurant seats more than 300 guests. The Red and Blue kitchens, similar to the two teams featured on the TV show, serve up modern lunch and dinner menus, including Hell's Kitchen signature dishes made with the highest quality ingredients. Several of the most successful signature menu items and recipes featured on the television show can be experienced during lunch and dinner, including: Pan Seared Scallops, Lobster Risotto, Beef Wellington, Truffle Arancini,



Hell's Kitchen



TAO

Brick Pressed Chicken and Crispy Skin Salmon. Special menu items direct from the show will be added as new episodes air. We also ordered the absolutely delicious rack of lamb and filet mignon. Not to be missed for dessert is the famous sticky toffee pudding - a true highlight.

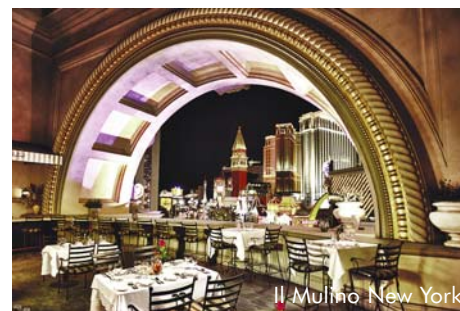
Il Mulino New York

The best word to describe the dining experience that accompanies every meal at the 17 Il Mulino New York locales in the US is "elegance." Such was precisely the case at their Vegas spot at The Forum Shops at Caesars.

Prior to receiving your menu, a cheese steward delivers some delicious Grana Padano to the table. Following this, you are also brought complimentary hors d'oeuvres and several offerings of Italian bread. While there is great pleasure in taking your time in such a restaurant, they also now offer pre and post theatre menus.

After enjoying some cheese, focaccia, and Italian bread, we began our meal with two delicious appetizers: a burrata and tomato salad, as well as breaded eggplant, stuffed with shrimp and lobster and topped off with cheese and a creamy pink vodka sauce. For our main course, we enjoyed the rack of lamb, as well as our personal favorite: Langostinos served on a bed of mushroom risotto. For dessert, we enjoyed their tiramisu, perhaps the best that we have ever had. The meal is completed with a small glass of limoncello. ■

WWW.LASVEGASTOURISM.COM



Il Mulino New York

Huangshan Gems

Xidi and Hongcun Attract Artists and Poets

by Habeeb Salloum, M.S.M.





“Since you are here in Huangshan, you must visit our two traditional villages, Xidi and Hongcun. They are little gems of elegance and tradition.” A guide advised when I asked him his favourite attractions in the region. We had already made plans to visit these villages and his advice reinforced our decision.

Both Xidi and Hongcun villages rest in the foothills of the Huangshan (Yellow) Mountain. They lay amid a landscape of greenery, dominated by bamboo forests and fields of corn, mulberry, rice and tea. They, as well as the Yellow Mountain, are on the itinerary of almost all tourists who travel to this region in China.

Early the next morning, we walked Xidi's stone-paved streets and alleyways, glorying in China's past history. Like its sister, Hongcun, the village dates back to the Sang Dynasty (960 - 1279 A.D.). Its buildings have remained remarkably intact from the days of the Ming (1368 - 1644 A.D.) and Qing Dynasties. A historical and culture village, it is one of China's ten most attractive towns.

Many of the 124 homes are still found from that era, many now souvenir or other tourist oriented shops. The ancient homes edge 45 narrow and winding streets and laneways paved with bluestone. UNESCO has named both Xidi and Hongcun, due to their historic remains, as World Cultural Heritage Sites.

The first thing that I noted when entering the town were the countless young painters working on the streets, sidewalks, and doorways and it seemed every other empty space around. They appeared to outnumber both



the inhabitants and the visitors. The guide said that many schools bring their students here - into a world of China's past.

All around the village appeared to have been designed for artists. Every part of the ancient buildings was covered with intricate and decorative carvings, reliefs and sculptures, carrying a flavour from Chinese history.

The Huizhou architecture predominated. This building style, with its white walls, dark tiles, horse-head gables, mirrors and open courtyards, were common features found in all parts of the old town. The guide noting we had stopped to admire some of the carvings remarked, “Some travellers say visiting Xidi is like stepping into a traditional Chinese painting. It gives visitors a perfect chance to explore China's ancient arts and culture.”

During our tour, we passed a large three-tiered stone archway, ancestral temples, schools for classical learning, beautifully paned windows, projecting horse-head walls, stone archways, bridges and much more. We stopped at streams and waterways, at times, covered gardens with their trees and courtyard walls draped with vines and flowers. We marvelled at the handiwork of the past Chinese artists before we made our way to Hongcun, only 15 km (9 mi) from Huangshan.

Hongcun, which we now entered, is a twin of Xidi - with much the same age and features. It, however, differs somewhat with a sophisticated water system and two large pools in town connected by streams, which passing every house, provide the water needs of the inhabitants.

Relatively untouched by the modern world, Hongcun, like Xidi, has for centuries inspired artists and poets. Both villages are living museums to traditional small town life in China's past ages.

We entered the village by a Crescent-shaped lake edged on one side by the ancient homes of Hongcun. The whole of our side of the lake was filled with high school students painting the picturesque



homes across the waters. After our tour of Xidi and Hongcun and after encountering hundreds of artists that day, it appeared to me that literally half the youth of China were well on their way to becoming artists. Like I told my colleague during our trip to China, “The Chinese have to be artists to be able to write their language. Every character is like a picture.”

Touring the village that afternoon, we rambled around intrigued by the many relics from the past. We stopped for a while to watch women do their washing in a village stream, tasted local delicacies and shopped for antiques and souvenirs. All through the walk, we were surrounded by exquisite architecture of stone and wood. For those who love history, Hongcun is a great place to spend at least half a day.

Our guide summed it all up during our relaxing dinner, “Here you can see how the Chinese, in a modern sense, live as their ancestors lived centuries ago. The village is not only of interest to foreign tourists but to the Chinese, as well.” ■

WWW.TOURISMCHINA.ORG





Two Wheeling Through Bella Italia

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

This trip would have a new twist for me. I have flown, driven and been driven by car, boarded a train and a boat, but for the first time in a dozen trips to Italy I would actually bicycle through some of the most beautiful scenery this country has to offer.

The journey started after I was invited by the Italian tourism office to participate in an annual event. The Giro D'Italia is a professional cycling race that traverses most of Italy. It is comparable to the top cycling

competitions worldwide, including the ever-popular Tour Du France.

The Giro itself is a very serious event that has attracted professionals and fans worldwide. It has become so successful that the organizers decided to have a competition for those less able to compete with the top athletes, and so the Giro E was started last year as a limited race for amateurs.

Giro-E bicycles are powered by an electric motor battery, which sounds like a scooter

but are absolutely not; these bikes are every bit a racing road bike, just with assistance. The cyclist still has to pedal to get moving but with a little help to keep you going. Stop pedaling and the motor cuts out.

This year's event would include the whole Giro route, but the E-cyclists would start earlier and much further down the route and finish way before the pros do. Starting near the north in Bologna, both the pros and E-riders head south way past Rome, then east to the opposite coast and zigzag up to the



Photo: Giro d'Italia





WT Photo Library

Alps and back down to finish in Verona. The whole ride would be over 21 stages and would take close to a month.

The pros, let's call them super athletes, would ride the entire route in each stage, that is approximately 200 km per stage while the E-cyclist would ride much less or about 100 km per day. Sounds easy until you have to do it. Summing it up, this boy (me) was beat after only four stages and it would be easier to point out which muscles were not sore then to the many that needed an urgent massage.

The teams

In this, the first complete year of the Giro E, there would be 10 teams in the competition that would include retired professional rac-

ers, serious amateurs and even want-to-be hopefuls. Needless to say, these riders were excellent and for the most part very serious, much more than I thought. This was evident as on our first day I would notice the large brand new vans rolling in with multiple expensive bikes on top of it, mega-sponsors logos and riders looking as they were ready to compete and win!

I would be on the Italian National Tourism Board team of invited guest from around the world each participating in three to four stages. Our team captain was the retired Italian champion Massimiliano Lelli. How could anything go wrong with such a beautiful Italian name - and one that is so fit for a racer. Max's success in racing has led to many sponsorships and even his own race line of bike clothes named Maxlelli.

Max would coach us all through the races as well as at the post-race meals and travel to the venues. He was indispensable when it came to equipment and road safety. A real inspiration to us all in many ways keeping us abreast of what to expect in each stage, and in an unspoken manner his abilities from the many years of racing kept us motivated to do our best.

The stages

It would be impossible for me to pick which part of Italy is the nicest, as it is unbelievably diverse and different but always beautiful. The north with the mountains contrasts wildly with the dry south and the coastal areas. My stages would be in the middle of the country where I would land in the magnificent internal city of Rome depart from the equally wonderful city of Venice and in between would include the beautiful regions of Lazio, Molise/Puglia, Abruzzo, and Marche.

More than a race, this is Italy

If you had to make the 'Best of Italy' list, then it would be as long as my arm. We would be spoiled every step of the way, whether in the grand cities, smaller towns, the many out of the way villages and breathtaking countryside we would cross, all the while enjoying great accommodation and, as always, feasting like kings on Italian delicacies.

Rome does not need any introduction, having arrived in my hotel in sleepy town of Frascati, with Rome being a few minutes away by a local train. I just felt I had to go even if it meant lots of walking on the eve of the race but then again this was Rome and it was one of the most remarkable cities I have ever visited. It called out my name.

Frascati and area

Without any hesitation, we told the locals that we just love their region, and we were out and about to visit wineries and enjoy an enormous meal, Italian style!

see following page



Photo: Giro d'Italia



Photo: Giro d'Italia



Photo: Giro d'Italia

Not knowing that the first buffet set-up was only for starters, I ate my fill before asking the person next to me 'why aren't you eating', his reply was I am saving myself for the next three courses. As full as I was, I made every effort to indulge through it all and stuffed, I would sleep like a baby.

While we were in Frascata, we would fully enjoy the Hotel Helio Cabala Marino. This lovely and stylish hotel was comfortable and clean. The best part was the views from the hill it is built upon. The balconies were spectacular and it is in a great location with a train service nearby and a shuttle.

We are racing

Early the following morning was the beginning of my first stage. It looked cloudy, but that I could handle. It was cool, no problem, I would still be sweating. But then the rain came! Yes, that was the forecast down the road. It was one of those situations where I really wished they had the weather report wrong, but it rained and it rained and it rained, for four hours straight. So much so that there were rivers running down some hills. If the rain was not enough, the spray and streams of water from bikes ahead of us made this a dangerous ride and at the finish line I felt like I had just walked out of a cold bath tub, clothes and all.

Easing the day was knowing the next stop was in Campobasso. That night I would reflect on the first stage with more great food and wine, I would think of the many hills we climbed and all the villagers who came out to cheer us on. Many smiling faces, the Giro was in town and there was a festive feeling!

Campobasso, famous for the production of pears and scamorza cheese, also provided us with a glimpse of the past in the form of one of the main attractions of the Castello Monforte, built in 1450 by the local ruler Nicola II Monforte. The building lies upon many other centuries of ruins, including traces of ancient settlements. This was a great find for the history lover within me.

On and On

In the following days, we would have more of the same pain and fame. Our handsome, and no doubt expensive, Pinarello bikes now felt like they were part of us. All five points of the body from hands to seat bottom to the feet seemed as one, man and machine fused for four uninterrupted hours. The scenery continuously changed from farmland to forests and villages were always beautiful. The locals would still come

out to greet us and, believe it or not, they even offered us wine and food on the run. It was an amazing experience and brought a new meaning to 'take away' food!

Culturally speaking

You do not have to go anywhere to experience wonderful Italian culture. History, architecture and gastronomy were around every corner. Memories were made in the charming city of Chieti as in just a few short hours we would experience an opera and then wine and dine to our hearts content on Italy's finest. The next morning's race would start here and to my amazement, the escort car was nothing less than a Lamborghini police car painted in baby blue. Wow, I thought, that is Italian flair!

Chieti is one of the most ancient Italian cities, and according to legends, the city was founded in 1181 BC by the hero Achilles and was named in honor of his mother, Thetis. Everywhere we rode, we saw pieces of history with wonderful churches and homes that stretch back through eras and ages.

Next up

We would have the same greetings at the end of the race in Senigallia. Exhausted and sore we would still have time to explore the best of the city, including the wonderful town square and museum and an opulent supper by the sea at the classy Hotel Bel Sit.

Senigallia

There are so many good reasons to visit Senigallia, a stunning and laid-back beach town in the heart of Central Italy. Aside from the crystal-clear waters and golden sand, this city also dates back through the centuries. I almost stopped riding to check out Rocca Roveresca a Gothic castle from 1492, which is really amazing and classic with its square shape and four large round towers.

Overall, this was a unique experience of a lifetime. The organizers did a fantastic job of making this race fun while keeping it light hearted. The participants enjoyed the wonderful countryside scenery, charming villages and the many people who would pull up a roadside chair to cheer us on, even for those few minutes while we passed on by they looked at us as if we were VIP in their own land! ■

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