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LEISURE & LIFESTYLE TRAVEL MAGAZINE

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*Exploring
the Orient*

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Published by:

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Canadian World Traveller
American World Traveler

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In this issue, we embark on a worldwide odyssey, beginning in dynamic Tokyo before heading north to the tranquil natural landscapes of Hokkaido. While in Japan, we explore the latest offerings from Oku Japan before venturing into the breathtaking beauty of China. Continuing through the Orient, we visit northern Vietnam and the vibrant city of Hanoi, followed by an unforgettable journey along the Mekong River. In Thailand, we uncover some of the country's most discreet and charming destinations before flying across Asia to the dazzling metropolis of Dubai.

Our European adventure starts with a cycling tour through Turkey before we take part in a special celebration in Malta. We then set sail with Katarina Lines in Croatia and embark on another remarkable cruise with Riverside Cruises along the scenic Danube. In Western Europe, we experience the best of Flanders, admire the magnificent chateaux's of the Loire Valley, and revisit the timeless charm of London and Scotland. Further south, we soak in the vibrant culture of Lisbon before concluding with the picture-perfect beauty of Tenerife.

Before crossing to the Americas, we make a detour to witness the stunning landscapes of Zambia. In the USA, our journey begins with a family trip to New Hampshire, followed by a visit to the historic city of Lexington. From

there, we explore the Midwest, where we embark on a fascinating crossing aboard the SS Badger and discover some of the best-hidden gems of Wisconsin and North Dakota. In the Rockies, we delve into the rugged beauty of British Columbia's Kootenays before uncovering exciting new developments in Nevada, Oregon, and Utah. A brief stop in Scottsdale offers a taste of the Southwest's charm before we head to the Sunshine State for a delectable foodie tour of Central Florida.

Continuing south, we embark on two spectacular cruises', first aboard the luxurious Explora I through the Caribbean, followed by a voyage on the stunning MSC Meraviglia as it sails through the sun-drenched Bahamas Islands. Yet another cruise takes us to the extraordinary wildlife of the Galapagos Islands. Finally, we wrap up our Americas journey in the often-overlooked Falkland Islands before heading Down Under to explore the latest travel developments in Australia.

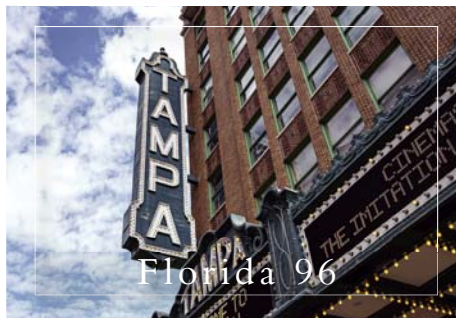
Join us as we navigate the world's most incredible destinations, uncovering hidden treasures and unforgettable experiences along the way! ■

Happy Travels!



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(short informative travel pieces)



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Oku Japan

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Lavishing Between the Past and Future in Stately Tokyo

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

Tokyo has a way of drawing you into its essence. It's a city that seems to pulsate with life while quietly holding the weight of history. My journey to this electric yet serene metropolis was a kaleidoscope of moments, each offering a glimpse of Tokyo's many contrasts—between the ultra-modern and the deeply traditional, between the buzzing chaos of its streets and the quiet reverence of its shrines. Staying at the Shibuya Stream Hotel, I was perfectly positioned in the vibrant heart of Shibuya. With its sleek, contemporary design and thoughtful amenities, the hotel felt like an urban oasis, offering stunning city views and immediate access to Shibuya Station. Its proximity to bustling shopping streets, local dining spots, and the iconic Scramble Crossing made it an ideal base for my adventures in Tokyo.

Shibuya: Where Chaos Meets Connection

The Shibuya Scramble Crossing is Tokyo's

beating heart, and stepping into it feels like entering a river of humanity. Hundreds of people move in all directions, a chaotic choreography that miraculously avoids collisions. From the second-floor café windows overlooking the crossing, I sipped my coffee, marveling at the symphony of life below. Shibuya is not just a district—it's a microcosm of Tokyo's vibrant energy. The Shibuya Stream Hotel offered easy access to all this action, situated just steps from the train station, a crucial convenience in a city like Tokyo.

Ajigawa Sumo Stable: A Glimpse into Tradition

The morning at Ajigawa Sumo Stable offered a stark contrast to the hustle of Shibuya. The dojo was a temple of discipline, where wrestlers, clad in mawashi, practiced in silence, their every move deliberate and powerful. Watching their training was humbling—it felt like stepping into another world. Their dedication to perfecting ancient techniques is a

reminder that in Tokyo, tradition is never far beneath the surface of modernity.

Asakusa: Senso-ji Temple and Nakamise Street

No trip to Tokyo would be complete without a visit to Senso-ji Temple in Asakusa. Walking beneath the iconic red Kaminarimon Gate, I was greeted by the fragrance of incense wafting through the air. The temple itself, with its striking five-story pagoda, stood as a testament to Tokyo's enduring spirituality. Adjacent Nakamise Street, a bustling shopping arcade lined with stalls selling everything from hand-painted fans to freshly made mochi, was a feast for the senses. I couldn't resist sampling ningyo-yaki, sweet cakes filled with red bean paste, as I wandered through this historic district.

Ramen: A Culinary Pilgrimage

Lunch that day was a steaming bowl of ramen at a small, tucked-away shop. The rich broth, perfectly cooked noodles, and tender slices of pork belly were a revelation. Ramen in Tokyo isn't just food; it's an art form, with each bowl telling a story. Seated elbow-to-elbow with locals, slurping enthusiastically, I felt a kinship with the city.



Ueno Ameyoko: Tokyo's Old-School Bazaar

Ueno's Ameyoko market is a sensory overload in the best way possible. This bustling street market is a labyrinth of vendors selling everything from fresh seafood to quirky souvenirs. I found myself bargaining for dried squid snacks and sampling takoyaki (octopus balls) at a roadside stall. The energy here was infectious, a throwback to Tokyo's post-war days when this area was a hub of black-market trade.

Tokyo Station & Daimaru's Gourmet Wonderland

Stepping into Tokyo Station felt like entering a modern cathedral dedicated to transit. Its sprawling halls and impeccable architecture gave way to one of my favorite discoveries: the food floor at Daimaru Department Store. This was not your average food court—it was a gourmet paradise. I indulged in delicate sushi, intricately decorated wagashi (traditional Japanese sweets), and freshly baked melon-pan. It's impossible to leave empty-handed—or hungry.

Reaching for the Skies: Tokyo Tower and Azabudai Hills

The iconic Tokyo Tower, standing proud in its Eiffel-like elegance, was my next stop. As the elevator climbed, I watched the city unfurl beneath me. From the observation deck, the view was breathtaking—a patchwork of skyscrapers, shrines, and gardens stretching to the horizon. Nearby, the newly developed Azabudai Hills offered a modern counterpoint with its sleek architecture and upscale shops. The juxtaposition of old and new, traditional and futuristic, was striking.

A Sacred Ceremony: Meiji Jingu Shrine Wedding

At the tranquil Meiji Jingu Shrine, nestled within a lush forest, I stumbled upon a wedding ceremony. The bride, dressed in an elaborate white kimono, and the groom, in traditional hakama, were a vision of elegance. The procession moved gracefully through the shrine grounds, accompanied by the solemn sound of taiko drums. Witnessing this sacred moment felt like an invitation into the heart of Japanese culture—a memory I'll carry forever.

Harajuku: The Pulse of Youth Culture

Harajuku is a vibrant explosion of color, fashion, and creativity. Takeshita Street, lined with quirky shops and cafés, was alive with the laughter of teenagers dressed in every imaginable style. I joined the queue for a rainbow-colored cotton candy, a whimsical treat that felt

right at home here. A short walk away, Cat Street offered a more subdued vibe, with boutique shops and trendy cafés. It was a reminder that even in the heart of Tokyo's youth culture, there's room for sophistication.

Kura Revolving Sushi Bar: A Dining Adventure

Lunch at Kura Revolving Sushi Bar was both a meal and an experience. Plates of sushi glided past on a conveyor belt, each bite-sized creation a masterpiece. The thrill of picking a dish as it passed by was matched only by the quality of the sushi itself. Tokyo's culinary scene never ceases to amaze, blending tradition with innovation.

Stand-Up Sake Bars & Okonomiyaki restaurant

By sheer coincidence, our senior travel writer, Steve Gillick, and his partner Mitsuru, happened to be on their annual visit to Japan during my stay. As fate would have it, we crossed paths on their first night in Tokyo and my last. To mark the occasion, we shared a fabulous slice of Japan at Orihara Shoten, a cozy stand-up sake bar in Monzen-Nakacho, where we savored a selection of premium sakes while exchanging stories of our adventures. The evening continued with a delightful dinner at Kondo Honten in Tsukishima, a renowned okonomiyaki-style restaurant. Cooking the savory pancakes at our table while laughing and reflecting on our journeys was the perfect way to close my pan-Japan tour. It was a night to remember—full of flavor, camaraderie, and a shared love for all things Japan.

Final Reflections

Tokyo is a city of contrasts and surprises, where every corner holds the promise of discovery. Whether it's the serene beauty of a shrine, the pulsating energy of a market, or the culinary artistry of a ramen shop, each experience adds a layer to the city's complex identity. Staying at the Shibuya Stream Hotel placed me at the heart of it all, allowing me to weave seamlessly between Tokyo's many facets.

As I boarded my plane home, I couldn't help but feel that Tokyo had left an indelible mark on my soul. It's a place that demands to be explored, savored, and experienced—a city that truly lives up to its reputation as both state-ly and dynamic. ■

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Northern Vietnam: Contrasting Experiences of Nature and the City of Hanoi

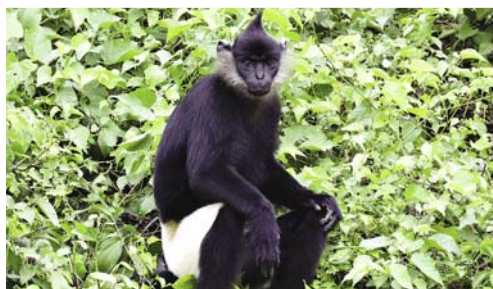
Article and photography by Steve Gillick

At 5:30 am, the only sounds came from the crowing roosters. We were two hours south of the Capital City of Hanoi in the Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve in the Red River Delta, Gia Vien District, Ninh Binh Province, Vietnam. The comfortable Van Long Green Hotel, where we had spent the night, was located directly across the road from the fishermen's boat dock, where we would meet our guide, Luc Nguyen, for a pre-breakfast stroll. At the creeping of dawn, we could see the mist rising on the shadowy outlines of the Van Long Mountains while clouds of croaking white Great Egrets flew out of the trees to forage for food. The distant howl of Langurs added a mystique to the scene as we started our walk.

Van Long is the largest wetland in Northern Vietnam. From April to October, the villagers cultivate the rice fields, plowing, planting, and harvesting. But in the off-season, wearing the ubiquitous conical hat (Nón lá) for protection against the sun, they take charge of flotillas of fishing boats filled with day-trippers from Hanoi and elsewhere to explore the incredible wetland scenery.

Taking a more rustic approach, we hiked along the road, past villages, mountains, and rice fields, to photograph birds: Yellow Bitterns, Chinese Pond Herons, Paddyfield Pippits, Sooty-headed Bulbuls, Brown Shrikes, and more. On one of the mountains, a troop of Assam Macaques, a threatened species of Old World Monkey, foraged for food.

After breakfast back at the hotel (Vietnamese Chicken Pho (noodle soup), rice cake, dumplings, and coffee), we drove further along the road to find Delacour's Langur, of which there are only 300 in the world. This critically endangered species of Old World Monkey, endemic to Northern Vietnam, lives in the forests amidst the limestone karst mountains. From a distant vantage point, we took photos of the black Langurs, with their bristly white sideburns and distinctive diaper-like patches of white fur over the rump and outer thighs. We watched the troop members interact as they fed on leaves and groomed one another. The long bushy tails used for balance on rocks and trees were also handy for younger Langurs to grab onto and keep their balance!



Afterward, we headed west for the 90-minute drive to Cuc Phuong National Park, passing small towns and villages and dramatic mountain peaks poking through the morning mist.

Cuc Phuong, also in the Red River Delta, is the oldest national Park in Vietnam, with lush forests, walking trails, mountain caves, plants, amphibians, mammals, and birds. We lodged at the Cuc Phuong National Park Guest House, where the park literature noted, "The Cuc Phuong forest and people have always been eager to share the relationship between the forest and life. Because 'Forest is one, future is two'. You can't get to two without going through one".

Meals were a treat. We feasted on delicious stir-fried chicken with lemongrass, roasted chicken with lime, salt, and chili, crispy fried spring rolls, stir-fried morning glory, steamed rice, and Bia Saigon (beer). For breakfast, we relished Bun Cha, a traditional dish of fried minced pork paddy in noodle soup. We added our own mint leaves, lettuce, bean sprouts, chili, garlic, and bamboo from the dishes provided on the table. So good!

The best way to describe our park experience would be to borrow the Japanese phrase "Shinrin-yoku", which refers to immersion in the forest's ambiance, sounds, and scents. This included plants, flowers, ancient trees, kaleidoscopes of butterflies, and reveling in the sight of endemic birds such as the White-throated Kingfisher and the stunning Crimson Sunbird.

In one of the blinds, set up to take photos without disturbing the wildlife, we had visits from Orange-headed Thrushes, White-rumped Shamas, Tonkin Partridge, Blue-rumped Pitta, and Pallas Squirrels.

On the evening walks, we encountered Mountain and Collared Scops Owls, an Indochinese Flying Squirrel, and a venomous Horned Pit Viper.

The next morning we climbed up to 'The Cave of Prehistoric Man', dating back 7500 years. But we couldn't hang around like the Shield-faced Roudleaf Bats in the cave. Hanoi was beckoning!

"Ha Noi" means 'the city located within the river' and refers to its location on the bank of the Red River. After a three-hour drive, we checked into the 5-star Hotel du Parc. From there, it was an energetic 30-minute walk through motorcycle-congested streets to Hang Buom, popular for Street Food. We sat at a curb-side restaurant munching on crispy Crab spring rolls with Bia Saigon. And then, across the street, we indulged in chicken Banh Mi, a traditional Vietnamese sandwich made with meat, vegetables, and herbs, on a baguette.

We spent the following days discovering Hanoi, mostly on foot. In the morning, locals visit the Botanical Garden for exercise, badminton, tai-chi, ballroom dancing, jogging, and meditation. Close by is the 11th-century Taoist Quan Thanh Temple and the Tran Quoc Pagoda, the oldest Buddhist Temple in the city, dating to 548 CE.

We hailed a 'cyclo', a bicycle taxi, to take us to Hoan Kiem Lake, 'the Lake of the Restored Sword'. Legend has it that in the 15th century, Heaven gave Emperor Ly Thai To a magical sword which he used to drive the Chinese out of Vietnam. One day, while boating, a giant golden tortoise grabbed the sword and disappeared into the Lake.

The Huc (Red) Bridge leads to the island where the Ngoc Son (Jade Mountain) Temple rests. The promenade around the Lake provides a glimpse of locals (and tourists) taking selfies by Turtle Tower, strolling, socializing, and enjoying the scenery.

Train Street is only a few blocks away. We arrived early to secure a railside seat at this 200-meter stretch of outdoor cafés that hug the railway track. The afternoon train arrived precisely at 3:15 pm and passed by us, literally only a foot in front of our noses. Afterward, the tourist crowd engineered their own high-speed departure. All in all, the 30-second thrill was well worth it!

With an interest in history and culture in mind, we visited The Old Quarter Cultural Exchange Center. Displays cover the reasons for the city's founding in 1010 by King Ly Thai To, the establishment of craft villages, and the city's evolution up to the present time.



The vast indoor/outdoor Dong Xuan Market is excellent for meeting locals and taking photos. Vendors sell vegetables, fruits, flowers, turtles, chicken, meats, and prepared foods in the tiny, congested back streets. It's an explosion of chatter, color, commerce, and culture.

The impressive Vietnam Museum of Ethnology showcases the 54 ethnic groups in the country with exhibits that include handicrafts, textiles, photographs, and masks. In the Architecture Garden, several traditional ethnic houses can be visited.

The energy of a city can be absorbed by walking the streets and observing: A motorcycle entirely hidden by the baseball caps about to be sold. Massage and Spa signs everywhere. Street stalls selling bamboo smoking pipes. French colonial architecture, small temples, souvenir stores, Vietnamese flags, flower boxes, restaurants, bakeries, cafes, and people going about their daily affairs.

Those who love interacting with a destination will love Northern Vietnam for its remarkable contrasts, all within the Red River Delta, from stunning nature in Van Long and Cuc Phuong to the immersive sensory explosion of Hanoi. ■

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The Great Wall of China

The 12 Most Popular Places to Visit in China

China, a land of rich history, diverse cultures, and stunning landscapes, is one of the most sought-after travel destinations in the world. From ancient landmarks to modern marvels, China offers a unique blend of old and new that captivates millions of visitors each year. In this article, we explore some of the most popular places to visit in China, each offering its own distinct charm and experience.

1. The Great Wall of China

Undoubtedly one of the most iconic symbols of China, the Great Wall stretches over 13,000 miles across the northern part of the country. Originally built to protect the Chinese states from invasions, the Wall now stands as a testament to the ingenuity and perseverance of ancient Chinese civilization. The most visited sections are near Beijing, such as Badaling and Mutianyu, where tourists can walk along well-preserved portions of the Wall and enjoy breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape.

2. The Forbidden City, Beijing

Located in the heart of Beijing, the Forbidden City was the imperial palace for the Ming and Qing dynasties. It served as the home of emperors and their households and was the political center of China for nearly 500 years. Today, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and houses the Palace Museum. Visitors can explore the vast complex of traditional Chinese palaces, gardens, and courtyards, gaining insight into the opulence and authority of imperial China.

3. The Terracotta Army, Xi'an

Discovered in 1974, the Terracotta Army is one of the most significant archaeological finds of the 20th century. These life-sized clay soldiers were buried with China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, to protect him in the afterlife. Located in Xi'an, the site features thousands of figures, each with unique facial expressions and details, spread across several pits. The Terracotta Army offers a fascinating glimpse into ancient Chinese funerary art and military organization.

4. The Bund, Shanghai

Shanghai's Bund is a waterfront area that showcases the city's historical charm and modern sophistication. Lined with colonial-era buildings, the Bund offers a striking contrast to the futuristic skyline of Pudong across the Huangpu River. Walking along the Bund, visitors can admire a blend of architectural styles, from Gothic to Art Deco, and enjoy the vibrant atmosphere of one of China's most dynamic cities.

5. Zhangjiajie National Forest Park

Famous for its towering sandstone pillars, Zhangjiajie National Forest Park in Hunan Province inspired the floating mountains in the movie "Avatar." The park is a haven for nature lovers and adventure seekers, offering hiking trails, glass-bottom bridges, and cable car rides with stunning views. The unique landscape of Zhangjiajie, with its mist-shrouded peaks and lush greenery, creates an otherworldly experience that leaves visitors in awe.



The Forbidden City



Terracotta Army



The Bund

6. Lijiang Old Town, Yunnan

Lijiang Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is known for its well-preserved ancient architecture and intricate network of canals. This charming town in Yunnan Province offers a glimpse into the traditional lifestyle of the Naxi people, an ethnic minority in China. Visitors can wander through narrow cobblestone streets, visit traditional tea houses, and enjoy local Naxi music and dance performances. The nearby Jade Dragon Snow Mountain adds to the town's picturesque scenery.

7. Potala Palace, Lhasa

Perched on Marpo Ri Hill in Lhasa, Tibet, the Potala Palace is a symbol of Tibetan Buddhism and was once the winter residence of the Dalai Lamas. This majestic structure, with its red and white walls, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a significant pilgrimage destination for Buddhists. The palace houses numerous chapels, stupas, and murals, offering visitors a deep dive into Tibetan culture, religion, and art.

8. West Lake, Hangzhou

Praised by poets and artists for centuries, West Lake in Hangzhou is a quintessential example of Chinese garden landscaping. Surrounded by temples, pagodas, and gardens, the lake has inspired countless works of art and literature. Visitors can take leisurely boat rides, stroll along the willow-lined paths, and explore historical sites such as the Lingyin Temple and Leifeng Pagoda. West Lake's serene beauty has earned it a place on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

9. Jiuzhaigou Valley, Sichuan

Jiuzhaigou Valley is a stunning nature reserve in Sichuan Province, known for its multi-colored lakes, waterfalls, and snow-capped peaks. The valley's ethereal beauty, especially during autumn when the foliage turns vivid shades of red and gold, attracts nature enthusiasts and photographers from around the world. Jiuzhaigou is also home to several Tibetan villages, where visitors can experience the rich cultural heritage of the Tibetan people.

10. Guilin and the Li River

The picturesque landscapes of Guilin and the Li River have been immortalized in Chinese

paintings and poetry for centuries. The region is famous for its dramatic karst mountains, which rise sharply from the ground, creating a surreal and serene environment. A boat cruise along the Li River from Guilin to Yangshuo is a highlight for many tourists, offering views of lush countryside, quaint villages, and fishermen using traditional cormorant fishing techniques.

11. Chengdu's Giant Panda Breeding Research Base

Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, is home to the Giant Panda Breeding Research Base, where visitors can observe and learn about China's beloved national treasure. The center focuses on conservation and breeding of giant pandas, as well as research and education. Watching pandas play, eat bamboo, and nap in their naturalistic enclosures is a delightful experience for visitors of all ages.

12. Hong Kong

While technically a Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong offers a unique blend of East and West. The city is known for its impressive skyline, bustling markets, and vibrant food scene. Attractions such as Victoria Peak, Hong Kong Disneyland, and the Star Ferry provide diverse experiences for visitors. Hong Kong's mix of traditional Chinese culture and modernity makes it a fascinating destination.

Conclusion

China's vast and diverse landscapes, coupled with its rich cultural and historical heritage, offer a plethora of destinations that cater to all types of travelers. From ancient wonders like the Great Wall and the Terracotta Army to natural beauties like Zhangjiajie and Jiuzhaigou, each location tells a story of China's past and present. Exploring these popular places not only provides unforgettable experiences but also a deeper understanding of one of the world's oldest civilizations. Whether you're drawn by history, nature, or modern urban life, China has something extraordinary to offer. ■

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Canadian Passport Holder Eligible For 240-Hour Visa-Free Transit Policy



China has expanded its 240-hour visa-free transit policy, allowing eligible foreign nationals to stay for **10 days** in **24 provinces** and enter through **60 designated ports**. Travelers can engage in activities like tourism and business but need prior visas for work, study, or news reporting.



List of Ports and Allowed Areas for Visa-Free Transit Travelers under the 240-Hour Visa-Free Transit Policy

30	Shandong	Jinan Yaoqiang International Airport	Shandong Province
31		Qingdao Jiaodong International Airport	
32		Yantai Penglai International Airport	
33		Weihai Dashuipo International Airport	
34		Qingdao Port (Passenger)	
35	Henan	Zhengzhou Xinzheng International Airport	Henan Province
36	Hubei	Wuhan Tianhe International Airport	Hubei Province
37	Hunan	Changsha Huanghua International Airport	Hunan Province
38		Zhangjiajie Hehua International Airport	
39	Guangdong	Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport	Guangdong Province (Exits available at all open ports across the province)
40		Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport	
41		Jieyang Chaoshan International Airport	
42	Guangdong	Nansha Port (Passenger)	Guangdong Province (Exits available at all open ports across the province)
43		Shekou Port (Passenger)	
44	Hainan	Haikou Meilan International Airport	Hainan Province
45		Sanya Phoenix International Airport	
46	Chongqing	Chongqing Jiangbei International Airport	Chongqing Municipality
47	Guizhou	Guiyang Longdongbao International Airport	Guizhou Province
48	Shaanxi	Xi'an Xianyang International Airport	Shaanxi Province
49	Shanxi	Taiyuan Wusu International Airport	Taiyuan City and Datong City
50	Heilongjiang	Harbin Taiping International Airport	Harbin City
51	Jiangxi	Nanchang Changbei International Airport	Nanchang City and Jingdezhen City
52	Guangxi	Nanning Changbei International Airport	A total of 12 cities: Nanning, Liuzhou, Guilin, Wuzhou, Beihai, Fangchenggang, Qinzhou, Guigang, Yulin, Hezhou, Hechi, and Laibin
53		Guilin Liangjiang International Airport	
54		Beihai Fucheng Airport	
55		Beihai Port (Passenger)	
56	Sichuan	Chengdu Shuangliu International Airport	A total of 11 cities: Chengdu, Zigong, Luzhou, Deyang, Suining, Neijiang, Leshan, Yibin, Ya'an, Meishan, and Ziyang
57		Chengdu Tianfu International Airport	
58	Yunnan	Kunming Changshui International Airport	A total of 9 cities and autonomous prefectures: Kunming, Yuxi, Chuxiong, Honghe, Wenshan, Pu'er, Xishuangbanna, Dali, and Lijiang
59		Lijiang Sanyi International Airport	
60		Mohan Railway Port	

S/N	Province/ Autonomous Region/ Municipality	Eligible Port	Permitted Stay Areas
1	Beijing	Beijing Capital International Airport	Beijing Municipality
2		Beijing Daxing International Airport	
3	Tianjin	Tianjin Binhai International Airport	Tianjin Municipality
4		Tianjin Port (Passenger)	
5	Hebei	Shijiazhuang Zhengding International Airport	Hebei Province
6		Qinhuangdao Port (Passenger)	
7	Liaoning	Shenyang Taoxian International Airport	Liaoning Province
8		Dalian Zhoushizui International Airport	
9		Dalian Port (Passenger)	
10	Shanghai	Shanghai Hongqiao International Airport	Shanghai Municipality
11		Shanghai Pudong International Airport	
12		Shanghai Port (Passenger)	
13	Jiangsu	Nanjing Lukou International Airport	Jiangsu Province
14		Su'nan Shuofang International Airport	
15		Yangzhou Taizhou International Airport	
16		Lianyungang Port (Passenger)	
17	Zhejiang	Hangzhou Xiaoshan International Airport	Zhejiang Province
18		Ningbo Lishe International Airport	
19		Wenzhou Longwan International Airport	
20		Yiwu Airport	
21		Wenzhou Port (Passenger)	
22	Anhui	Zhoushan Port (Passenger)	Anhui Province
23		Hefei Xinqiao International Airport	
24		Huangshan Tunxi International Airport	
25	Fujian	Fuzhou Changle International Airport	Fujian Province
26		Xiamen Gaoqi International Airport	
27		Quanzhou Jinjiang International Airport	
28		Wuyishan Airport	
29		Xiamen Port (Passenger)	



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Hokkaido



The Confluence of Nature, Taste, Scenery and Adventure

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

When you combine incredible vistas of nature with fantastic seafood and conversations with warm, friendly people, you must be Hokkaido!

On my first trip in 2012, I explored popular venues: Obihiro, Furano, Sapporo, Otaru, Lake Toya, and Niseko. In 2024, my friend and I chose other cities to explore, emphasizing nature, food, culture, history, people, and photography.

We flew from Tokyo's Haneda Airport to Kushiro, Hokkaido. On the train to Nemuro, the easternmost city in Japan, portents of being in a unique destination began to appear: glaring yellow banners warning of Brown Bear sightings, and vigilant Ezoshika, Hokkaido Sika Deer, staring at us from the woodlands.

Immersion into Hokkaido culture followed fast.

Nemuro

After checking into Guest House Nemuroman near the waterfront, we wandered past high-tech fishing boats en route to the Nemuro Kotohira Shrine. It sits on a promontory overlooking the city and Nemuro Bay, where sunset was the perfect time for reflection.

Our first Hokkaido dinner tastefully set the tone for future meals.

At Izakaya Hyotan, our grand repast included tuna, shrimp, and octopus sashimi, deep-fried oysters, ikura (salmon roe), grilled Hokke (a mackerel-like fish), chicken yakitori (grilled on a skewer), and Mushi Yaki (steamed and roasted) with clams, abalone, red shell, shrimp heads, and salmon. This was accompanied by Kitano Katsu, a smooth, dry sake from Nemuro.

The following day, at Shunkunitai Wild Bird Sanctuary, about 30 minutes outside the city, we hiked through the forest and strolled on the boardwalk. Grazing family groupings of Ezoshika, some sporting large, curvy, branched antlers, nonchalantly glanced as we passed by. And further afield, there were Japanese Red-crowned Cranes, Black Kites, Japanese Tits, Shorebirds, Swans, and more.

Kushiro

The return ride to Kushiro took about two hours. Across the street from the train station, the stalls in the Washo Market displayed symmetrical arrangements of Red Snapper, Mackerel, Sole, Flounder, Salmon, Sardines, Oysters, and ready-to-eat sashimi. However, Snow Crab was the flagship product. We tried to claw our way through the prices of whole crabs but were a bit shell-shocked at 10,000 yen per kilo (USD 65.00; CAD 92.00).

Nevertheless, the food scene in Kushiro is exceptional. Sengan Shokudo is located by the fishing port, and if ever there was a restaurant that you would travel long distances to re-visit as a destination unto itself, this is the place! For breakfast, the Salmon Makanai Don, salmon sashimi on a bed of



rice with green onion, ikura, nori (seaweed), and sesame seeds, lightly bathed in a sweet chili sauce, was unbelievably tasty!

However, the Oyakodon at lunchtime sealed the deal. Oyakodon is known as 'parent and kid'; a funny comment on the ingredients: chicken and egg. At Senchan Shokudo, the Oyakodon is Salmon and Ikura, a humorous 'take' on the concept of 'parent and kid'. But the freshness and taste were no joke. After each bite, we had to rest our chopsticks and mindfully savor the delicate flavors.

Food wonderment continued at evening meals: Boiled, grilled, and salted Quail eggs in the shell and served on a skewer. (You eat them whole). Shitake mushrooms grilled with sake, garlic, butter, and soy sauce. Luscious, thick and creamy raw Kushiro Oysters. Meaty, buttery grilled Hokke. And the Zangi, deep-fried chicken with garlic, was chopstick-licking good!

Lake Akan and the Wetlands

One day, we rented a car for the two-hour drive to Lake Akan, past fields and farmlands. The Lake appeared picture-perfect under a deep blue sky, with billowy white clouds seemingly dancing on top of Mt. Oakan. In town, many shops sold finely detailed wood carvings of Brown Bears, Owls, Red Foxes, Salmon, and mythical creatures, all associated with deities and spirits in the culture and beliefs of the Indigenous Ainu people.

The town center's Owl archway and totem poles mark the restaurant area and lead to cultural connections at the Ainu Theater, Folklore Museum, and Eco Museum.

The Folklore Café (Mingei Kissa Poronno) delectably specializes in traditional Ainu cuisine. Our tasty lunch featured salmon, deer, steamed rice, beans, mountain vegetables, pickles, and mushroom tea.

On a second day of exploration, we drove to the Hasooka Observatory north of Kushiro to see Japan's largest wetland and its two active volcanoes, Mt. Oakan and Mt.

Meakan. Nearby, a curious Ezo Red Fox stopped traffic as he casually sat in the middle of the road, watching us, watching him. At the Tsurui-Ito Tancho Sanctuary, we learned about the endemic Japanese Red-Crown Cranes, regarded in Taoism as symbols of good luck and longevity. And with fortune shining down on us, we spotted over 50 cranes feeding in the dry rice fields during several highway stops on the return drive to Kushiro.

Noboribetsu

As our train arrived at Noboribetsu, the foremost Hot Springs (Onsen) resort in Hokkaido, more fortune was on the way. We checked into the Hotel Mahoroba and then started to explore. Many stores on the main street, only a 5-minute walk from the hotel, displayed statues of Oni, demonic creatures in Japanese folklore that can bring good fortune and wealth despite their horrific toothy appearance. The largest Oni stood by the entrance to Shikotsu-Toya National Park, where Jigokudani (Hell's Valley) is located. The sunset lighting on the stark valley landscape, steaming vents, and colorful autumn foliage clinging to the surrounding mountainside was nothing short of surrealistic.

Nearby, a path ascended to a lookout over Oyunuma Pond, lying at the base of Mt. Hyori. Steaming vents surrounded the pond, while at the same time, a fumarole flowed directly skyward from the crater on the mountain's summit, resulting in an unbelievably beautiful vista.

Hakodate

Mountain vistas continued at our last stop in Hakodate. Our room view at the Tokyu Stay Hotel focussed on Mt. Hakodate looming over the city, the harbor, and the Brick Warehouse, the go-to tourist hangout for shopping and food.

And foodies adore this seafood-centric city. The Maitake and Cod dish at Kaisen Dokoro Hakodate Yama was outstanding. It was grilled in pepper and butter and then steamed. The flavors exploded with each bite.

Lunch was at Shigechan Sushi, a six-person stand-up counter. The affable chef/owner, Shigeru Soyama, pampers guests with perfect sushi rice, crisp, fresh nori, and exceptionally delicate sashimi.

Our last night dinner at Fusaya was taste bud bliss: Herring, Hokke, and Salmon sashimi, Kawahagi (Filefish) and liver, Komai Yaki (Grilled Saffron Cod), and grilled chicken wings.

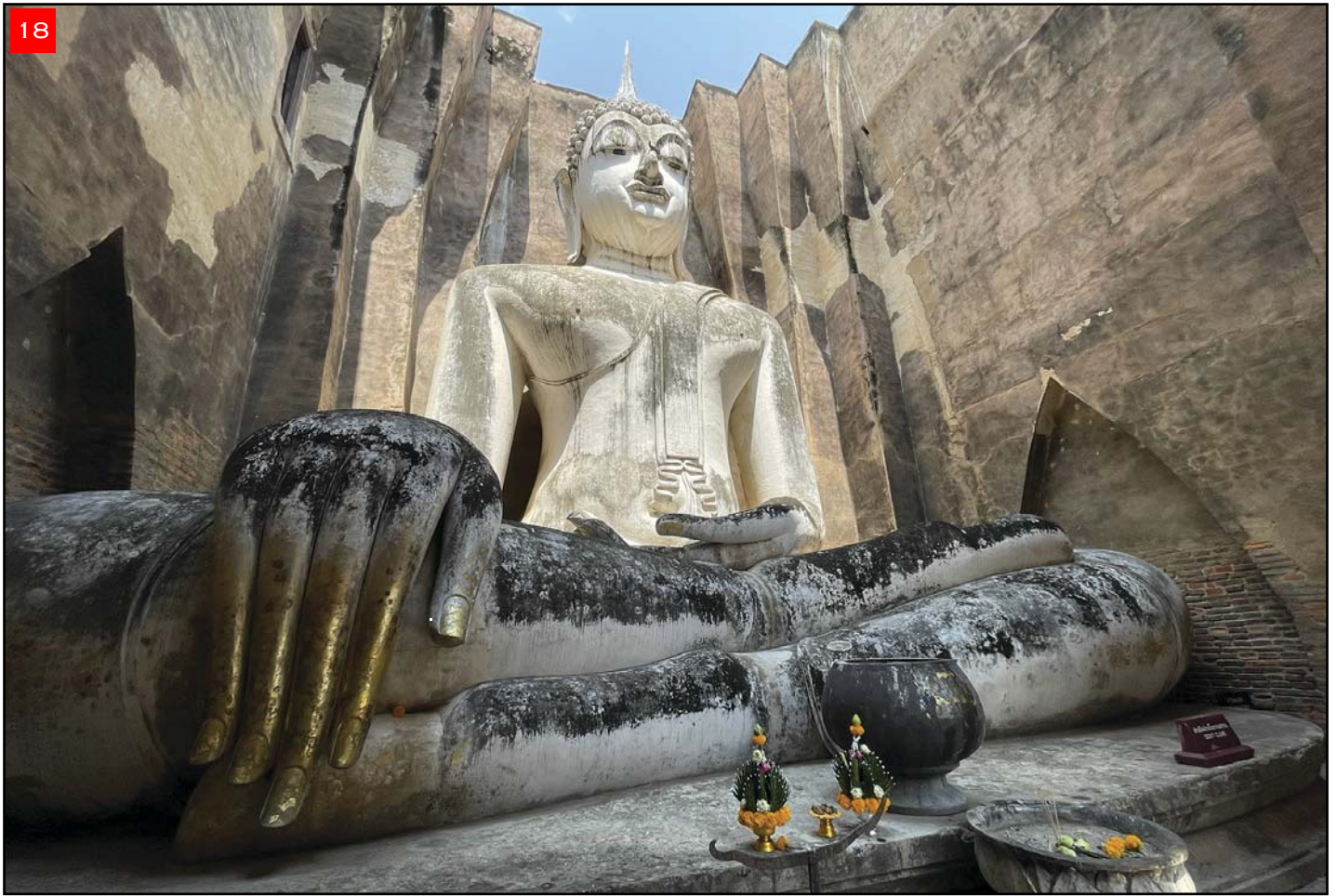
Each of the city's three seafood markets has a unique personality. In Nakajima Renbai, which caters mainly to locals, we were drawn to a shop selling Shiokara, fermented seafood. The friendly vendor offered us tastes of the different varieties. Jiyu-Ichiba, the Freedom Market, caters to a mix of locals and tourists. The Morning Market, a block from the train station, is a tourist mecca where visitors can purchase ready-to-eat fish cakes and sashimi as well as catch their own seafood from stocked aquariums.

And history comes alive at Goryokaku Fort. In 1854, Hakodate Port was opened to facilitate international trade after the American 'black ships' demanded that Japan open its trade doors to the world. Goryokaku Fort was completed in 1864 to defend the city. Then, in 1868-1869, the Fort was front and center in the Boshin War between the forces of the Shogunate and those of the Imperial Court. Visitors can wander the grounds of the Fort, tour the restored Magistrate's House, and visit Goryokaku Tower for fantastic views of the star-shaped Fort.

Our Hokkaido adventure was exhilarating on many levels: Nature, wildlife, hiking, food, sake, culture, history, photography, and conversations with the Ainu. Travelers looking to do something different and meaningful on a trip to Japan need to head to Hokkaido. ■

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Thailand: The Asian Paradise

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

Two weeks of pure bliss. On my return visit to this enchanting land, I would rediscover Bangkok and Chang Mai and visit some fabulous out-of-the-way places. In this part one of two articles, we will focus on the historic city of Sukhothai, the ever charming village of Baan Na Ton Chan, head way north to Chiang Mai and finish off in the amazingly beautiful island of Ko Samet.

Sukhothai

This must be the cutiest little airport in the world. This is when we land in the ancient Thai capitol. Just walk off the plane and you are at the extra small terminal where your luggage is brought to you on a hand cart. Amazingly, adjoining the landing strip is a zoo and the resident zebras would be equally surprised to us as we were to see

them. In Sukhothai, we would visit monk early in the morning give them offerings before we would visit the ancient capital ruins, and its archeological treasures from centuries ago I was particularly awestruck by one particular Buddha statue that was surrounded by a wall. I stood there for long period admiring this piece of artwork and also fascinated on how it was conceived and built. As always, we would feast on delicious Thai cuisine, experience unique local culture as we would visit a large ceramic factory that produced anywhere from finely sculptured religious artifacts to everyday tableware. After the tour we would take in part classes, painting simple cups and saucers, all the while laughing, and joking at our mistakes.



Baan Na Ton Chan

We would now head to the countryside to the village Baan Na Ton Chan. What a delight it was to be in the fresh air, seeing rice paddies and locals going about their day. Here we would experience true Thai village life. As expected, the pace of life is slow and relaxing. This village runs itself as a commune where everybody helps one another. Hands on arts and crafts is common in a way that has been passed down for generations using old style looms. The finished fine silk products like scarves and clothing are sold through a community store. Our multitalented driver was also a toy maker and brought us around to show us his amazing creations. We would finish our short visit by going to a Home Stay dwelling that is set with a magnificent view of the rice fields. Here we would have a quite time and be served a wonderful and Thai lunch. It was the most unbelievable colorful display of food I've ever seen. Choices were varied, it was a feast for both the eyes and the pallets

Resturant galore

On yet another foodie occasion, we would go to the Mai Heun 60 to discover this is more than a restaurant as we would walk-through a fantasy garden. Although this was all man-made, it was amazing to see, colorful mature orchids in full bloom everywhere, lush greenery, a gushing waterfall spilling into a tranquil pond and to make it all show so mysterious was fog pumping in from every direction to give the illusion of being in the rainforest. Also noted, the food was perfectly Thai and the fresh coconut water was refreshing.

Chiang Mai

Although I have been to Chiang Mai before, visiting the wonderful bustling night markets and the amazing Wat Phra That Doi Suthep Temple, our short visit this time would bring us to a once in a lifetime experience as we visited the Elephant Nature Park. This large out of the way property hosts abandoned or injured elephants. This sanctuary was not specific only to elephants, but also to buffalo dogs cats and whatever creature needed place to live. The stars of course were the Elephants and was an unbelievable way to

interact with these gentle giants who would literally and joyfully walk right up to you hoping for a snack. The Park is a non-profit organization and has vetrnaieans as well as a small rmy of volintieers. This is et another unique Thai experience and one that should on both childen and audaults alike while in Chiang Mai.

Koh Samet

If you're looking to do little and enjoy life one minute at a time, then Koh Samet is the perfect destination. As an island in the south of Thailand, this paradise was perfect to refuel and recharge and enjoy the magnificent scenery, warm waters, and fine sandy beaches. Here we would enjoy all this, plus continue eating amazing Thai gastronomy, take a speedboat to snorkel and discover colourful traopical fish, healthy coral reefs and exotic sealife. Our posh accommodations at the Paradee Resort was an experience on its own with opulent private villas facing white sandy beaches. Getting there was different then just checking into a hotel as we would have a crew bring our luggage on a luxury boat and then disembark us directly at the properties shore. Yet another amazing Thai experience. Life is good.

Turtle haven

On our way back to Bangkok from Koh Samet, we would stop at the Royal Thai Navy Sea Turtle Conservation Center. It was refreshing to see a big emphasis on saving and building up the turtle population of Thailand, and where we would be delighted to see many varieties of this creature sea being rehabilitated for the wild.

South East Asia sure has its magnificent destinations, all with their differences of languages, culture and food but Thailand stands out as being the easiest, safest and perhaps the best destination of them all. This memorable country tour is nothing short of enlightning and a must visit destination for both the serious traveler and those just looking to relax and on unwind. Truly an Asian paradise. ■

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(in 38 pages)

Around the World



Exploring Flanders

A Journey Through History, Art, and Gastronomy

Flanders, the northern region of Belgium, is a destination that effortlessly blends medieval charm with modern vibrancy. Known for its rich history, world-class art, and exceptional cuisine, it offers travelers an unforgettable experience.

A visit to Bruges, often called the "Venice of the North," is like stepping into a fairy tale. Its cobbled streets, picturesque canals, and well-preserved medieval buildings create a magical atmosphere. A boat ride along the canals provides stunning views of historic landmarks, while the Belfry of Bruges offers panoramic vistas of the city. The city's famous chocolate shops are also a must-visit, offering some of the finest handmade pralines in the world.

In contrast, Antwerp exudes a cosmopolitan flair. Home to one of Europe's largest ports, it is also the birthplace of Peter Paul Rubens, whose masterpieces adorn the Cathedral of Our Lady. The city's fashion district and trendy cafes make it a cultural hotspot. The MAS Museum (Museum aan de Stroom) offers a fascinating look at Antwerp's maritime history and provides breathtaking views from its rooftop terrace.

For art lovers, Ghent is a must-visit. Its crowning jewel, the Saint Bavo's Cathedral, houses the legendary Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, one of the most celebrated artworks of the Northern Renaissance. Strolling along the Graslei and Korenlei quays, with their stunning guild houses, offers a glimpse into the city's rich past. Ghent also has a vibrant nightlife and a thriving culinary scene, blending traditional Flemish cuisine with modern gastronomy.

No trip to Flanders is complete without indulging in its gastronomy. From crispy Belgian fries and decadent chocolates to a vast selection of craft beers, the region is a food lover's paradise. Dining in a traditional brasserie with a glass of Trappist beer is an experience in itself.

Whether exploring medieval towns, admiring Flemish masters, or savoring local delicacies, Flanders captivates with its unique blend of history and contemporary charm. ■

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Japan's Toyama Prefecture Recognized Among 2025's Top Destinations by The New York Times, Afar Magazine

The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) is pleased to share that Toyama Prefecture has been recognized by The New York Times and Afar, earning a spot on the former's list of "52 Places to Go in 2025" and the latter's "Where to Go in 2025."

Bordered on one side by the Japanese Alps, Toyama is part of Japan's 'Snow Country', complete with spectacular forests and charming thatched-roof houses. Its World Heritage alpine villages of Suganuma and Ainokura are nestled between sweeping mountain ranges, bubbling hot springs, and yawning gorges, evoking a sense of anachronistic wonder. The Kurobe Dam stands out as Japan's tallest, while the Tateyama Mountains hide an equally impressive natural wonder: a volcanic crater lake. Access to the Sea of Japan makes the region known for its fresh seafood (including the signature firefly squid) and master artisans, who still produce glassware, bronzeware, and wood carvings in traditional Japanese fashion.

As noted by Afar, Toyama has become a culinary hotspot in Japan, drawing international chefs with its offering of quality seafood ingredients like squid, perch, and boigai (a local mollusk.) In Toyama's storied Iwase district, centuries-old warehouses now host sake and beer breweries that carefully guard a distilling legacy that dates back generations.

The New York Times elevated some of Toyama's cultural offerings into the spotlight, encouraging visitors to add the Glass Art Museum - from world-renowned architect Kengo Kuma - to their itinerary. September sees the Owara Kaze no Bon festival light up Yatsuo, literally with lanterns and figuratively with traditional dance. Toyama Castle Park packs a reconstructed feudal keep, an art museum, and a serene Japanese garden into central Toyama, offering an ideal day trip excursion and a perfect place to stop for a restful lunch. The city of Osaka in the neighbouring Kansai region was also featured at #38 on the list, characterized as one of Japan's most progressive and greenest cities, with a vibrant food and shopping scene. Osaka is set to host Expo 2025 beginning April 13.

Toyama is accessible via Japan's bullet train system (shinkansen) from Kanazawa, Nagano, Tokyo, and other stations of the Hokuriku line. Buses are also available, connecting Toyama with Matsumoto city and other popular transport hubs. From the most common access point of Tokyo, the bullet train to Toyama takes two and a half hours. ■

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Spain, Camino de Santiago to Fisterra and Muxía

One of the Camino de Santiago's best kept secrets is the possibility of extending the experience to visit the legendary Costa da Morte. The Camino to Fisterra and Muxía is the only one that begins in the Plaza del Obradoiro in Santiago de Compostela, where the rest of the Jacobean routes end. It is 120 kilometres long and can be completed in five comfortable stages with no significant gradients.

It is a peaceful route full of mysticism, as the destination is Cape Fisterra, considered the 'end of the world' in Roman times. With its impressive landscapes, including beautiful villages, coastal towns, lighthouses and cliffs, this route is becoming increasingly popular.

In addition to visiting the shrine of A Barca, in Muxía, and the Santo Cristo de Fisterra, you will also find spectacular rural locations, such as the Sarela river or the Xallas livestock region. This diversity will also give you the opportunity to try the most prized delicacies of Galician cuisine: from fish and shellfish caldeiradas to "empanadas" to the local beef and the popular octopus á feira or the exquisite Santiago sweet pie.

Distance: 120 km. Recommended time: 5 days.

Places visited along the way: Negreira, Olveiroa, Corcubión, Fisterra and Muxía. ■

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A low-angle photograph of the Great Sphinx of Giza, showing its massive head and the tiered body. The Sphinx is flanked by two large, rounded stone structures. In the foreground, there is a smaller stone structure with hieroglyphs. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

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Exodus Adventure Travels Unveils Thriving Nature, Thriving People Approach to Responsible Travel

Leading Travel Company Offers Transformative Experiences, Giving Back to Communities and Nature

Exodus Adventure Travels, a leader in active small group guided adventures, announces its innovative “Thriving Nature, Thriving People” approach to responsible travel, which supports conservation initiatives driven by local communities to ensure lasting impact.

As Exodus celebrates its one-year anniversary of being certified as a B Corporation (B Corp), the adventure travel operator further commits to improving life through travel by championing the coexistence of nature and people in harmony.

“At Exodus Adventure Travels, empowering our guests to travel responsibly is a core aspect of the adventures we create,” said Kasia Morgan, Head of Sustainability at Exodus Adventure Travels. “By supporting local communities to conserve nature across our destinations, we can create transformative travel experiences that not only immerse our guests in the beauty of the world but also contribute to its restoration and resilience. Every adventure we offer is thoughtfully curated to leave a positive, lasting impact on the places and people we visit.”

A selection of Exodus Adventure Travels’ Thriving Nature, Thriving People initiatives include:

Citizen Science Departures: In a first of its kind program, travelers may participate in collecting vital biodiversity data, contributing to global conservation efforts, on specific Exodus trips.

Rewilding: In partnership with Rewilding Apennines, this program aims to restore natural habitats across Italy. For every traveler, the company funds the rewilding of 100 square meters of land, supporting biodiversity and ecosystem regeneration.

Ocean Restoration: This initiative focuses on conserving and restoring marine ecosystems through a partnership with Blue Marine Foundation, supported alongside Exodus’ sister companies. This program targets key habitats like seagrass meadows and mangroves, which play a critical role in carbon sequestration and biodiversity support. Efforts span across seven global locations, including the Dutch Caribbean, Greece, and Indonesia, aiming to protect 7,000 hectares of marine habitat while engaging and empowering local communities over the next three years.

Wildlife and Animal Welfare: Aimed at ensuring ethical wildlife experiences, Exodus follows strict animal welfare guidelines, avoiding experiences based on cruelty to animals or activities that could harm wildlife. This approach commits to supporting various conservation projects and promoting responsible practices in wildlife tourism across destinations like Kenya, Sri Lanka and India.

Empowering Disadvantaged and Under-represented Communities: Through the work of the Exodus Adventure Travels Foundation, the company supports under-represented and disadvantaged communities through tourism initiatives. A few of these programs include Exodus’ Mountain Lioness Project in Tanzania, which has supported 30 pioneering female porters to become mountain guides on Kilimanjaro. In Nepal and India, the Foundation’s Himalayan Community Project encompasses multiple initiatives, including delivering training and materials to women living in remote Himalayan regions, so they can generate income in the low season.

Community Kickstart Projects: Exodus supports various grassroots community empowerment and conservation initiatives through its global partner network. This could be through uplifting women, encouraging entrepreneurship, youth conservation engagement or regeneration. Most recently, The Exodus Adventure Travels Foundation partnered with Portugal A2Z Walking & Biking as part of their Community Kickstart Projects, to help restore the country’s vital ecosystem following devastating firestorms destroying over 40,000 hectares of land in 2017 - including the iconic 800-year-old Pinhal de Leiria forest. ■



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exodus
ADVENTURE TRAVELS

Natural Habitat Adventures Announces New Photo Expeditions Collection



Natural Habitat Adventures (Nat Hab), the leading conservation travel company in partnership with World Wildlife Fund (WWF), has recently unveiled a new and updated collection of photography-focused trips: Photo Expeditions.

Building on its 40 years of experience that includes crafting journeys for photographers, Nat Hab has reimagined its Photo Expeditions with a more in-depth educational approach to nature photography. This newly curated lineup offers more than 30 expertly designed itineraries, each tailored to meet the growing demand for specialized photography experiences in some of the world's most breathtaking natural environments.

Each Photo Expedition is led by a Nat Hab Expedition Leader who is both an accomplished professional photographer and a seasoned naturalist with extensive knowledge of wildlife habitats, behaviors, and movement patterns—enabling, guests to capture high-quality images through an understanding of animals and their habitats. Tailored instruction is provided for all skill levels and equipment, from DSLRs to smartphones, creating a personalized learning experience for every participant. Travelers will have the opportuni-

ty to enhance their photography talent and fine-tune their editing skills through guided presentations and workshops. These sessions cover essential tips for capturing stunning images, including in challenging conditions such as night, desert glare, rainforest shadows, or snow and ice.

Photo Expeditions provide an optimal context for getting the best possible wildlife and landscape images. Itineraries feature secluded and remote locations away from crowded tourist areas, offering guests the quiet, intimate setting necessary for capturing coveted shots. With small groups averaging just six to nine guests, the schedule is flexible, allowing the group to move to where wildlife is, and to linger in pursuit of the best light. Some Photo Expeditions offer additional baggage allowance for photography gear, which can be crucial on an African safari. All guests have window seats or full rows in a vehicle for optimal shooting, including on boats and aircraft. Accommodations are carefully selected for their proximity to key photography spots, from mobile safari camps along Africa's Great Migration route to secluded bases in Greenland and Alaska's Lake Clark National Park.

More than 30 Photo Expeditions are now available across North America, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Northern Europe. Here are some of the top trips:

Northern Lights Photo Expedition: Capture the aurora in Churchill, Manitoba, one of the world's premier destinations for northern lights photography. Visit remote wilderness locations via private snow coach and shoot from the comfort of private settings like Nat Hab's Aurora Pod®, a 360° glass enclosure, or the geodesic Aurora Sphere, with views on the sky through transparent panels.

Borneo Wildlife Photo Expedition: Explore the depths of Borneo's ancient rainforests, ripe for capturing images of exotic wildlife including endangered orangutans, leaf monkeys, pygmy elephants, and over 300 vibrant bird species among jungle rivers and waterfalls.

Secluded South Africa Photo Expedition: Capture Africa's iconic Big Five in action—elephants, leopards, rhinos, lions, and Cape buffalo—from exclusive private reserves such as Sabi Sand, Marataba, and Madikwe, away from the crowds typically found in Kruger National Park.

Ultimate Iceland Photo Expedition: Visit this small island nation, situated just beneath the Arctic Circle, to capture a dynamic landscape shaped by volcanic and glacial forces. Subjects include stark mountains, lava fields, iceberg lagoons, black sand beaches and wildlife including Arctic foxes and the world's largest population of Atlantic puffins.

Fat Bear Photo Expedition: A post-season expedition to Katmai National Park, where the stars of Fat Bear Week continue their final feast in preparation for winter. With no crowds, travelers will have unparalleled access to photograph these enormous brown bears near Brooks Falls and along the Naknek and Brooks Rivers.

Other Photo Expeditions include jaguars in Brazil, the monarch butterfly migration in Mexico, glaciers in Patagonia, unique wildlife in the Galapagos, and much more. ■

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INSPIRING
Tunisia

Oku Japan Elevates Culture-Focused Travel Experiences in 2025

From evocative coastal trails to culinary delights: explore the heart of Japan through its traditions and landscapes



Oku Japan, a leader in immersive, community-focused journeys into the heart of Japanese culture, prides itself on its range of self-guided and guided walking and trekking tours that cater to travelers seeking meaningful, culture-rich experiences.

From food-focused adventures with visits to sake breweries, fish markets, and cooking classes, to an immersion into traditional Buddhist life with stays at a shukubo or temple lodging, to learning about the indigenous Ainu culture, visits to abalone farms, partaking in traditional tea ceremonies, and so much more, Oku Japan understands that truly transformative, authentic travel comes about through connection, to both people and places.

"Our mission has always been to share the essence of Japan with travelers in a way that is both sustainable and deeply personal," says Hiroshi Kawaguchi, general manager for Oku Japan. "Culture-focused travel is about more than sightseeing; it's about fostering a genuine understanding and appreciation for Japan's rich heritage and offers our guests an opportunity to really connect with the various communities they will have a chance to explore on one of our tours.



Here are a few of Oku Japan's culture-focused journeys.

The Michinoku Coastal Trail: Set in the remote Tohoku region of Honshu, Japan's main island, the Michinoku Coastal Trail stretches over 630 miles (1,000 km) along breathtaking coastal cliffs, lush forests, and serene villages. Working in collaboration with local communities and the Michinoku Trail Club, a not-for-profit organization that manages and maintains the trail, Oku Japan has developed a range of self-guided and guided tours along this remarkable trail and will continue to expand its offerings here in 2025. The self-guided itineraries include Oku's exclusive fureai experiences, which offers guests the opportunity to foster meaningful connections with members of the local communities, while its brand-new guided tour provides expert insights into the region's traditions and history, further enriching the journey.

Shoguns and Samurai: Travel back in time with this 14-day small group guided cultural tour that explores the highlights of central Japan. Delving into Japan's feudal past, this expertly curated itinerary travels through history from modern Tokyo, known as Edo during the period of rule by the shogun, to end near Kyoto, the country's capital for 1,000 years and the repository of much of Japan's cultural heritage. Traveling along sections of the ancient Nakasendo Trail, guests will enjoy an in-depth discovery of the country's history through various historic sites, traditional post towns, cultural landmarks, and more.

Kyushu Island: Kyushu, Japan's third-largest island, is known as the cradle of Japanese civilization, where ancient traditions meet

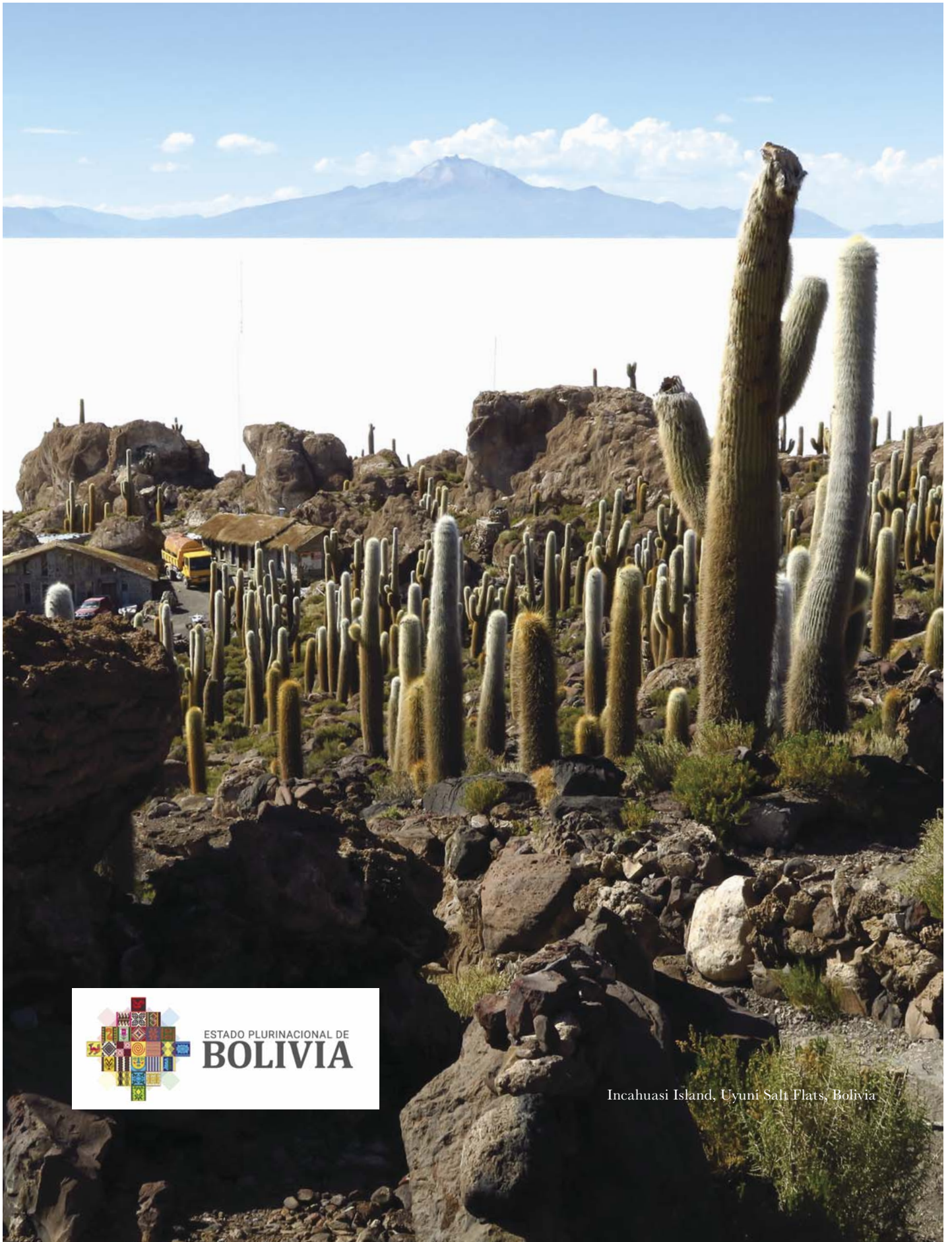
breathtaking natural beauty. Showcasing the island's vibrant mix of history, culture, and nature, Oku Japan offers two tours here – one guided, one self-guided – both with much to offer travelers. The self-guided trip – Kyushu's Hidden History – is an eight-day itinerary that as part of Oku's 'Walk and Explore' series combines stunning hikes with urban exploration. On the 15-day guided Land of Fire Kyushu journey, guests will delve into the island's unique history with the expert insights of their Oku Japan tour leader, visiting iconic landmarks like Mount Aso, the world's largest volcanic caldera, and vibrant towns like Kumamoto (including a visit to Kumamoto Castle, one of Japan's great castles), along with ample time spent enjoying the many onsen hot springs and the unforgettable hot sand baths that this island has to offer.

Japan's Culinary Heritage: Food enthusiasts can indulge in country's vibrant culinary traditions on this 11-day small group guided tour. Showcasing Japan's best-kept culinary traditions – from its bustling cities to its serene fishing villages and mountain towns – this amazing gastronomic journey invites guests to learn traditional cooking techniques, takes them foraging for sansai (wild plants), into historic food markets and to tea plantations, savoring multi-course kaiseki dinners, and participating in a "foodscape" beach lunch with a local chef on Awaji Island, known for its role in Japan's imperial food culture. With several exclusive behind-the-scenes experiences, including a community hosted lunch in the hidden valley of Gokayama, this is a trip for all the senses!

"Oku Japan is committed to creating travel experiences that honor the country's traditions while offering a window into the lives of its people," concludes Kawaguchi. "These itineraries invite travelers to immerse themselves in our culture, landscapes, and culinary heritage, providing both unforgettable memories and a deeper understanding of the people that call it home." ■

Visit: [OKUJAPAN.COM](https://www.okujapan.com)





Incahuasi Island, Uyuni Salt Flats, Bolivia

Explore the World by Bike

Beginner-Friendly Cycling Vacations with ExperiencePlus! Bicycle Tours



For travelers interested in a cycling vacation but are new to this form of adventure travel and not sure where to start, ExperiencePlus! Bicycle Tours, a trailblazer in cycling vacations and leader in active travel, provides the perfect starting points with a variety of beginner-friendly cycling vacations and online tools and resources designed to help with trip planning.

Beginner-friendly trips feature manageable daily distances, flat or gently rolling terrain, and exceptional support, including van assistance and GPS navigation or chalk arrows on classic tours, and local insights and tips from the ExperiencePlus! trip leaders themselves, who excel at creating memorable experiences from start to finish for every traveler.

To assist newcomers, or even people traveling as part of a group that includes members with different levels of experience, ExperiencePlus! offers a range of resources online.

This includes:

- A page detailing some of its "Best Bike Tours for Beginner Riders".
- A "Choosing the best bicycle tour for you" page that asks those considering a cycling trip six key questions: where you want to go, what

time of year you want to travel, what level of cycling do you want or need, how long you want to cycle, what type of experience you are seeking, and if you are traveling with someone thinking about what their idea of a fun bicycle vacation is.

- A clear description about their various "tour styles" (classic, gravel, bike & boat, expedition, and self-guided).
- Explanations and definitions of "tour levels" (1-5).
- Details on "what to expect on tour", with the ultimate goal of landing on a trip that is the best fit for each person/group.
- "Bike tour training programs" specifically designed for selected tour levels.

Here are a few recommended trips for those new to cycling vacations:

Bicycling Venice to Florence: The company's most popular trip for beginners, this classic journey features seven days of pedaling through the heart of Italian culture and cuisine. A level 2.5 tour with an average daily distance of 37 miles (60 km).

NEW! Bike and Barge: Bruges to Amsterdam:

This eight-day adventure starts in Bruges and travels to Amsterdam, spending seven nights aboard a luxury barge that follows the cycling trip the entire way, meaning guests only unpack once. With a Level 1 rating, and an average daily distance of 24 miles (40 km), this tour is a perfect choice for anyone new to cycling trips.

Bike Across Portugal: This eight-day classic tour explores Portugal's south-central lands and stunning west coast, traveling from Elvas, in the interior, to the coast. A level 2.5 trip with an average daily distance of 38 miles (63 km), this tour offers a bit more of a challenge while still being very accessible to all levels of experience.

Italy's Alpine Valleys: While a cycling trip through the Dolomites might seem like something for experienced riders only, this eight-day adventure from Bolzano to Bassano del Grappa is a level 1 ride that travels along bike paths through one of Italy's finest bike-friendly regions. With an average daily distance of 23 miles (37 km), it is a perfect option for couples or friends with varied cycling abilities.

Bicycling the Danube Passau to Vienna: On this seven-day, point-to-point itinerary, guests follow the Danube River, from Passau, Germany, to Vienna, Austria, enjoying leisurely rides along bike paths and quiet, country roads. With its level 2 rating, the average daily distance is 42 miles (67 km) with a total distance of 208 miles (335 km).

Berlin to Copenhagen: A 14-day, level 1.5 classic itinerary, this popular northern European adventure starts in Germany's vibrant capital city of Berlin and travels via some of the continent's best bicycle infrastructure to Denmark's innovative capital of Copenhagen. On the way, guests will explore some of Europe's most well-preserved medieval towns, experience distinct regions and cultures within both countries, and savor renowned food and wine. ■

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Set-Jet To Scotland Into The World Of Outlander With Highland Explorer



For Outlander fans, the allure of set-jetting to Scotland remains as strong as ever. The highly anticipated series Outlander released its latest episodes after a long wait in November 2024, marking a thrilling return to the world of time travel, romance, and historical intrigue. This highly rated series, inspired by Diana Gabaldon's mega-popular historical fantasy novels, has captivated audiences worldwide since its debut in 2014 and the saga continues to attract numerous travelers to Scotland who are eager to explore the stunning filming locations that brought Jamie and Claire Fraser's epic love story to life.

According to VisitScotland, the Outlander show has boosted tourism by an average of 67 per cent at locations featured in the series. The Radical Travel Group Ltd.'s award-winning Scotland touring brand, Highland Explorer Tours (HEX), is offering fans single and multi-day immersive Outlander-themed tours from Inverness,

Edinburgh and Glasgow, enabling them to experience the magic of these 18th-century places.

Highland Explorers Tours is offering seven must-visit filming locations for travellers to discover the fascinating history behind the Outlander series:

1. Clava Cairns, Inverness Mystical Standing Stones

Fans will recognize it as Craigh na Dun, the mystical standing stones that transport Claire back to 18th-century Scotland. Travelers can immerse themselves in the mystery of Clava Cairns and learn about the history and folklore by joining the 1-Day Loch Ness, Whisky & Outlander tour from Inverness or the 3-Day Isle of Skye & Loch Ness tour from Edinburgh.

2. Blackness Castle – Fort William

Fans will recognize it as Fort William, where Jamie is flogged by Captain Black Jack

Randall. Outlander fans can explore this fortress on the 1-Day Outlander Explorer Tour from Edinburgh tour.

3. Doune Castle – Castle Leoch

Fans will recognize it as Castle Leoch, home to Colum MacKenzie and Clan Mackenzie. Fans can join the 1-Day Outlander Explorer Tour from Edinburgh or the 1-Day Castles, West Highlands & Loch Lomond tour from Edinburgh.

4. Doune Castle – Castle Leoch

Fans will recognize it as Castle Leoch, home to Colum MacKenzie and Clan Mackenzie by joining the 1-Day Outlander Explorer Tour from Edinburgh or the 1-Day Castles, West Highlands & Loch Lomond tour from Edinburgh.

5. Culloden Battlefield

Fans will recognize it as the moor where Jamie fights in the 1746 Battle of Culloden for the Jacobite Rising and where the star-crossed lovers were forced to say their goodbyes.

6. Falkland Village - Inverness

Fans will recognize it as 1940s Inverness, where Claire and Frank spent their honeymoon, and the Bruce Fountain, where Jamie's ghost first made an appearance. Guests can stroll through this quaint wee village on the 1-Day Outlander Explorer Tour from Edinburgh or the 1-Day Outlander Castles & The Scottish Countryside from Glasgow.

7. Culross - Cranesmuir

Fans will recognize it as Cranesmuir, the village where Geillis Duncan lives, and where Claire is accused of witchcraft. On the 1-Day Outlander Castles & The Scottish Countryside from Glasgow, guests can wander these streets and explore notable locations. ■

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Extend Your Jubilee Year Pilgrimage of Hope 2025 to The Maltese Islands

His Holiness Pope Francis declared 2025 a year of Jubilee, from December 24th, 2024 to January 6th, 2026. Jubilee years happen every 25 years. The theme of the 2025 Jubilee year is "Pilgrims of Hope". Malta, an archipelago in the Mediterranean, a 90-minute flight (approx.) from Rome and just a ferry ride from Sicily (approx. 52.1 nautical miles), presents the perfect opportunity to extend one's Jubilee Year Pilgrimage and explore the historic relationship between the Maltese Islands and the Christian faith.

Steeped in 8,000 years of history, the Maltese Islands have three UNESCO World Heritage sites including Valletta, the Capital. Malta's ties with Christianity date back to when the Apostle Paul was shipwrecked on the archipelago's shores, accompanied by Saint Luke. Today, pilgrims visiting the archipelago will still find fervent Christian devotion, and in fact, in 2023, Malta officially became a part of the traditional Pilgrimage Route, Camino de Santiago.

Special Jubilee Year Pilgrims of Hope 2025 Events in Malta

The Archdiocese of Malta is organizing various programs related to Pilgrims of Hope 2025, including liturgical celebrations. Also, the Archdiocese has designated the Melita Mariana Pilgrimage dedicated to Marian devotions in Malta throughout the ages, as the Jubilee Year pilgrimage and is encouraging pilgrims to venture out on the routes. Melita Mariana is a collaborative effort between XirCammini, VisitMalta, Heritage Malta, and XirCammini members and volunteers and aims to explore religious and historical aspects through a 3-day, 60km (approx. 37 miles) pilgrimage encompassing ancient, old, and recent Marian devotions across Malta and Gozo. Melita Mariana can be walked on one's own as a self-guided tour, but group pilgrimages will also be organized. ■

WWW.VISITMALTA.COM



Exploring the Majestic Chateaux of the Loire Valley, France

The Loire Valley, often called the "Garden of France", is a breathtaking region renowned for its fairy-tale Chateaux, rolling vineyards, and rich history. Stretching along the Loire River, this UNESCO-listed area is home to more than 300 castles, each with its own unique charm and grandeur.

Among the most famous is Chateaux de Chambord, a masterpiece of Renaissance architecture. With its distinctive French medieval design, double-helix staircase (attributed to Leonardo da Vinci), and 440 rooms, Chambord is the largest and most extravagant Chateaux in the valley. Wandering through its opulent halls and climbing up to the panoramic terraces offers a glimpse into the lavish lifestyles of French royalty.

Equally enchanting is Chateaux de Chenonceau, known as the "Ladies" Chateaux due to its strong female influence over centuries. Built over the Cher River, its graceful arches and beautifully manicured gardens create an air of romance. The Chateaux's history is deeply intertwined with powerful women like Catherine de' Medici and Diane de Poitiers, making it a fascinating stop for history lovers.

For a more intimate experience, Chateaux de Azay-le-Rideau captivates with its picturesque setting on an island in the Indre River. Its reflection in the water and delicate Renaissance details make it one of the most photogenic castles in the region.

Beyond the Chateaux, the Loire Valley offers charming villages, world-class wines, and gourmet cuisine, making it a dream destination for travelers. Whether exploring the lavish halls of Chambord, strolling through Chenonceau's gardens, or sipping local Sauvignon Blanc, the Loire Valley promises an unforgettable journey into France's royal past. ■

WWW.FRANCE.FR/EN/



Explore Türkiye's Aegean through the Iconic Cycling Routes

Türkiye's Aegean region, known as the 'turquoise coast of happiness,' offers a haven for cyclists of all skill levels. From serene shores to historic sites, this corner of Türkiye invites cyclists to experience stunning landscapes, ancient cities, and charming villages. Along the way, you can indulge in local Aegean cuisine and sip on regional wines.

Here's a closer look at some of the most popular cycling routes in the area.

Explore History and Nature on EuroVelo 8

Türkiye's first inclusion in the EuroVelo network is the Mediterranean Route, also known as EuroVelo 8. Spanning 5,900 kilometres and connecting 11 countries, this route also passes through İzmir, Türkiye's third-largest city. The journey begins at Dikili Port, making its first stop at the ancient city of Pergamon, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Marmaris Mountain Biking Trails

For those seeking a thrill, the Marmaris mountain biking trails in Muğla provide the perfect challenge. Known for their rugged terrain, steep climbs, and exhilarating descents, these trails weave through pine forests and offer breathtaking views of pristine bays and fishing villages along the Aegean coastline.

ECO Trails in Köyceğiz-Ortaca-Dalaman

The districts of Köyceğiz, Ortaca, and Dalaman lie at the junction of the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, offering unique ECO Trails created by the Dalyan Tourism, Culture, and Environmental Protection Association.

Whether you're a leisure cyclist or a mountain biking enthusiast, Türkiye's Aegean region promises an unforgettable journey through nature, history, and culture, all while offering a warm welcome to those exploring it on two wheels. ■

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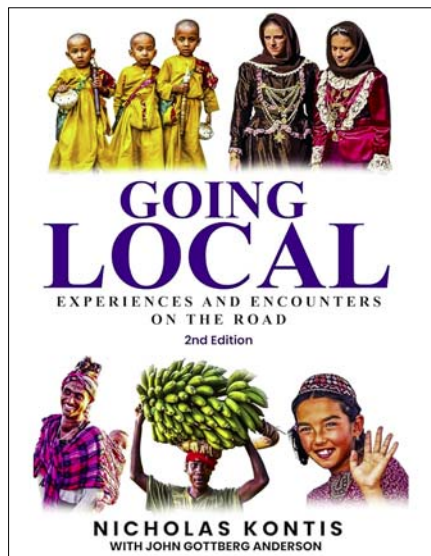
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Going Local - an around the world travel experience with Nick Kontis



Travel is not, and should never be, a "been there, done that" proposition. Enlightened travelers understand that it's not about selfies posted on Instagram, but what they can check off their bucket lists. It's about authentic experiences.

In the 21st century, to pardon the cliché, the world is our oyster. We can be in almost any city on the planet in 24 hours, in the most remote outpost of civilization within two or three days.

Modern explorers thrive in finding their personal discomfort zones and diving in, head-first. They seek immersion, wisdom, and a greater understanding of people and places. They challenge themselves to grow, to acknowledge their fears of the new and unknown, to glimpse and perhaps experience the ways in which other cultures live.

Within these pages, you'll learn:

- * How to become a part of the experiential travel moment, contributing to the sharing economy on a peer-to-peer level. Travelers find it easier than ever to "live like a local" — to become, however temporarily, part of a family or community.

- * How to embrace foreign cultures through their cuisine. Globetrotters seek a greater understanding of national cuisines by sharing meals in private homes, visiting food markets and taking cooking classes.

- * How to volunteer, short- or long-term, while you're on the road — traveling the world while helping others. Whether teaching, farming, assisting with environmental or wildlife conservation, there's nothing better than giving back to a community, working side-by-side with locals.

- * What it means to be a responsible traveler — and how to choose tour operators whose focus on sustainability gives back to local societies. At every turn, be aware that you can help to protect ecosystems and become environmentally and culturally responsible. Tread lightly, leaving a positive footprint.

- * How to turn a round-the-world journey into a life-changing adventure. Take off your blinders and you're sure to return home with a better understanding of yourself and of the world around you. You will be blessed with tolerance and knowledge that can only be learned from interaction with people of foreign lands and cultures.

Special features include contributions from numerous famed modern travelers, including Lonely Planet co-founder Tony Wheeler, adventure travel guru Richard Bangs, European travel icon Rick Steves, Emmy Award-winning broadcast journalist Peter Greenberg, and National Geographic Traveler editor-at-large Don George.

Through the lens of the authors' own personal tales, "Going Local" offers a unique approach to world travel. The pair have an international pedigree.

Nicholas Kontis was born on Greece's Santorini Island and at the age of 3 moved with his parents to San Francisco, where he was introduced to a range of lifestyles. His impulsiveness, curiosity about people, and spontaneous passions forged a life of travel. A summer trip back to Europe turned into a



multi-year adventure, and a career of priceless memories was born. Indeed, Nick has set foot in more than 100 countries.

John Gottberg Anderson, born and raised in the United States, followed in the footsteps of his maternal grandpa, who left his Finnish fishing village to become a transatlantic sailor and visited four continents before he was 25. John was injected with a passion for Asian and Pacific lifestyles during two summers in Hawaii; worked at a small factory in rural Sweden; then invested in a round-the-world air ticket and spent three years on the road, picking up jobs at bars and restaurants, farms and hotels, teaching skiing and making sales calls. In the decades that followed, he worked in 11 countries on four continents and traveled in scores more.

As Kontis and Anderson tell their stories, they encourage readers to explore the world on their own terms.

You're afraid? Of course you are. But don't let that stop you. As Goethe once wrote: "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it." ■



World Traveler's



21



Must Visit
PLACES





Driving New Hampshire: A Memorable Family Getaway

by Daniel Smajovits

New Hampshire, with its scenic beauty and charming attractions, is the perfect destination for a family vacation. Whether you start your trip from Canada or from another point in New England, as soon as you cross into New Hampshire, you're struck by the state's picturesque landscapes. Rolling hills, dense forests, and quaint towns create a stunning backdrop for your drive.

While the state has numerous attractions, including the bustling town of Portsmouth on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, we opted for the year-round destination of North Conway, which was close to many outdoor adventures, including Mount Washington, the highest peak in the Northeast, and the state's historic amusement park, Storyland, which always provides a magical experience for kids and adults alike.

In the winter, North Conway is consistently ranked as a premiere ski destination, but in the summer, the area transforms itself. The region is anchored by Storyland, which has delighted families from across New England and Eastern Canada for over 70 years. Built for young families, the amusement park has 50 rides and attractions and provides an affordable and exciting getaway which will create memories for years to come.

From classic fairytale-themed rides to interactive attractions, there's something for everyone. Must-visit rides include the Polar Coaster, a gentle roller coaster perfect for kids, and the antique German Carousel, which offers a nostalgic experience for parents. Storyland's water rides, like Dr. Geyser's Remarkable Raft Ride, are great for cooling off on warm days. Likewise for Moo Lagoon, the in-house waterpark, which

will entertain kids of all ages for hours. Don't miss the shows and character meet-and-greets that bring fairytales to life. The Cinderella Castle is a favorite spot for photos and magical moments and ensure to explore the play areas and hands-on exhibits, where kids can let their imaginations run wild.

For guests who arrive at Storyland after 2 PM, the park will welcome you back for one full day at any point that season. This perk allows you to get a taste of the excitement and then hit the ground running on your full day at the park. The park's manageable size and thoughtful layout make it easy to navigate without feeling rushed. Consider starting with the park's live performances or heading straight to the rides your family loved most. After a magical morning on your second day, enjoy lunch at one of the park's dining areas. Storyland's kid-friendly menu includes options like burgers, pizza, and ice cream. As the day winds down, browse the gift shops for souvenirs to remember your trip.

In the afternoon, take some time to explore the surrounding area. The nearby Kancamagus Highway is a stunning scenic drive, especially in fall, with its brilliant foliage. Alternatively, visit Diana's Baths, a series of cascading waterfalls perfect for a short hike and family photos. For those inclined to take advantage of the tax-free shopping that New Hampshire has to offer, North Conway is also home to a Settlers Green, an outlet mall with a host of options.

A drive through New Hampshire offers endless possibilities for adventure, relaxation and fun – but if you're traveling with a family, North Conway and its surrounding area offers the perfect backdrop for creating cherished memories. Whether it's your first visit or a return trip, the Granite State's charm will have you planning your next getaway before you even leave. ■

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China: Dim Sum



Germany: Black Forest Cake



Greece: Moussaka



Italy: Pizza Margherita

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Mexico: Tacos



Spain: Paella



Thailand: Pad Thai



What's New in Nevada

"Revel" in travel's latest trend

According to Virtuoso, travellers are ringing in the new year with Revelry Travel – traveling for joy. Expedia agrees, calling it JOMO Travel. Everyone has experienced FOMO, the fear of missing out, but it's time to embrace JOMO, the joy of missing out. This means leaving the hustle and bustle of everyday life behind and hitting the open road, escaping into nature or staying in a remote locale. Welcome to rural Nevada. Billed as the Road Trip Capital of the USA, Nevada offers 10 themed routes to take visitors across the state, such as The Loneliest Road in America. In the 1980s, Life magazine dubbed this stretch of U.S. Route 50 as having no points of interest. Road trippers willing to leave their Wi-Fi behind in search of stunning landscapes, state parks, ghost towns and sagebrush saloons, can be confident they will be anything but lonely, and in fact, may just find joy.

Sipping through sagebrush saloons

There are few better places to drink in Nevada's history than its historic watering holes or "Sagebrush Saloons," as the state calls them. To guide road trippers across the state, the Sagebrush Saloon Passport highlights nearly 30 iconic options. Free to download, the passport allows the user (and a designated driver) to digitally check in at each location and rack up points toward exclusive swag. At each stop, visitors will discover the history of both the saloon and the surrounding community. Stops include Nevada's oldest drinking parlour, the Genoa Bar & Saloon in the Carson Valley, which is also the oldest settlement in the state; Eureka Owl Club, a full-service bar along Highway 50, one of the most remote and haunted highways in the country; and the legendary Odeon Saloon in Dayton, which has drawn the likes of Wild West cowboys, Mark Twain and Marilyn Monroe. ■

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What's New in Oregon

Sustainable seafood makes waves

One of the draws of the Oregon Coast is the bounty of delicious seafood. Visitors can join marine biologist Alanna Kieffer of Shifting Tides for her popular workshops ranging from foraging for wild mussels to tours of Oregon Seaweed, where she farms Pacific dulse and educates the public about regenerative aquaculture. In February, "seafood-ies" flock to Winter Waters on the Oregon Coast, a culinary series that spotlights the state's seafood and sea vegetables, including wakame, kombu, sea lettuce, and dulse, with a variety of prix-fixe dinners, pop-ups, cooking classes and workshops. Oregon's Best Catch and Where to Buy Oregon Seafood provide visitors with guides that detail what seafood is local to Oregon, when it's in season and a map of retailers, so they can continue to sample Oregon's seafood throughout their stay or to take home.

Dark skies reach high five

Home to the Oregon Outback International Dark Sky Sanctuary, the largest in the world, Oregon has recently added new dark sky accreditations for a total of five throughout the state. With a population of less than 50, the rural town of Antelope has become Oregon's first International Dark Sky Community and the Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve is now an International Dark Sky Park, the second in the state, both certifications awarded by DarkSky International. The designation for the Oregon Caves has come after a multi-year effort by the National Park Service to improve natural darkness and reduce light pollution in the 4,554-acre (1,843-hectare) system of marble caves and formations beneath the Siskiyou Mountains. Protected within the monument are old growth forests, subalpine meadows, glacial cirques and alpine rock gardens offering visitors a unique blend of natural and celestial experiences highlighting conservation. Prineville Reservoir International Dark Sky Park and Sunriver International Development of Distinction are the other accredited dark sky places in the state. ■

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What's New in Utah

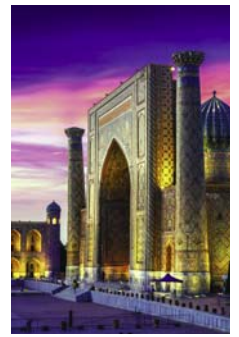
Dry tripping across the state for soda

Going beyond Dry January, alcohol-free getaways known as "dry tripping" continue to influence travel year-round. Utah is not a dry state, but its soda culture easily supports sober sojourns. Utah is home of the "dirty soda" – fountain soda with added ingredients such as heavy creams, flavoured syrups, fruit juices and even candy pieces. Due to Utah's large population of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who abstain from alcohol and hot beverages (such as coffee and tea), the dirty soda trend took off. Visitors will find the largest variety of soda shops in the U.S., with a variety of chains and hundreds of drink combinations. These soda shops are located across the state, including at the Salt Lake City International Airport, and are often a drive-through model, allowing road trippers to quickly grab a dirty soda to go.

Heber Valley home to new resort gateway

Deer Valley Resort has soft-opened its highly anticipated expanded terrain, Deer Valley East Village, for the 2024-25 ski season in Utah's Heber Valley, located 45 min. from Salt Lake City International Airport and half way between Park City and Sundance Mountain Resort. This gateway will offer visitors an alternative arrival option to Deer Valley Resort, and provide access to three new chairlifts, over 300 acres (121 hectares) of terrain and several debut ski runs. The brand new Grand Hyatt Deer Valley has also opened in the Heber Valley, providing luxury accommodation with 400 rooms and suites, five food and beverage outlets, outdoor heated swimming pool with three hot tubs, and a spa opening later this year. Four Seasons Resort and Private Residences Deer Valley has also announced it will be building in the Heber Valley. ■

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Discovering Scottsdale, Arizona

by Alexandra Cohen

The sky is cloudless and impossibly blue. There are orange and red desert mountains in the distance, with palm trees and cacti closer by. You have made it to your majestic and relaxing destination. You have arrived in Scottsdale.

Scottsdale is Arizona's premier destination for fine dining, shopping and luxury resorts, and I am fortunate to have just returned from my first visit to the region. Scottsdale has over 240,000 citizens, making it one of the fastest growing cities and housing markets in the United States, and it borders other well-known locations such as Phoenix, Paradise Valley, and Tempe, Arizona.

Worried about the weather? There is no need, with Scottsdale boasting 330 days of sunshine per year and year-round swimming weather.

Looking to explore the city and its surround-

ing regions? There are plenty of things to do in the Scottsdale area, starting with Camelback Mountain, which is one of the most prominent outdoor destinations in Arizona. Take one of many scenic hikes in the area, or consider engaging in some rock climbing.

The Phoenix Zoo is another nearby option, with 140 animals spanning 125 acres of land. Creatures available to visit include lions, giraffes, monkeys, iguanas, wolves, bears, and more. In the same vein, you may wish to explore Butterfly Wonderland, which is the largest indoor butterfly sanctuary in America. For those who like to shop, there are plenty of neighborhoods and shopping centers to explore. Fashion Square Mall is the largest shopping center in the American Southwest, with over 225 stores and 2,000,000 square feet of retail space. Finally, consider Old Town Scottsdale not only for dinner, but for boutique shopping,

cozy restaurants, art galleries, and wine tastings.

As for dining The Lincoln Steakhouse & Bar, located at the JW Marriott Scottsdale Camelback Inn Resort & Spa, serves up locally sourced American cuisine, shareable plates, and craft cocktails. For dinner you must have one the restaurant's signature prime steaks, a 14 oz ribeye which was truly cooked to perfection.

Tucked away in a quiet corner of Old Town Scottsdale, you will find The House Brasserie, where we enjoyed an excellent meal under the stars. Built in 1939 and nestled in one of Scottsdale's more historic blocks, The House Brasserie is indeed one of the region's oldest standing residences. Consider the branzino, which is the perfect light dish for all the fish lovers out there and the Chilean sea bass.

Seeking an authentic Italian fine dining experience during your trip? In the heart of Old Town Scottsdale, you will find Marcellino Ristorante, helmed by Chef Marcellino Verzino and his wife Sima. During our meal, we were treated to a tasting menu, which featured a starter of bruschetta and cheese, followed by scallops al pesto, a primi course, featuring pasta, followed by a secondi course, which features seafood or meat. Before visitors make the difficult choice of which pasta dish to sample, amidst the restaurant's many options, their server brings them a large plate which demonstrates the many special pastas available, including tortelloni stuffed with pureed filet mignon, and handcrafted porcini-infused fettucine with chunks of fresh lobster, sauteed with shiitake mushrooms and truffle oil. For our secondi, we were served one of the restaurant's specials, the branzino dish, which was topped with white wine and butter sauce and was served alongside an incredibly fluffy dollop of mashed potato as well as lemon, capers, grilled carrot, and zucchini. Finally, for dessert, we tasted the restaurant's walnut biscotti and cream, as well as the panna cotta. The restaurant's wine menu and reserve lists feature over 100 selections in addition to an exclusive "Secret Cellar" menu. ■

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Rediscovering London: Living Like a Tourist in a City I Once Called Home

by Olivia Liveng

I first arrived in London in the fall of 2014, wide-eyed and weighed down by a suitcase—and the enormity of starting a semester abroad. My flat near Marble Arch put me in the thick of the city. Arabic cafés lined Edgware Road with the scent of shisha in the air, red buses screeched to a halt every few minutes, and Oxford Street’s chaos was impossible to ignore.

I told myself I was living in London, but looking back, I wasn’t. I rode the Tube daily, hunted down cheap curries, and prided myself on knowing which supermarket had the best student discounts. But the city itself—the landmarks, the history, the magic that makes London one of the most visited cities in the world? I ignored them. Hyde Park was practically my backyard, but I rarely wandered into it.

Now, ten years later, I’m back—this time as a visitor determined to experience what I missed. The perfect excuse? The silver jubilee of The London Pass by Go City, celebrating 25 years of making London’s biggest attractions more accessible. With entry to over 95 experiences—including many I once dismissed—it was my chance to finally fully embrace the city.

My first stop was the Tower of London, which I



had stubbornly avoided. Back in 2014, I had dismissed it as a glorified history lesson. I was wrong.

Standing beneath its imposing walls, I felt the weight of history in a way I hadn’t before. I joined a Beefeater tour, led by a guide who made centuries of betrayal, imprisonment, and executions come alive. Queens lost their heads here. Conspiracies unraveled behind these stone walls. The ghosts of history lingered in every corner.

The Crown Jewels, which I once dismissed as overhyped, were breathtaking. Their brilliance felt surreal, as if I had stepped into a fairytale. As I stared, I imagined my two-year-old son, Aksel, wide-eyed and full of questions: “Who wore these? Why are they locked up? Could I wear them?” It was the kind of awe I had denied myself when I lived here before.

One of the best surprises of The London Pass was discovering places I’d never considered. The London Canal Museum, tucked near King’s Cross, was one of them.

This small museum tells the story of London’s canal network, once an industrial lifeline and now a peaceful escape for houseboats and kayakers. But the real surprise? The ice trade. In the 19th century, massive ice blocks were imported from Norway and stored in deep wells beneath the museum. Walking through the exhibits, I could almost feel the chill of those forgotten ice houses.

It was the kind of odd, fascinating history I hadn’t realized I cared about. I pictured Aksel here, darting ahead to peer into the displays, asking a million questions about why London needed so much ice. I didn’t have all the answers, but it would be fun to figure them out together.

In 2014, I had scoffed at the London Eye, dismissing it as overpriced and overrated. This time, I made no excuses. The London Pass let me skip the line, and as the wheel lifted me above the city, I finally understood its appeal.

From that height, London stretched out in every direction. The Thames shimmered, weaving through a skyline that blended old and new—Big Ben, St. Paul’s, The Shard. Seeing it from above gave me a new appreciation for the layers of history and change that make up this city.

Next, I made my way to Tower Bridge, another landmark I had taken for granted. I had crossed it countless times, but I had never stepped inside. With The London Pass, I explored its high-level walkways, where glass floors gave me a thrilling view of the river below. In the Victorian Engine Rooms, I learned how the bridge was powered in the 19th century, the mechanics just as impressive as the structure itself.

Back in 2014, most of these experiences would have been out of reach. As a student, paying for attractions wasn’t an option when I was scraping together coins for groceries. That’s what makes The London Pass so valuable—it allows visitors to see more for less.

In just one day, I visited the Tower of London, Kew Gardens, and the Canal Museum for a fraction of what they would have cost separately. The pass also covers guided bike tours, entry to the Royal Mews, and even Queens Ice Skating, making it easy to plan a day packed with variety.

As my trip wound down, I found myself near Marble Arch, retracing the steps of my 2014 self. The streets were just as busy, but I felt entirely different.

Back then, I was so focused on surviving each day that I missed the magic around me. This time, with the help of The London Pass, I had finally seen London.

The city never stops evolving, nor do the people who visit it. The silver jubilee of the London Pass was an invitation to rediscover, experience, and finally see London with the wonder it deserves. ■

[HTTPS://LONDONPASS.COM/](https://londonpass.com/)

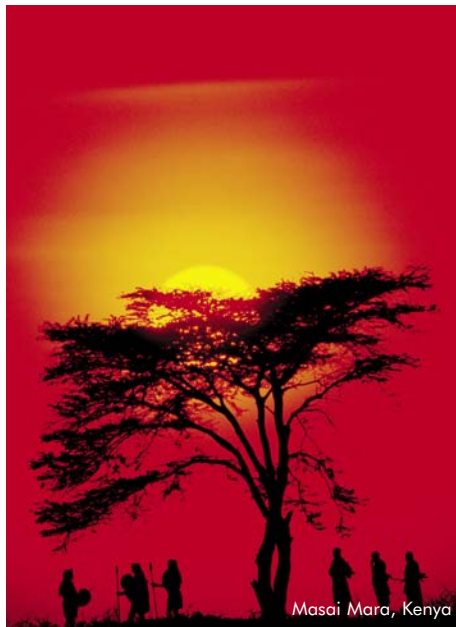




Balinese women



Moraine lake, Banff



Masai Mara, Kenya



Bamboo Forest ,Kyoto



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Lisbon, Portugal's vibrant capital, is a city brimming with history, culture, and culinary delights. The city's blend of old-world charm and modern vibrancy makes it an unforgettable destination. In only a few days, you can delve into its history, savor its cuisine, and explore its surrounding gems.

With all European cities, we recommend that you begin your journey in its oldest neighborhood, and for Lisbon, that is Alfama. With its narrow, winding streets and colorful buildings, you will be immersed in history at every turn. Ensure to visit the São Jorge Castle for panoramic views of the city and walk along the Tagus River. In the afternoon, we recommend you take one of Taste of Lisboa's incredible food tours, which will serve as the perfect guided introduction to the city and its cuisine. At night, find a Tasca, where you can enjoy a drink of wine and Fado music to cap off your day.

Some of Lisbon's most iconic landmarks are in Belém, which is the anchor to the city's rich maritime history. Belém is home to two UNESCO World Heritage sites: the Jerónimos Monastery, the resting place of Vasco da Gama, as well as the Tower of

Discovering the best of Lisbon

by Daniel Smajovits

Belem. A short walk along the river will bring you to the Monument to the Discoveries, which honors Portugal's explorers. The massive stone structure depicts famous navigators with interactive exhibits inside as well as a stunning view of Belém and the Tagus River. No visit to the neighborhood is complete without a trip to Pastéis de Belém, home of the original pastel de nata (custard tart). Grab a one to go or sit down and enjoy the world-famous tart fresh from the oven. The waterfront is also dotted with public art, cafes and performances, making it an ideal place to spend a morning or afternoon. To sample all local cuisine in one spot, ensure to visit the TimeOut Market, where dozens of local restaurants offer their best dishes, perfect for sharing.

The cultural center of Lisbon is Chiado and a perfect place to spend a morning. After a light breakfast at Café A Brasileira, a historic spot frequented by literary greats, head to Alfama (Martim Moniz) to grab Lisbon's famous Tram 28. While still used by locals,

Tram 28 has become a must for tourists. The hour-long ride uses a vintage 1930's tram and gives your feet a break as it winds by all the major sights. In the afternoon, head to Bairro Alto for its vibrant atmosphere. This district comes alive in the evening with lively bars and restaurants and for dinner, try petiscos, the Portuguese interpretation of tapas, paired with a refreshing vinho verde.

As Lisbon area has so much to offer, consider also spending a day visiting Sintra, home to the Pena Palace and the Quinta da Regaleira, both UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Explore lush gardens, mysterious grottoes, and stunning palaces that will transport you to another era. Return to Lisbon in time to enjoy dinner at Lisboa Tu & Eu. Located in an alleyway in Baixa, the unassuming restaurant boasts a lineup around the block each night as it's coveted for its authentic, fresh and home-made food. In our opinion, it's worth the wait. ■

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sandwich, to the classic ginjinha drink and naturally, the sweet Pastel de nata, each stop was a perfect introduction to a different aspect of local cuisine. Wine, beer or a non-alcoholic beverage was paired with each meal, offering us a true taste of Portugal's culinary richness.

49

While food anchors the tour, the Taste of Lisboa Food Tour isn't just about eating—it's a cultural experience that immerses you in the city's rhythm. Along the way, you'll interact with locals, explore hidden alleyways, and gain a new appreciation for Lisbon's dynamic spirit. Each stop is thoughtfully chosen to provide an authentic and memorable experience, away from the throngs of tourists, ensuring you can enjoy each bite. Also not lost on us was the fact that the tour route ventured off the beaten path, allowing us to explore parts of the city that only a local would know.

To make the most of the Taste of Lisboa Food Tour, we suggest that you arrive hungry and be willing to embrace new flavors. Should you have any allergies or aversions to food, please let your guide know in advance and he or she can make the proper accommodations for your needs.

The Taste of Lisboa Food Tour is an unforgettable way to experience Lisbon's culinary and cultural treasures. Whether you're a seasoned foodie or a curious traveler, this guided journey offers an intimate look at the heart and soul of the city. From sweet pastries to savory delicacies, every bite tells a story that deepens your connection to Lisbon. If you're planning a trip to Portugal, make sure this tour is on your itinerary—it's a feast for the senses you won't want to miss. ■

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Lisbon Through Food: The Taste of Lisboa Food Tour

Article and photography by Daniel Smajovits

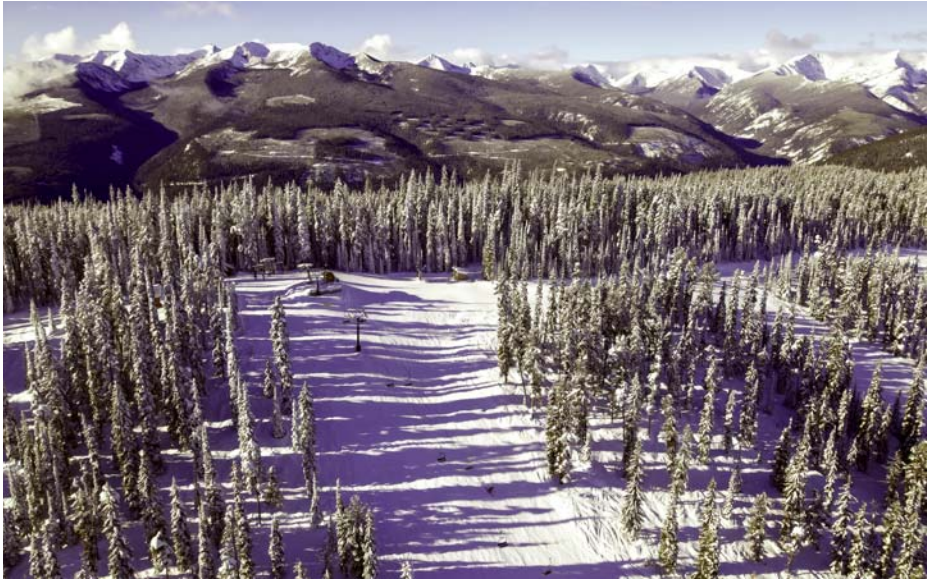
Lisbon, the sun-kissed capital of Portugal, is a city steeped in history, culture, and a rich culinary tradition that captivates foodies from around the globe. A food tour through Lisbon offers an immersive experience of the city's gastronomic delights, blending traditional flavors with contemporary innovations. For those eager to experience Portugal's culinary soul, the Taste of Lisboa Food Tour is an unforgettable journey and a must do by all visitors.

Our tour was the classic Lisbon Roots, Food & Cultural Walk, which served as the perfect introduction to the city. As suggested by Taste of Lisboa, we opted to take the tour on our first day in Lisbon, which allowed us to take advantage of all the recommendations that our guide, Daniel, had to offer. After a brief introduction to the city's history, Daniel whisked us away for four hours of indulgence. From the hearty local favorite bifana



Craving the Mountains but not the Crowds? Visit the Kootenay Rockies!

by Jennifer Merrick



What do you picture when you think of the Canadian Rockies? Most of us conjure up the iconic images of Banff and Lake Louise with their turquoise glacial lakes and snow-covered jagged peaks. Stunning to be sure. Over 4.5 million people from all over the world visit these national parks every year to marvel and vacation in their beauty. But the glorious mountain scenery is not confined by the borders of our parks.

Drive from Banff and head down Highway 93. In less than an hour, you'll find yourself in the East Kootenay region of south-eastern British Columbia surrounded by mountains, the Rocky Mountains to the east and the Purcell Mountains to the west. In this alpine wonderland, there are natural hot springs, ski resorts, hiking/biking trails and friendly communities. What you won't see are millions of tourists.

Our family had the pleasure of visiting the towns of Cranbrook and Kimberley on our winter holidays. When we arrived at the

Kimberley Alpine Resort to do some much-anticipated skiing, we were flabbergasted. Why weren't there more cars in the parking lot? Where were the lineups at the lift? It was especially hard to comprehend because of what the resort offered. We're talking about 1,800 acres of terrain, a 2,464 ft vertical, an award-winning ski school, 80 trails and the fine white powder snow this region is famous for.

On the slopes, surrounded by snow-covered evergreens and mountain vistas, there were times we had this magic all to ourselves. In the village, there were accommodations, restaurants and snack bars to enjoy an apres-ski drink or meal. The vibe was family-friendly, and everyone was welcoming.

"It's the kind of place you have to go out of your way to find," said our volunteer ski guide. "But people love it when they do."

An avid lifetime skier from Calgary, he now winters in Kimberley. He told me the black diamond runs here were on par with any

he's done in the region and that the snow is more consistent.

What does he like the most? "The people," he answered without hesitation. As he showed me the easiest way to get down the mountain, he talked about his beloved mountain community. By the time we were finished, I was ready to move here myself.

We only had a few days, unfortunately, but we made the most of them on the slopes and off.

Après Ski Breweries

Heid Out Restaurant in downtown Cranbrook was a local favorite with award-winning craft brews made on the premises and original dishes that showcased the flavors of the region. It was here in its convivial atmosphere that we enjoyed the tastiest meal of our trip. Another Cranbrook brewery won the medal for the most fun. Encore Brewery not only had crisp beer with quirky and alliterate labels like Liftoff Lager, a ludicrously luscious lunar lager, but it was also a bowling alley. We had a blast competing with each other for top scores and the last piece of delicious pizza.

Heavenly Hiking

Next to the Kimberley Alpine Ski Resort is the Trickle Creek Golf Course, where multi-use trails are maintained during the winter months.

To my delight, the paths led to lookouts with panoramic views of the misty mountains and through stands of evergreens with their boughs adorned with snow. As I walked, a sense of peace fell over me. The tranquility was no doubt facilitated by the fact that in two hours of hiking, I saw only two other people.

A mountain paradise without the crowds. I'll be back. ■

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SS Badger: A Floating Landmark

by Randy Mink

Anticipating my trip to the shores of western Michigan, I was most looking forward to a Lake Michigan crossing aboard a well-preserved relic from another era—the car ferry SS Badger. The vintage vessel is one of only two mobile National Historic Landmarks (the other being San Francisco’s cable cars).

The four-hour “cruise” from Ludington, Michigan to Manitowoc, Wisconsin is more than just going from Point A to Point B. It’s an experience in itself, something I’d wanted to do ever since hearing about the last coal-fired passenger steamship operating in the United States. Built in 1953 to carry railroad cars across Lake Michigan, the SS Badger, gearing up for its 72nd season, is the last of 14 Ludington-based car ferries still transiting this inland sea.

Besides transporting up to 600 passengers, the seven-story vessel, named after the University of Wisconsin athletic teams, hauls

cars, RVs, motorcycles, tour buses and freight-carrying trucks, even farm and industrial equipment, but no longer trains.

I kept so busy during the 60-mile trip that time sped by. When we docked in Manitowoc, I wasn’t ready to get off, so I lingered on deck watching the young car attendants retrieve passengers’ cars from the cargo hold, drive them onto the dock and run back for the next one.

Afloat, many of us spent a good chunk of time playing bingo and trivia (for prizes) in the ship’s Main Lounge. I also visited the gift shop, perused car ferry exhibits in the museum room, and stood at the rail taking in the vast blue expanses of Lake Michigan while watching for freighters. For relaxing, benches and chairs are scattered throughout the two passenger decks, indoors and out. You can walk around the entire ship; six laps equals a mile.

For those who desire rest or privacy, the vessel has 40 staterooms equipped with two beds, a sink and toilet.

Some passengers passed the time playing cards and board games in one of the lounges, while others read a book or napped under a blanket in a lounge at the bow. Younger travelers watched animated movies in the theater or played Pac-Man in the arcade. There’s even a playroom for toddlers. Each deck has food and drink service—think hot dogs, bratwurst, burgers, pizza, popcorn, soft pretzels, nachos, salads, fruit cups, ice cream treats.

It’s advisable to bring an extra layer of clothing, as temperatures out on the “high seas” are 10 to 15 degrees cooler than ashore. For about an hour there’s no land to be seen. The Badger travels at an average speed of 18 mph or 15.6 knots.

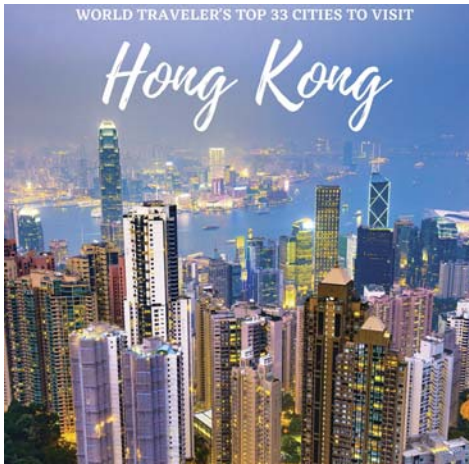
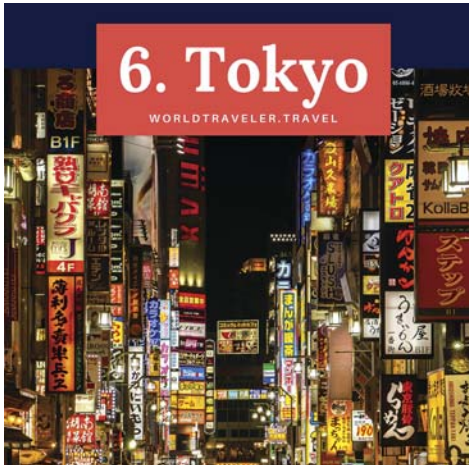
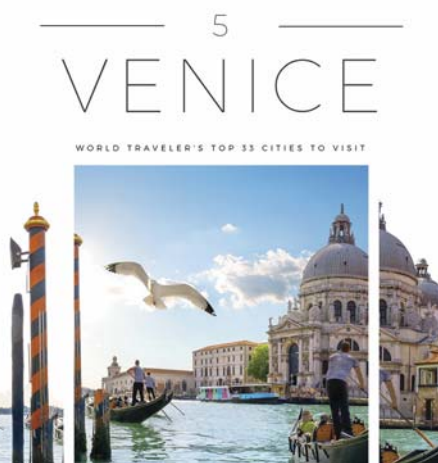
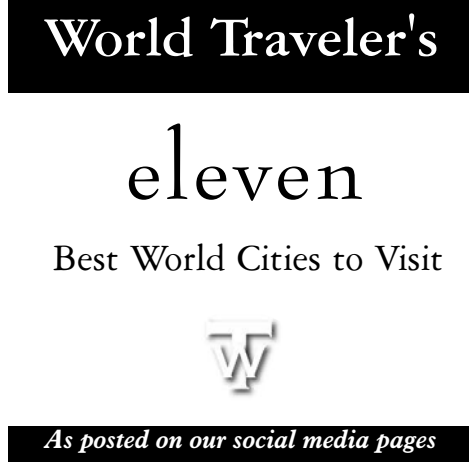
The one-way adult fare in 2025 is US \$86 in summer (June 20-September 1), \$75 in spring and fall. Autos are \$99. From May 16 to October 12, the Badger departs Ludington daily at 9 a.m., from Manitowoc at 2 p.m. There are night crossings as well. Keep in mind that Ludington is in the Eastern time zone, Manitowoc in the Central.

In the delightful resort town of Ludington, I spent two days seeing the sights while based at the 1903 Stearns Hotel. Besides drifting between downtown specialty shops, I checked out the Port of Ludington Maritime Museum, where one exhibit focuses exclusively on the Badger, and climbed up historic lighthouses at the harbor entrance and in Ludington State Park.

In Manitowoc, don’t miss the first-rate Wisconsin Maritime Museum and touring its WWII submarine. The town’s best photo op, close to the Badger terminal, is the statue of a badger, the official state animal. ■

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Lexington, Virginia: Small-Town America at its Best

by Randy Mink

When I think of idyllic Main Street communities with a walkable historic district, my thoughts often drift toward Lexington, Virginia. Long ago, when deciding where to go to college for journalism, I seriously considered Washington & Lee University, whose picture-perfect campus symbolizes the town's sense of order and gentility. What a nice place to live, I mused.

Thankfully, things haven't changed radically since then. Often included in lists of best small towns in the South, Lexington (population 7,500) packs a big punch for its size. Home to the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) as well as Washington & Lee, it combines vestiges of yesteryear with youthful vibes of a college town. History looms around every corner.

Many downtown buildings date back to the early 19th century, the oldest to the late 1700s. For an overview of the well-preserved historic core, consider a horse-drawn tour with Lexington Carriage Company and then hit the brick sidewalks on your own.

Blessed with a vibrant retail and dining scene centered around Main Street, Lexington makes the perfect base for exploring Virginia's southern Shenandoah Valley. The scenic Blue Ridge Parkway, running along the crest of the Appalachian Mountains, is a short drive away.

Lexington's two college campuses, adjacent to each other and just blocks from Main Street, are chief tourist attractions. VMI, the country's oldest state-funded military college, offers cadet-led walking tours daily, and visitors are treated to the pageantry of a full-dress parade most Friday afternoons in spring and fall.

The VMI Museum, a treasure house of U.S. military history, boasts a magnificent collection of antique firearms. An exhibit on Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson has the bullet-scarred raincoat he was wearing when mortally wounded in a Civil War battle; his taxidermied horse, Little Sorrel, is preserved for the ages. (Jackson taught at VMI before the conflict, and down-

town's Jackson House Museum shines a light on the famous warrior's life as a civilian.)

Also on the VMI post, characterized by its austere Gothic architecture, is the George C. Marshall Library, which honors America's first five-star general (VMI class of 1901). He is most remembered for the Marshall Plan, which aided the reconstruction of post-World War II Europe.

Visitors at VMI can expect a "Hello, ma'am" or "Good evening, sir" from cadets passing by. Ten percent of the cadets are women.

An air of civility also permeates neighboring Washington & Lee (all male until 1984), where the small school's long-standing "Speaking Tradition" calls for members of the community to greet each other—and visitors—when out and about.

In the heart of the campus, The Colonnade, a stately ensemble of red-brick buildings fronted by gleaming white columns, faces an expansive lawn that sweeps down the hillside. Exhibits in Washington Hall tell the story of George Washington's financial gifts to the college, founded in 1749 as Augusta Academy.

At nearby University Chapel, a museum holds artifacts with connections to Washington and Robert E. Lee, commander of Confederate forces during the Civil War and later the school's president. Lee is buried in the family crypt there.

A boutique inn, The Georges, offers 33 guest rooms spread across four of Lexington's oldest buildings on Main Street. It is named for two generals—Washington and Marshall. (By now you may have sensed the "generals" theme that pervades Lexington.) On my recent stay there, I enjoyed a plushly furnished room in a former livery stable circa 1897. The Georges has two restaurants—TAPS, just off the lobby in the main building, and Haywood's Piano Bar & Grill in the 1789 Alexander-Withrow House. ■

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New from Australia

Bluey's World

Doors have officially opened to Bluey's World in Brisbane / Meanjin, one of the largest and most ambitious immersive events to be staged in Australia. Located at the expensive 4,000 sqm (43,055 sq ft) custom-built Northshore Pavilion in Brisbane, Bluey's World offers a unique guided experience for families and fans. With innovative set designs, interactive games, and activities for children and adults alike, the experience has been carefully curated to mirror the spirit of the series, encouraging creative play and connection.

Turtle Nesting Season at Ningaloo

Turtle nesting season has officially begun in Western Australia. From November to March annually, green, hawksbill and loggerhead mature female turtles make the long journey to the beaches of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Ningaloo Marine Park, located in the northwest coastal region of Western Australia, one of the world's major sea turtle breeding areas.

Visitors can take in the action of the journey on a guided Turtle Education eco-tour with Jurabi Turtle Centre, or join Exmouth Adventure Co. for a summer sunset turtle watching and stargazing tour in the Jurabi Coastal Park.

Sealink's New Kangaroo Island Indigenous Day Tour

Explore Kangaroo Island's cultural and natural heritage through Sealink's new First Nations tour led by Ngarrindjeri Elder Mark Koolmatrie. Known as Nurrunga, or the 'place of Nurunderi', Kangaroo Island holds profound cultural significance and offers a rich landscape of stories and sacred sites. This one-day tour takes visitors on a journey through the island's rugged beauty while connecting them with the ancient traditions and knowledge of the Ngarrindjeri people.

The experience begins with a scenic coach and ferry transfer from Adelaide / Tarntanya and includes a tour of significant locations on the island. Elder Mark Koolmatrie will share insights into native bush foods and medicinal plants that have been used by his ancestors for generations, and guests will enjoy a two-course lunch made from local produce. ■

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Exploring Zambia's Aquatic Adventures

Home to the majestic Mosi-oa-Tunya - Victoria Falls - Zambia is one of the most freshwater-rich countries in Africa. As one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World, Victoria Falls calls to travelers looking to witness its beauty, but beyond the falls, Zambia's vast network of rivers and lakes offers many water-based adventures for travelers to enjoy. For those looking to get off the beaten path and dive into Zambia's untouched wilderness, we've rounded up a selection of hidden gems that are waiting to be explored.

Lake Kariba, Southern Province

Straddling the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe in central Africa, Lake Kariba is the world's largest man-made dam by volume. Spanning 140 miles in length and up to 24 miles in width, this reservoir not only provides significant power to both countries but also supports a thriving commercial fishing industry.

Lake Tanganyika, Northern Province

Lake Tanganyika, the second-deepest freshwater lake in the world at 4,711 feet, is a unique destination located in the Great Rift Valley. Stretching across four countries - Zambia, Tanzania, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo - it is renowned for its biodiversity, clear waters and picturesque scenery. Home to more than 300 species of fish, it's a paradise for anglers. Among the notable fish species found here are the Tanganyika sardine and colorful cichlids, making it a prime location for sport fishing.

The Zambezi River, Northwestern Province

The Zambezi River, Africa's fourth-longest river, flows through six countries, carving a path of waterfalls, wildlife and dramatic landscapes. In Zambia, the river offers opportunities for exploration, adventure and relaxation. Its ecosystems are home to a wide range of wildlife, including hippos, crocodiles, elephants and an abundance of birdlife such as fish eagles and herons.

Lake Bangweulu, Northern Province

Lake Bangweulu, located in northern Zambia, is an expansive wetland ecosystem that encompasses open waters, floodplains and swamps. Its name, meaning "where the water meets the sky," perfectly describes the lake's relaxing setting. The Bangweulu Wetlands are internationally renowned for offering a haven for wildlife enthusiasts and bird watchers alike. The area is particularly famous for the endangered Shoebill stork, a rare and iconic bird that draws visitors from around the world.

Mutanda Falls, North Western Province

For thrill seekers, a trip to Mutanda Falls is a great alternative to the famous Victoria Falls. With rapids emerging from the falls, this is a great place to enjoy a range of water-based activities such as kayaking and rafting. Swimming and fishing are also popular sports around Mutanda Falls in the Northwestern Province. This quiet and peaceful waterfall offers a great natural escape for those looking to explore more of Zambia. ■

WWW.ZAMBIA.TRAVEL

Expect the Unexpected: Why Wisconsin is a Design Lovers Dream



Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin

Located in Spring Green, Taliesin is a masterpiece by one of the most renowned architects in history. This stunning property combines Wright's organic architectural principles with the serene Wisconsin countryside, offering visitors a glimpse into his genius and connection to nature. A tour of this 800-acre property will reveal his genius as a designer and allow you to peer into the mind of one of Wisconsin's finest sons.

The Milwaukee Art Museum

With its iconic "wings" designed by Santiago Calatrava, this museum is not just a home for fine art—it's a work of art itself. Situated on the shore of Lake Michigan, the building's dramatic design and lakefront views provide an unparalleled cultural experience. As Wisconsin's largest arts institution, the Museum offers a diverse collection of art from antiquity to contemporary times.

Cana Island Lighthouse

A beacon of history and beauty, this iconic lighthouse on Door County's Cana Island has stood tall since 1869. The highlight of any Cana Island visit is climbing the 97 steps of the tower's spiral staircase to reach the gallery deck, which delivers a sweeping

panoramic view of Lake Michigan and the Door County peninsula.

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Saint Kate – The Arts Hotel

Saint Kate is a unique, boutique arts hotel created by artists for artists. Recognized as one of Milwaukee's most esteemed hotels with an elite award repertoire, Saint Kate – The Arts Hotel offers a modern luxury experience with an artful twist. With a prime location in Milwaukee's Theater District, Saint Kate serves as a creative hub for the city, where every aspect of the hotel is inspired by music, painting, sculpture, and design. Saint Kate welcomes all the artists who are interested in showing their work at the hotel. This is a place where creators can feel represented, where they can feel at home. ■

WWW.TRAVELWISCONSIN.COM



It's not uncommon for tourists to feel a bit underwhelmed or disappointed when a famous attraction doesn't look or feel quite like the photos they've seen online. This phenomenon, often called Paris Syndrome, can leave travellers wishing for a more fulfilling experience.

That's where Wisconsin flips the script - a destination that not only meets expectations but exceeds them in the most unexpected ways. More than just cheese and beer, Wisconsin is a hidden gem for design lovers, offering a treasure trove of stunning and impressive architecture.

Here are some landmarks from the state that you can't miss:



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This photo: Explora I at Sea

Sail The World!



CroisiEurope is celebrating 30 years on the Rhone and 25 years in Venice

The Rhone CroisiEurope started operating on the Rhône in February 1995 with a cruise from Chalon to Martigues on the MS Camargue. 30 years on, they now have four ships on the Rhône offering itineraries in Burgundy and Provence that sail from the wild expanses of the Camargue to the majestic gorges of the Ardèche, passing through the Vercors massif and visiting the beautiful cities of Arles, Avignon, Viviers, Lyon and Vienne.

Venice CroisiEurope started operating in Venice in 2000 with a cruise on the MS Michelangelo which docked in the heart of the city, very close to Saint Mark's Square. Today, CroisiEurope is one of the only operators still allowed to sail into the heart of Venice with cruises that reveal the splendors of the city and take guests to other historic towns and cities such as Mantua, Padua, Murano, Burano and Verona. ■

WWW.CROISIEUPERIVERCRUISES.COM



Virgin Voyages Announces Industry First Annual Pass

Virgin Voyages, Richard Branson's kid-free, boutique hotel at sea, announced today an all-new, industry first travel offer fit for the wanderlust explorer. In celebration of Travel Tuesday, and on the heels of the brand's Summer Season Pass, travelers can now experience what it's like to Set Sail the Virgin

Way all year long. Starting from sailings in 2025, they can hop onto any ship, anytime, from anywhere – for an entire calendar year. Whether Sailors are chasing the sun to soak in the crystal blue waters of St. Kitts, dreaming of tangerine sunsets in Ibiza, or stargazing alongside the Icelandic shores, there is no shortage of itineraries, destinations and voyage lengths to choose from. ■

WWW.VIRGINVOYAGES.COM



Seabourn Announces New 2026 Northwest Passage Expeditions on Seabourn Venture

Seabourn, a leader in ultra-luxury cruising and expedition travel, has unveiled its 2026 itineraries to the Northwest Passage and Canadian Arctic, giving guests the chance to explore some of the world's most historic destinations and storied waterways. Between August and October 2026,

Seabourn Venture will offer six voyages ranging from eight to 24 days, traversing the historic routes of The Northwest Passage and Canadian Arctic before sailing south to explore the Caribbean, South America and Antarctica. ■

WWW.SEABOURN.COM

Viking Announces New 2026-2027 World Cruise Itineraries



Viking® has recently announced its new 2026-2027 World Cruise itineraries, including the Viking World Voyage III, which will journey around the world in 170 days, visiting 41 countries with 82 guided tours and overnight stays in 18 cities. Setting sail on Viking's award-winning 930-guest ship, the Viking Sky®, from Fort Lauderdale on December 22, 2026, the itinerary will include ports of call across six continents before its final destination of Stockholm on June 10, 2027.

World Cruise guests can explore ports of call in Hawaii and journey through the isles of the South Pacific, including French Polynesia; traverse New Zealand and Australia; sail to iconic destinations throughout Asia; and travel up the western coast of Africa to Europe before concluding in either London or Stockholm. A shorter, 153-day portion of the sailing, Viking World Voyage IV, departs from Los Angeles on January 8, 2027 and visits 37 countries with 18 overnight ports of call before ending in Stockholm. Guests may also choose the 142-day Viking World Cruise 2026-2027 itinerary from Fort Lauderdale to London visiting 31 countries, or the 125-day voyage, Viking World Discoveries, which departs from Los Angeles and visits 27 countries before ending in London.

Viking's newest World Cruise itineraries visit dozens of the world's most iconic cities, alongside lesser-known destinations; in one continuous journey. Overnight stays in iconic ports such as Sydney, Zanzibar, Cape Town, Casablanca and many others allow guests to delve deeper. Viking will also visit Africa's western coast, including Lagos in Nigeria, as well as Accra and Takoradi in Ghana. While on board, Viking offers cultural enrichment through onboard lectures and entertainment – such as the Viking Resident Historian® program, which provides guests with a high-level historical and cultural education specific to their journey. Guests can immerse themselves in the world's rich cultures during included excursions that provide unmatched insight into daily life, as well as Privileged Access® visits to cultural institutions. ■

WWW.VIKING.COM

MSC Cruises' 2027 World Cruise



MSC Cruises has recently opened sales for the MSC World Cruise 2027 with an exciting new itinerary aboard MSC Musica.

The new 121-night route will visit 45 stunning destinations in 25 countries, with seven overnight stays in must-see places and full-day stays in all other calls along this journey of a lifetime, which spans over 37,000 nautical miles across five continents.

This extraordinary sailing will cross the Equator two times, offering travelers the unique experience of 'losing' and 'reliving' a day, while having the chance to discover unique sights, sounds, flavours, and traditions from all around the globe.

With embarkation possible from one of four European ports – guests will voyage westward on a remarkable journey through some of the most diverse and spectacular destinations.

Guests will explore South America, including its southernmost point in Ushuaia (Argentina), nicknamed the "end of the world", relish in the South Pacific's stunning landscapes, and experience Australasia's vibrant charm. The voyage continues to Hawaii and the U.S. West Coast before returning to Europe via a scenic transit of the Panama Canal, stopping to enjoy the flavours and colours of the Caribbean.

Some of the highlights of 2027 MSC World Cruise highlights include: Casablanca for Marrakech, Morocco, Mindelo, Cape Verde, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Ushuaia, Argentina, Aitutaki, Cook Islands, Milford Sound, New Zealand, Sydney, Australia, Honolulu, Hawaii, Panama Canal, Panama and Ocho Rios, Jamaica. ■

WWW.MSCCRUISES.COM

Princess Cruises' 2026-2027 Sailings from the West Coast



Leading Cruise Line on the West Coast Offers Voyages from Los Angeles, San Francisco and Vancouver, B.C.

From sun-drenched Mexican beaches to the volcanic landscapes of Hawaii and the rugged beauty of California's coast, Princess Cruises' newly announced 2026-2027 West Coast season delivers unforgettable journeys across 26 breathtaking destinations. Sailing from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Vancouver, B.C., the program spans 69 voyages, including the debut of the highly anticipated Star Princess. With itineraries designed to immerse travelers in the culture, natural beauty, and cuisine of each region, the season promises a world-class cruising experience unlike any other.

Key Highlights of the 2026-2027 West Coast Season

Total Departures: 69, Unique Itineraries: 12, Destinations: 26, Ships: 8, including the new Star Princess

Sailings from Los Angeles

Roundtrip, seven-day Mexican Riviera voyage, 16-day Hawaiian Islands cruises, 7-day Classic California Coast sailings, and 10-day Baja Peninsula & Sea of Cortez voyage.

Sailings from San Francisco

16-day voyages to Hawaii, 11-day sailing to Mexico over the Christmas holiday, 7-day Pacific Northwest Coast in November 2026 and April 2027.

Vancouver, B.C. to Los Angeles

Wine lovers can enjoy cruises aboard five ships departing from Vancouver, B.C., including stops in San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Catalina Island, and San Diego. Departures are scheduled for September 2026, with cruise lengths ranging from six to seven days aboard five ships. ■

WWW.PRINCESS.COM

Explora Journeys Unveils Details of the Upcoming Explora III



Explora Journeys has recently announced details of EXPLORA III, setting sail for her inaugural journeys in Summer 2026. Designed to offer a refined home-away-from-home, EXPLORA III will feature 463 spacious Ocean Suites, Penthouses, and Residences, complemented by award-winning culinary offerings and ocean-inspired wellness experiences.

During her inaugural season, EXPLORA III will take guests on scenic journeys through Northern Europe's dramatic coastlines, the magical landscapes of Iceland and Greenland, and the vibrant scenery of North America's East Coast, before positioning to the Caribbean for the winter of 2026/2027. Throughout, guests will be invited to embrace the Ocean State of Mind while experiencing a redefined meaning of luxury ocean travel.

A Spacious Haven at Sea

EXPLORA III has been designed with the guest experience in mind, offering more space than ever before. The ship features one of the highest ratios of total public space per guest, as well as expanded outdoor public spaces. The ship offers 201 square feet (18.7 sqm) of public space per guest, one of the highest ratios in the industry. With 463 spacious suites, slightly more than EXPLORA I and II despite the ship's increased size, EXPLORA III ensures a relaxed and airy atmosphere for all who step aboard.

The ship's layout includes a focus on higher suite categories, offering more luxurious, inclusive, and spacious accommodations. EXPLORA III will feature 313 Ocean Suites, 109 Ocean Penthouses, 39 Ocean Residences, and two Owner's Residences. ■

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Culinary Delights Aboard the Explora I

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow across the Caribbean waters, Explora I revealed itself as more than just a luxury cruise ship. This was an intimate journey of discovery, where every experience—from the breathtaking vistas to the world-class cuisine—was carefully curated for travelers who appreciate the finer things in life. For those who cherish comfort, adventure, and exceptional dining, this voyage is a celebration of all three.

The Beginning of a Gastronomic Adventure

From the moment I stepped onto Explora I, I was greeted by the warm smiles of the crew, a prelude to the exceptional service that awaited me. The ship itself was a marvel, blending modern elegance with Italian flair and hospi-

talities. As I was shown to my state room, I was immediately struck by its spaciousness and the panoramic views of the ocean. The design was thoughtful, with every amenity one could desire, from plush bedding to a private balcony perfect for morning coffee with a view.

What truly set Explora I apart, however, was its commitment to culinary excellence. With several dining venues on board, each offering a unique menu, the ship promised a journey of flavors as diverse as the destinations we would visit.

Culinary Delights

Explora I was a haven for food lovers. In addition to the restaurants I visited, the ship offered several other dining venues:

Sakura, an Asian-inspired restaurant, was a favorite for those craving flavors from the Far East. Its menu featured a variety of sushi, sashimi, and tempura dishes, along with an array of expertly crafted ramen and stir-fried specialties. The serene ambiance and the meticulous presentation of each dish made dining here an experience to remember.

Marble & Co. Grill, a contemporary steakhouse, was known for its prime cuts and fresh seafood. One evening, I indulged in a perfectly seared filet mignon accompanied by truffle mashed potatoes and a rich red wine reduction. The dessert, a molten chocolate lava cake with a hint of Caribbean rum, was the perfect ending to a day spent in paradise.

Med Yacht Club, brought the flavors of the Mediterranean to the high seas, featuring dishes like grilled octopus, fresh pasta, and classic paella.

Fil Rouge, an elegant venue serving a fusion of European cuisines with a rotating menu that included delights like duck confit and risotto with truffles.



Emporium Marketplace, was a diverse buffet-style venue that offered a wide array of international cuisines. The marketplace featured live cooking stations where chefs prepared dishes on demand. My favourite was the Sushi station that offered 18 different freshly prepared sushi options.

Each restaurant on Explora I paid meticulous attention to detail, from the quality of the ingredients to the presentation of the dishes. The menus were thoughtfully crafted, ensuring that every meal was a memorable experience.

A Drink for Every Occasion

In addition to its outstanding restaurants, Explora I featured a variety of bars, each with its own unique atmosphere: Astern Bar, located on the open deck, was the perfect spot for a sundowner. The Lobby Bar provided an elegant setting for pre-dinner drinks or a nightcap and the Sky Bar, with its panoramic views, was the ideal place to sip on a refreshing mojito while taking in the sunset. These bars added to the ship's vibrant social scene, providing the perfect setting for conversations, relaxation, and enjoying the journey.

Life aboard the Explora I

Beyond the dining and bar experiences, Explora I boasted a variety of public spaces that added to the overall luxury of the voyage. The pools were inviting, surrounded by comfortable loungers perfect for soaking up the sun. The health center was well-equipped, allowing me to keep up with my fitness routine even while at sea. The spa facilities offered a serene escape, featuring a range of treatments, including massages, facials, and hydrotherapy sessions, designed to rejuvenate both body and mind. And for moments of quiet reflection, the library provided a cozy retreat.

Evenings on Explora I were filled with entertainment. From live music performances to theater shows, there was never a dull moment.

Ports of Call

Guadeloupe, known for its French-Caribbean culture and stunning natural beauty was our first stop, there we went to the vibrant spice

market. It was a sensory delight, filled with the rich aromas of cinnamon, nutmeg, and vanilla and I couldn't resist purchasing some to bring back home.

Antigua, is famed for its 365 beaches, one for every day of the year. Instead of exploring on land, I opted for a perfect day aboard a luxurious catamaran where we went snorkelling, enjoyed secluded sandy beaches and fantastic grilled lobster prepared on board. It was a day of pure bliss

Experiencing the Latin Vibe of **Puerto Rico**. The city pulsed with a lively Latin vibe that was infectious. We wandered through its streets and alleys, feeling the rhythm of Puerto Rican life in every corner. The cobblestone streets of Old San Juan, with their colorful colonial buildings and vibrant murals, told stories of a rich history and dynamic culture.

Reflections on an Extraordinary Voyage

As our journey came to an end, I felt a profound sense of gratitude for the experiences and memories created aboard Explora I. The ship had been my home, the crew my family, and the Caribbean my playground. Each destination we visited added a unique chapter to the story of this voyage, and the culinary journey aboard Explora I was the thread that tied it all together.

Explora I delivered an unparalleled travel experience, blending the thrill of discovery with the comforts of luxury and the pleasures of fine dining. Whether it was the captivating landscapes of Guadeloupe, the pristine beaches of Antigua, or the vibrant culture of Puerto Rico, each moment was a testament to the wonders of the Caribbean.

I disembarked with a heart full of joy and a mind brimming with stories, eager to share the magic of Explora I with fellow travelers. For anyone seeking an unforgettable adventure at sea, this is the voyage to take—a journey where every wave tells a tale, every meal is a masterpiece, and every sunset marks the beginning of a new adventure. ■

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Aboard the Amandara on the Mighty Mekong



AmaWaterways' "Riches of the Mekong" cruise visits treasures of the legendary Asian river

Article and photography by Nicholas Kontis

The Mekong River is a lifeline that unites six countries, from the Himalayas through Southeast Asia. Beginning in Tibet, it traverses China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam enroute to the broad South China Sea. For thousands of years, the fabled thoroughfare has connected merchants and traders from China to Southeast Asia.

Interest in river exploration has boomed in the past decade. On this voyage, I have chosen to focus on two countries in the lower Mekong region with a past inextricably intertwined. My seven-day "Riches of the Mekong" cruise operates between frenetic Ho Chi Minh City, still called Saigon (its French colonial name) by many, and Siem Reap, Cambodia, the gateway to Angkor Wat.

The meandering, open-jaw itinerary aboard the AmaDara with AmaWaterways, a respected leader in the river-cruise industry, runs in both directions. My wife and I started in Cambodia and ended in Vietnam, using

our full week to explore the ancient cultures of Cambodia and the secrets of Vietnam's fecund Mekong Delta.

Siem Reap to Ho Chi Minh City

The exotic splendors began in Siem Reap. Our home base for exploring Angkor Wat, the world's single largest religious building and hub of a vast archaeological park, was the five-star luxury Sofitel Phokeethra Golf & Spa. Our Cambodian guide, Fin, explained that the massive Angkor Wat citadel was a Hindu temple complex before it transitioned

to Buddhism in the 10th century. And he offered many other snippets of knowledge: "Did you know that the movie Tomb Raider, with Angelina Jolie, was filmed at Ta Prohm Temple?" Fin queried.

We boarded the AmaDara in the river town of Angkor Ban, a four-hour bus ride from Siem Reap. From there, our voyage down the Mekong took us to stopovers that are anything but household names: Oudong, Silk Island and Ouknhatey Village, Cambodia; Tan Chau, Sa Dec and Cai Be, Vietnam.



We docked for two nights in the Cambodian capital city of Phnom Penh. Here we visited the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Unlike the rest of the cruise, this museum is a place of sadness instead of joy. From 1975 to 1979, under the despotic neo-Marxist rule of General Pol Pot, nearly 2 million Cambodians were brutally killed by Khmer Rouge soldiers. It's not a happy place, but it is a part of history that must be told for a full understanding of modern Cambodia.

We ended our trip with a bus ride from the AMA dock to the Sofitel Saigon. Some passengers opted to continue with the cruise company to Hanoi and HaLong Bay.

Founded in 2002, AmaWaterways is deeply passionate about designing outstanding guest experiences. Indeed, the word *ama* is Latin for "love." AMA's promotional slogan — "Oceans take you to countries; rivers take you through them" — reminds me of the beauty of river cruising.

Aboard the riverboat

The AmaDara never leaves the Mekong. Launched in 2015, the ship is 302 feet long and 46 feet wide; it transports up to 124 guests along with 52 crew. Its 62 spacious staterooms and suites on four decks boast twin balconies and air-conditioning. A fitness room, spa and treatment room are other highlights. A small souvenir shop sells T-shirts and other items from the region.

The ship's Saigon Lounge is an all-purpose meeting lounge. Briefings of the day's stopovers, cultural lectures, folklore performances and cooking demonstrations are daily fare; singing and dancing often continue well into the night.

Another focal point is the shaded top deck, where guests may enjoy AmaDara's pool with lounge chairs and two bars, and the bridge from which Vietnamese Captain Tuc navigates the AmaDara down the Mekong. The onboard crew includes Hannah from Danang, Vietnam; as the ship's wellness coach, she provides classes in stretching, core strengthening and Tai Chi.

Luxurious cabins

French Colonial décor, including rich teak-wood-veneer paneling and staircases, local art and paintings, bring authentic color to the epic sailing. Stylish corridors guide guests to staterooms and suites. Luxurious cabins feature king-sized beds with cotton bedding; spacious bathrooms have glass showers and suites include a separate Jacuzzi tub. A mini-sofa, writing desk, hair dryer, bathrobe and slippers, flat-screen TV, daily complimentary water, and an in-house telephone round out the roomy guest quarters.

Fine dining

Executive Chef Nhan, from Vietnam, and his team of Cambodian and Vietnamese cooks create delicious meals. Besides the extraordinary local fare, Western options are always available as well in the riverboat's Mekong Restaurant.

Breakfast includes pho', a Vietnamese beef- or chicken-noodle soup with vegetables, lemongrass and chilies. Local fruit includes mango, jackfruit, papaya, rambutan, dragon fruit and sapodilla. Home-made pastries, yogurts and muesli are also at the breakfast buffet. An omelet station serves made-to-order egg dishes, including eggs Benedict. Champagne is available for mimosas, and Vietnamese coffee is among the world's most flavorful.

Lunch features a variety of freshly baked breads, cold cuts, a wide variety of cheeses, and sandwiches of the day, along with made-to-order pasta, soups and marinated Asian tuna. Caesar salad, pizza, smash hamburgers and cheeseburgers are available on the Sun Deck for those craving American fare.

Dinners are like those of a specialty restaurant. A vegetarian option is always available. My favorite meals were the braised lamb shank with balsamic jus, tomato-pepper ragout and creamy garlic potatoes; and a buttery hoki fillet with stir-fried Thien Ly flowers, garlic butterfly peas, sticky rice and a curry shrimp sauce.

Our farewell dinner menu was a surf-and-turf of sirloin streak and crawfish in thyme-shallot red wine or a crispy, melt-in-your-mouth fillet of barramundi and crawfish in cream sauce.

Each guest is assigned an intimate evening for an elevated meal at the Chef's Table — a tasting menu for a limited number of guests. The lavish main included aged, marbled sirloin steak served with garlic roasted creamed potato, crispy onion rings, and Asian leaves with a mushroom-and-truffle dressing.

Hospitality gems

"Please travel the Mekong River with an open mind and an open heart. To immerse yourself in local culture," said A.K., our cruise director from Saigon. "At the end of the day, you will leave us with an unforgettable experience." Indeed, AmaDara's Cambodian-Vietnamese crew is nothing short of remarkable, catering to the every whim of guests. My wife has dietary restrictions. Makara, the Cambodian maitre d', personally assured that each of her meals was dairy-free.

Tipping is left entirely to guests' discretion. Many passengers follow a guideline of US\$80 per person, to be distributed among the AmaDara ship crew. Informative, social and always available to answer questions, A.K., our cruise director, deserved a bit more: AMA recommended US\$60 as a tip for our stellar leader. Guests have the option of settling gratuities by credit card or cash.

The pulse of the Mekong

The mantra of veteran cruisers is to always be flexible and tolerant. At the heart of AMA's Mekong passage, it's about forming a connection with the generous onboard team, including the knowledgeable guides. Those who gain the greatest rewards create new friendships with fellow shipmates, immerse themselves in unique experiences, and—above all—dive headfirst into encounters with curious children practicing their English, with village monks delivering Buddhist blessings, with strolls through food markets and simple villages, with jungle treks and exchanges with talented native artisans.

Built for the Mekong River, the AmaDara transports guests into the rhythms of the immense waterway, delivering an unforgettable cultural immersion into life along the lower Mekong. ■

AMAWATERWAYS.COM





A Small Ship Cruise Beyond the Ordinary My Galapagos Adventure with Metropolitan Touring

Article and photography by Judi Cohen (Traveling Judi)

When I imagined visiting the Galapagos Islands, I thought I knew what to expect: stunning wildlife, dramatic landscapes, and the thrill of stepping into a world where nature reigns supreme. What I didn't anticipate was how profoundly this trip would reshape my connection to the natural world—and to myself. This expedition was different from the ones I'd done in the Canadian Arctic, Antarctic, Greenland, and many other places.

Arrival: A First Glimpse of Paradise

The journey with Metropolitan Touring

began on Baltra Island, where I was greeted by a playful sea lion lounging on the dock, a vibrant Sally Lightfoot crab scuttling nearby, and the unrelenting equatorial sun. These initial encounters set the tone for what would be a week of awe-inspiring sights and the closest encounters with nature I've ever experienced.

The Wildlife: Up Close and Personal

Iconic Encounters

The Galapagos is synonymous with wildlife, and it did not disappoint. Over the course of the trip, I checked off 12 of the "Big 15"

species unique to the islands, including the endearing blue-footed booby, the prehistoric-looking marine iguana, a handful of Galapagos penguins, and the lumbering Galapagos giant tortoise. What struck me most was how unafraid the animals were. Sea lions frolicked mere feet away, and curious birds seemed to study us as much as we studied them.

A Lesson in Coexistence

The absence of natural predators has made the wildlife here remarkably approachable. This dynamic creates a humbling experience for visitors, where the onus is on us to



respect their space. Watching a Galapagos frigatebird overhead or a flamingo delicately wade through a lagoon felt like witnessing nature at its most unspoiled.

The Islands: A World Apart

Our six-night itinerary, "Darwin's Legacy: Navigating the Diverse South-Western Volcanic Archipelago," included visits to five islands, starting and ending on Baltra Island. It was here that we embarked and disembarked from our ship, *La Pinta*.

The Galapagos: A UNESCO World Treasure

The Galapagos Islands are often described as "otherworldly," and it's easy to see why. Located 600 miles off Ecuador's coast, this volcanic archipelago is a living museum of evolution. Designated a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site in 1978, nearly all the land and the surrounding 50,000-square-mile marine reserve are protected as part of Ecuador's commitment to preserving this delicate ecosystem.

Strict regulations by the Galapagos National Park Authority (GNPA) limit visitor impact. Ships like *La Pinta* carry no more than 100 passengers, and shore excursions are capped at 20 people per guide. These measures not only protect the islands' fragile habitats but also create an intimate experience for travelers. There's no risk of mega-ships disrupting the pristine landscapes or overwhelming the wildlife.

We visited the islands of North Seymour, Isabela, Rábida, Santa Cruz, and Floreana, each with its own personality. We walked, hiked, swam, snorkeled, and kayaked, as well as enjoyed panga and glass-bottom boat excursions. The geology, flora, and fauna were unique to each island—and even parts of an island. For example, the 180-year-old Galapagos giant tortoises roamed freely in the highlands of Santa Cruz Island, exhibiting no fear of our presence. At the Charles Darwin Research Station in Puerto Ayora on the same island, giant tortoises are protected in enclosures to aid in their conservation and repopulation.

The volcanic landscapes of Fernandina felt like stepping onto another planet, including the carpet of dark-colored marine iguanas below our feet as we carefully walked on the black lava beaches. This diversity ensured that every day brought something new and unexpected.

The Challenges: Equatorial Heat and a Grueling Pace

The Galapagos sun is as intense as its wildlife is charming. In December, temperatures hovered in the high 70s to mid-80s, with the sun's rays making it feel much hotter. Sunscreen, wide-brimmed hats, and plenty of water are a must.

Exploration in the Galapagos is not for the faint of heart. Days were packed with activities—hiking, snorkeling, and kayaking—often under the blazing sun. While exhilarating, the schedule was physically demanding. By evening, I found myself collapsing into bed, utterly exhausted.

The Unexpected Delights

One of the quirkiest stops was Post Office Bay on Floreana Island. Here, a wooden barrel serves as an informal post office where travelers leave postcards for others to hand-deliver. I took two postcards addressed to Toronto for delivery and left two postcards of my own for my grandchildren in Toronto and New York City.

Despite the busy schedule, there were moments of profound peace. Whether it was the sound of waves against the hull of our ship or the calls of birds and sea lions on the beaches, these were the moments I welcomed most.

Practicalities: Certified Guides and Strict Regulations

All activities were led by certified Galapagos National Park guides who shared insights that deepened my appreciation for the islands. Visitors cannot explore on their own; every excursion is guided to ensure both safety and the preservation of the environment. The Ecuadorian crew onboard

introduced us to local dishes and traditions, adding authenticity to the experience.

Minimalist Luxury

Unlike traditional cruises, Galapagos ships prioritize exploration over indulgence. Don't expect spas or extensive entertainment options. Instead, the focus is on the destination—and that's exactly how it should be.

While *La Pinta* has a capacity of 48 passengers, our early December 2024 sailing hosted just 24 guests. This small ship felt more like a private yacht, offering personalized service and spacious public areas. All passenger cabins featured ocean-view fixed windows.

Metropolitan Touring has been sharing the wonders of Ecuador and the Galapagos for over 70 years. Their deep experience and local knowledge was evident from the moment we were met at Baltra Airport and transferred to our floating home for the next 6 nights. *La Pinta* was a comfortable and luxurious exploration platform with very attentive staff on the ship, and one of the finest expedition teams I've had the pleasure of cruising with. They created a perfect balance of adventure, fun, education and relaxation. My husband and I loved everything about our expedition experience on *La Pinta*.

The Takeaway: A World Worth Protecting

Visiting the Galapagos is more than a vacation; it's a call to action. The fragile beauty underscores the importance of conservation and responsible tourism. The memories of turquoise waters, volcanic landscapes, and fearless wildlife will stay with me forever, but so will the responsibility to ensure these wonders endure for generations to come.

If you're ready for an adventure that challenges, inspires, and transforms, the Galapagos is waiting. ■

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MSC Cruises Reveals Five Trends Driving Changes in Guest Travel Decisions for 2025 and Beyond



Whether it's switching traditionally hot getaways for something a little cooler or booking the next trip thanks to the latest hit TV show or film, MSC Cruises is revealing five travel trends that are driving guest holiday decisions into 2025 and beyond.

MSC Cruises, a leading global cruise brand is giving an insight into some important influences that are impacting how holidaymakers are researching and booking cruises, with trends like radical sabbaticals, coolcations, set-jetting and more shifting the way guests are deciding where, and how to travel.

Coolcations on the Rise

In 2025, cooler destinations are rising in popularity as travelers seek out milder climates in place of traditional 'summer sun' hotspots. More and more holidaymakers are switching walks on the beach for walks in the mountains and sunbathing for basking in breathtaking landscapes. This trend, dubbed 'coolcation' draws explorers towards destinations that offer natural wonders to discover and pristine landscapes to admire. Anyone resonating with this trend should look out for MSC Cruises' itineraries to Northern Europe or Alaska. In 2026, MSC Cruises will set sail for the first time to Alaska. Known for



its breathtaking scenery, rugged wilderness, and abundant wildlife, guests will be able to enjoy the region's unparalleled beauty and rich cultural heritage aboard MSC Poesia sailing from Seattle, U.S weekly throughout summer 2026.

Radical Sabbaticals

Over the last few years, with workplaces being increasingly more flexible with remote work, and more companies offering sabbaticals as an employment perk, there's a heightened eagerness to take extended work breaks in the middle of careers to travel. This has driven the rise of the 'radical sabbatical'. MSC Cruises' World Cruise is the perfect solution, giving people the opportunity to embark on a voyage of a lifetime to circumnavigate the globe without having to repack their suitcase or take endless flights. Departing Europe in January 2025 and 2026 (with the 2027 sailing soon to be revealed), in the comfort of a modern and elegant balcony cabin, guests can experience up to 50 destinations across up to 32 different countries. With alongside day calls that allow guests plenty of time to explore the best that each destination has to offer, the itinerary also offers a number of overnight stays, meaning guests can have even more time to fully immerse themselves in the culture, history and landscapes of the destinations they visit.

Set-jetting: Travel Inspired by Popular Culture

Another emerging travel trend for 2025 is 'set-jetting', where travelers are inspired to visit a destination because of a book, movie or television series. This phenomenon has gained momentum with the rise of globally accessible streaming platforms, allowing audiences to connect emotionally with the settings of their favourite stories.

With its unparalleled choice of destinations to explore, MSC Cruises offers more than one itinerary featuring some of the world's most iconic cultural and cinematic landscapes. From sailing aboard MSC Opera in the Mediterranean to discovering the stunning old city of Dubrovnik (Croatia), a UNESCO World Heritage Site made infamous by the hit TV show Game of Thrones, to embarking on a journey through the Middle East aboard MSC Euribia, including calls to Dubai and Abu Dhabi (UAE), the set of not one but two Mission Impossible films, or for the ultimate Sex and the City fan, sail from New York City (U.S.) aboard MSC Meraviglia, and follow in the footsteps of Carrie through the streets of Manhattan.

The Craving for Culinary Tourism

Food has become much more than just a part of the travel experience, it's now a driving force behind destination choices. Fuelled by appreciation for diverse flavours, social media's influence, and a desire to discover new tastes, culinary tourism is surging in popularity. More travelers than ever are now planning trips specifically to explore unique restaurants or culinary experiences, planning to immerse themselves in local food markets, take part in specialist cooking workshops or heading out on a tasting tour.

Not only does MSC Cruises sail to a vast range of famed foodie hotspots such as Naples, Palermo (Italy), Barcelona (Spain) and Buenos Aires (Argentina), but guests can also book a range of culinary shore excursions such as visiting charming wineries in the Italian countryside to taste local wine, savouring delicious tapas in Alicante (Spain), or attempting at recreating Greek dishes during a cooking workshop in a family-run olive oil mill located in the heart of the traditional agricultural region of Katakolon (Greece).

The Desire for Elevated All-inclusive Holidays

All-inclusive holidays have long been a favourite for their ease and convenience, but there has been a noticeable shift in preferences. Today, travelers are increasingly willing to spend more for an elevated all-inclusive experience that balances traditional simplicity with touches of exclusivity. This evolution caters to a growing desire for thoughtfully curated, high-quality getaways that go beyond the basics.

MSC Cruises redefines the all-inclusive holiday with the MSC Yacht Club. The luxury 'ship within a ship' concept offers an elevated and refined all-inclusive concept with private facilities including dedicated restaurant and lounge, 24-hour butler service and private sundeck, all with keycard-only access, and within easy reach of everything a larger ship has to offer. ■

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Katarina Line Explores the Hidden Gems of Kvarner

Article and photography by Nicholas Kontis

When most cruisers consider a Croatian sailing around the Adriatic, they opt to visit the country's southern coast gems: exuberant Split, the country's second-largest city and probably the best place to view buzzing Dalmatian life, or Dubrovnik, the ancient walled fortress with its stately baroque buildings.

I venture north to the chic Adriatic seaside resort town of Opatija, located at the foot of the Učka mountains, seemingly a world away from the glitzy southern tourist hotspots. During the Austrian-Hungarian empire, Opatija was home to the elite, many of whom resided in its belle époque villas.

My sailing is aptly titled "Best Kept Secret Kvarner." It is one of many cruises offered by Croatian-owned Katerina Line. The company's model is to visit new destinations daily with enough time on each island to explore history, culture, and gastronomy, weather permitting. You also make one or two swim stops daily to swim stops where you can paddleboard or snorkel the opaque Adriatic Sea. Each evening, you spend the night at a different port, offering an authentic small island way of life.

Katarina Line: A Family Business

Finding an almost wholly family-run business in the cruise industry is rare, yet Katerina Line is just that. Matriarch Katika Hauptfeld, the

founder and CEO, has a journey in the travel industry that dates back to the former Yugoslavia and started Katerina Line in 1996, shortly after the war. The forward-thinking Hauptfeld convinced ship owners to consider seven-day sailings to different islands on continuous journeys instead of sailing back and forth to one port. Katerina Line is an agency and owns no ships. Small private companies own over 60 boats, contracting with the cruise leader of Croatia.

Her son Daniel is the director of marketing, while her daughter Anamaria is the director of the cruise division. The company is gaining recognition worldwide with a blistering rise in visitors from the United States and Canada.



MS Nautilus Katerina Line offers twice weekly seven-day sailings departing on Saturdays and Wednesdays. As with the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, including the Adriatic, Croatia cruise season begins in May and culminates in late October.

My small ship sailing is on the 2019-built, 164-foot-long MS Nautilus. The wooden motorized sailboat boasts 18 spacious cabins and can accommodate 36 guests.

Joining Captain Duje are two sailors. The small staff consists of two cooks, one housekeeper, two waitstaff, one barman, and Tatiana, our cruise director and leader.

Modern cabins are furnished with air conditioning, safe deposit box, wardrobe closet, nightstand, a chair, and sofas. Bathrooms feature showers and hair dryers.

As my sailing is nearing the end of the sailing season, we are a close-knit group of 16 passengers from a collection of countries that include the U.S., Great Britain, Denmark, Serbia, Australia, and Austria, allowing for close encounters, making new friendships at the restaurant-bar communal area over meals, including a buffet breakfast. Three-course lunches include delicious Croatian dishes. Some onboard dinners, including the captain's dinner, are also in the dining area.

The top deck features panoramic views of the Croatian coastline, a jacuzzi, sunbeds, and deck chairs. Paddleboards, masks, fins, and snorkels are stored for swim stops.

Be Flexible The mantra of expedition cruises is "If weather permits." As on all expedition sailings, the captain reserves the right to change routes and stopovers due to inclement weather or other unforeseen conditions. This flexibility ensures your safety and comfort, allowing for the best possible experience despite unexpected challenges.

Such was the case on my October 5 departure when our knowledgeable cruise director, Tatiana, advised us that due to an incoming storm. Krk, which was to be our first stop, is now the last, and we begin with an afternoon exploring Venetian-style Cres. We now traverse from Opatija, Cres, Mali Losinj, Kornati National Park, Zadar, Rab, Krk, and return to

Opatija. The captain's dinner, generally scheduled at the end of the sailing, changes to day one as the entire trip operates in reverse.

Highlights

Cres Venetian-style and sparsely populated Cres is a short sailing an hour from the mainland. Upon arrival, you might believe that you've actually entered Italy. We arrived in the late afternoon to explore Croatia's second-largest island. Strolling the port town, also known as Cres, flaunts an Italian feel throughout the picturesque fishing village. The Venetians built much of the old city, featuring sublime palaces and churches

Mali Losini A narrow bridge connects the islands of Cres and Losinj, known as "the Sunshine Island," the largest archipelago in the Adriatic Sea. Following a morning swim stop, we visit another popular destination of the landlocked Austrian-Hungarian empire: the largest town on Losinj Island, Mali Losinj, an enchantress retaining its fabled past. An impressive line of 19th-century captain's houses threads the seafront. One of the island's popular sites is the Museum of Apoxyomenos, which showcases an ancient bronze statue of an athlete, one of eight worldwide.

Kornati National Park The UNESCO World Heritage Site Kornati National Park covers 85 square miles and includes 89 islands with vertical cliffs facing the open sea. We sipped cocktails on the top deck, which offered spellbinding views of the Istrian peninsula. Sali is a popular tourist region and fishing village on Dugi Otok island. Telašćica Nature Park in the Nature 2000 area preserves natural habitats to ensure endangered species throughout the EU protect natural habitats.

Zadar A full day is needed to explore Zadar's treasure trove. Situated at the site of the Roman forum, the church of St. Donatus dates back to the 9th century and is one of the many highlights of the capital of Dalmatia. We visit the unique museum of ancient glass at the city walls adjacent to the harbor. Zadar Cathedral is the biggest in Dalmatia. Climbing to the top of the cathedral tower provides sweeping views of the town and port below.

Join locals and tourists at dusk for a walk along the Zadar promenade to experience

what Alfred Hitchcock once called "the most beautiful sunset in the world."

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Rab In Croatia, Rab is known as the "island of love." In 2008, due to its diverse landscape, towering cliffs among a forested area with groomed walking trails led to its declaration as a geopark. Take advantage of the island's specialty dessert, "Rapska Torta," or Rab Cake. The addictive spiral treat's main ingredients are almonds and maraschino liqueur. In the evening, climb Kamenjak hill for an eye-popping caravan of fiery hues. Its narrow streets, lined with stirring bars and cafes, authentically show locals relaxing after work. Dine on Kvarner scampi, which Michelin mentioned as the best in the world.

Krk Known as the "golden island," Krk is the largest island in Croatia, connected to the mainland by a nearly one-mile-long toll bridge. The buzz begins along the animated waterfront promenade of Krk town, lined with galleries, souvenir shops, restaurants, bars, and cafes. The 12th-century Krk Cathedral, dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is a highlight of the island. A bus ride takes guests to 900-year-old Vrbnik village for wine tasting. Vrbnicka Zlahtina is a well-known, high-quality dry white wine made exclusively on Krk Island. Another Krk delicacy is pršut, which is Croatian smoked prosciutto.

Katerina's Keight Hotel

The family business recently became more impressive with the tour operator's opening of the Keight Hotel in Opatija, its hometown. K8 is a pun for Kate. Katica's lucky number is eight, the symbol for infinity turned 90 degrees. The hotel is part of the Hilton Curio label's 132 hotels worldwide.

Tatiana's Pro Tip

"Just as in Greece in the busy months of July and August, while the south of Croatia is overrun with summer family travel, the weather is exceptional in Opatija when sailing the Kvarner islands," the expert reminds me.

A small ship cruise to Croatia's road-less traveled Kvarner islands is an unforgettable adventure. ■

KATARINA-LINE.COM





Viking Announces 10 New Ocean Itineraries in 2026 and 2027

Viking has recently announced 10 new ocean itineraries in the Mediterranean, United Kingdom, Ireland and Northern Europe are now available for booking in 2026 and 2027. The new itineraries range from eight to 22 days and feature 12 additional recurring ports that are new for Viking ocean voyages: Fowey, England; Bordeaux, France; Limerick (Foynes), Ireland; Riga, Latvia; Klaipeda, Lithuania; Londonderry, Northern Ireland; Haugesund, Norway; Palma de Mallorca and Bilbao, Spain; Fort William and Tobermory, Scotland; and Karlskrona, Sweden.

With a fleet of small sister ships, Viking offers more than 100 different itineraries across all five oceans. Viking's new ocean voyages visit iconic cities—as well as lesser-known destinations—throughout Europe and include the following, with additional combination voyages also available.

New for 2026 and 2027

Amalfi Coast, Africa & Iberia – Embark on an unforgettable journey through the southern Mediterranean as you explore the lively ports and cities of Italy, Tunisia and Spain. Marvel at the beauty of the Amalfi Coast as you visit the picturesque town of Salerno. Delve into the rich history of the ancient Roman harbor of Carthage in La Goulette, Tunisia. Explore a diverse array of Mediterranean delights in Valencia, known for its delicious cuisine, including paella, its signature dish.



Spain & Portugal Discovery – Discover Lisbon, Portugal's vibrant capital, known for its colorful streets and neighborhoods. Immerse in the rich history of Andalusia with a visit to Seville, Málaga and the Alhambra Palace. Admire the stunning palm tree lined waterfront of the Balearic Islands in Palma de Mallorca and explore Tangier to learn the city's impressive history. Embrace Barcelona, marveling at the architectural wonders of Antoni Gaudí and enjoy the lively Las Ramblas.

Iberia, France & England Explorer – Embark on a wide-ranging sojourn to historic cities in Europe. From the vibrant streets of Lisbon to the wine-rich region of Bordeaux, discover destinations that are rich in history, culture and gastronomy. Explore Bilbao with its majestic Guggenheim Museum, quaint old town and delicious pintxos—displays of which are truly works of art. Experience regal London as you sail the iconic Thames River, the beating heart of the capital.

New for 2027

Scandinavia Discovery – Discover the allure of Scandinavia, from stunning fjords to bustling cities. Call at the UNESCO World Heritage City of Karlskrona and get a glimpse into Sweden's maritime legacy. Visit Copenhagen and immerse yourself in Danish cultural and gastronomic delights. Delve into nature in the lesser-known Åland Islands, an archipelago of 6,700 isles. Enjoy an overnight stay in Stockholm, allowing you to explore more of its Viking legacy and historic treasures.

Baltic Discovery – Discover a myriad of cultures as you circumnavigate the Baltic Sea. Explore the UNESCO-listed cities of Tallinn and Riga, medieval gems of the Hanseatic League. Call at Klaipeda, Lithuania's historic port city on the Curonian coast, and immerse yourself in its contemporary art and cultural treasures. Overnight in Copenhagen to experience more of the "City of Spires" and indulge in the many eateries that celebrate its trending Nordic cuisine.

Nordic Wonders – Discover the dramatic coastlines of Norway and Denmark as you explore Scandinavia's natural treasures. Immerse yourself in stunning vistas as you journey through scenic landscapes, along majestic fjords and winding mountain passes. Be captivated by charming cities and experience first-hand why the Danes are considered among the world's happiest people.

British Isles & Ireland – Traverse the coast of the British Isles and the stunning shores of Cornwall and Scotland. Call at the historic Scottish ports of Greenock and Tobermory, and visit Fort William to behold the splendor of Ben Nevis. Discover Ireland's rugged coastline and visit the ancient city of Limerick, with the iconic King John Castle on the banks of the River Shannon. Your voyage is bookended with overnight stays in London and Belfast, allowing you to explore more.

Scandinavia & Baltic Capitals – Trace the shores of the Baltic Sea to discover magnificent fjords and bustling cities. Call at UNESCO-listed cities and get a glimpse into the area's medieval past in the old towns of Tallinn and Riga, and Karlskrona's historic port. Witness the natural splendor of the Åland Islands, an archipelago of more than 6,500 isles. With overnights in the vibrant capitals of Sweden and Denmark, delve deeper into the region's rich heritage and Viking legacy.

Scenic Scandinavia & Baltic Jewels – Delve into the maritime heritage of Scandinavia as you trace the dramatic coastlines of Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Witness stunning natural landscapes as you sail amid pristine fjords and the Åland Islands. Explore more of Oslo and Stockholm with overnight stays, allowing you to fully experience two of Europe's capitals. Sample New Nordic Cuisine and stroll historic towns as you spend time mingling with friendly locals.

Icons of the Viking Age – Circumnavigate the Baltic Sea as you sail through the homelands of the Vikings. Explore the deep-rooted cultural ties of Scandinavia, calling at iconic capitals in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Sail the picturesque Åland Islands. Immerse yourself in the customs, traditions and fascinating history of the Baltic states, home to UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including the old town of Tallinn and the historic center of Riga. ■

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Good Vibrations Sailing Aboard the MSC Meraviglia

Article & photography by Michael Morcos



Cruising has always been one of my favorite ways to travel—a perfect mix of relaxation, entertainment, and adventure. So when I had the chance to set sail aboard the MSC Meraviglia, one of MSC Cruises' most innovative and beautiful ships, I knew I was in for something special. With a sleek design, luxurious accommodations, world-class dining, and an array of activities, this floating paradise was an experience to remember.

A Grand Entrance

From the moment I stepped aboard, I was captivated by the ship's Atrium and the stun-

ning Galleria Meraviglia. The Atrium, with its sweeping staircases adorned with Swarovski crystals, set the stage for the elegance that awaited throughout the ship. The shimmering surfaces, ambient lighting, and live music performances made it an inviting space to relax with a cocktail and soak in the refined atmosphere.

Just beyond, the Galleria Meraviglia stretched out like a vibrant European boulevard at sea. This lively indoor promenade was lined with high-end boutiques, stylish cafés, and entertainment spaces, but what truly took my breath away was the LED

dome ceiling overhead. Changing throughout the day, the dome displayed everything from tranquil blue skies to dazzling nighttime spectacles, immersing guests in a constantly shifting visual masterpiece. It was the perfect place to sip an espresso, enjoy live music, and feel the pulse of life aboard this extraordinary ship.

Ultimate Relaxation: Spa & Wellness

No cruise experience is complete without a little self-care, and the MSC Aurea Spa delivered just that. Inspired by Balinese traditions, this wellness retreat offers a range of



treatments designed to rejuvenate the body and mind. I opted for the Balinese massage, a deep, rhythmic treatment that worked out every bit of tension from my shoulders. The tranquil setting, combined with expert hands, left me feeling completely renewed.

Beyond the spa, the fully equipped gym was impressive. With state-of-the-art equipment, ocean-view workout spaces, and a variety of fitness classes, it was easy to stay active between indulgent meals and leisurely afternoons. Whether it was hitting the treadmill at sunrise or joining a yoga class on deck, staying fit on the *Meraviglia* was both accessible and enjoyable.

Pools & Sun-Kissed Relaxation

With multiple pools to choose from, there was no shortage of places to cool off and unwind. The atmospheric Horizon Pool, located at the aft of the ship, was a favorite for its incredible ocean views, especially at sunset. For a livelier vibe, the Atmosphere Pool was the place to be, offering plenty of lounge chairs, music, and an energetic ambiance.

On hotter days, I found myself drawn to the indoor Bamboo Pool, a climate-controlled sanctuary perfect for a quiet swim or a soak in the hot tub. Families had their own space at the Polar Aquapark, where waterslides and splash zones kept kids entertained for hours. No matter the mood, there was always the perfect spot to take a dip.

Broadway & Illusions: Nightly Entertainment

Evenings aboard the *MSC Meraviglia* were filled with world-class entertainment. The Broadway Theatre staged incredible performances, with dazzling costumes, talented singers, and high-energy choreography that rivaled productions on land.

A unique experience aboard the *Meraviglia* is the House of Houdini stage at Carousel Lounge, where magic and mystery come alive in an intimate setting. The illusions were mind-bending, the storytelling captivating, and the immersive setting made the entire show feel like an exclusive event. With

a cocktail in hand and a front-row seat to some of the most innovative performances at sea, it was an unforgettable way to spend an evening.

Culinary Delights

Food is always a highlight of any cruise, and the *MSC Meraviglia* delivered a culinary journey that satisfied every craving. The Marketplace Buffet was a go-to for casual dining, offering an impressive selection of international dishes from fresh pasta to sizzling stir-fry.

For a more refined experience, Butcher's Cut steakhouse served up perfectly grilled cuts, paired with fine wines and decadent sides. The sushi bar was a dream for seafood lovers, with expertly crafted rolls and sashimi that transported me straight to Japan.

One of the most exciting dining experiences, however, was at the Teppanyaki restaurant, where chefs turned cooking into a full-blown performance. Flames danced, knives flew, and guests laughed as our meal was prepared right before our eyes. Not only was the show entertaining, the flavors—perfectly seasoned meats, seafood, and vegetables—were out of this world.

A Private Island Escape Ocean Cay MSC Marine Reserve

No *MSC* cruise would be complete without a visit to Ocean Cay, *MSC*'s private island in the Bahamas. Stepping onto this slice of paradise, I was immediately taken in by the powdery white sand, turquoise waters, and laid-back atmosphere. Unlike some commercialized private islands, Ocean Cay focuses on sustainability and natural beauty, with an eco-friendly approach that preserves its stunning surroundings.

I spent the day lounging on a quiet beach, sipping a tropical drink under a shaded cabana. Later, I explored the island's walking trails, spotting colorful marine life in the shallows. The island's lighthouse, with its panoramic views, was the perfect backdrop for sunset.

Staterooms with a View

After days packed with adventure, returning to my stateroom with a balcony was a pleasure. Waking up to the sight of endless blue ocean and falling asleep to the gentle sound of waves was a luxury that never got old. The room itself was well-appointed, generous in size, with comfortable bedding, ample storage, and a sleek, modern design that made it feel like a boutique hotel at sea. Having my own private outdoor space to enjoy tea in the morning or a glass of wine at night added an extra layer of tranquility to the journey.

Optional Excursions: Adventure Awaits

While life on the ship was incredible, the excursions offered even more opportunities for adventure. One of the highlights was a catamaran snorkeling trip off the coast of Ocean Cay. As we sailed through the crystal-clear waters, I marveled at the marine life below—vibrant coral, playful fish, and even a few curious stingrays.

For those seeking even more thrills, excursions ranged from jet-skiing and paddleboarding to cultural tours of nearby islands. Whether it was adventure or relaxation, there was an option to suit every traveler's style.

The Meraviglia Experience

Sailing aboard the *MSC Meraviglia* was everything I'd hoped for and more. From luxurious relaxation at the spa to thrilling entertainment, indulgent dining, and breathtaking island escapes, every moment was filled with excitement and wonder. Whether you're a seasoned cruiser or a first-timer, this ship offers an experience that is both grand and intimate, lively yet serene.

As the voyage came to an end, I found myself already dreaming of my next adventure at sea. Because once you experience the magic of the *MSC Meraviglia*, the call of the ocean becomes impossible to ignore. ■

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Adventure Canada Announces New Vessels for 2026



After 10 happy years on *Ocean Endeavour*, Adventure Canada is moving to *Exporis One* and *Ocean Nova* in 2026. The leader in small ship expedition cruising is excited to offer their iconic program, focused on education, immersion, and fun, on the updated vessels.

Adventure Canada is excited to announce two new-to-them vessels for the 2026 operating season. The vessels, *Exporis One* and *Ocean Nova*, offer increased comfort to guests and a more intimate experience with a capacity of 144 and 78 guests, respectively. Of course, the same fantastic Adventure Canada programming, service, and experience will remain.

"We are thrilled to be operating on *Exporis One* and *Ocean Nova* for the 2026 season and beyond," says Cedar Swan, CEO of Adventure Canada. "These ships set the foundation for adventure perfectly with the facilities and capability to operate in challenging Arctic conditions safely while facilitating meaningful, educational, and fun-filled programs in the most beautiful and moving places in the world. The new vessels will increase the comfort of our guests with enhanced shipboard facilities and allow us to continue with our immersive shore-side experiences as well. They truly offer us the best of both worlds, and we couldn't be more excited to welcome our guests to these vessels in 2026."



Operating on both vessels will also allow Adventure Canada to offer more trips, with a small but steady increase in trips offered in 2026 and beyond. Key considerations in selecting both vessels included analysis of their carbon footprint and environmental impact, proven track record of safety and experience operating in ice and Arctic conditions, and guest comfort and capacity.

Exporis One, a vessel with capacity for 144 guests and operated by Silversea Cruises until 2023, was purpose-built for expedition travel in 1989, making it well-suited for polar environments and comfortable exploration. Having undergone several refurbishments – the latest in 2018 and 2023 – the ship is well appointed with 72 staterooms and suites, many with balconies, two restaurants, a fully equipped fitness area, outdoor jacuzzies, sauna, steam room, and massage facilities. In addition, the vessel offers common areas for lounging, reading, participating in workshops, presentations, performances, and attending daily briefings with a learning lounge, main lounge, and panoramic lounge. *Exporis One* is outfitted with a fleet of Mark V zodiacs to get guests from ship to shore quickly and efficiently. New for 2026, Adventure Canada is proud to be able to include WIFI access and standard alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages on all trips on *Exporis One*. Adventure Canada will work in partnership with expedition travel company and ship owner *Exporis* to operate *Exporis One*.

"We are absolutely delighted with this strategic partnership with Adventure Canada," says President of *Exporis* and co-founder of PONANT, Philippe Videau. "This collaboration represents a tremendous opportunity to

combine our expertise and shared vision to provide unforgettable experiences for all passengers. Adventure Canada shares our core values, including responsible exploration, authentic discovery of destinations, and respect for local cultures."

In 2026 Adventure Canada will offer the following expeditions aboard *Exporis One*: Spirit of Scotland (formerly *Scotland Slowly*), Scotland, the Faroe Islands, & Iceland: North Atlantic Saga, Iceland Circumnavigation, Iceland to Greenland: In the Wake of Vikings, Into the Northwest Passage, Out of the Northwest Passage, and Greenland and Wild Labrador: A Torngat Mountains Adventure.

Ocean Nova Purpose built in 1992 for Greenland's icy waters, *Ocean Nova* is a comfortable vessel born for expedition travel. Built for efficiency, function, and an intimate experience, the cozy ship offers 45 guest cabins, a restaurant, fully equipped gym, library, and panoramic observation lounge. One of the vessel's highlights is its open decks which are a dream for photographers and scenery lovers. With a shallow draft and easy access with a fleet of eight zodiacs, guests will spend more time exploring and less time ferrying from ship to shore. Adventure Canada will work together with Nova Logistics to operate *Ocean Nova*. Importantly, *Ocean Nova* sails with a lighter carbon footprint than most expedition vessels, which was an important consideration in the selection of which vessels Adventure Canada would operate going forward.

In 2026 Adventure Canada will offer the following expeditions aboard *Ocean Nova*: Scotland and Faroe Islands: Isles of Wonder, Scotland, The Faroe Islands, & Iceland: North Atlantic Saga, Iceland to Greenland: In the Wake of Vikings, Heart of the Arctic, Baffin Island and Greenland: Circling the Midnight Sun, Greenland and Wild Labrador: A Torngat Mountains Adventure, and Newfoundland Circumnavigation. ■

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Sailing the Danube on the Riverside Mozart

Article and photography by Nicholas Kontis

River cruisers who bemoaned the passing of Crystal Cruises in 2022 have sister and brother Anouchka and Gregor Gerlach to thank for its reincarnation.

The entrepreneurial siblings, who share 40 years in the hotel industry as owners of the Seaside Collection, found Crystal's fleet of luxury vessels to be a perfect complement to the Seaside brand of 11 luxe-boutique properties in Europe and the Maldives. They swiftly purchased Crystal's river ships, named for classical composers: the Crystal Mozart, Bach, Mahler, Debussy and Ravel.

The largest of the quintet, the luxurious Mozart, was built in 1987 and refurbished in 2016. In April 2023, it launched again on the Danube as the flagship of the new Riverside Collection.

The Debussy traverses the Rhone, Mosel, and Rhine, a popular route that travels from Amsterdam to Basel and includes parts of the Danube. The Ravel sails the Rhone from Burgundy to Provence in France. Two of the other former Crystal ships are now operated by Uniworld Boutique River Cruises.

Thirty percent of all European river cruise passengers travel the Danube. The double-wide Mozart sets the bar high for luxury cruises with attention to every detail. "We want to showcase a more excellent personal service, along with an elevated culinary experience second to none," Gregor Gerlach said.

Key players On the first evening of our sailing, we met our Hungarian captain, Bela Burjan, and "executive chef, Johannes Bear, of Austria. Our most crucial point of contact was hotel director Sonja Gruber, who seemed to be everywhere on the ship.

"We can accommodate 162 guests in 81 suites, and with 82 crew, that's more than other river lines," Gruber said. "We pride ourselves on providing a better, personal yet professional service. We are going for the international clientele looking for an upscale experience second to none. Our guests come from all over the world, and each guest is looking for something different."

Aboard the Mozart At 395 feet long and 75 feet wide, the luxurious four-deck Riverside Mozart is nearly twice the width of other Danube riverboats. It couples a contemporary design with unrivaled service and plenty of room to find peace and quiet in less crowded spaces.

After long days of shore excursions, guests hover around the piano bar at night or mingle with the friendly bartenders. On warm summer nights or during travel days, guests stargaze on cozy loungers on the top deck.

Inclusions include free wi-fi, meals at all four restaurants and bars, and a beverage package. There is also a convenient self-service laundry room. The boat also carried 30 bicycles for use in Vienna, Budapest, and smaller towns or more countryside rides along the Danube during stopovers.

Accommodations Each room comes with river views, king or twin beds with plush bedding, marble bathrooms, sumptuous



silks and linens, flat-screen television, glass rain showers, and Nespresso coffee machines.

A half-dozen home-away-from-home suites range from the Symphony and Mozart suites to the Owner Suite, a two-bedroom, two-bathroom retreat of 860 square feet.

The meticulous house cleaning staff refreshes rooms twice daily. Personalized butlers, on call on WhatsApp 24/7, graciously make spa appointments and dinner reservations.

Epicurean delight Few river cruises can boast the culinary options on the all-inclusive Mozart. The main dining room, the Waterside Restaurant, offers open breakfast, lunch, and dinner seating. The breakfast buffet is second to none, with more sweet and savory options than I've ever had on a river cruise. An omelet station serves made-to-order egg dishes. In the evening, prix-fixe dinner plates include Arancini (golden saffron risotto balls topped with tomato basil ragout and Parmesan cheese). Trio of Mangalica (Hungarian pig) was a standout, featuring pork cheek, belly, and fillet, as was the tomato-mushroom herb-crusted Gratinated Butter Fish.

The Bistro serves late-risers, much like an elevated coffee house. It also offers evening tapas and shared Austro-Hungarian plates. The Blue Deli on Deck 3 is an alternative for a casual lunch of burgers, pasta, or sandwiches. Informal barbecues occur on the top deck at the Rooftop Grill. Room service is also available 24 hours a day.

In the top-flight Vintage Room, dining is all about wine pairings: The sommelier chooses the wine, the chef creates the meal according to the selections. This seven-course culinary event, designed for six to 12 guests, costs 295 Euros per person. It's worth noting that all passengers' dietary needs are closely monitored.

Rejuvenate All passengers have complimentary access to a meticulous retreat on Seahorse Deck 2, which has a Finnish

sauna, steam room, hot tub, and cold plunge pool. The Fehi Spa has two treatment rooms for passengers requesting a massage or facial treatment. The modern fitness center has Technogym equipment and free weights.

An open-air track on Deck 3 is perfect for walking or light jogging laps to burn off calories. Next to the spa, a beauty salon on the ship offers haircuts, manicures, and pedicures for an additional fee.

On-board immersion A Viennese Waltz dance class, taught by Vienna's Opera ballet soloists, is held in the Palm Court in the evening. Mixologists offer classes on making craft cocktails in the Cove and Vista bars, open from noon until late evening. After dinner, Philippine pianist Angel performs nightly at the Piano Bar.

Shore excursions Our trip began with an overnight in the baroque Bavarian town of Passau, near the German-Austrian border. Here we boarded the Mozart. In each stop of our itinerary, Riverside offered optional excursions of around three hours.

Melk The highlight of the riverside village of Melk is its magnificent Melk Abbey. Built in 1089, the Benedictine abbey was reconstructed in the 18th century. Other excursions include Artstetten Castle, an Austrian farm, and a jaunt to Durnstein for wine tasting.

Vienna Once the capital of the Hapsburg Empire, home to such iconic figures as Johann Strauss, Sigmund Freud and Marie Antoinette, Vienna is filled with Baroque walkways and historical riches. A walking tour of this City of Music features the imperial Hofburg Palace. Vienna's most popular attraction is the impressive Gothic-style St. Stephen's Cathedral. Schonbrunn Palace, the opulent summer residence of the Hapsburgs, features room after room of stately art along with imposing gardens and park. Another excursion is to the renowned Spanish Riding School for outstanding performance by the Hapsburg-bred Lipizzaner Stallions.

Budapest Hungary's very walkable capital, dubbed "the Pearl of the Danube," is blessed with rich art-nouveau architecture, superlative bathhouses, and a vibrant restaurant, bar, and coffee-shop culture. Sisi's Palace in Godollo was the summer home of Emperor Franz Josef and Empress Elizabeth (Sisi). Cruise passengers may see the most memorable sights of this metropolis with plenty of free time for more exploration and shopping.

Bratislava Slovakia's understated capital stands on the Danube between Austria and Hungary. A guided walking tour of the old Gothic town and main square ends at the Renaissance-style Bratislava Castle and the ChatamSofer Memorial, recalling its Jewish Quarter. Another tour travels to the ancient village of Svaty Jur and Palfy Palace, known for its wine production.

Krems This Austrian enclave, gateway to the Wachau Valley wine region is one of the Danube's prettiest towns. Travelers may choose to experience Wachau's top-quality wines, including Gruner Veltliner and Riesling, or stroll around neighboring Stein a der Donau and its treasure trove of sights dating back to the 11th century, followed by a tasting of apricot schnaps at the BailoniDistillery.

Mauthausen The upper Austrian hamlet of Mauthausen was a Nazi concentration camp from the annexation of Austria in 1938 until the end of World War II in 1945. A guided tour provides a glimpse into a painful past. A more upbeat tour option is the Augustine St. Florian Monastery. The library, with a famed ceiling fresco, houses over 150,000 books. A guided nine-mile bike tour along the Danube stops at historic Enns, where houses in the old town date back to the 15th and 16th centuries. ■

RIVERSIDE-CRUISES.COM





Communing with the Past at Manhattan's Algonquin Hotel

by Randy Mink

With a resident cat named Hamlet in a supporting role, a legacy of arts and literature takes center stage at the 181-room Algonquin Hotel Times Square, Autograph Collection. It's just a hop, skip and jump from Broadway theaters.

A literary landmark that has welcomed authors, poets, illustrators, playwrights, actors and other storytellers over the past century, the oldest operating hotel in New York City (est. 1902) is synonymous with The Algonquin Round Table, a lunchtime gathering of literary luminaries that took place daily throughout the 1920s. People like Robert Benchley, James Thurber, Dorothy Parker and Edna Ferber met around a 15-seat round table to gossip, trade barbs and talk about current projects.

Recently, the original table—after years of sitting in a back room—was restored and today hosts modern-day thinkers and trendsetters at programs held in the lobby's Blue Bar Restaurant and Lounge. A linear room distinguished by Corinthian columns and high corniced ceilings, the Blue Bar extends from the street entrance to a seating area with bookshelves and a grand piano. The

back bar glows from a bank of blue track lights, and the room's grandfather clock lends a nostalgic note.

Guests relaxing in this lobby space may meet up with Hamlet, the Algonquin's ginger-colored feline ambassador who roams about when not napping in his perch by the front window or hanging out in offices behind reception. The hotel has had an in-house cat since the 1920s. Over the years there have been eight Hamlets and three Matildas (the name for females). Hamlet VIII began his residency in September 2017.

Wandering around one night on the second floor, just outside the fitness room, I discovered a display of vintage photographs of Round Table members and recent articles about the Algonquin. Poking around on various floors, I found guest room doors bearing quotable wit-ticisms from New York wordsmiths. On the door of the Promises, Promises Suite, the quote from playwright Neil Simon reads, "If no one ever took risks, Michelangelo would have painted the Sistine floor." ■

WWW.ALGONQUINHOTEL.COM



Casablanca Hotel, NYC

by Randy Mink

An oasis of calm just steps from the madness of Times Square and lights of Broadway, the Casablanca Hotel sets itself apart from any other hotel in America by subtly capturing the flavor of North Africa. Moroccan motifs, clearly evident but not overdone, evoke visions of a bygone era and a far-away place.

Inspired by the romance of the classic 1942 movie "Casablanca," the 48-room boutique hotel lies tucked away on West 43rd Street in the tourist heart of New York City. Filigree brass lanterns hang from the ceiling in the lobby and in Rick's Cafe, a spacious second-floor lounge named after the iconic bar in the film starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. A large mural of whitewashed buildings in a 19th century Moroccan seaside city decorates the stairwell connecting the lobby to the lounge.

Rick's Cafe, accented with fresh orchids, potted palms, lampshade sconces, cane chairs with Moroccan-print cushions and a painting of a vintage Moroccan scene, is the hotel's gathering spot. Guests come to this inviting club room for continental breakfast and for snacks, fresh fruit, coffee and tea available 24 hours a day. The fireplace, bordered by glazed mosaic tiles in geometric designs, lends a cozy touch.

Guest rooms, done in warm, earthy tones and mostly on the small side, sport a ceiling fan, wooden blinds and a bathroom with Moroccan-style tilework. I loved the Sicilian blood orange bath products by Tarocco. Framed swatches of Moroccan fabrics adorn the stucco-like hallways.

The Casablanca Hotel is part of the Library Hotel Collection, which includes three other Manhattan properties—Library Hotel, Hotel Elysée and Hotel Giraffe. ■

WWW.CASABLANCAHOTEL.COM



Timeless and Contemporary Kempinski Hotel Corvinus Budapest
by Nick Kontis

Budapest is a tale of two halves within one iconic capital, surrounded by the majestic Danube River. Its old-world charm dates back to its imperial past during the rule of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The grand-dame metropolis, divided into two sections fringed along the mighty Danube, receives nearly seven million visitors a year.

Buda showcases a treasure trove of Hungary's old-world charm, including the UNESCO world heritage site Buda Castle, the Hungarian National Gallery, the 13th-century Matthias Church, and the Fisherman's Bastion.

Pest is a contemporary contrast, with pulsing energy on its vibrant streets, colorful markets, lively cafes, and cozy bistros. Choosing the right hotel for your travel style can elevate the guest experience.

Ideally situated in Budapest's pulsing Pest city center, with its outside terrace connected to thriving Fashion Street, the Kempinski Hotel Corvinus Budapest is a luxury contemporary glass construction hotel with an unrivaled quality of service in the Pearl of the Danube. Opened in 1992, during the political change, it was the first luxury hotel in Hungary's capital.

Location

You'll be hard-pressed to find a better central backdrop in the iconic capital city. Its façade faces the giant Ferris wheel, Budapest Eye, in Erzsébet Square. The property is well-placed to explore the city's main tourist attractions and gastronomy. Its most famous pedestrian thoroughfare, Fashion Street, at the back of the hotel, attracts visitors and locals alike and is lined with restaurants and shops. Its prime location is within walking distance of all major highlights in the inner city of Pest's 5th district. The Chain Bridge, Parliament Building, St. Stephen's Basilica, and Váci Utca pedestrian shopping street will be found.

Style

The inviting ambiance on the ground floor, designed by Greek-born Maria Vafiadis of London's MKV Design, creates the feel of an outdoor wrap-around promenade. It is a solace from the busy outside world, with a sweeping arc of a gallery area featuring local artists, a takeaway deli, and comfortable spaces to relax with designer chairs, sofas, and bookshelves. You'll also find the reception and concierge at the entry level.

Rooms

The 353 rooms are divided into 14 suites and six other room categories. English designer Alex Kravetz fully renovated the fifth, sixth, and seventh floors. Each room contains LED televisions, and suites have Nespresso coffee machines. The sumptuous quarters feature art deco features with cream and gold accents and are equipped with Salvatore Ferragamo toiletries, a safe minibar, and 24-hour room service from the in-house Nobu and ES Bistro. ■

KEMPINSKI.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 Brassa 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.

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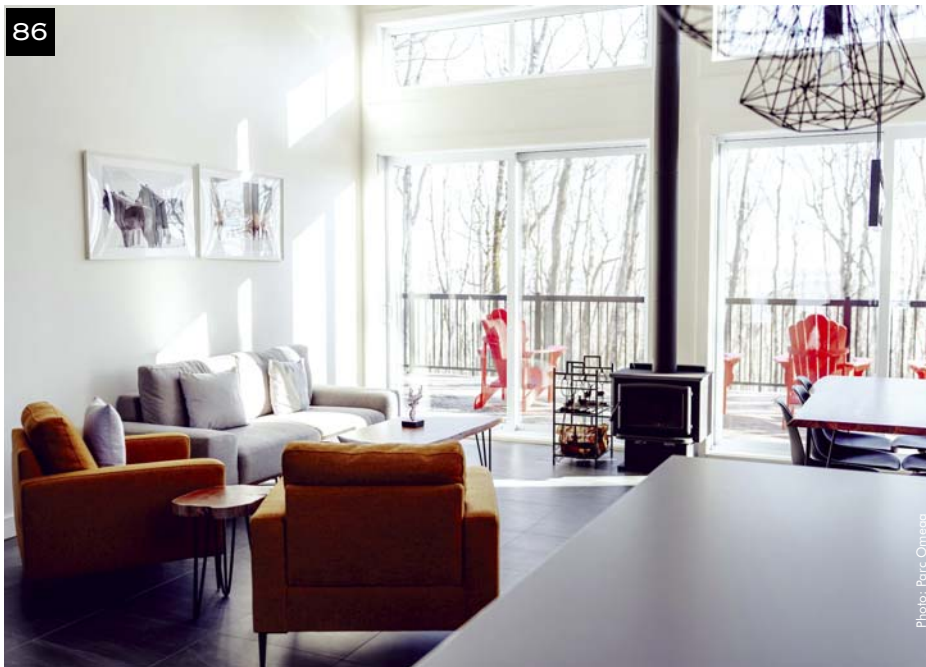
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For more Information visit: www.puntacana.com



Montebello, Quebec: Luxuriate in an Immersive Wilderness Experience at Parc Omega

Article and photography by Jennifer Merrick

All three of us collectively gasped as we opened the door to our panoramic chalet. We dropped our bags, pulled out our phones, and hurried towards the floor-to-ceiling windows that took up the entire back wall of this beautifully designed accommodation. Outside was a large patio with a hot tub surrounded by evergreen trees, their boughs glistening with a dusting of pure white snow.

But that wasn't the only reason we were awestruck. Right below us, among the trees, was a herd of five deer foraging on the shrubs.

"It's Bambi," my daughter whispered, pointing at the fawn still speckled with white spots. We forgot about unpacking and

watched until the deer wandered off. And this was only the beginning. There would be many more wildlife encounters and magical moments during our stay at Parc Omega.

Olivier Favre opened the park to the public in 1991 to showcase the wonders of the Canadian wilderness he fell in love with as a European.

"Parc Omega is completely different from a zoo," he said. "A zoo has exotic animals in a small space, and we have native animals in a big space." In addition to accommodation, the 2,225-acre property features hiking trails, picnic areas, and an unforgettable safari driving trail. Entrance fees are included with a stay in the chalets, but there is an optional admission cost. Carrots. Lots of them.

As soon as we entered the gates, two deer ambled up to the car, stuck their noses in the window, and demanded payment. We giggled as we handed over the carrot, and drove a little further, only to repeat this routine again and again. The deer came in all shapes and sizes with many species: fallow deer, white-tailed deer, red deer, caribou (also known as reindeer), and elk. One massive buck was double the height of our car with antler racks that almost spanned the size of our windshield. He also wanted carrots, so we gave him two just to be sure he was happy.

We then rolled up the windows to drive through the other sections of the safari that sheltered black bears, moose, bison, mountain goats, foxes, and wolves. We also walked the scenic Indigenous trail, which features interpretive signs about the history and culture of Quebec's First Nations.

Dinner was at OmegaBon Restaurant inside the park, where we saw wolves as we enjoyed the Boreal-inspired meal. Access to the park offerings was a definite highlight of staying on the property, but so was just hanging out at our cottage.

The 14 panoramic chalets are modern, luxurious, and comfortable. They have two bedrooms, a fully equipped kitchen, a living area with a fireplace, and amenities that include a Nespresso machine, BBQ, hot tub, and fire pit. Of course, its best features are the windows that look out to the forest and its 'deer' inhabitants.

When you go: The closest airports are Ottawa (a 60-minute drive) and Montreal (a 90-minute drive). Accommodations on the property include luxurious wolf cabins and panoramic chalets as well as more economical rustic cabins, sleeping pods, tipis, and tents. It's recommended that you book well ahead of your visit, especially during peak periods. ■

WWW.PARCOMEGA.CA





JOIA Aruba by Iberostar
New Upscale Luxury on Eagle Beach
by Susan Campbell, photos: JOIA Aruba

I recently had the opportunity to enjoy a short, but very sweet, stay at this brand-new property on award-winning Eagle Beach. (Often ranked among the top three beaches in the world!) I knew that Aruba would be the location of the flagship of Iberostar's new JOIA brand, but the speed of its build and opening took me by surprise. So, when I arrived over the Christmas holidays this year and discovered it was about to open in January, I made it my business to get the lowdown in person. And though it was not finished during my stay, construction of the new casino, a mas-

sive conference hall, a steakhouse/grill, a chef's table nook, and kid's club were still underway, what was completed was absolutely delightful.

The design of the three-story multi-level hotel is elegant and sophisticated, and unlike some newer hotels, it seamlessly fits into the local area. This stretch of the island's tourist beach scene is known as the low-rise region, harkening back to the days when hotels were not to be built any higher than a palm tree. (Palm Beach next door is all high-rise resorts.) The gentle rise of the

levels there and the soft, muted tones blend in beautifully with the alabaster sands and cerulean seas of this famous beach area allowing the natural scenes to be the star. And I was especially impressed with the obvious effort to pay tribute to Aruba's distinctive flora, fauna and underwater treasures as their colorful interior accents in the grand lobby- all created by local artists.

Standout exterior features include a gorgeous adults-only rooftop infinity pool with a lounge area and a bar area cresting 'Spa Sensation', with a gorgeous glassed-in sea view water circuit on the top level. The ground level expanse sports two pools, one adults-only exclusively for members of the Star Prestige Club, and the other the family-friendly oasis replete with a swim-up bar.

The beach, though across the street, is a very short walk to their dedicated lounges and umbrellas where guests enjoy food and beverages served by staff riding Segways. (So much fun to watch; they are very skilled!)

Accommodation-wise, there are 240 suites of various class distinctions, some include butler service, and all boast 24-hour room service. There are also ten very special second level suites with their own swim-out channels and all other rooms have either an interior whirlpool or one on the balcony.

We thoroughly enjoyed the Star Café and the lobby bar, but it was our dinner at their new Marea Caribbean fusion restaurant that seriously impressed. We dined outside to catch the sunset over the sea in the near distance. I didn't get a chance to try their signature restaurant the Bucatini Market & Cucina for breakfast or for upscale Italian at night, but I can't wait to return and experience all the new amenities that were in the works. The vibe is lovely, and it really is a welcome addition to the island's accommodation offerings.

They have also taken over ownership of the Tierra del Sol Golf Course a few miles away and offer special rates to hotel guests. ■

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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

A Journey Through Germany: From the Alps to Berlin

by Olivia Liveng



Adlon Kempinski



Schloss Elmau



There are few ways to truly understand a country than by immersing yourself in its contrasts. On my latest journey through Germany, I experienced two completely different yet equally mesmerizing sides of the country: the serene luxury of Schloss Elmau in the Bavarian Alps and the grandeur of Hotel Adlon Kempinski in the heart of Berlin. Taking the train between these two iconic destinations allowed me to witness firsthand the cultural, culinary, and environmental diversity that makes Germany such a fascinating place to explore.

The Journey Begins: A Train Through Changing Landscapes

My journey began in Munich, where I was picked up in a lavish vehicle, bound for Garmisch-Partenkirchen, the gateway to Schloss Elmau. As the car moved further from the city, the scenery transformed—flat landscapes gave way to rolling hills and, eventually, the dramatic peaks of the Bavarian Alps. The crisp mountain air greeted me as I arrived at my first destination, a retreat that felt a world apart from urban Germany.

Schloss Elmau: A Sanctuary in the Alps

Schloss Elmau is more than just a hotel—it's a secluded haven where nature, culture, and wellness intertwine effortlessly. The retreat offers an unparalleled sense of peace in a valley surrounded by the Wetterstein Mountains. My first morning there, I awoke to the sound of birds and the scent of fresh mountain air, a stark contrast to the bustling city life I had left behind.

One of the defining features of Schloss Elmau is its dual concept: the Schloss Elmau Retreat and the Schloss Elmau Hideaway. With its grand spa and classical architecture, the Hideaway evokes timeless elegance, while the Retreat provides a more intimate, contemporary experience. No matter where you stay, the breathtaking views and the hospitality are seamless.

Dining in the Bavarian Alps

Each meal at Schloss Elmau felt like a celebration of the senses. At Luce d'Oro, the two-Michelin-starred restaurant, I indulged in an exquisite tasting menu crafted by Executive Chef Christoph Rainer. Alpine trout, paired with delicate herbs, was a standout, as was the perfectly prepared wagyu beef. Every bite reflected the natural bounty of Bavaria.

For a more relaxed experience, Fidelio served up comforting yet sophisticated Italian dishes. Sitting on the sunlit terrace, with a plate of handmade pasta and a glass of white wine, I felt completely at ease. Meanwhile, Ananda catered to my health-conscious cravings with its plant-based, Ayurvedic-inspired dishes.

Between meals, I explored the wellness offerings, from panoramic saunas to rejuvenating spa treatments. Hiking through the surrounding meadows, I marveled at the quiet majesty of the Alps, a stark contrast to the urban energy I knew awaited me in Berlin.

A Change of Pace: The Train to Berlin

Leaving Schloss Elmau was bittersweet, but I knew another unforgettable experience lay ahead. Boarding the train to Berlin was an adventure in itself—watching the landscapes shift from rugged mountains to the flat plains of central Germany before finally arriving in the vibrant capital. The transition felt symbolic: from tranquility to dynamism, from old-world charm to modern sophistication.

Hotel Adlon Kempinski A Grand Welcome to Berlin

Stepping out of Berlin Hauptbahnhof and arriving at the doors of the Adlon Kempinski felt like stepping into another era. Overlooking the Brandenburg Gate, this legendary hotel exudes old-world elegance. From its grand chandelier-lit lobby to its impeccable service, Adlon Kempinski remains one of the most storied hotels in Europe, having hosted royalty, celebrities, and dignitaries for over a century.

Where Schloss Elmau offered solitude, Adlon Kempinski provided access to the very heart of Berlin's culture and history. In the mornings, I strolled down Unter den Linden, soaking in the city's historic landmarks. Afternoons were spent visiting museums, indulging in Berlin's dynamic café culture, and discovering the creative energy that defines the city.

Culinary Excellence in the Capital

The dining experiences at Adlon Kempinski rivaled those of Schloss Elmau but in a completely different way. At Lorenz Adlon Esszimmer, a two-Michelin-starred restaurant, I experienced modern German gastronomy at its finest. Each dish, from tender venison to an intricate dessert inspired by Berlin's

urban landscape, was a masterclass in flavor and presentation.

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Sra Bua by Tim Raue offered a refreshing change of pace, blending Asian flavors with European techniques. Each bite transported me further east, with bold spices and delicate seafood dishes providing an exciting contrast to the Alpine fare I had enjoyed days earlier.

Afternoons at the Adlon Lounge became a cherished ritual. Enjoying traditional afternoon tea with a view of the Brandenburg Gate, I reflected on how different yet complementary Schloss Elmau and Adlon Kempinski were—two halves of the same incredible journey.

A Tale of Two Destinations

My trip between Schloss Elmau and Adlon Kempinski revealed Germany's incredible diversity. The train journey between the two offered a window into the country's landscapes and culture, transitioning from snow-capped peaks to bustling boulevards, from rustic Alpine traditions to sophisticated urban elegance.

At Schloss Elmau, I found serenity in nature, deep relaxation, and an appreciation for mindful living. In Berlin, I embraced the energy of the city, indulging in its cultural offerings and world-class dining. The juxtaposition of these two experiences made each one more profound.

For travelers seeking the ultimate German experience, combining Schloss Elmau and Adlon Kempinski is an unforgettable way to discover the country's contrasts. Whether you start in the Alps and end in the capital or vice versa, this journey offers a perfect blend of nature and culture, tradition and innovation, retreat and revelry.

One thing is certain: I will return. Whether to once again breathe in the fresh mountain air of Schloss Elmau or to sip a perfectly crafted cocktail at the Adlon, Germany's luxury hospitality has left an indelible mark on my heart. ■

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[HTTPS://WWW.KEMPINSKI.COM](https://www.kempinski.com)





Exploring the Falkland Islands *A Journey to the Edge of the World*

by Olivia Liveng

The Falkland Islands, a windswept archipelago in the South Atlantic, offer a unique blend of rugged beauty, untouched wilderness, and rich cultural experiences. Over seven unforgettable days, I immersed myself in this remote destination, discovering its abundant wildlife, unique cultural traditions, and warm hospitality. Each island and settlement offered a glimpse into a way of life deeply rooted in nature and tradition. Here's a detailed account of my journey and everything you need to know for your own Falklands adventure.

Getting There: A Gateway to Isolation

Reaching the Falklands is an adventure in

itself. My journey began in Santiago, Chile, where I boarded a LATAM flight bound for Mount Pleasant Airport. The five-hour flight, treated as an add-on to a domestic Chilean route, lands at a military base shared with civilian operations. Upon arrival, I was greeted by representatives from the Falkland Islands Tourist Board, who arranged a scenic drive to Stanley, the capital. Along the way, I got my first taste of the island's raw, untamed beauty—rolling hills, windswept grasses, and a sense of vastness that somehow made the world feel bigger.

Stanley: A Harbor Town Steeped in History

Stanley, the capital, is home to the majority of the Falklands' population and serves as

its cultural and administrative hub. Its picturesque harbor, colorful cottages, and charming British character make it an ideal place to start exploring. My first stop was the Historic Dockyard Museum, where I learned about the islands' maritime history and their role in the 1982 conflict. The exhibits, which include shipwreck artifacts and taxidermy of native wildlife, offered a fascinating glimpse into the islands' story.

Another highlight was Christ Church Cathedral, the southernmost Anglican cathedral in the world. Its adjacent Whalebone Arch, constructed from the jawbones of blue whales, is a striking symbol of the island's whaling heritage. A walk along Ross Road, Stanley's main thoroughfare, revealed more of the town's charm, from the colorful Jubilee Villas to the Lady Elizabeth Shipwreck resting at the harbor's edge.

My stay at the Malvina House Hotel was more than just a comfortable retreat. It was a warm embrace from the locals, offering a perfect mix of modern comfort and tradi-



tional charm. Overlooking Stanley Harbor, the hotel is known for its welcoming staff and hearty meals. The lamb, sourced from local farms, was a particular highlight, paired with a pint of locally brewed beer from Falkland Beerworks.

Sealion Island: A Wildlife Spectacle

The journey to Sealion Island began with a flight on a small FIGAS plane, which carried just a handful of passengers and limited baggage to 14 kilograms. The aircraft's views, with its rugged coastline and scattered islands, were breathtaking. Landing on a grassy airstrip, I was met by Micky Reeves, the manager of the Sealion Island Lodge. I immediately felt the sense of isolation and calm that defines this place.

Sealion Island is a haven for wildlife. Gentoo penguins greeted me just steps from the lodge, their playful antics providing endless entertainment. A short walk revealed a colony of Rockhopper penguins perched on cliffs, their distinctive yellow crests fluttering in the wind. On the way back, I encountered Johnny Rooks—bold, curious birds that seemed as interested in me as I was in them.

Though simple, the lodge was cozy and welcoming. Meals featured locally sourced ingredients, and guests spent evenings sharing stories while the sun set over the island. Sealion Island felt like a world apart, a place where nature reigns and time slows down.

Carcass Island: A Conservation Success Story

Another FIGAS flight brought me to Carcass Island, renowned for its rodent-free environment, which has allowed native bird species to thrive. As I explored the island's trails, I was captivated by the Cobb's Wrens darting among the tussock grass and the bright red flashes of the Long-tailed Meadowlark.

Bonita and Derek Goodwin manage the Carcass Island House, which was more than just accommodation—it felt like staying with family. The meals were a highlight, featuring fresh-caught fish, homegrown vegetables, and baked goods made with care. Afternoon tea, or “smoko,” was a daily treat, with cakes and cookies served alongside local delicacies like teaberry scones. Bonita and Derek's passion for conservation

and the island's history shone through in every conversation, making my stay informative and heartwarming.

Bleaker Island: Flat Landscapes, Big Wildlife

Bleaker Island's name belies its charm. The flat terrain made it easy to explore, and its quiet beauty was captivating. My hosts, Nick Rendell and his mother, greeted me at the airstrip and took me on a tour of the island. A highlight was the sizeable cormorant colony, where hundreds of birds nested and dove gracefully into the sea. The beaches stretched endlessly, offering peaceful solitude and incredible photography opportunities.

I stayed at Cassard House, a cozy, eco-friendly lodge that perfectly matched the island's laid-back atmosphere. Evenings here were simple but memorable, with delicious seafood dinners and the sound of waves as a constant companion. Bleaker Island was the perfect place to disconnect and immerse myself in nature.

Volunteer Point: A Penguin Paradise

Back in Stanley, I set out on a 4x4 adventure to Volunteer Point, home to the largest King Penguin colony in the Falklands. The drive was an adventure, crossing rugged terrain and wide-open landscapes. Arriving at Volunteer Point, I was greeted by a pristine white-sand beach teeming with hundreds of King Penguins. Their stately movements and vibrant orange markings made them unforgettable subjects for photos and observation.

Watching these magnificent creatures in their natural habitat was a humbling experience. Volunteer Point reminded me of why the Falklands are essential for wildlife conservation.

Cuisine in the Falklands: A Taste of Tradition

The food in the Falklands reflects the islands' self-sufficient and practical way of life. Outside Stanley, meals were hearty and homemade, featuring slow-cooked mutton, freshly caught Patagonian toothfish, and vegetables grown on the islands. In Stanley, I explored various dining options, from the relaxed vibe of Shorty's Diner to the more refined offerings at The Waterfront. Smoko

was a daily highlight, with cakes, scones, and jams made from local berries like diddle-dee (a fantastic name!) and teaberry. And, of course, I had plenty of fish'n chips—locals say Falklanders are more British than the Brits, and I believe it!

The drinks were equally memorable. Locally brewed beers, like the Peat Cutter ale, were a perfect accompaniment to the Falklands' hearty cuisine. A hot toddy—a mix of rum, hot water, and sugar—hit the spot for some warming on a chilly evening.

History and Heritage: A Deep Connection

Everywhere I went, the Falklands' history was present. In Stanley, the British influence is clearly evident in architecture and culture, while the reminders of the 1982 conflict are never far away. On the outer islands, conservation efforts and sustainable living are testaments to the resilience and adaptability of the people who call this place home. The Falklands' past and present are deeply intertwined, from the shipwrecks dotting the harbors to the carefully preserved bird habitats.

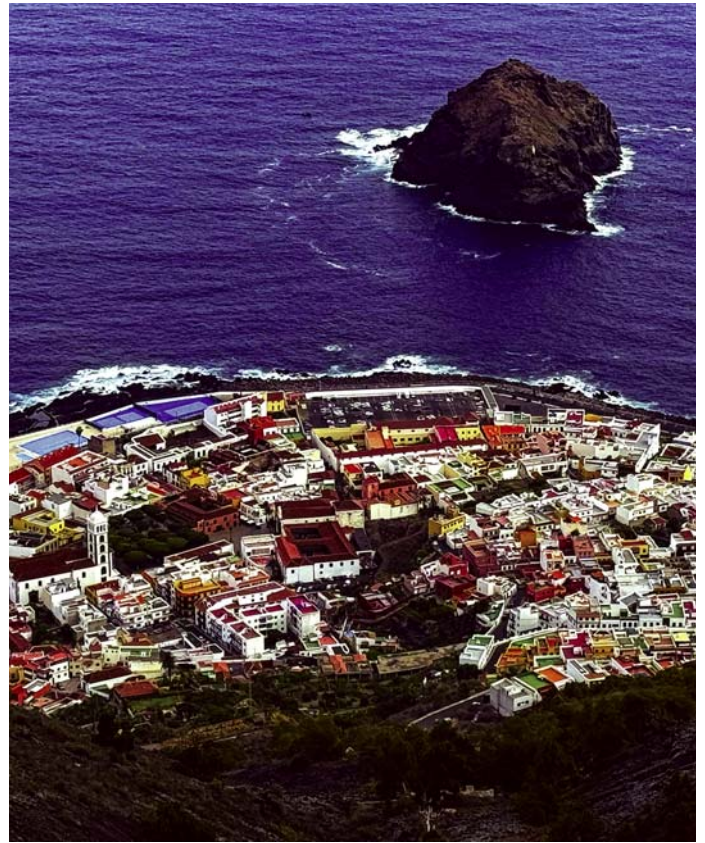
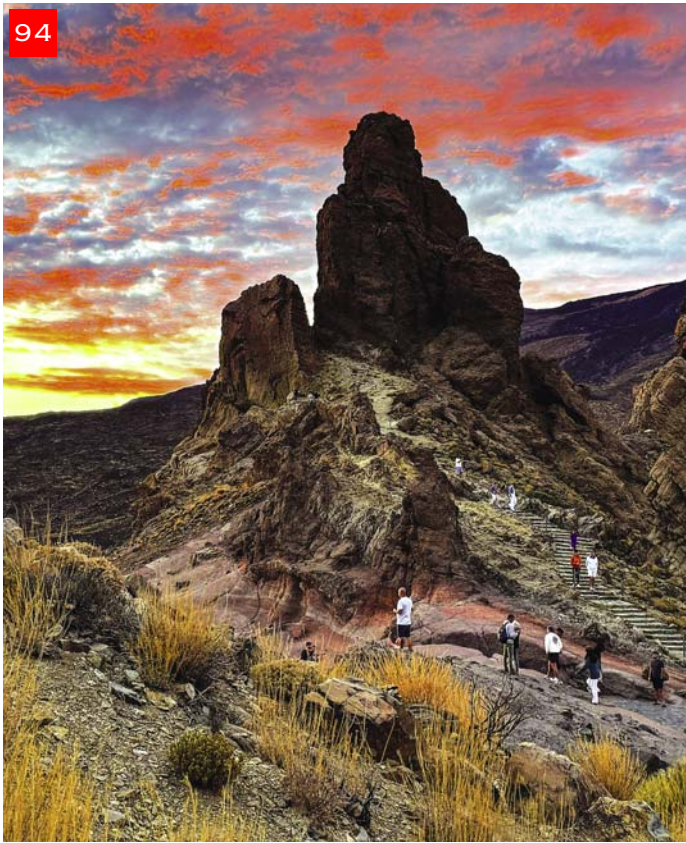
Why the Falklands Should Be on Your List

The Falkland Islands are a destination that defies comparison. Their combination of raw natural beauty, abundant wildlife, and rich history creates an experience that feels both adventurous and deeply personal. Whether standing among King Penguins at Volunteer Point, savoring a home-cooked meal at a remote lodge, or learning about the islands' maritime heritage in Stanley, every moment feels authentic and unforgettable.

As I boarded my flight home from Mount Pleasant Airport, I felt deeply grateful for the chance to experience this unique corner of the world. The Falklands aren't just a place to visit—they're a place to connect, reflect, and be inspired by the power of nature and the stories of those who live alongside it. ■

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Tenerife - The Striking Grand Dame of the Canary Islands

Artilece and Photography by Nicholas Kontis



Tenerife, the staggering grand dame and largest of Spain's seven Atlantic archipelago Canary Islands, located west of the mainland of Africa, might be considered a tale of two islands. While the volcanic Island attracts over six million annual visitors, most arrive from the UK searching for an all-inclusive sun-drenched beach vacation with pulsing karaoke, happy hour, and brimming nightlife on its sandy beaches with otherwise barren landscapes.

In deep contrast beyond the revelry of its tourist spots is a lush green island that showcases one of the most concentrated biodiversity on an island of extraordinary beauty filled with rugged cliffs, lofty peaks, perfectly manicured hiking trails, and remote picturesque towns. The north tends to be cooler, making going on walks and longer hikes easier.

Teide National Park

In the center of the Island, the 2007-anointed Unesco World Heritage site El Teide National Park is the Island's centerpiece with impressive volcanic landscapes and the most dramatic backdrop with pine forests and lofty red rock peaks. Spain's highest mountain (12,188 ft 3,715 meters) is like entering another planet. The Island's volcanic beginnings came about when an eruption created the Island 30 million years ago. The Island of Eternal Springs is ripe for hiking. Tenerife has countless trails in El Teide and throughout the Island's northern section. For spectacular sunrise and sunset photos, hike the Montana Blanca trail 5-6 hours to the summit, then take the cable down.

Garachico

No place better showcases the Island's rich history, culture, and tradition than the laid-back, picturesque northwestern settlement of Garachico. In its inception in the 16th century, the coastal village was

the most influential port on the Island. Its strategic location provided for a thriving maritime trade. In 1706, a volcanic eruption changed the town's fate. Many historical buildings surround the epicenter of Libertad Square, including the Santa Ana Church and the contemporary art museum in the Convent of San Francisco—the perfect scenario for a glimpse into Canarian life. The local gastronomy is based on the fresh catch of the day. Shop for local souvenirs, or head to the sea for a snorkeling experience in natural saltwater pools.

San Cristobal de la Laguna

Once the capital of Tenerife, San Cristóbal de La Laguna is another inviting hamlet and a must-visit on any visit. Offering fine examples of Canarias architecture, art galleries, excellent shopping in designer boutiques, and some of the Island's oldest shops, the vibrant university town also hosts a wonderfully preserved historical quarter, declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Of special interest is the Teatro Leal, a refurbished theatre built in 1915. It has been decorated with murals and oil paintings of beautiful landscapes, nymphs, and ancient Greek scenes. The town comes to life in the evening. Try Canarian coffee at one of the many coffee shops and soak up local life.

Anaga Rural Park

Just a few minutes' drive from La Laguna lies the second most important natural heritage of Tenerife Anaga Rural Park, the gateway for hiking on countless well-kept trails of the Anaga mountains. The untamed coastal mountains have been declared a Biosphere Reserve and have preserved their natural assets. Here, you will find Tenerife's most incredible areas of lush laurel forests. The area has trails of varying difficulty, as well as many fauna and flora with plenty of native species. The deep valleys and ravines sever across and eventually reach the



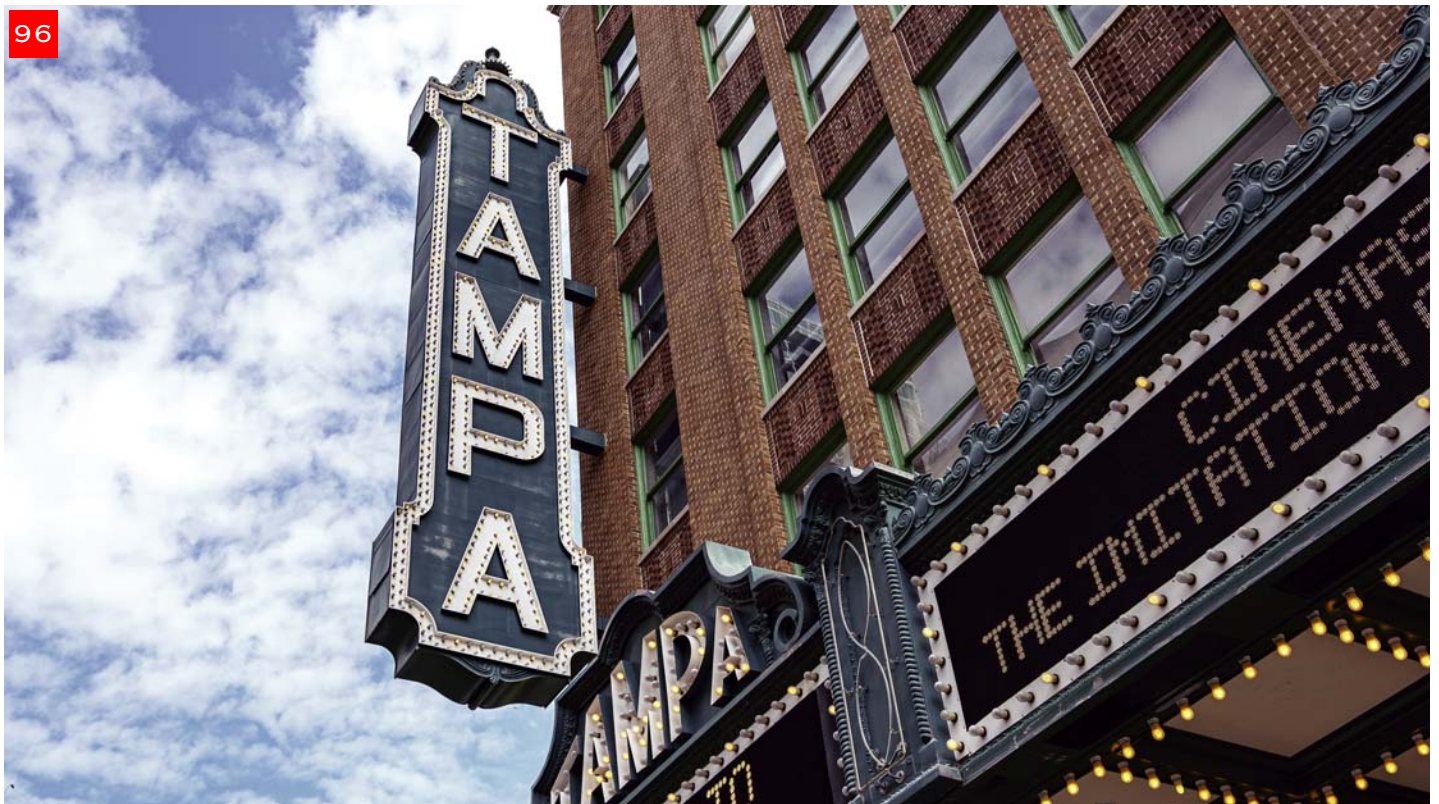
sea, where a series of beaches lie below. In the tiny town of Toborno is preeminent Roque de Taborno hike passing quaint hamlets with sweeping picturesque views of the Atlantic.

Acantilados De Los Gigantes (whale watching, water sports)

The highlight of Tenerife's southern section is whale watching. Every day is a great day for whale watching in Tenerife. Unlike Mexico's Pacific, where whale watching season falls in the winter months, in Tenerife, it lasts year-round. The southwest Costa Adeje in the Island's south is the perfect backdrop for watching pilot whales, bottlenose dolphins, and many more cetaceans. The area between Las Galletas and Los Gigantes has been designated as a Whale Heritage Site. Sustainable and respectful operators set sail from Puerto Colon, Los Cristianos, and Los Gigantes ports. Of 28 different species in the region's warm Atlantic waters, Pilot Whales are the most spotted—Kayak at Los Acantilados de Los Gigantes with a backdrop hugging lofty cliffs. ■

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Florida's Friendly Folk and Fine Food

Article and photography by David J. Cox

I love visiting Florida and am enjoying the emergence of a food culture that is turning from chains to a new reality where chefs from around the country, and world, are creating a foodie paradise!

After a day of seeing some of the greatest cars ever built and designed at the Mecum Kissimmee Car Auction, I would enjoy my first meal at the Wilson restaurant in the lovely Melia hotel in Kissimmee. The low-key theme in the restaurant was contrasted by the creative cooks who make regular fare exceptional. On the recommendation of the hotel's front desk clerk, I chose the house



made "Pull Apart" bread with its dipping sauce. I would have eaten 3 portions if it were not for the Rigatoni Bolognese that I was presented. A nice taste of home cooking, it had just enough of everything to make the pasta dish memorable.

Kissimmee has many fun adventures, and I enjoyed a helicopter tour with Leading Edge Helicopters and an exciting morning Airboat adventure where we got close to some alligators in their own habitat at Wild Florida. While there, I also toured their drive-through animal preserve and then ate some interesting dishes at the canteen, including Gator Bites with sauce, as well as a great fruity "Swamp Slushy."

A while later, I would enjoy lunch at the Formosa Winery Tasting House. The main hall has an industrial chic set up with a central bar, product racks filled with Florida wines and local merchandise. I would enjoy their O.G. chicken flatbread with a tasting of 10 of their wines. I was surprised at how much I enjoyed the dry blueberry wine!

In the evening, I was joined by local history buff Kelly in front of Old Osceola County Courthouse. She took me on a walking tour of historical and significant sites, including the re-vamped port with a walkway and parks, the unique Monument of States, all while telling personal stories about the old days and how much her town had changed. A highlight was running into some local heroes, the Kapps, who run the only B&B around and are now opening a brewery, hotspot and art workshop named Violet's Garage.

After the walk, we headed to the 1881 Restaurant Located in the historic W.B. Makinson Hardware building. The owner's



transformation of the store into a bar and restaurant is impressive, with a casual dining area, a Wine Room and banquet area, as well as artifacts from its previous life including pictures and hand-written receipts. Another highlight was being present when the congregation of the Church of Beer showed up, a gang of locals who meet here for beers and socialisation.

That night, I would enjoy one of the highlights of the trip - Gatorland Night Shine. Led by a wonderful guide, I took an animated walk through the creaking walkways of their Breeding Marsh. There is something primeval and deeply affecting seeing hundreds of glowing eyes looking at you from the water!

Tampa

Tampa Bay has become a food lover's dream, with an explosion of restaurants of all sorts, from family diners to fine dining favorites.

In a nondescript building on a suburban street lies the Michelin Star Rooster and Till. The trio of Chefs have been busy creating bold new dishes blending flavours and textures of all sorts. Here we did not only eat amazing dishes like roasted golden beets and fried chicken on a waffle, but we also enjoyed watching the crew show off their style and skills. It felt like we were in a Broadway show.

The next day I would enjoy the Tampa Bay History Center, which included interactive exhibits and a fun pirate adventure with video, surround sound and special effects. It traces local history from the Tocobaga Indians who first called the waters of Tampa Bay home through pirates, conquistadors, plantations all the way to the present.

Not too far away is the Tampa Museum of Art, boasting rotating exhibitions and an amazing view of downtown. Its façade is

also a work of art itself with the shifting colors of Leo Villareal's "Sky (Tampa)."

Morning would bring a nice breakfast in the unique Psomi. This Greek eatery has an on-site bakery and a gift store and serves fresh bread and pastry every day. I was full after enjoying their Strapatsada plate with a Greek egg scramble filled with feta and caramelised onions.

I worked off the meal with a fantastic tour of the wetlands with Tampa Bay Kayak Anglers. The couple who run it are locals who decided to start the non-profit company after Covid and they never looked back, except if there was a big fish. They run sight-seeing tour, day camps for kids and fishing trips.

Afterwards I would be regaled with stories of how the Tampa Riverwalk came to be while enjoying a braised fish and local beer at the art-inspired Ulele restaurant. The riverfront was redesigned to maximize access to the river and to bring an urban oasis to life with shops, restaurants, parks, condominiums, and stylish office buildings.

The afternoon was spent in my hotel, the Current. With a view on the bay, this Marriott Autograph hotel offered a pool, private beach and rooftop bar, all maximizing the views of Tampa. Magnificent property.

That night I would enjoy another restaurant show at the Rocca. This upscale and elegant restaurant has some great options, particularly the pasta. However, the highlight was the chef who made fresh mozzarella at the table.

Before heading off to Ocala, I ate breakfast at Timpano. Located in historic Hyde Park, the restaurant offers Italian fusion foods with odd but delicious combinations that are filling and delicious.

Ocala

Once I arrived in this lovely town, I enjoyed a good old-fashioned American dinner at District Bar and Kitchen. Filled to capacity, this family-friendly restaurant was loud and lively. And I mean what is more American than watching the big game while enjoying a cheeseburger, fries...and braised brussel sprouts?

The next day was filled with adventure, starting with a visit to Canyons Zip Line and Adventure Park where two spectacular canyons and 4 lakes welcome adventurers. Zip lines, horseback riding, gem mining, and kayaking are all offered to visitors at this majestic park.

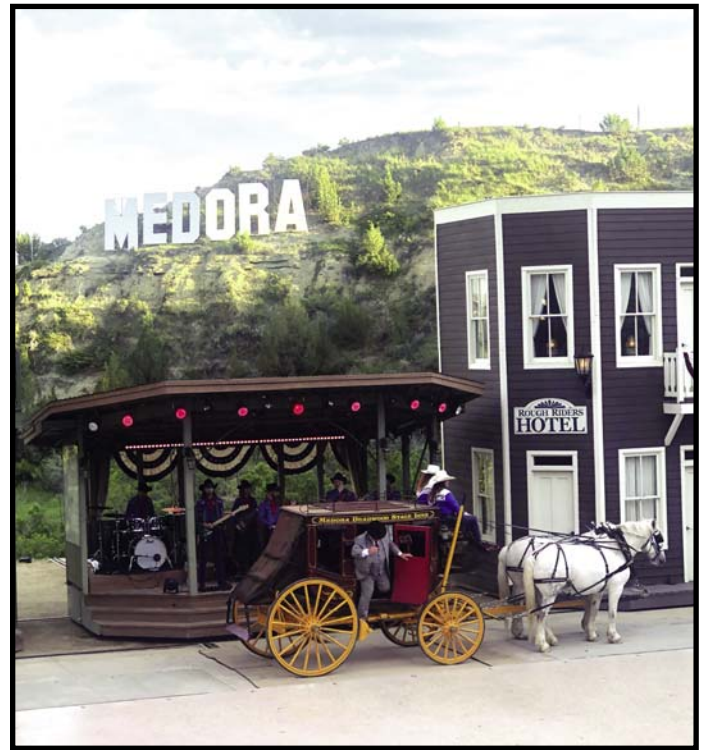
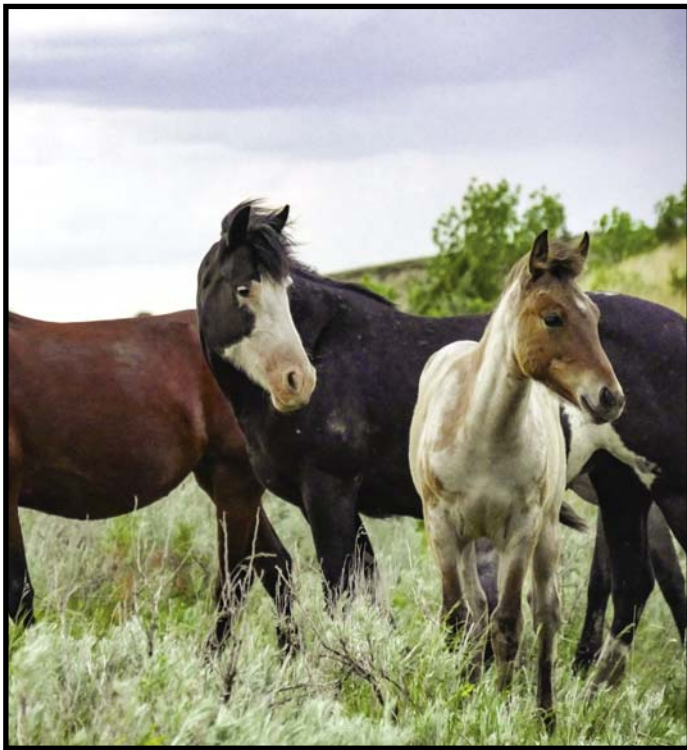
That tour was followed by a great clear kayak adventure on the Rainbow River with Sam of Get Up and Go Kayaking. Charming and chatty, he led our group through small channels filled with fish and turtles we could see in the clear water beneath us. A great time and one that I highly recommend.

After, I was treated to more aquatic fun with a Glass Bottom Boat Tour at the Silver Springs State Park. Led by a great captain, we were taken for a ride through the park and given an up-close view of Florida manatees. The highlight was seeing where various TV shows and movies had been filmed on the location, including a Tom Cruise film, Legend!

My final stop was Stirrups Restaurant, an elegant southern steakhouse, where the chef has created comfort food coupled with extraordinary service. I enjoyed the deviled eggs, beet salad and a wonderfully braised venison. I cannot emphasize the quality of staff and the food – both were amazing. ■

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North Dakota Offers a Dash of Frontier Flair

by Randy Mink

Crowning a distant hilltop, silhouetted against the sky, they appeared to be statues until we noticed the two animal forms had tails that swished back and forth. To our delight, these were the first wild horses we had encountered at Theodore Roosevelt National Park, a vast wilderness of grasslands, barren plains and towering buttes in the rugged Badlands of southwestern North Dakota. The park's free-roaming bison, elk, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, mule deer and prairie dogs also captivate wildlife watchers.

A sparsely populated agricultural state bounded on the south by South Dakota and on the north by the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, North Dakota

is not exactly on the average traveler's radar. It's often overshadowed by South Dakota, whose Black Hills/Badlands region abounds with top-tier tourist attractions like Mount Rushmore.

Why Not Minot

Always looking for new places to explore, I took Amtrak's Empire Builder from Chicago to Minot, a pleasant 18-hour overnight train journey. Minot, only 50 miles from Canada, attracts many Canadian girlfriend getaway groups who come to shop in the downtown boutiques and at Dakota Square Mall.

I was primarily interested in the town's Norwegian roots and enjoyed my visit to Scandinavian Heritage Park, a free-admis-

sion outdoor museum that celebrates the cultures of immigrants who came to North Dakota from not only Norway but from Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland as well. The best photo ops are the full-size replica of a wooden stave church from Norway; a 1928 Danish windmill; and a 30-foot-tall, orange-painted statue of a Dala horse, the most recognizable symbol of Sweden. Dala figurines and other Scandinavian imports are sold in the park's gift shop. Norskfest, the largest Scandinavian festival in North America, is held the last weekend in September.

The 9-day North Dakota State Fair takes place in Minot every July. Also on the summer agenda are the Minot Hot Tots, a minor league baseball team named after a popular Upper Midwest comfort food—the tater tot hotdish, which is served at the ballpark. Another Minot crowd-pleaser: Dakota Territory Air Museum, whose four cavernous buildings house 60 civilian and military aircraft.



A Pioneer Past

Taking Route 83 south towards Bismarck, the state capital, travelers should stop in Washburn and tour the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center. Bold exhibits chronicle the historic journey westward of trailblazers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and the hospitality shown them by the Mandan and Hidatsa peoples. Two miles up the Missouri River is Fort Mandan, a replica of the explorers' 1804-05 winter home. The Lewis & Clark expedition, consisting of about 50 men, spent more time in North Dakota than any other (future) state.

More frontier history surfaces in the Bismarck-Mandan area. Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park, at the confluence of the Heart and Missouri rivers in Mandan, features a reconstruction of the U.S. Army post from which Lieutenant General George Armstrong Custer led his troops in 1876 on the ill-fated trip to Montana to confront the Sioux at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Also in the park are six rebuilt earthlodges in On-A-Slant Indian Village and a visitor center with Mandan Indian artifacts and items relating to Custer and Lewis & Clark.

Best of Bismarck

Bismarck's premier attraction is the North Dakota Heritage Center & State Museum. Located on the State Capitol grounds, the largest museum in North Dakota has lots of hands-on exhibits. I found each of its cavernous galleries more engaging than the next and learned much about the state, from Native tribes and dinosaur fossil finds to agricultural innovations and the booming oil industry. (Only Texas and Alaska produce more oil than North Dakota.) Steps away is the North Dakota State Capitol, a 19-story tower with an observation deck offering panoramic views.

A great way to end the day in Bismarck is a sunset cruise on the Missouri River aboard the 105-passenger Lewis & Clark Riverboat.

Medora and the Legacy of Teddy Roosevelt

West of Bismarck, the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and its

gateway—the tiny Western-themed town of Medora—have always been one of North Dakota's biggest draws and soon will offer another incentive to visit. The Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library, a museum and research center overlooking the park, will open on July 4, 2026, the 250th anniversary of American independence.

The 26th U.S. president, acclaimed for his visionary conservation policies and one of four chief executives memorialized in stone at Mount Rushmore, ranched in the area for two years as a young man in the 1880s. He returned almost every year until his death in 1919. In the Badlands the New Yorker found inner strength and renewal through the healing power of nature. Looking back at his life, Roosevelt remarked, "I would not have been president if it were not for my experiences in North Dakota."

The Medora Musical, a summertime staple staged in an amphitheater affording views of the majestic landscape, is built around the life of Teddy Roosevelt. A rousing, patriotic variety show featuring a cast of young cowboys and cowgirls and an actor playing TR himself, it concludes with fireworks and a flag-carrying horseback rider dramatically positioned on a bluff beyond the stage.

Before the performance, close to the theater, my group feasted at Pitchfork Steak Fondue, a Western-style cookout where 12-ounce steaks are loaded onto giant pitchforks, deep-fried in lard and served with all the fixin's, including baked potatoes, baked beans, garlic toast, coleslaw and mixed fruit, with brownies and mini-donuts for dessert.

The next day I took part in an early morning group hike in the hills above Medora with Joe Wiegand, the man who had played Teddy Roosevelt in the musical the night before. Still in character and dressed for the part, he uncannily portrays TR right down to the iconic wire-rim spectacles, bold mannerisms and lust for life. At one point during the hike, he scrambles up onto a rock balanced on a sheer cliff, addressing us from his "bully's pulpit" (and making me nerv-

ous). Roosevelt had referred to the White House as his "bully's pulpit," a national platform he used to make his voice heard.

More to Explore in Medora

Medora's Bully Pulpit Golf Course, set against gorgeous Badlands backdrops, winds through meadows, buttes and bluffs. For riders of all skill levels, Medora Riding Stables offers guided trail rides through the hills east of town.

The North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame, another Medora crowd-pleaser, is a treasure house of art and artifacts celebrating ranch life, rodeo champions and Native American lore. Just outside of town lies Chateau de Mores, the well-preserved ranch house built in 1883 by a French nobleman who came to the Badlands to develop a beef cattle operation.

North Dakota's National Park

The visitor center at Theodore Roosevelt National Park, within walking distance of town, shows a 17-minute orientation film. Items in the small museum include the bullet-scarred shirt the president was wearing when shot by an assassin in Milwaukee.

From overlooks at pullouts along the park's 36-mile scenic loop drive, motorists enjoy spectacular views of vast horizons stretching over the northern Great Plains. Close to the roadsides they likely will see some of the 500 bison and 200 feral horses that inhabit the rolling prairies. And everyone likes watching the little critters scurry from hole to hole in the grasslands' prairie dog towns.

The loop offers a dozen hiking trails, one of which leads to a cliff that affords dramatic vistas of Wind River Canyon and the Little Missouri River. Happily, this unspoiled North Dakota kingdom is much less crowded than Yellowstone and other popular national parks that get overrun every summer and fall. ■

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Playground Dubai: A Journey through Gastronomy, Culture, and Adventure

Article and photography by Michael Morocs

Dubai had long been on my list of must-visit destinations, and finally, I was here for the first time. As a travel writer, I've explored many cities, but nothing could have prepared me for the sheer grandeur and variety of experiences Dubai offers. A city where history meets innovation, where adventure collides with luxury, and where every corner tells a different story. My days here were filled with discovery, from crafting my own perfume to racing across the skyline on a zip line, indulging in world-class

cuisine, and wandering through historic neighborhoods that spoke of a time before the towering skyscrapers.

Paramount Hotel

A Stay in Hollywood Glamour

For my stay, I checked into Paramount Hotel, a luxurious retreat that blends classic Hollywood glamour with modern comfort. From the moment I stepped inside, I was transported into the golden age of cinema. The hotel's interiors are inspired by classic films, complete with vintage-style movie

posters, cinematic lighting, and an elegant, star-studded atmosphere. My room was stylish yet comfortable, with a plush bed, sleek furnishings, and floor-to-ceiling windows offering a fantastic city view. It felt like a perfect escape from the city's non-stop energy, a place where I could relax in style while still being in the heart of the action.

A Fragrant Start at Oo La Lab

I kicked off my Dubai experience with something entirely unique: crafting my own signa-



ture scent at Oo La Lab. Walking into the studio, I felt as though I had entered a modern-day alchemist's lab. Glass bottles filled with aromatic oils lined the shelves, each containing a different essence: floral, woody, musky, citrusy. Under the guidance of an expert perfumer, I mixed and matched different notes, experimenting until I found a combination that felt like just right, the result? A warm, spicy scent with hints of oud and spice, something I'd always associate with my first time in Dubai and named it "Spice Route". It was a deeply personal and immersive experience, a perfect way to start my journey

Luxury Dining with a View at SLS Dubai

While I wasn't staying at SLS Dubai, I made it a point to visit its stunning Italian restaurant, Fi'ilia for lunch. Located on the 70th floor, the restaurant offers breathtaking views of Downtown Dubai, with the Burj Khalifa standing tall in the distance. As I dined on freshly made pasta, creamy burrata, and truffle-infused dishes, I marveled at the juxtaposition of Dubai's futuristic skyline against the vast desert beyond. The ambiance was sophisticated yet welcoming, and the combination of authentic Italian flavors with an unforgettable view made this meal truly special.

Dubai Mall & Burj Khalifa Reaching New Heights

My next stop was the Dubai Mall, an architectural wonder in its own right. Spanning over 1.1 million square meters, this shopping and entertainment mecca houses everything from luxury brands to an indoor ice rink. One of my favorite experiences inside the mall was walking through the Dubai Aquarium & Underwater Zoo, where I found myself face to face with sharks and manta rays as I strolled through a massive glass tunnel.

But the real highlight was ascending to At The Top, Burj Khalifa. The high-speed elevator ride alone was exhilarating, shooting me up to the 124th floor in seconds. The moment the doors opened, I was greeted with a view unlike any other. Dubai stretching endlessly in all directions, its skyscrapers standing like futuristic sculptures against the desert backdrop. Watching from this vantage point was mesmerizing.

To add to the artistic journey, I visited Arte Museum Dubai, where digital projections and interactive exhibits created a surreal, dreamlike environment. Walking through the immersive art installations, I felt as if I had stepped into a painting, one moment surrounded by swirling galaxies, the next by cascading waterfalls made of light.

A Taste of Old Dubai at Arabian Tea House

For a complete contrast, I ventured into Arabian Tea House, a charming cafe tucked away in the historic Al Fahidi neighborhood. Stepping inside felt like entering a different era, whitewashed walls, rustic wooden tables, and the soft chatter of locals enjoying traditional Emirati fare. I sipped on karak chai while savoring a spread of balaleet (sweet vermicelli with eggs), fresh khameer bread, and fragrant hummus. The simplicity and authenticity of the meal were a refreshing break from the city's high-energy vibe.

Culinary Adventures

To further dive into Dubai's diverse food culture, I joined a Frying Pan Adventures guided tour. We wandered through the Dubai Souks, where the scent of spices filled the air and stalls overflowed with colorful textiles, dried fruits, and gold jewellery. I tried Iranian kebabs, Syrian hummus, and Emirati regag (crispy crepes), a delicious culinary journey through the city's multicultural flavors. As part of the Creekside Food Walk, I hopped on a traditional abra to cross Dubai Creek, stopping at hidden gems serving mouth-watering dishes.

Museum of the Future: A Glimpse Ahead

Dubai is a city that constantly reinvents itself, and nothing embodies that spirit better than the Museum of the Future. The building itself is a masterpiece, resembling a gleaming silver torus adorned with Arabic calligraphy. Inside, I explored exhibits that imagined a world shaped by AI, robotics, and space exploration. The experience was thought-provoking, making me wonder how much of this envisioned future would become reality in the coming decades.

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The mighty Atlantis

Atlantis, The Palm in Dubai is more than just a luxury resort, it's a destination in itself, offering a world of entertainment, dining, and relaxation. Situated on the iconic Palm Jumeirah, this architectural marvel boasts opulent accommodations, including underwater trekking with breathtaking views of marine life. Guests can indulge in Michelin-starred dining at restaurants helmed by celebrity chefs like Gordon Ramsay and Nobu Matsuhisa or explore the massive Aquaventure Waterpark, home to record-breaking slides and a private beach. The Lost Chambers Aquarium offers an immersive journey through marine ecosystems, while Dolphin Bay provides up-close encounters with dolphins. Also on site, is a balloon ride that gives amazing vistas of the islands and the Dubai skyline. For those seeking relaxation, the AWAKEN Spa delivers world-class treatments, and high-end boutiques cater to luxury shoppers. With a vibrant nightlife scene, exclusive lounges, and endless activities, Atlantis, The Palm is a self-contained paradise that offers something for every traveler.

A Persian Feast at Ariana's Persian Kitchen

After the day's excitement, I sought out a relaxing dining experience at Ariana's Persian Kitchen, located at Atlantis, The Royal. The setting was elegant, with manicured gardens and an ambiance of refined luxury. The food was equally exquisite: succulent beef kebabs, saffron-infused rice, and pomegranate-laced stews. Each dish was a delicate balance of flavors, a testament to Persian culinary artistry.

X-Line Dubai: Adrenaline over the Marina

I've experienced my fair share of adventure sports, but nothing prepared me for X-Line Dubai, the world's longest urban zip line. Launched from a 45-story skyscraper, I raced across the Dubai Marina, my heart pounding as I soared over yachts and high-rises at nearly 80 km/h. The sheer thrill of it was electrifying, and the perspective it offered seeing Dubai from such a dynamic angle was unbeatable.

A day in the Desert

No first visit to Dubai is complete without a desert experience, and Platinum Heritage Safari delivered an unforgettable one.

Driving through the dunes in a vintage Land Rover, I viewed many native animals and as the sunset painted the sand in shades of gold and crimson we were treated to the popular sport of falconry. Arriving at a Bedouin-style camp, I enjoyed an evening filled with camel rides, and a lavish feast under the stars. Traditional Emirati music played in the background as I savored grilled meats, mezze platters, and freshly baked breads, a magical night in the heart of the desert.

Dubai Frame & La Perle Show

I would also visited the Dubai Frame, a striking structure that offers views of both old and new Dubai. It perfectly encapsulated the city's transformation from a humble fishing village to a global metropolis. That night, I attended the La Perle Show, a jaw-dropping spectacle of acrobatics, aerial stunts, and water performances.

A Culinary Masterpiece at Orfali Bros Bistro

Dining at Orfali Bros Bistro, a Michelin-starred gem, was a culinary highlight of my trip. Run by three Syrian brothers, the restaurant masterfully blends Middle Eastern and international flavours with modern techniques. From the Shish Barak a la Orfali, a creative take on traditional dumplings, to the bold and unexpected Umami Eclair, every dish was a work of art. Watching the chefs in action from the open kitchen added to the experience, making this meal not just delicious but truly memorable. It was the perfect finale to my Dubai journey.

Final Thoughts

As my incredible journey through Dubai came to an end, I boarded my Air Canada flight home, settling into their exceptional business class. From the moment I stepped onboard, the experience was seamless, spacious seating, impeccable service, and gourmet dining that rivaled some of the meals I'd had on the ground. Sipping on a fine glass of wine while reclining in my lie-flat seat, I reflected on the whirlwind of adventures, flavors, and cultural discoveries from the past few days. It was the perfect way to unwind and savor the memories of Dubai, already dreaming of my return to this ever-evolving city. ■

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A photograph of two Buddhist monks in traditional red robes and golden hats with red tassels. They are blowing into large, ornate golden horns. The background features a vast, mountainous landscape with snow-capped peaks and a valley with some buildings.

Piece of heaven

Peace of mind

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Monks blowing horns in a monastery in Ladakh. To know more, log on to www.incredibleindia.org