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LEISURE & LIFESTYLE TRAVEL MAGAZINE

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World Traveler
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Tel: 1-855-738-8232

www.worldtraveler.travel

info@worldtraveler.travel
info@canadianworldtraveller.com
info@americanworldtraveler.com

Publisher
Michael Morcos

Editor-in-chief
Greg James

Contributing Editor
David J. Cox

Graphic Department
Al Cheong

Advertising Department
Leo Santini

Marketing Department
Tania Tassone

Distribution
Royce Dillon

Senior Travel Writers:

Susan Campbell
Steve Gillick
Nicholas Kontis
Olivia Liveng
Jennifer Merrick
Randy Mink

Contributors:

Mike Cohen
Natalie Ayotte
Daniel Smajovits
Lisa Sonne
Jasmine Morcos
Cherie DeLory
Judi Cohen
Glenn J. Nashen
Jessica Percy Campbell
Mathieu Morcos
Gregory Caltabanis
Anne-Marie MacLoughlin
Alexandra Cohen
Parm Parmar

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In this this issue, we start our worldwide journey in Tokyo to find the best of its art scene. While in Japan, we head to the fascinating island of Shikoku to find its hidden treasures before experiencing the majesty of Mount Fuji. We then embark on a trek with Oku Japan on its Hokkaido's Sacred Peaks itinerary. To the west, stopping for a tasty bite in the Maldives then off to fabulous Dubai to discover some of the best in this exotic land.

In Europe, we start with many fun discoveries in Türkiye before heading to the less traveled island of Kasos, Greece. While in the Mediterranean, we visit the wonderful island nation of Malta and then nearby Sicily. On the continent, we take an invigorating river cruise with Viking to the eastern reaches of Europe. In Spain, we discover the beautiful Alhambra fortress before embarking on an amazing Canary Island cruise with MSC cruises. In Germany, we find great wine tours then close-by we explore the many beautiful and diverse regions of northern France, and in Flanders we discover the beautiful art of its master painters. We then head north and find the many wonderful offerings of Highland Explorer Tours before venturing to Armagh, Ireland for a "Food & Cider Weekend." On to discover Reykjavik, the 'Dynamic Capitol' of Iceland before embarking on another cruise, this time with Secret Atlas heading to Greenland.

Onwards to North America, with time on board, we research and find "Exodus Adventure Top

Adventure Travel Destinations for 2025" and "Natural Habitat Adventures Launches Five New Trips for 2025 to Kenya, Australia, Iceland and More."

In the Americas, we start with a family ski trip to wonderful Mont Tremblant and then embark on an amazing cruise with Adventure Canada to the far reaches of the Arctic. While on the topic of adventure cruising, we discover the many great sailings of UnCruise Adventures. To the far west, we take a fun drive on Route 66, find the new developments in the magnificent states of Nevada, Oregon, and Utah before heading to Santa Barbara to find it is a year-round destination.

Back east, we discover the newly built and wonderful Sun Princess is now in its winter home in Miami with Caribbean itineraries before heading to visit the best of Bonaire. In Mexico, we head to the worldly city of Guadalajara before going to Aguascalientes, Mexico and indulging in its many great and diverse offerings.

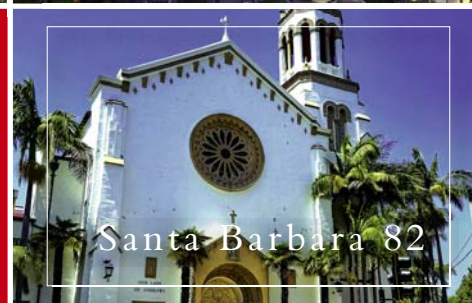
Finally, we head into the sun-drenched Pacific to experience the natural beauty of Maui and Oahu, and still opulent hotel offers before finding the best new developments found in wonderful Australia. ■

Happy Travels!



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The Art of Exploring Tokyo / Exploring the Art of the City

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

Ayumi Shibata takes the Japanese art of *morisuke* up a notch. *Morisuke* refers to the arrangement of food on plates with an eye to symmetry, harmony, seasonality, visual pleasure, and anticipation of the taste. We watched Ayumi-san ('san' denotes respect), the Chef/Owner of Shibata Wasuke in Tokyo's Kappabashi neighborhood, create a platter of assorted sashimi (various raw fish and seafood). After thoughtfully placing each portion on the platter (shrimp, tuna, snapper, sardine, kamasu, and hirame), along with aromatic, tasty perilla leaves and dollops of ground ginger and pungent wasabi, Ayumi selected tiny, colorful flowers from a container, positioned them on the

plate, contemplated the look, repositioned the flowers, reflected on the arrangement, and then presented it to us. Watching Ayumi was watching an artist create.

Morisuke is only one aspect of exploring the art of the city. Tokyo's architectural wonders captivate the imagination. A great example is the new Azabudai Hills complex, which opened in 2023. The development includes the Mori JP Tower, the tallest building in Japan, along with residences, hotels, parkland, and upscale shops. The Market is great for purchasing various prepared foods, tempting fish cakes, spring rolls, croquettes, salads, meats, seafood, and decadent eye-pleasing desserts such as the Mont

Blancs made with sweetened chestnut purée.

The Azabudai Hills Gallery had a notable ticket lineup for the special Pokemon Crafts exhibit, while nearby, the free gallery featured a mesmerizing exhibition by the late renowned Japanese pop artist Keiichi Tanaami.

But so many visitors were at Azabudai Hills to "wander, explore and discover in one continuous borderless world" at teamLab Borderless Digital Art Museum. In fact, over one million people have done so since the opening in February 2024. And it's immersive! Visitors interact with the art through



multi-colored mazes of flowers, butterflies, crystals, wobbling lights, rivers, waterfalls, and forests. Flowers bloom from body heat if you lean against the wall. Kaleidoscopes of butterflies appear but then disappear if you try to touch them. Rivers flow around your feet and follow you as you walk through the room. And if you touch the cartoon soldiers or imaginative creatures marching across the walls, they turn their heads to look at you! There is even an opportunity to create your own sea creature to float across the ocean for all to see.

Takashi Kudo, the teamLab Director of Communications, explained that the art collective had good Karma. "We try to make something about what we believe. We trust our feelings and emotions. Art has some kind of power. It should be experienced in person. We have created something that can't be experienced on the internet".

Indeed, one could argue that Tokyo is flush with immersive art experiences. Consider the 17 architecturally designed washrooms in the Tokyo Toilet Project throughout the city. We visited a few in Shibuya, including the Wonderwall by Masamichi Katayama and the 'friendly' house-shaped washroom by Nigo. Then we moved on to the red Triangular toilet block by Nao Tamura that brightens up the streetscape in Higashi-Sancho-me, and Tadao Ando's 'Amayadori', a washroom in Jingu-Dori Park designed as 'a comfortable and safe space in an urban landscape'.

While exploring Tokyo's various neighborhoods, visitors can feel the energetic vibe in the Shibuya Metro station that features Tadao Ando's M-shaped roof, or they can prepare for a relaxing outdoor shopping stroll in Togoshi Ginza, starting with the unique wooden roofs of the outdoor Metro station platform.

The artistic sense of awe follows at street level. In Sanganjaya, the Gorilla Building features a giant King Kong-like figure hanging over a Family Mart convenience store with a woman in his right paw that he seemingly rescued from the rooftop. In Roppongi Hills, the Giant Spider, a bronze sculpture by Louise Bourgeois entitled 'Maman',

makes for great selfies, and the same holds true for the 19.7 meters tall (64.6 feet) Unicorn Gundam robot standing guard outside the DiverCity Tokyo Plaza shopping mall in Odaiba.

In the spirit of the brand, 'Tokyo Tokyo Old meets New', visitors could be checking out the artistry of the futuristically designed Nissan Hyper Punk at the Nissan Crossing (which has been referred to as a car showroom on steroids) in Ginza Place and then a few blocks over, happen upon the former home of Futaba Sushi, located in a classic 1950's-style building, nuzzled amidst glitzy skyscrapers. Or take in serenity and nature at the Meiji Shrine in Harajuku, and then close by, marvel at Akihisa Hirata's stunning design of the new Tokyo Plaza Harajuku 'Harakado', which features a rooftop garden, shopping, food, a nature-relaxation area, and public bath.

The annual Tori-no-Ichi, the Festival of the Rooster, was a serendipitous experience on the theme of 'Old Meets New'. It takes place on the three Rooster (Tori) Days of November. We followed the crowds, past colorful tented food stalls, to the Otori Shrine in Asakusa, where the festival originated in the Edo era. Visitors passed by Shrine guardians who fanned away bad luck before descending on some of the hundreds of booths selling Kumade rakes, literally to rake in good fortune for the home and business. Kumade, in all shapes, sizes, and prices, contained symbols of good luck, including owls ('fukuro'), where 'fuku' means good luck or fortune), cranes ('tsuru', symbolizes longevity and happiness), shishi (guardian dogs) and dragons (represent good luck and good fortune), one or more of the Seven Gods of Fortune, gold coins, and more.

Several bookstores showcase books on art and also have noteworthy English book sections. These include Maruzen in Nihombashi, Kinokunya in Shinjuku, and Tsutaya in Ginza and Daikanyama. But the new kid on the block is the multi-floor Tsutaya Bookstore in Shibuya (near the Crossing). This has been called 'one of the best-curated Manga selections in Tokyo'. The feature attraction, based on the release



of the movie "Venom: The Last Dance", was a life-sized Venom character (a snarling symbiote that merges with humans), along with display cases of more diminutive, pricey Venom collectibles. On another floor, the popular Japanese TV Manga soccer competition entertained visitors with model figurines, t-shirts, and more.

And the art of 'shinrin-yoku', where people connect with nature and breathe in the ambiance of the forest, abounds in Tokyo's parks and rooftop gardens. Ponds of Coy (giant colorful goldfish) and enormous snapping turtles are often complemented by tranquil scenes of Great Blue Herons or bright blue Kawasemis (Common Kingfishers) checking the waters for food. And with Tokyo being one of the great food capitals, they seem to have the right idea!

Guided by the art of gastronomy and an addiction to seafood, we tasted some of Tokyo's finest. Ankimo, Oysters and Sashimi at Shibata Wasuke in Kappabashi, Chirashi at Sanzen Sushi in Togoshi Ginza, Savoury-sweet Black Tendon at Tempura Nakayama in Ningyocho, Firefly Squid and the Cod Roe Omelet at Wasuke in Machiya, and Bonito sashimi at Zawasan, an excellent stand-up sake bar in Kita-Senju.

The art of exploring the art of Tokyo is pleasing to all the senses. It's a customized pursuit that can be energetic or laid-back, inevitably leading visitors to appreciate why Tokyo is one of the highest-ranking travel destinations in the world. ■

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Blissful Maui and O'ahu: My Hawaiian Adventure

Article and photography by Michael Morcos

Returning to Maui felt like reconnecting with an old friend. Even though I had visited years ago, the island's warm aloha spirit welcomed me back as if no time had passed. This trip, however, came with an added treat—a visit to O'ahu, completing my Hawaiian experience in a way I had always dreamed of.

The Westin Maui Resort & Ka'anapali Tower

When I arrived at the Westin Maui Resort, a wave of nostalgia hit me. A decade ago, I had stayed at this very property. Yet, as familiar as it felt, it was clear the resort had undergone significant transformations. Its Hokupa'a Tower, a newly renovated luxury wing, stood as a testament to its growth. From the moment I stepped into the exclusive Lanai, where cultural experiences and wellness activities awaited, I

knew this was going to be an elevated stay.

Every morning, I sipped my coffee on my lanai, taking in the views of the Pacific Ocean against the lush volcanic mountains. The air felt fresher here, the colors more vibrant. The property's five dining options made it nearly impossible to leave, but Ulu Kitchen by Merriman quickly became my favorite. Over dinner, I savored the perfect blend of Hawaiian hospitality and flavors crafted with care, all while marveling at the stunning ocean views.

Artistic Discoveries and Dolphin Adventures

One of the highlights of my Maui journey was a guided tour of Small Town, Big Art in Wailuku. This initiative turned the town into an outdoor gallery, showcasing murals and sculptures that celebrated the island's history and

culture. Walking through the streets, I felt a deeper connection to Maui's roots, as each piece of art told a story of its past and present.

Another unforgettable experience was the dolphin watch sail with Teralani Adventures. Boarding a sleek catamaran, I set off into the turquoise waters off Ka'anapali. Watching wild dolphins and turtles alongside our boat was magical—a reminder of the incredible natural beauty that surrounds these islands. Their playful energy was contagious, leaving me in awe of nature's wonders.

Giving Back with Kipuka Olowalu

Volunteering with Kipuka Olowalu gave me a sense of purpose during my trip. Nestled within a 75-acre reserve, I joined efforts to restore native plants and preserve Hawaiian traditions. It felt deeply rewarding to contribute to protecting this land that had given me so much joy.

The Hyatt Regency Maui

Later, I moved to the Hyatt Regency Maui Resort



and Spa. Spread across 40 acres, it was a paradise of waterfalls, tropical gardens, and luxurious amenities. My evening was spent at Japengo, indulging in exquisite Japanese-inspired dishes that I simply couldn't get enough of.

Exploring Iao Valley State Park

As I set foot on the paved trail at Iao Valley State Park, I felt instantly immersed in its serene beauty. The gentle walk led me to a breathtaking viewpoint of Kuka'emoku, known as the Iao Needle. Rising dramatically 1,200 feet from the valley floor, this natural wonder stood tall against the lush green backdrop, a striking reminder of the island's volcanic origins. Along the way, I wandered through a small botanical garden, marveling at the plants once brought here by early Hawaiian settlers. Each step felt like a connection to the land's history, its beauty as captivating as its cultural significance.

Haleakala Sunset

But the most breathtaking moment came at Haleakala National Park. Standing at 10,023 feet above sea level, I watched the sun dip below the horizon. The sky transformed into an artist's palette of fiery oranges and soft purples, while the crater seemed otherworldly. Legend says the demigod Maui slowed the sun here, and for a brief moment, time truly felt like it stood still.

O'ahu: A Blend of Culture and Relaxation

O'ahu was a new chapter in my Hawaiian adventure, starting with a visit to the Bishop Museum. I explored the rich cultural and natural history housed within its walls. Learning about the islands' origins through its artifacts gave me a profound appreciation for this land.

At Iolani Palace, I stepped into the royal world of Hawaii's last monarchs. The specialty tour offered unique insights into the lives of the palace staff, adding a personal touch to the grandeur of this historic landmark. Walking its halls felt like stepping back in time.

Beachside Bliss at Kaimana Beach Hotel

My stay at Kaimana Beach Hotel was the epitome of relaxation. Situated on the shores of Waikiki with Diamond Head as its backdrop, the hotel's charm was undeniable. Dinner at Hau Tree, with its casual beachside menu, was the perfect way to wind down. The gentle sound of the waves and the warm breeze made every bite unforgettable.

Art, Chocolate, and Cultural Performances

The Honolulu Museum of Art (HoMA) was another highlight. Wandering through its galleries, I admired a collection that beautifully bridged Hawaii's history with global influences. Lunch at the museum's café was a delightful surprise—a perfect mix of flavors and creativity.

Later, I found myself at Lonohana Estate Chocolate, learning about the art of crafting chocolate from cacao grown right on the islands. Tasting their small-batch creations was a sensory journey, each piece a tribute to Hawaii's land and people.

At the Polynesian Cultural Center, I was captivated by "HA": Breath of Life," a spectacular evening show featuring dance, music, and fire-knife performances. The story of Mana and Lani, told through Polynesian traditions, was deeply moving. Earlier that day, I had also attended Huki, a canoe show brimming with spirit and storytelling. These performances weren't just entertainment; they were celebrations of heritage and community.

Exploring Haleiwa and Planting a Legacy

Haleiwa, a charming surf town on O'ahu's North Shore, offered a blend of local style and history. Its boutiques, art galleries, and laid-back vibe made it a perfect spot to wander and soak in the island's character.

At Gunstock Ranch, I had the chance to leave a lasting mark on the island. Participating in their Planter's Experience, I planted a tree in their Legacy Forest. It was humbling to know this small act would contribute to reforestation efforts, leaving a positive impact on the land I had grown to love.

A Journey to Remember

As my trip came to an end, I reflected on the beauty and diversity of these islands. From the rejuvenating landscapes of Maui to the rich cultural tapestry of O'ahu, every moment felt like a gift. The sunsets, the food, the art, and the people made this journey unforgettable. Hawaii isn't just a destination—it's an experience that stays with you long after you leave. ■

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Want to Experience the Real Mexico? Go to Guadalajara!

Article and photography by Jennifer Merrick

“Guadalajara, Guadalajara, you’re the actual heart of Mexico,” say the lyrics of the popular mariachi song, written by Pepe Guizar and covered by multiple performers, including Elvis. Having recently visited this capital of the state of Jalisco, located in the Atemajac Valley in west-central Mexico, I wholeheartedly agree with the composer.

Though it’s one of the largest cities of the country with a population of approximately 1.5 million, it feels smaller with friendly Tapatios (the affectionate nickname for people from Guadalajara) and a strong sense of tradition. In fact, it’s the birthplace of three of the most important cultural icons of Mexico: mariachi music, tequila and the sombrero. This authenticity combined with its cultural richness and delectable cuisine

certainly made this traveler’s heart sing and filled me with a desire to return to the ‘enchanted romance’, ‘markets and pottery,’ and ‘unforgettable city’ that Pepe and Elvis sang about.

Here were some of the most memorable experiences that had me humming –
 ♪ Guadalajara, Guadalajara ♪:

Marveling at the murals of Jose Clemente Orozco at the Cabanas Museum

Considered to be the Michelangelo of the Americas, the one-handed painter Orozco is known for his emotionally expressive and dramatic frescoes that convey political commentary on post-revolutionary Mexico. Though I couldn’t quite grasp his interpretation, looking up at ‘Man on Fire’ was as moving as the Sistine Chapel.

These murals are the star attraction of the Hospicio Cabanas, an indoor-outdoor complex originally built in 1810 to house orphans. The site is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site both because of the murals and the architectural significance of the place itself.

Painting pottery in the pretty town of Tlaquepaque

In the outskirts of Guadalajara sits one of Mexico’s Pueblos Magicos, magical towns deemed to be uniquely beautiful or significant. Tlaquepaque earned this designation in a large part because of its rich craftsmanship, particularly in pottery but also wood carving, hand-blown glass and textiles. We began our enchanting visit here at Taller Paco Padilla, a family run ceramic workshop and showroom that honors and continues the pottery tradition that existed here since ancient times.

“The clay’s minerals in this location make it special,” said Santiago Padilla, whose





styles unique to the area before letting us loose on our own calaveras (day of the dead skulls). Painting them was a thoroughly relaxing and fun way to connect to Tlaquepaque.

After our artistic endeavors, we explored its colorful streets teeming with galleries, shops and art displays. We finished our magical day with a meal at Luna Restaurant, whose live music and flamboyant décor took full advantage of Tlaquepaque artistic spoils.

Biting into birote and birra

Guadalajara is a collection of neighborhoods that eventually grew into one city, but each still retains its own character and its own flavors. Added to that, is the fusion of indigenous, Spanish and modern cuisine and the creativity of the city's chefs. Suffice to say, the food scene here is phenomenal. Some mouthwatering specialties include birote, Guadalajara's crunchy sourdough bread that is known throughout Mexico. It's also the base for the famous torta ahogada (drowned sandwich) which is filled with pork, and beans pickled onions all smothered in salsa. Another signature dish here is birra, a rich meat stew in a red chili broth.

Every meal we had in the city delighted our taste buds, whether it was cappuccino and chilaquiles, a traditional breakfast dish, at PalReal Café from or a gourmet spread of seafood and fusion specialties at Allium Restaurant. Piso Siete in the city's historical center not only had delicious and well-presented food but also a panoramic view of the central plaza and Guadalajara's 400-year-old cathedral glowing in the sunset.

Touring and tasting in a town called Tequila

Another Pueblo Magico is Tequila, a town located approximately 40 miles from Guadalajara. As our bus rolled out of the city, the landscape transitioned to verdant hills dotted with plants until we came to a sign that read: Bienvenido a Tequila. Until my visit, I had no idea that such a town existed. It turned out that there was a lot I didn't know about Mexico's national drink.

Just like champagne, tequila has strict rules about production and origin. And most of it is made right here in Jalisco. Its history goes back thousands of years, when according to

legend, Mexico's favorite elixir was created after a bolt of lightning struck the agave field causing a fire that cooked the plants. A few days later, locals tasted the fermented juice and declared it a 'gift from the gods'.

After spending some time exploring the sites and markets of the town of Tequila (which like Tlaquepaque is not only a Pueblo Magico but also UNESCO World Heritage Site), we boarded a barrel-shaped bus and toured Casa Sauza, one of 20 tequila operations in and around the town. It was a fun and informative tour, where we wore many hats. We donned a straw cowboy hat when we stopped at the botanical gardens to learn how the agave is planted and harvested, a hard hat when we toured the distillery and a hairnet to witness the final step of bottling the finished product. My newfound respect for tequila was cemented at the Casa Sauza tasting room back in town. Surrounded by barrels, we were led through the tasting process that involved all the senses.

Moving to the beat of mariachi music

This traditional folk music that combines brass and stringed instruments is famous throughout Mexico, but it was born in the state of Jalisco. And nowhere is it revered more. This is especially apparent in August, when Guadalajara hosts the International Mariachi Festival. Luckily for us, this much-anticipated event coincided with our visit, and the city's cobble-stoned streets were alive with outdoor performances. At the historic Degollado Theater, we watched in rapture as more than a dozen of the region's top mariacheros accompanied by the Guadalajara Philharmonic Orchestra captured the audience. The emotion of the music was palpable and conveyed the deeply cultural expression and heart of Mexico.

When you go: Direct flights to Guadalajara are now available with Flair Airlines from Toronto and Vancouver. We stayed at the luxurious and comfortable Indigo Hotel, one of the city's newest hotels. ■

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grandfather founded the studio. He went on to tell us that pieces from this region are displayed in many of the world's most prestigious museums, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England.

The three-generation studio and workshop is the real deal with shelves stocked with ceramic pieces in various stages of completion, piles of broken pieces and a large kiln. A potter sits at his wheel, expertly spinning plates.

"He's worked here all his life," said Santiago. "Like his father before him."

On display are some of the finished plates, beautifully painted by his grandfather, who shares his love of Mexico and the land with stylistic depictions of charros (cowboys). Touring the workshops got my own creative juices flowing, so it was a treat to be able to paint our own ceramic creations. Santiago demonstrated some of the classic decorative





Kitsch and Kicks on Arizona Route 66

Article and photography by Randy Mink

Before being bypassed by an interstate highway decades ago, Route 66 was the chief thoroughfare in Northern Arizona for more than 50 years. Dubbed “Main Street of America,” the storied asphalt artery traversed thriving towns lined with roadside curiosities, friendly filling stations, and mom-and-pop motels and diners.

Many communities along the 2,448-mile diagonal corridor from Chicago to California have been reduced to backwaters, but that just adds to their charm. Happily for nostalgia-minded tourists, some

towns cling to their Route 66 heritage, and this passion for the past will be on full display in 2026, when the road celebrates its 100th anniversary.

Today the two-lane ribbon of roadway—a true slice of Americana—has become a destination in itself, a romanticized symbol of simpler times that captivates travelers from around the world. Many original stretches, signposted as Old or Historic Route 66, still exist across the land, offering a look at the 1930s, '40s, '50s and '60s through the rear view mirror.

A big Route 66 fan and collector of vintage signs and Coca-Cola memorabilia, I recently spent four magical days soaking up retro vibes on a bucket-list driving trip with my son. Traveling from Las Vegas, we covered the western and central portions of Arizona Route 66, starting in Kingman.

Each town we visited seemed to be more special than the one before. With my iPhone camera I went wild clicking away at neon signs, gas pumps and rusted cars of yesteryear prominently displayed at stores and museums, motels and restaurants. I couldn't get enough of these relics from the heyday of automobile travel.

Arizona takes pride in being the first state to form an association dedicated to preserving Route 66's heritage, and the Seligman-



Kingman stretch was the first in the country to be designated as Historic Route 66.

Kingman, Oatman and Hackberry

The town of Kingman, conveniently situated on Interstate 40, made a good starting point for us, as it is home to the Arizona Route 66 Museum. Housed in the city's former power plant along with the Kingman Visitor Center, the museum chronicles the area's pioneer past and the road's history as a pathway for both tourists and folks seeking a better life out West. I liked the poignant exhibits depicting refugees from the Dust Bowl that ravaged mid-America during the Great Depression, their west-bound trucks piled with furniture. In his 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, author John Steinbeck called Route 66 the "road of flight" for destitute families fleeing from drought and economic hardship. He coined the term "Mother Road," a moniker used today.

The museum's diner, gas station and barber shop mock-ups invite selfies, as does a lovingly restored 1950 Studebaker Champion. But the best photo op may be in the parking lot, where you can park your car inside the arch forming the giant Route 66 Drive-Through Shield.

Mother Road fans in Kingman also seek out Mr. D's Route 66 Diner. Whimsically painted teal and pink, it serves up house-made root beer and comforting classics like chicken-fried steak, burgers, shakes and sundaes, all to the tunes of golden oldies.

After Kingman, our first big adventure was the 50-minute drive to the old gold mining town of Oatman, 30 miles to the southwest. On the way, we stopped at Cool Springs Gift Shop & Museum, built in the early 2000s on the remains of a 1920s gas station/tourist camp. Then we drove nine more miles to Oatman, and what a nine miles it was! It's hard to believe this twisty road through the Black Mountains—full of switch-backs and sheer drop-offs—was part of a major thoroughfare, Route 66.

Like every tourist in the tiny town of weathered wooden buildings and plank side-

walks, we made friends with Oatman's free-roaming resident burros, descendants of pack animals that hauled ore from the mines. Visitors have a field day posing with the docile burros that seek handouts of hay cubes sold in the stores.

The Oatman Hotel is where movie stars Clark Gable and Carole Lombard spent their honeymoon in 1939. Now a free museum that allows a view of their room, the two-story adobe building has a bar/restaurant papered with \$1 bills.

The best concentration of photo opportunities on Arizona Route 66 awaits at Hackberry General Store, a half hour from Kingman. The grounds are strewn with old cars, antique gas pumps and rare signs. Inside the ramshackle building, a major service stop from 1934 until the 1970s, you'll find license plates plastered on the ceiling and a soda fountain set-up with Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. Offering every imaginable type of Route 66 curio, the store has been called the "mother lode of Mother Road memorabilia."

Cruising on to Seligman and Williams

If I had to choose one town to savor and explore, it would be Seligman, population 700. Called the "Birthplace of Historic Route 66," it is practically a pilgrimage site for Mother Road aficionados, as a group of citizens from Seligman and other communities, led by barber shop owner Angel Delgadillo, in 1987 started the movement to revive Route 66 and breathe life back into dying towns. The group's efforts to rally business owners ultimately resulted in Route 66 being designated a historic highway, inspiring similar efforts in other states.

The barber shop, opened along with a pool hall in 1950, is now a shrine where you can sit in the swivel chair and stand with a color photo cut-out of Angel. Adjacent, Angel and Vilma's Original Route 66 Gift Shop, managed by their daughters, operates out of the former pool hall.

Now 97 and retired, Angel has received worldwide fame for saving a piece of American history. Pixar director John

Lasseeter's interview with Angel helped shape the storyline of the 2006 computer-animated movie *Cars*.

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Another Seligman must-see is Delgadillo's Snow Cap, a drive-up eatery established in 1953 by Angel's late brother, Juan, and now run by his children. On the patio, I enjoyed the best-ever peanut butter banana malt. The menu lists everything from burritos to snow cones. Cluttering the restaurant's backyard are aging vehicles painted with googly-eyed windshields, a nod to Pixar's *Cars*. We stayed across the street at the Aztec Motel, which opened in 2023 in a building that has housed many businesses over the years.

One night we dined at Roadkill 66 Cafe, whose motto is "you kill it, we grill it." None of the dishes served have really been scraped off the road, but the creative titles on the menu are a hoot. Randomly named, items include Curbside Kitty, Buzzard Bait, Vulture Vittles, Roadside Revenge, Treads & Bread, Armadillo on the Half Shell and Too-Slow Doe. I had the BBQ beef sandwich and a big slice of lemon meringue pie.

Like Seligman, the town of Williams (pop. 3,000) worked its magic on us, delivering a solid dose of nostalgia in the six-block stretch of historic downtown. Neon lights, souvenir shops, retro diners, classic cars and old-school motels make it a Disneyland for Route 66 fans.

We stayed at The Lodge on Route 66, a motor court where each room is named after a town on Route 66. Blocks away were places like Pete's Gas Station, a Route 66 museum/gift shop, and Cruiser's Cafe 66, a 1930s filling station turned diner whose patio tables are set among restored gas pumps and Coca-Cola artifacts.

Our four-day Route 66 odyssey was packed with adventures from morning to night, but we only scratched the surface and yearn to return. Next time we'll concentrate on the section from Flagstaff to the New Mexico border—for another epic road trip. ■

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Around the World (in 34 pages)



The Flemish Masters

Flanders is fertile ground for art and heritage. This began long ago, when the Flemish Masters first influenced the art of painting. For a period spanning over 250 years, from the 15th century to far into the 17th, Flanders set the artistic tone in Western Europe. They inspired all the most important movements of the time, such as Early Netherlandish painting, Renaissance and Baroque.

Flanders' impact is exemplified by luminaries such as Jan van Eyck, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Peter Paul Rubens and their contemporaries. Their skill, creativity and innovations made Flanders one of the world's most important regions for the arts. Many following generations of artists built on these foundations, Modern Master James Ensor for example.

This impressive artistic heritage is omnipresent in Flanders. As well as museums containing a wealth of masterpieces, there is art to be found in numerous churches and castles, town halls and abbeys, chapels, artists' homes and many other places. Flanders is one enormous museum, as it were, courtesy of the Flemish Masters.

Who are the Flemish Masters

Rubens, citizen of Antwerp to the bone You can't say Rubens without saying Antwerp. This pioneer of Baroque is inextricably linked with the city. In his home city, an impressive collection of his works are available to admire at the Rubenshuis, Cathedral of Our Lady, Saint James' Church and Royal Museum of Fine Arts (KMSKA).

Bruegel, a citizen of Brussels in Antwerp While Pieter Bruegel did live in Antwerp for a time, Brussels was his home. This is where he painted his most important works, had his children and breathed his last. The two cities are ideal places to explore his genius.

Van Eyck: associated with Ghent, at home in Bruges Van Eyck will forever be associated with Ghent thanks to his Ghent Altarpiece. This masterpiece is still on display in St. Bavo's Cathedral to this day. Van Eyck also had a bond with Bruges, where he lived for the majority of his life. The city's Groeningemuseum does homage to him, and Antwerp houses several of his paintings as well.

Ensor, all around Flanders by way of Ostend James Ensor's home was and always will be in Ostend. This Queen of seaside resorts contains the Ensor House and Mu.ZEE, which grant a glimpse into the artist's life and work, while the world's largest Ensor collection is housed at the KMSKA in Antwerp.

Dieric Bouts. World-class painter, at home in Leuven Dieric Bouts, world-class painter and artistic icon of Leuven. You will find the oeuvre of this Flemish Primitive in the most important museums in the world, but only in Leuven is he eternally at home. You can follow in his footsteps in St Peter's Church and M Leuven.

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Malta Recognized

VISITMALTA Wins Gold Travel Weekly Magellan Award for its Explore More Ad Campaign

VisitMalta won a Gold 2024 Travel Weekly Magellan Award for its current Advertising Campaign, *Explore More*. Malta was also showcased in another Gold Magellan award won by Travelzoo, the club for travel enthusiasts, for its campaign *The Many Facets of Malta*. The prestigious Magellan Awards recognize excellence in design, marketing and services across the travel industry.

The *Explore More* campaign as well as the Travelzoo's *The Many Facets of Malta*, have strengthened VisitMalta's appeal to the many niche markets, showcasing the diversity of the destination. A few examples of the *Explore More* campaign: *Gastronomy - Explore More Flavors & Explore More Taste*; *Curated Experiences - Explore More Horizons*; *History and Culture - Explore More Culture*; *LGBTQIA+ - Explore More Freedom*.

Travelzoo's *The Many Facets of Malta* provides a stunning tour of the diversity of Malta, focusing on film tourism and locations of many of the blockbusters filmed in Malta, such as *Game of Thrones*, *Gladiator II*, and *Napoleon*. It also features each of the three sister islands, Malta, Gozo and Comino, ideas for a mini vacation, history and Best Time to Go.

Malta Tourism Authority Wins Bronze Travvy Award Named Best Destination - Mediterranean

The Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) was once again named Best Destination – Mediterranean (Bronze Travvy) at the 2024 Travvy Awards, produced by Northstar Travel Group's TravelPulse.com and AGENTatHOME. The 2024 Travvy Awards, now celebrating its 10th year, have quickly earned a reputation as the Academy Awards of the USA travel industry. The Travvy's recognize the top suppliers, hotels, cruise lines, airlines, tour operators, destinations, technology providers and attractions, as selected by those who know them best – travel advisors.

Malta Tourism Authority, has won one Gold, six Silver and three Bronze over the past ten years (including this year's award) since MTA re-established its presence in North America. ■

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Baden Wine Route – a route of indulgence along Germany's longest wine trail

The route takes visitors on an adventure covering around 500 kilometres of the sun-soaked Baden wine region, where there is plenty of opportunity to explore charming wine-growing villages on the western edge of the Black Forest and in the foothills of the Upper Rhine Valley.

Anyone who has ever wanted to hike from wine cellar to wine cellar or dreamt of cycling through a sea of flowers and stopping off for no end of food and drink breaks along the way should head for the Baden Wine Route. It passes through the wine-growing areas of the Baden Mountain Route, Kraichgau, Ortenau, Kaiserstuhl, Tuniberg, Breisgau and Markgräflerland in the Baden wine-growing region, which is the third-largest in the whole of Germany, with vineyards covering 15,906 hectares. Sun-soaked landscapes featuring meadows, orchards and vineyards can always be relied upon to wow visitors on the route.

There is plenty to see and do, with picturesque wine-growing villages, pretty little towns, grand castles, monasteries and several nature reserves along the way, boasting no end of cultural sights and must-see scenery. Nature and culinary delights await anyone who sets off on the Baden Wine Cycle Path for a bike ride or hike. And the healing power of the thermal springs, dating back to Roman times, is just the answer in case of aching muscles after the exertions. ■

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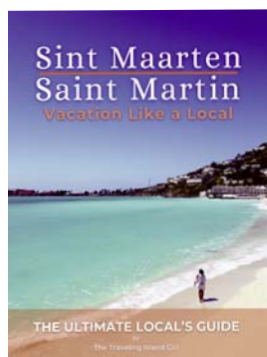
Our travel specialists review the best travel gear and gadgets to get you on the go better



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Exodus Adventure Travels Announces Top Adventure Travel Destinations for 2025



Exodus Adventure Travels, the leader in active small group guided tours, announces its top trending destinations for 2025, for travelers wanting to experience the joy of hiking, biking, cultural and wildlife trips around the world.

Based on MMGY's 2024 Portrait of American Travelers data, travelers are increasingly seeking immersive cultural experiences, active adventures, and under-the-radar gems. Based on traveler feedback and data-driven research, Exodus highlights some of the many breathtaking destinations that are on the rise for adventurers in the coming year.

Europe's diverse offerings, from iconic cultural landmarks to breathtaking natural landscapes, make it an enduring favorite for adventurers. Whether it's exploring the ancient cities of Italy, cycling along Portugal's Atlantic coast, or hiking through the French Alps, Europe provides endless opportunities for immersive travel experiences with Exodus.

Italy continues to be a top trending destination for small group tours. Known for its vibrant culture and varied regions, Italy attracts adventurers who wish to explore everything from its famous coastlines to majestic mountain ranges. Exodus not only visits Italy's iconic sights but also guides travelers to lesser-known, off-the-beaten-path destinations, offering a deeper connection with local culture such as these: Highlights of the Amalfi Coast and Walking the Amalfi Coast, Classic Dolomites and Treasures of Sicily

Portugal's diverse landscapes, rich history, and gastronomic excellence have made it a rising star for adventure travelers. From the cultural hotspots of Lisbon and Porto to the sun-drenched beaches of the Atlantic coast, Exodus takes travelers to must-see sites across Portugal: Porto to Lisbon Atlantic Ride and Walking the Island of Madeira

France – Home to the 2024 Olympics, some may consider France to have already had its moment in the spotlight. However, as travelers seek escapes beyond Paris, France's Western Alps and Loire Valley are gaining popularity for 2025. Try, Mont Blanc Highlights and the Loire Valley

The Baltics – In theme with the emerging 'coolcation' trend, The Baltics, with their stunning landscapes, ancient villages and charming capital cities, are

proving to be a popular choice for adventure travelers looking to explore lesser-known regions of Northern Europe with cooler climates. While still relatively undiscovered by mainstream tourism, the region won't stay that way for long, look for Walks of the Baltics and Finland, and Winter in the Baltics, Helsinki & Stockholm

The Americas -From the lush rainforests of Costa Rica to the cultural depth of Cuba, the Americas offer a wide range of adventures for travelers. These regions provide the perfect blend of natural beauty and cultural richness, and Exodus Adventure Travels offers a gateway to the continent's most captivating destinations. Like, Costa Rica Active Escape, Cuba trips, A Taste of Cuba.

Asia's vast landscapes and rich cultural histories make it a captivating region for those looking to experience both natural beauty and deep cultural immersion. >From the bustling streets of Vietnam to the tranquil mountains of Thailand, Exodus Adventure Travels offers journeys that bring travelers closer to the heart of Asia's unique allure.

Vietnam continues to top the list of Exodus' most booked destinations, attracting adventurous travelers looking for a blend of vibrant cities, serene landscapes and cultural immersion. Known for its unique blend of history, natural beauty and warm hospitality, Vietnam offers an unforgettable journey for travelers. Try Cycling Vietnam, Hidden Vietnam: Sapa & Beyond.

Thailand is expected to be a top destination for 2025, spurred by its natural beauty, rich cultural heritage and the growing buzz from pop culture influences like White Lotus season 3, which filmed in the region and is expected to premiere in 2025: Treasures of Northern Thailand and Southeast Asia Express.

The Silk Road – For adventure travelers looking to explore a destination steeped in rich history, Exodus' Silk Road tour allows adventurers to walk in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Marco Polo, through countries whose location on the Silk Road has resulted in a culture with flavors from Europe, the Middle East, Russia and Asia. Try Exodus' Silk Road'

Africa's expansive landscapes, ancient cities, and abundant wildlife make it a must-visit destination for adventurous travelers. Whether trekking the rugged mountains of Morocco or spotting wildlife in Namibia, Exodus Adventure Travels presents a myriad of ways to explore this vast and diverse continent.

Morocco – Following the recent earthquake, Morocco remains a resilient and captivating destination. A popular destination for European travelers, Morocco is booming for North Americans looking to experience its untouched landscapes, magnificent ancient cities and centuries-old customs that still hold sway here. See Highlights of Morocco and Undiscovered Atlas.

Safari Travelers' interest in wildlife trips continues to be high and Exodus offers an array of unforgettable safari experiences across Africa. Namibia, Botswana and South Africa are a few of the top wildlife destinations capturing the attention of wildlife enthusiasts as in these Namibia & Botswana: Dunes and Delta tour and . South Africa: Walking & Wildlife. ■

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ADVENTURE TRAVELS

Discover Hokkaido's Sacred Peaks on Oku Japan's Newest Self-Guided Tour

The Daisetsuzan mountain range is the setting for this brand-new adventure



Oku Japan, a leading Kyoto-based tour operator specializing in sustainable and culturally immersive walking and trekking experiences, has just unveiled the newest offering to its self-guided roster: a six-day exploration within Hokkaido's Daisetsuzan National Park.

Japan's second largest and northernmost prefecture, the island of Hokkaido – formerly known as Ezo – is also the country's largest wild frontier. Home to sprawling national parks, Hokkaido's abundant nature and unique wildlife make it a particularly special region of unparalleled beauty. On this new self-guided trip, Oku Japan invites travelers to discover the island and the beauty of the Daisetsuzan mountain range at their own pace, using detailed maps and walking instructions to travel from place to place each day.

Hokkaidō Daisetsuzan self-guided walking tour
Starting off in the culturally rich city of Asahikawa, where travelers are encouraged

to arrive early to have time to sample the ramen that the city is famous for, they will have the opportunity to explore a charming pottery village and visit a museum that features sake tasting along with a chance to learn about Japan's indigenous Ainu people. This is followed by a stop in Asahidake Onsen, a charming town located in Daisetsuzan National Park.

From here, the itinerary follows the gentle Sugatami Pond loop course which, at an elevation of 1,969 feet (1,600 metres), offers stunning panoramic views of Hokkaidō's vast landscapes, including Mount Asahidake, the island's highest peak. For those looking to extend their exploration that day, they can choose to hike the Susoai Plateau, which is known for its Aleutian avens, a species of alpine plant native to the island that blooms in the summer months.

After a night in a relaxing onsen hotel, the itinerary returns to Asahikawa city to visit a local museum for a chance to gain further insight into the Ainu culture. While here,

travelers will visit a chise, a traditional dwelling, and enjoy a private performance of a traditional legend told through song. It is then on to Sounkyo Onsen, a charming hot spring town, for the night.

On day four, the itinerary travels to Kogen Onsen, which sits at an elevation of 4,133 feet (1,260 metres) and is one of the most biodiverse areas of the park. The Numa-Meguri trail features magnificent marshlands, lush forests, and breathtaking waterfalls. As this area is also home to brown bears, the day will start with a session about bear safety and ecology before embarking on the hike.

Next is a trip to the peak of Mount Kurodake (6,509 feet/1,984 metres). Using a cable car and chairlifts to get to the starting point of the hike at an elevation of 4,987 feet (1,520 metres), the peak will reward hikers with stunning panoramic views of the Sōunkyō area and the majestic scenery of the Daisetsuzan mountain range, with its contrasting greenery and snow. The day, and tour, wrap up back in Asahikawa for the final night.

This new self-guided tour on Hokkaido expands Oku Japan's offering on the island to three tours – two self-guided, with this new Daisetsuzan itinerary complementing the seven-day Hokkaidō Winter – Lake Akan to Shiretoko tour, and one guided: the nine-day Wild Lands of Eastern Hokkaidō small group tour.

The Daisetsuzan itinerary offers an ideal option for exploring Japan in the summer; while other parts of the country are very humid at this time of year, this region offers a much more temperate climate. Departures are recommended from July through September and pricing includes all rail tickets, accommodations, daily luggage transfers, entrance fees for sites and activities detailed on the itinerary, and most meals. ■

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Highland Explorer Tours Launches Three Brand New Day Tours From Glasgow

Discover Scotland's wonders from the mysteries of Loch Ness to the magic of Hogwarts Express and Outlander Castles



Highland Explorer Tours, Radical Travel Group Ltd.'s award-winning Scottish touring brand, is launching three brand new captivating day tours departing in 2025 from Glasgow, Scotland's largest city. Guests will be whisked away to the breathtaking Scottish Highlands. They can look for the legendary Nessie at Loch Ness, enjoy an unforgettable train ride along the Glenfinnan Viaduct aboard the Jacobite Steam Train (Hogwarts Express), or walk in Jamie and Claire Fraser's footsteps on an Outlander-themed adventure. These tours invite travellers to explore Scotland's stunning landscapes and rich heritage, expertly led by passionate Local Guides.



The following are the three newly launched day tours departing from Glasgow beginning in April 2025:

A Loch Ness Adventure with Legends and Highlands

The new Scottish Highlands & Loch Ness day tour offers an unforgettable full-day adventure, starting with a scenic drive through the enchanting Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, where visitors can admire the beauty that inspired the legends of Rob Roy. The journey continues into the majestic Highlands, where they will venture into the dramatic Glen Coe, renowned for its towering mountains and poignant history and the stunning views of the Commando Memorial and Britain's tallest mountain, Ben Nevis. In the quaint village of Fort Augustus, clients will explore the shores of Loch Ness and embark on an optional boat cruise to hunt for the elusive Nessie. The day concludes with a beautiful drive through the rugged beauty of Cairngorms National Park before returning to Glasgow.

The Highland Express with Glen Coe and Beyond

Starting in Glasgow, guests on the West Highlands, Glen Coe, and The Jacobite

Steam Train day tour embark on a once-in-a-lifetime journey, starting with a panoramic drive through Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. After soaking in the wild beauty of Glen Coe, guests and Potterheads will board the famous Jacobite Steam Train, aka Hogwarts Express from the Harry Potter films, for a breathtaking ride along the rugged west coast and crossing the iconic Glenfinnan Viaduct, the longest concrete railway bridge in Scotland. Following a delectable seafood lunch in Mallaig, a bustling fishing port, the adventure will continue along the picturesque Appin coast, passing the medieval fortress Kilchurn Castle standing on the shore of Loch Awe. Travellers visit the historic town of Inveraray, nestled on the shores of Loch Fyne, for a walk along its charming streets before returning to Glasgow with jaw-dropping views of the Arrochar Alps and Rest and Be Thankful viewpoint along the way.

Time travel through iconic Outlander's Castles

Fans of the Outlander books and television series will walk through time on this new Outlander Castles & The Scottish Countryside day tour, which includes visits to the filming locations, including the 14th-century fortress Doune Castle, featured as the iconic Castle Leoch. Clients will stroll around the charming village of Culross, used as Cranesmuir with its cobbled streets and white-harled houses. They will also visit Claire Fraser's herb garden. Guests will have the opportunity to explore Falkland, a charming town in Fife, famous for its royal palace and see the Bruce Fountain, the spot where the ghost of Jamie Fraser made an appearance in the series. They will next visit the Midhope Castle, known as Lallybroch, Jamie Fraser's ancestral home, and Blackness Castle, which served as Fort William. The journey concludes with impressive views over the Firth of Forth, an engineering marvel before returning to Glasgow with a strong connection to Outlander's sweeping saga. ■

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World Traveler Winter 2024-25

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ExperiencePlus! Bicycle Tours Highlights Winter Escapes in Patagonia and Cuba

Seize the season with sun-soaked cycling in two iconic destinations



ExperiencePlus! Bicycle Tours, a trail-blazer in cycling vacations and leader in active travel, is looking forward to winter, and particularly its unforgettable adventures in Patagonia and Cuba. Perfect for those looking to escape winter's chill, these expertly guided tours promise immersive experiences in two scenic, culturally rich, and sun-soaked destinations.

Patagonia

For those seeking adventure in the great outdoors, Patagonia's summer season – North America's winter – is the ultimate cyclist's playground. ExperiencePlus' 10-day Bicycling Patagonia's Lake District Plus! the Island of Chiloé (there is also a seven-day version of this trip available) takes guests on an amazing adventure across the Continental Divide in the Andes – from Argentina into Chile – experiencing the wild expanse of Patagonia's ever-changing landscape of pristine lakes, lush forests, conical volcanoes, and snowcapped Andean peaks. Then it is onto explore Chiloé Island's tranquil fjords, pastoral landscapes, and the rugged Pacific coastline. With its rich history and isolated location, Chiloé Island offers a

cultural experience that is unique to Chile and the world.

Carretera Austral

The famed Carretera Austral – also known as Route 7 – is an intrepid cyclist's paradise through a full third of Chilean Patagonia. Paved only part of the way, which makes for a nice introduction to gravel riding, this road connects some of Chile's most remote communities located across a wild and mountainous, fjord-laden region whose snow-capped volcanoes, dense forests, stunning lakes, impressive rivers, and glaciated peaks are largely protected within national parks and reserves.

On ExperiencePlus! Bicycle Tours' 17-day Chile's Carretera Austral expedition, cyclists will travel a total of 640 miles (1,030km) following a partially-paved Route 7 from Puerto Montt to the southern shores of General Carrera Lake, including along a few long stretches of ripio (gravel) near the tour's end.

Cuba

Cycling through Cuba during its winter months offers the opportunity to enjoy mild temperatures while exploring this Caribbean

gem during the island's dry season. Delving deep into the rich and lively culture, ExperiencePlus' 15-day Grand Bicycling Tour of Cuba cycling adventure combines the company's central and western tours to provide an in-depth experience of one of the most fascinating countries in the world. These itineraries meet the United States requirements for legal travel under a 'Support for the Cuban People' general license and therefore includes a full-time agenda of cultural activities that provide a unique glimpse into the lives of Cubans.

Traveling a total of 354 miles (571 km) and averaging 34 miles (57 km) per day, guests will pedal past much of Cuba's less-traveled countryside on quiet roads with visits to local farms, national parks, and even snorkeling in the Bay of Pigs. From its crystal blue waters and lush forested hills to its vibrant cities and rich musical heritage, this stunning route shows off the best of Cuba's culture and landscapes. ■

EXPERIENCEPLUS.COM



Natural Habitat Adventures Launches Five New Trips for 2025 to Kenya, Australia, Iceland and More Following Strong Demand



Natural Habitat Adventures, the leading conservation travel company in partnership with World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is offering five new itineraries for 2025 giving travelers opportunities to see new and less-traveled sides of sought-after nature and wildlife destinations including Kenya, Newfoundland and Labrador, Australia, Canada, Iceland and Greenland.

Kenya Rhino Conservation Safari

Visit the Ol Pejeta Conservancy to meet the world's last two northern white rhinos and their dedicated guards. and learn about intensive conservation efforts during a private session with the rhinos' keepers. At Lewa Conservancy, encounter endangered black rhinos, and explore the Maasai Mara from the private Olderkesi Conservancy, avoiding crowds. In contrast to the government-owned national reserve, private conservancies offer exclusive activities such as guided bush walks, off-road exploration, and night drives to spot nocturnal wildlife. A private behind-the-scenes visit to Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Nairobi, with its Daphne Sheldrick Elephant Orphanage, highlights

elephant and rhino rescue and rehabilitation efforts.

Discover Newfoundland & Labrador

Explore rugged northern landscapes, rich history and abundant wildlife in Canada's most easterly province on a small-group tour with no more than 14 guests. The journey begins in the 400-year-old capital of St. John's, one of North America's oldest municipalities with a rich cultural blend of Indigenous, English and Irish influences. Guests take a whale-watching and puffin tour in Witless Bay, an ecological reserve that is home to North America's largest Atlantic puffin colony, and a feeding and breeding ground for migrating humpback whales.

Rainforest to Rockies

Vancouver to Banff: On a less-traveled route from the Pacific Ocean to the Continental Divide, discover the grand mountains and lush evergreens of Canada's Mountain West on a luxury trans-mountain journey, followed by helicopter-supported hiking from a fly-in wilderness lodge. Board the Rocky Mountaineer train in Vancouver, enjoying GoldLeaf service to Kamloops with views of

the rich agricultural farmlands of the Fraser Valley, the deep chasm of Fraser Canyon, and the Thompson River. Continue into the Canadian Rockies, passing notable landmarks like Rogers Pass in Canada's Glacier National Park, and the Spiral Tunnels, a railway engineering feat, as the train continues through Yoho National Park before arriving in Lake Louise.

Iceland & Greenland

A Nordic Discovery: On this 14-day two-country adventure, travelers will experience a less-traveled side of northernmost Europe. Start in Reykjavik to begin with an exploration of Iceland's dynamic South Shore. Highlights include a visit to the Lava Center for interactive exhibits that illustrate the history and science of eruptions and lava flows; powerful waterfalls like Skogafoss and Kvernufoss; and the legendary Reynisdrangar Rocks, just off a black sand beach. Hikes in Fjadrargljufur Canyon and Skaftafell Nature Reserve offer vistas of bright green moss covering hardened lava landscapes, rugged mountains and glaciers winding down from the ice cap. The adventure continues with a rare foray into Iceland's Central Highlands, stopping to view Ofaerufoss waterfall and the vivid landscapes of Landmannalaugar.

Australia North

Kakadu, Kimberley & the Outback

Explore three remote tracts of northern Australia wilderness, including an overnight journey aboard the historic Ghan luxury train. Begin in Sydney with a stay in the heart of The Rocks, a district rich in Aboriginal history, followed by a waterfront dinner overlooking Sydney Harbor. Travelers will enjoy a private nature walk at North Head Sanctuary and an Aboriginal bush tucker tour in the Royal Botanic Garden. Fly to Uluru (Ayers Rock) to encounter this legendary monolith, with a guided walk to Nutijulu Waterhole. Participate in an exclusive dinner inside Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, followed by stargazing with a local expert. ■

[HTTPS://WWW.NATHAB.COM/](https://www.nathab.com/)





Assos: The Gem of Türkiye's North Aegean

Nestled at the foot of Mount Ida, Assos is an Aegean jewel that gazes out over deep blue waters beneath the shade of ancient olive trees. Located in the modern-day Ayvacık district of Çanakkale, this historic site has hosted many civilizations over the centuries. With its untouched nature, fresh air, and ancient treasures, Assos is one of the Aegean's most beautiful getaways. Even though it is not well known, this hidden gem has a lot to offer.

Aegean's Cool Route Assos features numerous coves and beaches where visitors can dive into the crystal-clear blue waters. Picturesque coves like Kadirga and Sivrice, pristine beaches such as Sokakağzı, and the Ancient Harbour are among the area's many unspoiled natural attractions. Kadirga Bay, with its expansive shoreline, has earned a Blue Flag status for its environmental standards. While most of Assos' shores consist of large stones, many visitors opt to swim from wooden piers. Due to its geographical location, the waters of Assos are cooler than those in the Mediterranean, warming up a bit later in the season.

The Majestic Ancient City of Assos The ancient city of Assos, perched on a dormant volcanic hill, offers breathtaking views of the Aegean Sea. Its history dates back to the 6th century BCE, and the city is known for its well-preserved walls and structures revealed through archaeological excavations. It was added to the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage tentative list in May 2017.

Flavours to Savour In addition to its natural and historical beauty, Assos is also a destination for food lovers. The region offers a wide range of Aegean dishes, from stuffed zucchini flowers to sea beans. Restaurants and taverns along the harbour serve signature local dishes, including grilled octopus salad, swordfish skewers, grilled dusky grouper, scorpion fish soup, and stuffed calamari.

Known for its olive oil, Assos is a popular stop for sampling mezes made from vegetables, herbs, and local olive oil. To cool off, try the region's famous mulberry syrup – a refreshing treat on a hot day in Assos. ■

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World Traveler Winter 2024-25



Unearthing Türkiye's Cultural Treasures of the Past

Anatolia, a millennia-old crossroads of civilizations, is home to some of the earliest settlements on earth. Today, it boasts unique treasures from these ancient cultures.

The richness of these lands is gradually being uncovered through year-round excavations led by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. This year, experts made significant discoveries that will once again impact the historical narrative.

Golden Age of Turkish Archaeology Türkiye has emerged as a global stronghold for archaeology through numerous archaeological excavations and restoration projects aimed at preserving its cultural heritage. The country plans to achieve in the next four years what has been accomplished in the past 60.

As part of this effort, 2024 has been declared the 'Golden Age of Turkish Archaeology.' The number of archaeological projects across the country has increased by nearly 100 in only three years. Additionally, Türkiye continues to prioritize conservation and visitor arrangements at excavation sites.

Archaeological Highlights in 2024 Discovered in the ancient city of Laodicea in Denizli a group of extraordinary sculptures were unearthed depicting Scylla, the man-eating monster, the body of Odysseus, statues of his companions, and the bow of his ship. The statues, with their well-preserved original paint and baroque style of the Hellenistic period, are exceptional. Another major find was found a two-hour drive away at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Aphrodisias in Aydın, where archaeologists unearthed a nearly 2,000-year-old Zeus head sculpture with minimal damage.

Cultural Recoveries of the Year Türkiye remains dedicated to repatriation of looted artefacts from abroad, a mission reinforced by notable successes this year. The country recently secured the return of 14 archaeological and ethnographic artefacts from the United States. Among the recovered items are two bronze heads, a giant bronze statue from the ancient city of Boubon in Burdur, ceramic works, coins, a jewellery piece, and two Ottoman-era daggers, all significant cultural treasures. ■

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Get your retail therapy in İstanbul, where culture meets style

As the crisp November air settles over the city, İstanbul transforms into a retail wonderland, offering global discounts and sales that would make any shopaholic's heart skip a beat. This vibrant metropolis, where East meets West, isn't just a feast for the senses—it's a treasure trove for those seeking the ultimate shopping experience.

Picture yourself strolling through the Grand Bazaar, one of the world's oldest and largest shopping centres. The air is thick with the aroma of Turkish coffee and the gentle clink of artisans at work. Here, you'll find everything from intricately woven Anatolian carpets to handcrafted leather goods that tell stories of centuries-old traditions.

But İstanbul isn't just about traditional markets. For those craving a more contemporary retail fix, the city's modern malls offer a stark contrast to the historical bazaars. Imagine spending a day in climate-controlled comfort, hopping from luxury brand stores to chic cafes, all under one roof.

For the fashion-forward, the streets of Nişantaşı beckon. This trendy district is a playground for local designers and international brands alike. As you window-shop along Abdi İpekçi Street, you might find yourself rubbing shoulders with İstanbul's stylish elite. Don't forget to take a break at one of the many upscale eateries—shopping is hungry work, after all!

And for those with a penchant for the past, İstanbul's vintage shopping scene is a dream come true. The winding streets of Çukurcuma are a veritable treasure hunt, with antique stores offering everything from ornate Ottoman-era furniture to quirky mid-century finds. It's not just shopping—it's time travel with a credit card.

Whether you're after luxury goods, designer threads, or one-of-a-kind souvenirs, İstanbul delivers with a flourish. This November, as global sales sweep the city, there's never been a better time to discover why İstanbul is truly a shopper's paradise. So pack your bags (and maybe an extra suitcase)—retail adventure awaits in the city where two continents collide!

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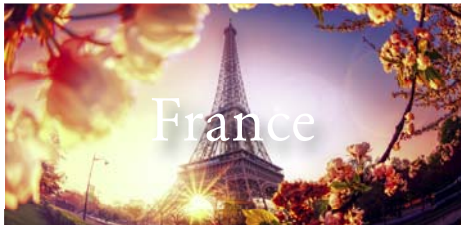
World Traveler's



21



Must Visit
PLACES





The Conrad Maldives Rangali Island Eating and drinking in paradise

by Daniel Smajovits

Imagine schools of fish swimming underneath your feet with five-star cuisine at your table. Throw in the setting sun on the horizon and the warm Indian Ocean breeze in your hair. Welcome to the Sunset Grill at the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island.

The Sunset Grill is just one of 12 incredible dining experiences available for guests at the island paradise. From underwater dining to beachfront teppanyaki, each meal promises to be more unique and memorable than the last.

Undoubtedly the signature experience at the Conrad Maldives is Ithaa, which is the world's first undersea restaurant. Situated five meters below sea level, diners are treated to panoramic views of the vibrant coral reef while savoring either lunch or dinner.

The culinary artistry is matched only by the breathtaking marine life around you, creating an unforgettable dining experience.

Although celebrities love to stay at the Conrad, celebrity chef Jereme Leung has turned the island into his home by opening the first authentic Chinese restaurant in the Maldives. At Ufaa, guests can dine on Peking Duck, dim sum, handmade noodles and hot pots as your palate is temporarily transported to China, albeit with a better view.

With two spas and a dedicated yoga pavilion at the resort, it's only natural that guests can also find a restaurant dedicated solely to wellness inspired cuisine. The Mandhoo Spa Restaurant is a breathtaking over-the-water dining space that combines fresh and sustainably grown produce with inventive

techniques to deliver an inspiring dining experience filled with vibrant colours, elegant textures, and fresh and healthy undertones.

Bringing Italian cuisine to the Maldives, Vilu Restaurant and Bar offers refined and shared style Italian cuisine for breakfast and dinner. In the morning, Vilu offers a Mediterranean-meets-Western-style breakfast with barista-made coffee, while at night, guests can enjoy elevated, Italian-inspired fare that perfectly complement the paradise that surrounds you.

With your feet in the sand and palm trees providing the shade, there's no better way to start your day off with a trip around the world at the Atoll Market buffet. With eight live cooking stations, guests can enjoy everything from Maldivian specialties to western classics, sushi, curries and more. Complementing the food are made-to-order juices, coffees and teas.

Going hand-in-hand with five-star cuisine is the best in wine and cocktails. The Conrad's Rangali Bar offers hand-crafted cocktails to complement your day in paradise, while the Wine Cellar, the Maldives' first underground wine cellar and private dining venue, is home to over 20,000 bottles of wine, offering guests a luxurious and unique dining and drinking experience.

For a more intimate and unique experience, reserve your seat at the Koko Grill, a teppanyaki restaurant built right into the beach or The Wine and Cheese Bar, where some of the world's best cheeses and wine can be savored while sitting on top of a floor of black volcanic sand. To take your vacation to the next level, the resort can also arrange for a sunset dinner on the beach, allowing you to revel in the sand, stars and make memories that will last a lifetime.

Whether you're a foodie, wine connoisseur or someone who simply enjoys casual dining with unparalleled views and impeccable service, memories are made with every meal and drink at the Conrad Maldives. ■

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China: Dim Sum



Germany: Black Forest Cake



Greece: Moussaka



Italy: Pizza Margherita

WORLD TRAVELER'S

Foodie Tour!

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Japan: Sushi



Mexico: Tacos



Spain: Paella



Thailand: Pad Thai



What's New in Nevada

Yee-haw! National Cowboy Poetry Gathering to celebrate 40 years in Nevada

The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering held annually in Elko will mark its 40th anniversary from January 27-February 1, 2025. This week-long, town-wide, celebration of authentic western cultural arts is not just about poetry, and is not just for cowboys. Beginning with a handful of poets wrangled together to share an overlooked American tradition, the gathering has grown to attract artists and audiences from all walks of life and around the world, including Canada. In addition to poetry, the festival showcases music, film, dancing, workshops, exhibits, conversations, food and fellowship in celebration of the living American West. Elko is accessed via Travel Nevada's Cowboy Corridor from either Reno or Salt Lake City; one of 10 themed road trips across the state.

How to Hit the Slopes in Nevada

Despite its reputation for having a desert landscape, Nevada is actually the most mountainous state in the Lower 48 with over 300 mountain ranges. Nevada means "snowcapped" in Spanish, after all. Visitors can ski just 45 minutes outside of Las Vegas at Lee Canyon, the only ski resort in southern Nevada. Lake Tahoe is famously split between Nevada and California boasting dozens of ski resorts, but it is Nevada's Mt. Rose Ski Resort that provides the highest base at 8,260 ft/2,518 m. The Ruby Mountains in northern Nevada boast 300 in/762 cm of some of the driest, fluffiest snow in the U.S. for winter warriors on the Rubies Route (one of 10 themed road trips across the state), with the oldest, family-owned heli-ski operator in the nation taking powder-hungry backcountry skiers up for fresh tracks. ■

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What's New in Oregon

New Native American resort and restaurant experiences in Oregon

Interest from Canadian travellers in Indigenous tourism experiences continues to increase and visitors to Oregon can overnight with intent to support Indigenous entrepreneurs. After a multimillion-dollar and six year-long renovation, Kah-Nee-Ta Hot Springs Resort recently reopened in Central Oregon by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, debuting riverfront hot spring soaking tubs, cold plunges, poolside cabanas and lodging that includes 20 teepees, 30 hotel rooms and an RV park. The Allison Inn & Spa, a luxury resort in the Willamette Valley, also offers an Indigenous connection with Chef Jack Strong, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, sharing Native stories through his dining program that spotlights First Foods at the on-site restaurant, JORY.

Oregon lights the way for wanderlust

Wanderlust Tours offers naturalist-guided tours throughout Central Oregon, and are the only guide company permitted to take visitors into the region's vast network of lava tubes and caves. They also offer a range of unique tours above ground, especially at night and particularly in winter, including: a sunset hike and stargazing tour to Fort Rock near the Oregon Outback (the world's largest Dark Sky Sanctuary); a snowshoeing journey at awe-inspiring Crater Lake National Park; and additional snowshoeing tours at night under the light of the moon where guests arrive upon an illuminated, hand carved amphitheater in the snow to enjoy a bonfire and stargazing. Wanderlust Tours is a founding member of Oregon's Go With A Guide program, which encourages visitors to consider a licensed guide or outfitter to provide safe and responsible travel experiences. ■

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What's New in Utah

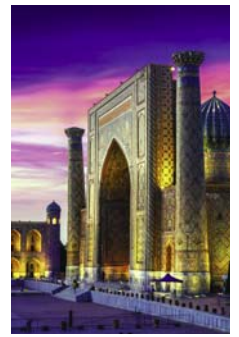
Olympic Fever in Utah

It's official! Hot on the heels of the success of Paris 2024, Salt Lake City has been selected as the host city for the 2034 Winter Olympic & Paralympic Games. Having hosted the 2002 Games, Salt Lake becomes only the fifth city in the world to host the Winter Olympics twice. A celebration of sport is at a mountain high in the state as this announcement follows the NHL's arrival in Salt Lake City with the Utah Hockey Club (UHC) joining the league beginning October 8, 2024. Visitors can go ice skating or take a curling lesson at the Utah Olympic Oval. And, of course, Utah is scientifically-proven to have the Greatest Snow on Earth® and is home to 15 ski resorts; 10 of which are within an hour's drive of the new SLC International Airport.

Utah goes "wild" for British filmmaker, Guy Ritchie

Visitors to Utah know Park City for the skiing and Sundance Film Festival, but there is an incredible food scene that can't be missed. Case in point, renowned British filmmaker, Guy Ritchie, has partnered with The Lodge at Blue Sky to open a second installation of his outpost restaurant, WildKitchen, which is featured in his Netflix hit series, The Gentlemen. Set in a high alpine field overlooking the dramatic landscape of Utah's Wasatch Mountain Range, guest chefs and diners will interact through cuisine touched by smoke and flame, including locally sourced proteins like native Utah trout and seared elk loin and organic produce grown at the resort's own farm. The menu will also be complemented by flights of Ritchie's beer, Gritchie Brew, along with featured wine pairings and signature cocktails. Originally scheduled to be a seasonal pop-up experience, WildKitchen will now stay open permanently, weather-permitting for the winter. ■

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C o m e W i t h U s & S e e T h e W o r l d !

Discover New Ways to Experience the Majesty of Mt. Fuji



Mount Fuji is Japan's most iconic cultural symbol and the most recognizable mountain in the world. The UNESCO World Heritage Centre describes its profound beauty as a "Sacred Place and Source of Artistic Inspiration". At 3,776 meters, it is the highest peak in Japan and one that attracts droves of visitors every year during the climbing season between July and September.

As of 2024, the government of Japan has implemented travel restrictions along the popular Yoshida Trail in Yamanashi Prefecture to prevent overcrowding and to preserve the nature of this destination. In addition to applying for the permit online, there is now a ¥2,000 hiking fee and an optional ¥1,000 donation towards conservation efforts. A maximum of 4,000 climbers are permitted each day, and there is no climbing from the 5th Station between 4 pm and 3 am without a mountain hut reservation.

The other three trails: Subashiri, Gotemba and Fujinomiya in Shizuoka Prefecture do not yet have new restrictions, but travellers must submit a hiking plan online and receive a QR code to present before ascending.

Beyond climbing Mt Fuji, there are several ways to experience the spectacular scenery of the area that surrounds it. These sustainable tourism experiences speak to luxury and luxury-for-less travellers seeking an easy immersion into the culture and the unspoiled nature of Japan.

The Fuji Five Lakes district at the foot of Mt. Fuji consists of pristine lakes in which to rent boats, go fishing, camping, hiking and even sink into relaxing hot springs with the unique panorama of Mt. Fuji in the mist. From cherry blossom viewing in spring to the floral profusion of tulips, cosmos and sunflowers leading into summer, and the vibrant foliage in the fall, the colours of Yamanakako Hana no Miyako Park are simply breathtaking.

Oshino Hakkai is one of many small, traditional, old-world villages in the Fuji area. It is surrounded by eight ponds of crystal-clear water.

Thatched roof houses, water wheels and beautiful gardens distinguish this bucolic setting with a magnificent view of Mt. Fuji.

A quintessential taste of Japan is Japanese green tea. Visiting one of the green tea plantations near Mt. Fuji is an experience unlike anywhere else in the world. Picking fresh tea leaves amidst a picturesque setting with Mt. Fuji in the background is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Imamiya City in Shizuoka Prefecture is home to many tea farms with stunning landscapes that change dramatically with the seasons.

Family-friendly experiences include Fuji Safari Park, home to a range of wildlife to be viewed by safari tour, day or night. Free roaming animals include lions, elephants, tigers, rhinoceroses and giraffes. There is also Fuji Q Highland, one of the most popular amusement parks in Japan. Located at the base of Mt. Fuji, it boasts world record-breaking rides including roller coasters and swings, as well as other kid-friendly attractions.

For the best Instagram views of Mt. Fuji, head to Chureito Pagoda in Fujiyoshida City. It is one of the most popular photos of the area and is often referred to as "the authentic view of Japan," with both the five-storied pagoda and Mt. Fuji in the frame. During cherry blossom season, the contrasting colours are extraordinary. It's 398 steps up to the bright red pagoda, located at Arakura Fuji Sengen Shrine within Arakurayama Sengen Park, which is surrounded by over 650 cherry blossom trees.

The Narusawa Ice Cave is a 153-metre-long lava tube-turned-natural refrigerator located in the Aokigahara forest. Visitors can walk through and explore the ice pillars and ice walls year-round.

There are many accessible ways to experience Mt. Fuji that are low-cost but high-end, each offering authenticity, unspoiled nature and family-friendly adventures of a lifetime. ■

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The Alhambra, one of the 10 World Heritage Sites in Andalusia

It's true that Andalusia has many World Heritage sites, but by far the most visited and most spectacular is the Alhambra, a monumental historic site. Its success can be understood if you see it from the San Nicolás viewpoint, on the other side of the river Darro. Even better if you do so at sunset, accompanied by the guitars and songs of local buskers. Former US president Bill Clinton only needed a few hours there to declare it "the most beautiful sunset in the world".

If you're wondering about the origins of the monument visited by almost three million people every year, you need to know that its name comes from the Arabic: al-Hambra ('the red one'). It was designed between the 9th and 12th centuries as a military area (Qal'at al-hamra, 'Red Fortress'), but not only for that: the Alhambra was a stronghold, a Nasrid palace and a medina (small city) all at the same time. That was until 1492, when it became a Christian court after the reconquest of Granada by the Catholic Monarchs. As the heritage site is enormous and full of details, a visit to the Alhambra is never short. Some people do it in one or two hours, but history lovers can take more than five hours. From the Alcazaba to the Royal Palaces, the charming Gilded Room, the majestic Comares Hall, the Renaissance palace of Charles V (now the Museum of Fine Arts) or the famous Courtyard of the Lions... Where to start?

We recommend beginning the tour with the splendid gardens of the Generalife, the summer residence of the sultans. Then walk through the majestic Nasrid palaces to the picturesque Lions Courtyard and its sonorous fountain, one of the most famous in the world. And if you'd like to walk some more, go towards the Alcazaba, the oldest part of the site. Given that this is the sight nobody wants to miss on a visit to Granada. ■

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White-Knuckle Drives and Delicious Surprises Our Epic 10-Day Sicily Journey

Article and photography by Judi Cohen

A Scenic Adventure Awaits

As we drove our rental car from Catania Airport along Sicily's winding roads, we quickly realized that this road trip was going to be one wild ride. Driving in Sicily is an experience unto itself—chaotic yet liberating and exhilarating. The narrow streets and spontaneous drivers kept us on our toes, but the freedom to explore the cities and towns at our own pace was unbeatable.

Sicily's landscape is a mix of beaches, ancient ruins, desert-like terrain, and hilltop villages, all wrapped in a dramatic coastline. The island might not be huge, but it's packed with interesting sites—and we were determined to see as much as we could during our ten-day visit.

Taormina: A Cliffside Gem

Our drive into Taormina, overlooking the Ionian Sea, was thrilling with its narrow roads and hairpin turns—a true nail-biter! Staying at a boutique hotel near the top of the town, made us feel like we were on a movie set. We enjoyed sitting on the terrace, with sweeping views of the city and beach below. We took the hotel shuttle down to explore the charming cobblestone streets, shop and dine. Parking was very limited in town.

Agrigento: The Valley of the Temples

Driving towards Agrigento's Valley of the Temples was mesmerizing, especially as we approached the Temple of Concordia. Our hotel offered sensational views and direct walking access into the Valley of the Temples. We spent hours exploring the site during the day and couldn't resist returning at sunset for the golden illumination of the temples.

Relaxing in Cefalù

Not-to-be-missed while driving in Sicily is Cefalù, a bustling beach town with limited parking for visitors. Be sure to use the designated visitor parking lots to avoid the hassle of navigating the narrow streets only to find that parking is reserved for residents with permits. We strolled along the medieval streets and wandered along the sandy beach with its colorful umbrellas and food stands.

White-Knuckle Ride to Mount Etna

The road to Mount Etna was a steep, twisting climb with dramatic views of the volcanic landscape. We white-knuckled it through the sharp turns, but the sight of smoking craters and black lava made it worth every heart-pounding moment. If you drive there, be sure to locate the shop where you can buy parking tickets to avoid fines.

A Culinary Journey: Food Stops You Can't Miss

We found ourselves stopping at every turn—for gelato, granita, and cannoli, as well as penne alla Norma. One of the best unexpected surprises was the food at the Autogrill. Like service centres along Canadian highways, they offer gas and snacks, but that's where the similarity ends. In Sicily we found fresh sandwiches, pastries, gourmet pasta and risotto. Morning drives started with a brioche dunked in pistachio granita with espresso poured on top - a Sicilian frozen treat.

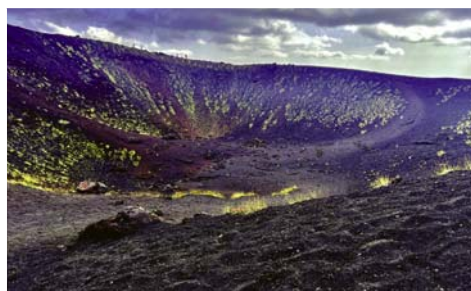
A Taste of Sicily

Sicily swept us off our feet with its beauty, history, and culinary delights. Driving was an exhilarating experience with breathtaking landscapes and cool towns. If you prefer, you can always book a private driver, but that's just not our style!

Tips for Renting a Car in Sicily

- **Document Everything:** Take videos and photos of your rental car before leaving the lot.
- **Have Your Licenses:** Carry both your home country's driver's license and an International Driver's Permit. They may or may not ask for both.
- **Have Your Passport:** It's often required at rental locations.
- **Credit Card Name:** Ensure your credit card matches the name of the renter. ■

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Refined Travel: Emirates Airlines

by Daniel Smajovits

There's flying – and then there's flying Emirates Airlines. Renowned for its luxury, regardless of the class of service, an exceptional journey with world-class amenities, superior comfort, and personalized service awaits every passenger.

For the Business Class traveler, the exceptional service begins long before you even reach the airport. Beginning with their complimentary chauffeur service, that offers door-to-door transfers within a specific radius of the airport, the airline ensures that every aspect of your journey is taken care of.

The seamless journey from home to the plane continues with dedicated Business Class check-in counters and a priority security screening line, allowing you to grab a drink or a bite in Air Canada's Maple Leaf Lounge before your journey onto Dubai. While Emirates does not operate its own lounges in Canada, your return trip will

allow you to experience their world-class lounges in Dubai International Airport – complete with their Timeless Spa, private showers and tremendous food and beverage selection.

Once onboard, the pampering truly begins as Emirates' Business Class cabins feature lie-flat seats with adjustable headrests, lumbar support, and a massage function. Once you're ready to get some rest, the seats convert into fully flat beds, complete with plush duvets, soft pillows, and comfortable blankets, ensuring a restful sleep.

Known for their premiere dining in all classes, Emirates takes the Business Class experience to the next level via a gourmet, multi-course meal inspired by regional cuisines. Prepared with fresh, high-quality ingredients, the selection and quality will truly make you believe that a chef is with you in the air, preparing your courses to order. Naturally, the extensive menu includes

options for special dietary requirements and all meals are complemented by a selection of fine wines, champagnes, premium spirits and cocktails. While passengers in all classes of service can also have light bites throughout their flight, Business Class passengers also enjoy an extensive menu of hot dishes, in addition to sandwiches and other snacks, in between meals. Should your flight be on one of Emirates' signature A380s, flown on the Toronto – Dubai route, Business Class passengers also have access to an in-flight bar and lounge.

Whether you're socializing at the in-flight bar, enjoying one of the 4,500 channels of on-demand entertainment at your seat, or taking advantage of the complimentary Wi-Fi, Emirates has provided passengers with a host of ways to enjoy their time on board. Complementing all of this is a dedicated crew of flight attendants who deliver five-star service way up in the clouds.

As all good things come to an end, upon arrival at Dubai International Airport, Business Class passengers benefit from priority disembarkation, fast-track immigration, and priority baggage handling, ensuring a swift and hassle-free arrival process. Regardless if you're off to a meeting or one of Dubai's incredible attractions, you'll arrive rested, relaxed and ready to begin your adventure in one of the world's most exciting cities.

With a combination of luxury, comfort, and exceptional service. From the moment of booking to your arrival in Dubai, Emirates ensures that its passengers are treated to a superior level of care and attention, providing the perfect beginning and your end to your journey.

Emirates currently offers daily non-stop service to Dubai from Montreal and Toronto. Furthermore, with a code-share agreement with Air Canada, Dubai can be reached from most Canadian cities with only one connection. ■

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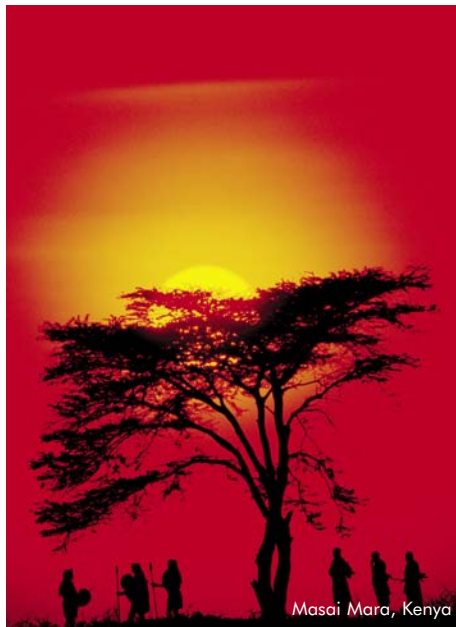




Balinese women



Moraine lake, Banff



Masai Mara, Kenya



Bamboo Forest ,Kyoto



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Mt Cook, New Zealand



Red Lizard Train, Tunisia



Armagh Food & Cider Weekend

Article and photography by Cherie DeLory

An apple a day in County Armagh, Northern Ireland is as easy as, you guessed it, pie. I had the good fortune in early September to experience the annual Armagh Food & Cider Weekend, and one of the many highlights was visiting the orchard at Crannagaal House, where the county's first Bramley apple tree was planted in 1884 by the owner's great grandfather. The "Orchard County" is known for its Bramley apples that are particularly good for cider and not so much for eating off the tree, unless you favour tart and sour. After rambling through the apple orchard I enjoyed a luscious four-course meal (including cured trout from Lough Neagh Lake) and cider tasting hosted by John and Jane Nicholson of Crannagaal House and Greg MacNeice of MacIvors Cider.

My artisan food and cider experience in the Irish countryside began at Killeavy Castle, an hour's drive from both Dublin and Belfast airports, set amidst the Mourne Mountains and Slieve Gullion, the highest point in the county. A quintessential farm to fork experience, the chef creates seasonal menus inspired by the

estate's walled kitchen garden, honey apiary and cattle and lamb farm, as well as fresh fish from the nearby Irish Sea. I enjoyed an atmospheric meal whilst watching the long-horn cattle and sheep grazing in the field; and wouldn't hesitate to order the unforgettable lamb sausage infused with Killeavy honey, sweet potato and bok choy on a return trip.

Bean to Bar Chocolate, Irish Coffee and Cider
Armagh Cider Company's 80 acres of apple trees at Ballinteggart farm were in full bloom and ripe for the picking, as we sat down to a tasting of the ciders pressed at the Troughton family orchard since 1898. I recalled how when my first time trying cider in the UK I naively didn't know it had alcohol. This time around I knew to pace myself.

Northern Ireland's first stoneground bean to bar chocolate factory, NearyNogs, collaborated with Killowen Distillery for a sensational chocolate and spirits tasting. Husband and wife chocolatiers, Shane and Dorothy Neary craft single origin bars evocative of Northern Ireland's landscape and cuisine; like Soda

Bread, Gorse Flower and Irish Seaweed, Irish Whiskey with orange bitters and burnt sugar. Their latest is a prototype Irish Coffee, and Peat Smoked chocolate is coming soon.

A Scenic Drive in the Country in County Armagh, NI

You don't have to be a fan of the Game of Thrones TV series to be won over by the studio tour at Linen Mill Studios. My group sat down at the Chef's Table for a scene-stealing culinary experience; after touring sets and posing in green screens it was a chance to break bread while discussing favourite scenes shot across Northern Ireland.

Truth be told, the star of this trip is Armagh, the oldest city in Ireland and its spiritual capital. The city was founded by St. Patrick as the centre of Christianity. I visited St. Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral (Protestant), the site where the patron saint of Ireland built a church in 445 AD, and the magnificent St. Patrick's Cathedral (Roman Catholic), perched on the hill offering lovely views of the nearby green pastures.

Continuing our countryside culinary journey we drove along the Mourne Mountain coast, through cozy coastal villages of Warren Point and Rostrevor, and visited Tayto Castle for a tour of Ireland's beloved potato crisps factory. Then we were treated to a whimsical high tea party in the garden at Blackwell House, a luxury 5-star country house with gourmet dining and spa. Heading to the Causeway Coast we stopped by Bakehouse cookery school near Bellaghy to bake soda bread and go foraging for sloe berries at River Bann Retreat to make gin.

At the Coleraine Marina we tucked into fresh Irish seafood at Lir: Native Seafood before sailing aboard the 30 ft MV Kingfisher on the River Bann for a whiskey, charcuterie, and Irish Coffee tasting with Bushmills Distillery, the world's oldest whiskey distillery. The boat was built in 1947 by world renowned Harland and Wolff shipbuilders (Titanic) in the historic Belfast Shipyard.

Back at home, as I pull out my souvenirs from Armagh, I spy a red Bramley apple from the orchard at Crannagaal House. I take a bite, and another, until I'm at its juicy core. Tart and sour and deliciously divine. ■

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A Few Perfect Days in Reykjavik: Iceland's (Surprisingly!) Dynamic Capital

by Olivia Liveng

Reykjavik, Iceland's lively capital, effortlessly blends its old-world charm with modern design. My stay at the Exeter Hotel, right by the old harbor, was the perfect base for exploring both sides of this intriguing city. The hotel itself, a stylish nod to Reykjavik's industrial roots, was once a warehouse for fishing equipment. Now, it's a sleek, comfortable retreat that still holds onto its heritage through exposed brick, polished concrete, and minimalist Scandinavian décor.

After a long day of travel, sinking into the hotel's soft bedding, with views of the harbor through large windows, felt like an immediate reset. The calm, warm atmosphere of the room was exactly what I needed to recharge for the days ahead.



Exploring Reykjavik

Mornings at the Exeter began with breakfast at Le Kock, the hotel's restaurant. Fresh rye bread, smoked fish, and tangy Icelandic skyr provided a delicious taste of local flavors. Each day, the hotel's friendly staff gave me insider tips for exploring Reykjavik, and from the old harbor, everything seemed just a short walk away.

First on my list was Harpa Concert Hall, just a few minutes from the hotel. Its iconic glass facade glistened in the light, reflecting the sea. Even if you're not seeing a performance, it's worth stepping inside to admire the architecture.

For lunch, I headed to Grandi Mathöll, a vibrant food hall that offers a perfect mix of



local and international cuisine. I tried plokkfiskur, a creamy Icelandic fish stew that was comforting and hearty. Later, I couldn't resist a visit to Bæjarins Beztu Pylsur, the famous hot dog stand that's been serving locals since 1937. It's a simple snack but one that captures Reykjavik's laid-back charm.

A Step Into History

Reykjavik is a small city with a rich history. I spent one afternoon at the National Museum of Iceland, learning about the Viking Age through fascinating exhibits and ancient artifacts. The museum captures Iceland's journey from early settlement to modern times in an engaging and informative way.

Afterward, I went to Hallgrímskirkja, the towering church that defines the city's skyline. Climbing to the top of the tower offered panoramic views of Reykjavik's colorful rooftops, the harbor, and the distant mountains—a reminder of how connected the city is to its natural surroundings.

Unwinding Like a Local

To experience Reykjavik like a local, I spent an evening at Laugardalslaug, a geothermal pool that's a favorite among residents. Soaking in the warm waters after a day of sightseeing was the perfect way to relax, and it gave me a taste of Iceland's wellness culture. The combination of hot tubs and cool air and the easy chatter of Icelanders around me made for a truly local experience.

The quiet, modern ambiance at the Exeter Hotel felt like the perfect retreat after a busy day. Whether you're in Reykjavik for its cultural landmarks, stunning landscapes, or unique food scene, the Exeter Hotel offers a comfortable, stylish base for your adventures in this captivating city. ■

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Kasos Island - Off-The-Beaten Path

Article and photography by Nick Kontis

Kasos, the southernmost island of Greece's fabled Dodecanese chain, is a sanctuary for those seeking a more relaxed, off-the-beaten-path Greek Island experience. It is small, wild, and remote, offering a breath of fresh air and a lack of mass tourism. The rugged island is Greece at its most personal, a barren island in the middle of nowhere, a world away from the package-deal vacationers.

At Free Bar, the island's central watering hole, you'll meet a diverse cast of characters that embody Greek authenticity. The meeting place is a microcosm of the island's vibrant community.

Further exploring the island, you'll encounter crusty fishermen proudly displaying their catch of the day, a group of older men drinking thick Greek coffee while engaged in a lively game of cards, and children playing carefree. Or the clandestine cheese monger, hidden in a mountain settlement, diligently crafting the same buttery Graviera cheese that takes 12 months to mature, recipes handed down from generations past.

Things to do

Immerse yourself in an unrushed way of life with locals in one of the five picturesque villages of Fri, Agia Marina, Poli, Arvanitohori, or Panagia, gaining insight into the islands' identity.

If the possibility of a remote and secluded beach all to yourself enthralls you, then Kasos is right for you. Helatros Beach is a hidden paradise on the southwest of the island. Emporios Bay's crystal clear waters, located within walking distance from the port, provide for a relaxing swim. Boat captains bring travelers on a 40-minute ride to the soft sands of Marmara Beach on Armathia Island.

Over 100 churches are scattered throughout the island. The crown jewel, with its mosaic floors and sweeping island vistas, is the monastery of Agios Mamas, the patron saint of shepherds and flocks, perched high on the island's south side.

A hiking and trekking paradise, walk the island's seven primitive trails along beaches,

traversing settlements through abandoned rural landscapes with impressive views of nearby Karpathos. Walk towards the eastern ridge of Kasos, and you'll see ancient Greek Ellinika Grammata, inscriptions of Greek letters carved on the rocks.

Where to stay

Kasos remains a well-kept secret due to accommodation—or lack thereof. There are only 300 rooms for sojourners, and they fill up quickly in the high-season months of July and August. Although there is a small hotel in the Fri capital, the rest of the accommodations are in private homes, local homes, or small full-service apartments for rent.

Cuisine and dining

Artisanal products, including the quaint island's honey produced by beekeepers with wild thyme and exceptional goat and sheep dairy products, including the island's favorite soft and creamy steak cheese sold at family-run shops, showcase the island's classic flavors. Bakeries serve murky Greek coffee, pies, and other Greek sweets. Many islanders make a smooth, sweet red traditional wine from the Fokiano and Kypreiko varieties.

Warm and welcoming traditional tavernas line the Bouka harbor. Mylos Restaurant and Meltemi are two of the exceptional diners. Regional dishes include stuffed vine leaves known as dolmades, salted sardines, cuttlefish baked in local wine, grilled meats, and crayfish spaghetti.

Getting there

Kasos is not the most accessible island, which creates an even greater allure. Most visitors arrive by ferry from Rhodes or Karpathos at the capital of Fri in the Bay of Bouka. The port also houses captivating, colorful fishing boats and restaurants lining the sea. There are also flights via Karpathos.

The Kasiots exemplify hospitality and the cardinal Greek virtue of "philoxenia," the love of strangers or friends with outsiders, rather than hitting familiar Greek hotspots, set sail to Greece's carefree, remote Dodecanese outpost of Kasos, where locals welcome you with open arms. ■

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A First-Class Experience Layover in Bogota

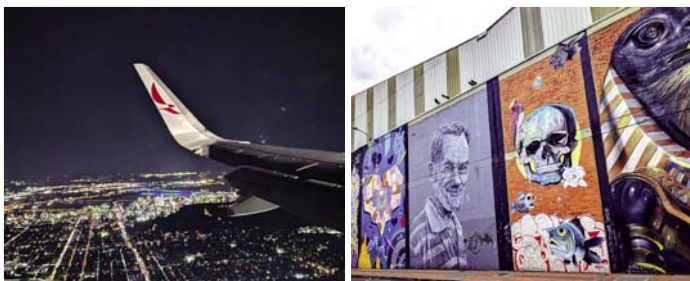
by Susan Campbell

I was excited to discover that Avianca now flies from Montreal to Curacao during the summer as off-season flights are expensive and tough to find. I'd never flown Avianca before, but the price was right, and I liked the fact that it was overnight with a 9-hour layover in Bogota. I'd never been to Colombia, but it was on my bucket list, so I figured I'd tack on a quick downtown tour between flights. While researching layover logistics, I was delighted to discover that First Class Experience—a VIP Fast-Track Service that I frequently use in Aruba, has a satellite operation in El Dorado International Airport. I booked them immediately. Their personal assistance through immigration and security lines is priceless. They also offer concierge service, so I requested they book my private city guide since I trust them to use well-vetted operators.

I was impressed with Avianca from check-in to touch-down both ways, service was first-rate, and I will fly them again. And I was grateful for the warm welcome of my VIP hosts right out of the gate. I'd no idea what a massive, modern place this newly minted complex was, apparently, they serve 60 million passengers per year! But big means LOTS of walking, and signage in Spanish can be daunting, so expert help navigating the systems and dealing with luggage is essential for a first-timer.

After a bountiful breakfast, and hot shower in the lovely El Dorado VIP Lounge (included in the experience cost) I was off to check out some famous Colombian street art. My guide chose the closest district to the airport to have optimal time to stroll the streets and sample local food. (Arepas anyone?) It was an ideal way to preview the region. I'll visit longer next time. ■

[HTTPS://FIRSTCLASSEXPRIENCE.COM/COLOMBIA/](https://firstclassexperience.com/colombia/)



France, between sea, culture and mountains

This winter, immerse yourself in the gentle Mediterranean coastline, where turquoise seas and picturesque villages mingle with rich local traditions. Venture into the majestic Alps, a playground for nature and winter sports enthusiasts and let yourself be captivated by the cultural heritage that makes the heart of cities vibrate, where history, art and modernity come together.

Les 3 Vallées is the world's largest ski area, located in the French Alps, encompassing the renowned resorts of Courchevel, Méribel, Val Thorens, Les Menuires, Saint-Martin-de-Belleville, Brides-les-Bains and Orelle.

Beyond its impressive ski terrain, Les 3 Vallées is celebrated for its world-class gastronomy, featuring numerous Michelin-starred restaurants, and its luxurious accommodation options, ranging from budget-friendly accommodations to elegant chalets and five-star hotels.

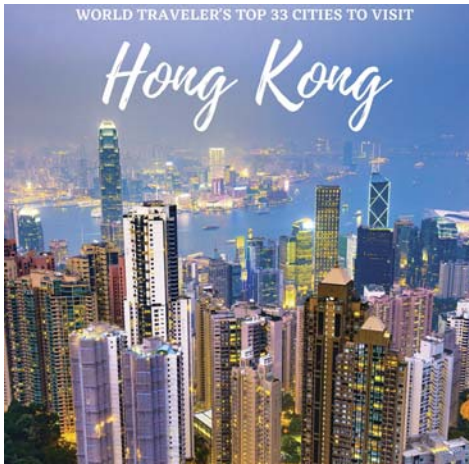
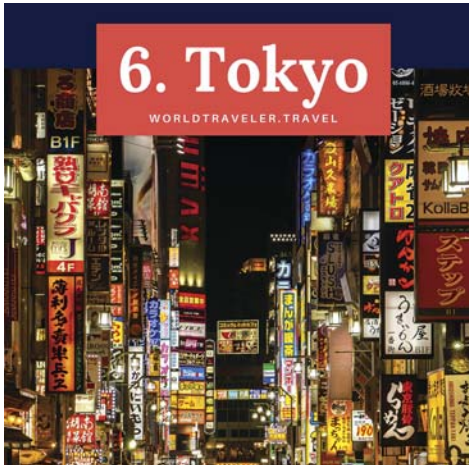
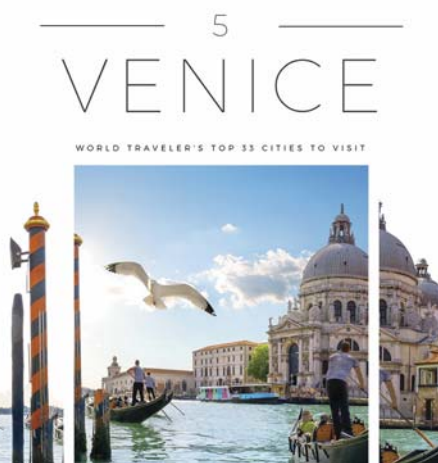
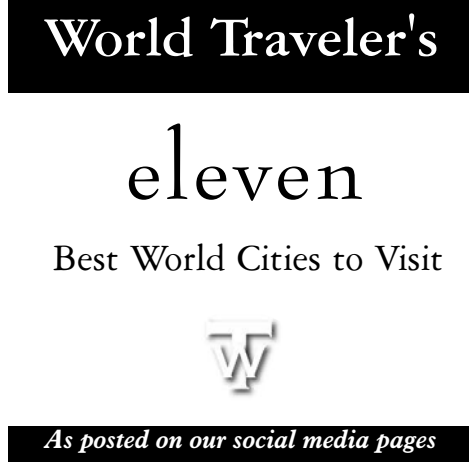
Lyon Bordered by the Rhône and Saône rivers, the city offers visitors a unique panorama dominated by the majestic Basilique de Fourvière. In 2024, Lyon celebrates both the 25th anniversary as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Made famous by the Mères Lyonnaises and Paul Bocuse, Lyon boasts over 4,000 addresses and just as many creative chefs. Gourmets will enjoy discovering starred and bistro cuisine, as well as its famous bouchons. Lyon is reflecting the French art of living.

Corsica In the heart of the Mediterranean, 1 hour 30 minutes' flight from Paris and nearly 2 hours from the main European capitals, this beautiful island with its magnificent mountain range allows you to enjoy a wide range of sports activities while you get close to nature. Choose from gentle or sportier activities - at sea or in the mountains, indulge in local products and specialties throughout the towns and villages of each of the regions to discover the island's history, and enjoy the many cultural events which are at the heart of the island's identity.

Brittany Between blue and green, walks and gourmet delights... it's a mosaic of universes, a multiple territory to discover. 2700 km of coastline and endless panoramas, from Saint-Malo to the Côte de Granit Rose, from the Pointe du Raz to the Golfe du Morbihan. Watch dolphins, sleep on an island, meet a lighthouse keeper, discover seaweed gathering... Brittany is a land of a wealth of activities and the inland is also full of surprises.

Aix-en-Provence The Art of slowing down! In 2025, enjoy 300 days of sunshine in Aix-en-Provence, its terraces, shady streets and daily market, where you can sample local produce, give the city a dynamic, intimate and safe atmosphere. Aix-en-Provence is like an open-air museum, but a living one. 2025 will be a special year dedicated to the painter Paul Cézanne, highlighted by an international exhibition. ■

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The Layover: 24 Hours in Dubai

by Daniel Smajovits



Emerging as the crossroads of the world for travelers, if you're lucky enough to have a layover in Dubai, there is plenty to see and do to make the most of your short time in the City of Gold.

If your flight lands early in the morning, start your day with breakfast at the **Arabian Tea House**. Located in the **Al Fahidi Historical Neighborhood**, the Arabian Tea House is a charming spot offering a traditional Emirati breakfast in a serene courtyard and a perfect way to experience local culture. Walk off your breakfast with a tour of Old Dubai and take an abra ride across Dubai Creek to the spice and gold souks for a taste of old Dubai's bustling markets.

After immersing yourself in the history of Dubai, continue your journey by stepping into the future at the **Burj Khalifa**, the world's tallest building and the **Dubai Mall**, the largest shopping mall in the world, where you can spend some time shopping or at their aquarium, amusement park and Gold Souk.



As Dubai is home to the most five-star hotels in the world, consider spending your afternoon adjusting to the time change. When we pass through Dubai, one of our favorite places to rest our heads is the **Grosvenor House**. Located in the Dubai Marina, the hotel provides guests with the utmost in luxury and relaxation. Relax steps from your room at one of their two pools or take advantage of the free shuttle to the hotel's sister property, Le Royal Méridien, which offers direct access to the Persian Gulf.

When it comes time for dinner, naturally, Dubai also boasts some of the best restaurants in the world. A favorite amongst tourists and locals alike is **Bushra**, which offers a modern twist on Mediterranean cuisine. Bushra is an experience that embodies the rich flavors, warm hospitality, and vibrant ambiance of the Mediterranean. With a focus on fresh, high-quality ingredients and bold, vibrant flavors, the menu features a variety of dishes inspired by the Arab world. From mezze platters brimming with hummus, baba ghanoush, and tabbouleh to hearty mains like lamb kofta, grilled seafood, and slow-cooked tagines, every dish at Bushra is a testament to the rich culinary heritage of the Mediterranean. The culinary experience at Bushra is further elevated by its impressive selection of wines and cocktails, including unique concoctions that incorporate Mediterranean herbs and fruits, creating a refreshing and innovative drinking experience.

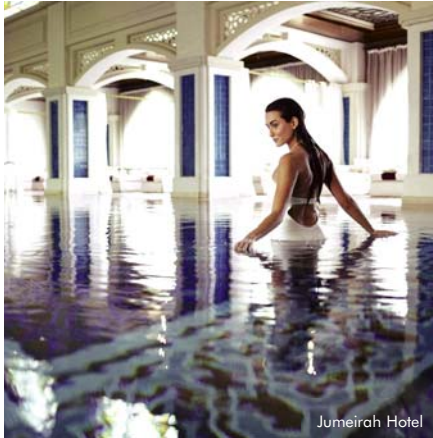
Following a hearty meal, make sure to cap your day off by experiencing some of city's vibrant nightlife. With a variety of options ranging from glamorous nightclubs, rooftop bars and laid-back beach lounges, there's something for everyone. Downtown Dubai, home to the aforementioned Burj Khalifa, has its fair share of upscale lounges, bars, and nightclubs with stunning views of the city skyline. Highlights include **Armani/Privé** at the Burj Khalifa, Address Sky View's **Ce La Vi** and **STK Downtown**. For a more laid-back atmosphere, the Palm Jumeirah area has high-end beach clubs such as **WHITE Beach** at Atlantis, **Soho Garden Palm Jumeirah** and **101 Dining Lounge and Bar** with chic waterfront views.

After an exciting day in Dubai – head back to your hotel for some much needed rest before you continue your journey to the other side of the world. ■

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Wellness in Dubai



Jumeirah Hotel

Here is just a sample of Wellness offerings:

Spa-cations, retreats and exclusive packages

Get pampered during a spa-cation at Jumeirah Zabeel Saray. The five-star hotel on the West Crescent of Palm Jumeirah is home to the award-winning Talise Ottoman Spa, one of Dubai's most spectacular wellness facilities, which features a luxurious Turkish hammam, Thalassotherapy pools, and sub-zero snowrooms.

Stunning spas at hotels and resorts

The Lana in Business Bay is the Dorchester Collection's first hotel in the Middle East – and is also home to Dior's first spa in the UAE. Located on the 29th floor, the Dior Spa The Lana has relaxing spaces that are dedicated to rest and wellness. Among its treatments are two unique 'Diorituals' created especially for Dior Spa The Lana: Stopover at the Lana and Dior Stone Therapy.

Spas, hammams and wellbeing centres

One&Only One Za'abeel is a recent addition to Dubai's luxury hotel portfolio. The 'vertical urban resort' has two towers connected by The Link, a restaurant and lounge

destination, and is also home to the Longevity Hub by Clinique La Prairie, a unique three-storey space dedicated to wellness and personal transformation.

Homegrown brands and venues

EVA Experience in Jumeirah 1 is a holistic haven and one of the city's hidden gems. The wellbeing centre has fitness spaces and hosts regular reiki and sound healing workshops, as well as yoga teacher training programmes.

Unique experiences and treatments

Surround yourself with views of 65,000 marine animals at Atlantis, The Palm's 'underwater wellness' sessions. Activities include sound healing meditation and hatha yoga

Healthy eating and wellness restaurants

Aside from making food tastier, many spices and herbs also offer a range of health benefits, such as reducing inflammation, acting as antioxidants, and boosting the immune system. Visitors to Dubai can add healthy ingredients to their menus by shopping at the Spice Souk. This traditional market in Deira has hundreds of different stalls selling aromatic herbs and spices. ■

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Wellness enthusiasts can enjoy a rejuvenating break in Dubai. The city is home to luxurious spas, holistic retreats and wellbeing activities that will help visitors relax and recharge. With a warm climate and stunning beaches, Dubai provides an idyllic backdrop for outdoor activities such as meditation, beach yoga, and watersports, enhancing the overall wellness experience.

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New from Australia



Ranked as the second safest country to travel in 2025, Australia continues to be a top choice for travelers seeking unique, secure, and memorable experiences. With its breathtaking landscapes, vibrant culinary scene, and luxurious accommodations, there's no better time to explore what Down Under has to offer. Whether you're an adventure seekers, wellness enthusiasts, or fine-dining aficionados, these new attractions are sure to captivate you.

Uluru-Kata Tjuta a Signature Walk

Experience the spiritual heart of Australia on the Uluru to Kata Tjuta Signature Walk, a five-day hike launching April 2026 from award-winning Tasmanian Walking Company. This world-first trek unites two of the country's most iconic landmarks through 54 kms (33 mi) of spectacular landscape.

Developed in consultation with Anangu Traditional Owners, the walk features exclusive overnight stays in eco-sensitive accommodation within the World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. The journey promises intimate cultural immersion with Indigenous Australian guides, gourmet dining under starlit skies and hikes through remote desert, red dunes and native woodlands.

Located in Australia's Red Centre, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is approximately a three-hours flight from major capital cities.

Ocean Road Abalone

Explore the world of premium abalone with Ocean Road Abalone immersive farm tours, where dedicated aquaculturists guide visitors through the fascinating world of sustainable abalone cultivation.

Experience the complete growth cycle from nursery to live holding tanks, culminating in a

one-of-a-kind tasting that showcases this prized delicacy in three distinct preparations - live, canned and vacuum-packed.

This unique farm-to-table experience offers a glimpse into premium seafood production, combining education with gastronomy. Perfect for culinary enthusiasts and eco-conscious travellers, the tour delves deep into sustainable farming practices while offering tastings of one of the ocean's most sought-after delicacies. Nestled along Victoria's iconic Great Ocean Road in Port Fairy, this working farm is three and half hours drive west of Melbourne / Narm.

Bangarra Dance Theatre Presents Illume

In 2025, Australia's leading Indigenous performing arts company, Bangarra Dance Theatre, will present the world premiere of their first-ever visual arts collaboration, *Illume*, an exciting new presentation from Mirning woman and Bangarra artistic director, Frances Rings and Goolarrgon Bard visual artist, Darrell Sibosado.

Inspired by Sibosado's *Bard Country* on the north-western coast of Western Australia, *Illume* draws together music, visual arts and dance to explore the ways light has captivated and sustained Indigenous cultural existence for millennia.

Following a two-decade tenure at the Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre, in 2025, Bangarra will move to the prestigious Joan Sutherland Theatre stage at the Sydney Opera House to premiere the work in June, allowing bigger audiences to experience Bangarra's extraordinary storytelling. *Illume* will then embark on a national tour, which in a welcome return in 2025, will also include performances in Western Australia.

Peninsula Hot Springs Eco Lodges

The award-winning Peninsula Hot Springs, just an-hour drive from Melbourne / Narm, has just opened its brand new Eco Lodges. Comprised of three lodges featuring ten rooms, each enriched by the surrounding coastal environment, the lodges provide the ultimate sanctuary to connect, rejuvenate and sleep. Each of the lodges has been designed and crafted to encourage guests to wind down into serenity. Overlooking a private lake, the



eco-conscious lodges nestle into the bushland with nature-inspired architecture, bespoke amenities and furniture and original scenic artwork by local Mornington Peninsula artists.

Outside the Eco Lodges, guests can enjoy access to the Peninsula Hot Springs for bathing, nutrition and movement activities, alongside a complementary 45-minute guided wellness activity and buffet breakfast each morning.

The International

The International, a highly-anticipated fine-dining establishment, is set to open in Sydney / Warrane's iconic Martin Place this November. Spanning three levels, this forthcoming venue is nestled between two Harry Seidler architectural masterpieces in the heritage-listed MLC Centre.

The crown jewel is The Grill, where culinary director Joel Bickford crafts wood-fired seafood platters served alongside champagne and signature martinis in a luxurious setting of marble, steel, and custom mid-century furniture. Below, The Wine Bar's extensive by-the-glass list complements small plates and wood-fired pizzas across its 60-seat outdoor courtyard, 40-seat wine bar, and 60-seat dining room.

The Panorama Bar presents spectacular city views, hibachi-grilled skewers, creative cocktails, and a curated champagne and Chablis selection. The newest venture from The Point* Group, known for Shell House and The Dolphin Hotel, The International is a short walk from Circular Quay Station. ■

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Tropical Tidbits

by Sue C Travel

I regret to announce that the final sun will be setting on this column now, but I'm grateful for the opportunity to bring so many Tropical Tidbits to World Traveler readers over the years. It's been a pleasure, but work commitments make it impossible now to give it the time it deserves. So, for my swan song (or should I say flamingo farewell?) I want to showcase a favorite tropical destination that's still off-radar for many, and that is Bonaire.

Bonaire is where?

This enchanting little island outpost is just 37 miles off the coast of Venezuela, the "B"

of the Dutch Caribbean trio of sister islands often referred to as the "ABCs" (Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao), and though each share commonalities, idyllic, sunny year-round weather outside of the hurricane belt, semi-arid desert like climate, and cultural and historical colonial similarities, each is extremely different in development and vibe. Bonaire is most famous for early adoption of marine life preservation. The surrounding waters have been a protected nature preserve since the 70s. Their reputation as one of the world's most prolific shore diving destinations is well known among scuba fans, and their designation as the world's first "Blue Destination" is an award

well-deserved. But you need not be a diver to enjoy a unique holiday here. Especially now.

My love affair with Bonaire

There are few islands to compare it to by way of bucket list activities, but trust me, in my 25 years of writing about this quirky oasis, it's been a colorful tapestry of 'firsts'. (Many of which I didn't even know I wanted to experience until I did!) Here are a few things I've checked off my list here...

The surreal sight of wild flamingos feeding with massive white mountains of salt behind





them? Check. An ethereal aerial view of unique pink salt lakes below from a tiny two-seater airplane? Check. Getting up on my very first try windsurfing due to expert instruction from world champions (The Frans Brothers) who now run their own school on Lac Bay? Check. Riding a powerful steed while it swims in the sea and then galloping back through a cacti-studded out-back? Check. Spotting wild dolphins, and viewing a baby octopus and spotted eagle ray within arm's reach while I snorkel steps offshore from a full-service resort? Check. Trying to learn golf on a "greenless" course with the main hazards being wild donkeys and goats? Check. Paddling through a lush mangrove tunnel in a clear-bottom kayak, then swimming with the juvenile fish and sea turtles? Check. Taking a water taxi to explore an uninhabited island (Klein Bonaire) with one of the world's most pristine alabaster white sand beaches? Then, encircling the same island's coral reefs in a little red semi-submarine to view the marine life without getting wet? Check and check. Drinking a delicious cocktail made from cactus? (The Cadushy Distillery in Rincón makes the world's only liqueur from cactus.) Check. Those are just a few cool non-diving focused things to do.

Where to stay, play, and eat, and best ways to explore...

Accommodation wise, Bonaire has grown to cater to all different types of travelers beyond divers. My go-to since the beginning has always been Divi Flamingo Beach Resort & Casino, they offer the best of all possible worlds from families to romantics



to divers, they have it all. They have an all-inclusive option, too. Its downtown location is also ideal. Those seeking seriously upscale digs flock to Harbour Village Beach Club for beachfront villas with big marble bathtubs and old-world luxury furnishings. And legendary Plaza Resort has upped their game big time since they were taken over by the famous Dutch Van der Valk family. Now they are a snazzy all-inclusive. If budget is a consideration, Bonaire Oceanfront Apartments downtown are still a best bet, especially for extended stays. The owners also operate SunRentals Bonaire, a superb collection of deluxe private villas ideal for small groups and big families at exceptional prices.

But it's the newer resorts that are responsible for igniting an explosion of foodie-focused dining options lately. Like Delfins Beach Resort and their Brass Boer- created by Dutch Michelin Chef Jonnie Boer offering world class fusion cuisine. And I was seriously impressed with the chef's table experience at the brand new Chogogo Dive & Beach Resort's signature restaurant Biña. New little Wapana Boutique Hotel also offers an impressive intimate chef's table.

(For reviews of some of these resorts, visit our Stay & Play archives:
<https://worldtraveler.travel/category/stay-play/>)

And many off-resort trendy eateries have blossomed up all over the island. In fact, there are so many foodie options now, (including a spot named "Foodies",) a 15-day culinary event called Bonaire Culinaire (www.bonaire-culinaire.com) is now held twice a year to introduce all the offerings with special tasting menus. Lots of new downtown nightlife also beckons. Follow your ears to find karaoke, live salsa music, and DJ driven beats all over the tiny grid after dark now. And the addition of the newly imagined Karel's Beach Bar palapa, and its sister overwater luxury dining lounge Pier Dos have become the crown jewel of the tiny capital- day and night.

Ensuring an eco-friendly evolution

But though the island has been developing at a dizzying pace, eco-conscious growth is



still top of mind. Many resorts are part of the Reef Renewal project that build new coral gardens in front of their properties. And the new Blue Defender program helps WWF protect breeding grounds for marine life. Visitors and locals can send locations to help their data when they spot a dolphin or a whale nearby. There are also many new environmentally friendly ways to explore the island. Choose from electric golf carts, electric cars, electric tuk-tuk tours, and even solar powered fat bikes! And new activities like Lady Bellai's party/ snorkeling schooner keeps local culture alive with lots of authentic local food on their buffets. Now, locally made arts and crafts are the only souvenirs to be found at the lively pop-up market that greets each cruise ship arrival, it's a must-visit in Wilhelmina Park. And if you want to explore Washington Slagbaai National Park- the protected nature reserve, I recommend a private tour with a reputable operator like HopiBonaire. They specialize in off-the-beaten-path locations, are extremely environmentally conscious, and will even curate personal itineraries to your liking that include snorkeling in off-radar regions. They'll also take wonderful photos as personal keepsakes.

So, what are you waiting for? Cross Bonaire off your bucket list this winter! Visit: www.bonaireisland.com ■

(Thanks to Casper Douma Photography for the fabulous flamingo shots, and to HopiBonaire , and Tourism Corporation Bonaire for many of the stellar photos in this article.)



So, I will sign off now and wish you all safe and sunny travels. If you wish to follow my further adventures, you can always find me on social @suectravel. Susan Campbell.

ARCTIC

NORTH ATLANTIC

SOUTH ATLANTIC

NORTH

Cruise Travel

WORLD TRAVELER

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This photo: MSC World Europa at Sea

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CroisiEurope Expands its 2025 Cruise & Hike Program to include the Rhine Valley & The Gironde

Europe's largest river cruise operator, CroisiEurope, has expanded its popular Cruise & Hike program for 2025, adding two new itineraries through the Rhine Valley and along the Gironde. The cruises, which feature guided walks

through some of the most beautiful scenery, are perfect for walkers and non-walkers alike with a selection of excursions available for those who don't want to hike.

The Rhine Valley: A five night cruise round trip from Strasbourg through the Rhine Valley taking in a stunning mix of landscapes, cultures and history via Rüdesheim, Koblenz, Mainz and Rastatt.

The Gironde: A four-night cruise round trip from Bordeaux exploring the Gironde, trekking across the banks of an estuary dotted with traditional fishing cabins, through Bordeaux and its historic downtown. ■

WWW.CROISIEUPERIVERCRUISES.COM



Tauck to Launch Two New Riverboats in France in 2026

Tauck has announced that two new ships will be joining the company's fleet of award-winning riverboats in 2026. The two ships, which have not yet been named, will launch in spring 2026 following construction next year in Serbia and The Netherlands.

The newbuilds include a 135-meter vessel that will sail on Tauck itineraries along the Rhone. Accommodating a maximum of just 130 guests in sixty-eight cabins.

A slightly smaller (125-meter) sister ship will host up to 124 guests along the River Seine. In keeping with Tauck's tradition of welcoming solo travelers, all Category 1 cabins on the new ships will have the single supplement waived on every sailing. ■

WWW.TAUCK.COM



Seabourn Revises Fall 2025 Itineraries for Seabourn Encore to Asia, the Caribbean, Mediterranean and More

Seabourn, has modified the fall 2025 itineraries for Seabourn Encore to include a series of voyages through the Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas, the Southern Caribbean, the Panama Canal, Hawaii, and Japan between October 2025 and January 2026. The new deployment features seven itineraries from

eight to 17 days, with visits to 33 destinations in 17 countries, including three maiden calls.

Seabourn Encore's originally planned itineraries were revised to prioritize the safety of guests and to avoid the Red Sea. Instead, the ship will head westbound from the Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas to Japan, traveling more than 18,500 nautical miles across five continents and two oceans. ■

WWW.SEABOURN.COM

Viking Announces Expansion of China Offering with New Voyages Starting in 2025



Viking® has recently announced six new itineraries in Asia that will expand exclusive access for guests to Japan and China, with Tibet (Xizang) in 2025. The new voyages range from 15 to 22 days and explore iconic destinations in China, including Shanghai, Beijing, Xi'an and Lhasa in Tibet (Xizang), as well as Osaka, Japan. The itineraries will continue to highlight rarely-seen destinations and ports in China to which only Viking has access. Each voyage will offer guests immersive destination-focused experiences, insightful lectures and regionally inspired cuisine. The new itineraries will operate from September 2025 to November 2025 on the Viking Yi Dun—formerly the Viking Sun—a sister ship featuring the same award-winning design and service as all other ocean ships in Viking's fleet.

New Asia Voyages in 2025: Jewels of Japan & China (15 days; Beijing to Tokyo), Classic China Discovery (20 days; Hong Kong to Beijing), Pearls of Japan & China (22 days; Tokyo to Beijing), Gems of China & Japan (22 days; Beijing roundtrip), 2025 Wonders of China (22 days; Beijing roundtrip) and 2025 Best of China (22 days; Hong Kong to Beijing).

Pre and Post Land Extensions

For additional immersion in Asia, Viking is also offering a variety of pre and post land extensions for its 2025 China itineraries, including: Beijing, Hong Kong, Hong Kong & Guilin, Spirit of Mongolia and Tokyo.

The Viking Yi Dun

Dedicated specifically to exploring destinations in China, with an onboard experience that complements guests' discoveries ashore, the Viking Yi Dun is a sister ship in Viking's award-winning ocean fleet. Classified by Cruise Critic as "small ships," Viking's ocean vessels have a gross tonnage of 47,800 tons, with 465 staterooms that host 930 guests; the ships feature all veranda staterooms, Scandinavian design, light-filled public spaces and abundant al fresco dining options. ■

WWW.VIKING.COM

MSC Cruises Offers the Ultimate Winter Escape to the Caribbean's Most Idyllic Destinations



Guests looking for the ultimate sunshine-filled winter escape need to look no further than MSC Cruises' vast array of Caribbean itineraries, which showcase some of the most idyllic destinations the region has to offer.

With its pristine white sand beaches, clear turquoise water, tropical weather and rich cultural heritage, the Caribbean continues to grow in popularity as a holiday destination.

MSC Cruises has a total of five ships sailing the Caribbean this 2024/2025 winter season with varied itineraries from a range of easily accessed departure ports in north America including Miami, Port Canaveral, New York City.

The itineraries range from short mini getaways to extended sailings to some of the most coveted and sun-drenched destinations in the region including The Bahamas, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, the Cayman Islands, Mexico and more.

Those guests looking for the ultimate comfort, privacy and personalized service on holiday can make the most of the MSC Yacht Club, the cruise line's luxury 'ship within a ship' concept, with all five ships that call to the Caribbean this winter, MSC Seascope, MSC Seaside, MSC Seashore and MSC Meraviglia and MSC Divina offering the MSC Yacht Club to book. With 24-hour butler and concierge service, premium drinks, elegant and spacious accommodations, an exclusive restaurant, lounge and pool, the MSC Yacht Club provides a secluded sanctuary, all within easy reach of everything a larger ship has to offer. ■

WWW.MSCCRUISES.COM

Princess Cruises Debuts Most Destination-Rich Voyage Ever with 131-Day Circle Pacific Cruise in Early 2026



Princess Cruises has recently announced the cruise line's most destination-rich voyage ever offered with its new 131-day Circle Pacific Voyage departing January 2026 and visiting 60 ports in 19 countries around the Pacific Ocean. This voyage replaces the previously announced 2026 World Cruise to bypass the Red Sea and surrounding region.

This new itinerary aboard Coral Princess departs Ft. Lauderdale on January 5, 2026, and sails through Hawaii, French Polynesia, the South Pacific, New Zealand and Australia, before continuing north on a tour of Asia highlighted with an extensive journey through Japan, followed by a Pacific crossing to experience the natural wonders of Alaska. Finally, after cruising southbound along the scenic Pacific Coast, the adventure culminates in Los Angeles on May 16, 2026. Guests may also choose a shorter 115-day roundtrip voyage from Los Angeles, departing January 21, 2026, as well as shorter segments sailing in various regions.

Iconic destinations await including Auckland, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Fiji, Osaka, Singapore, Sydney and Tahiti, with many late-night stays to enjoy the most time in port.

Coral Princess Amenities and Entertainment
With enrichment speakers, destination experts, ambassadors, performers and theatrical productions, Coral Princess brings each destination to life through immersive onboard programming. These thoughtfully crafted experiences, combined with an expertly curated itinerary, ensure a truly memorable voyage.

Additionally, the exclusive Princess MedallionClass vacation experience delivers exceptional, personalized experiences typical of small ships, while enjoying the best large-ship amenities. With expedited boarding, located loved ones anywhere on the ship, and enhanced service like having whatever they need delivered. ■

WWW.PRINCESS.COM

Explora Journeys Unveils Unique Destination Experiences in the Caribbean



Explora Journeys, the luxury lifestyle ocean travel brand of the MSC Group unveils a series of exclusive Caribbean destination experiences. Guests can discover these meticulously crafted experiences during their Caribbean journeys, blending celebrated destinations with off-the-beaten-path ports.

On both EXPLORA I and EXPLORA II, guests will have unparalleled opportunities to immerse themselves in the Caribbean's breathtaking landscapes and vibrant cultures, all while indulging in exceptional luxury.

EXPLORA I and EXPLORA II will visit a varied array of destinations in the Caribbean until March 2025. These include Gustavia in St. Barts, Oranjestad in Aruba, and St. John's in Antigua. Itineraries also feature ports such as Belize City, Bequia in the Grenadines, and Cozumel and Progreso in Mexico. Each destination is selected to provide a unique and enriching exploration experience.

About Explora Journeys

Explora Journeys is the privately-owned luxury lifestyle brand of the MSC Group, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, created at the heart of Swiss luxury hospitality. The brand stems from the long-held vision to redefine the ocean experience for a new generation of discerning luxury travellers, drawing on the Aponte family's 300 years of maritime heritage. The brand's aspiration is to create a unique 'Ocean State of Mind' by connecting guests with the sea, with themselves, and like-minded others, while remarkable itineraries blend renowned destinations with lesser-travelled ports, for a journey that inspires discovery in all its forms. ■

[HTTPS://EXPLORAJOURNEYS.COM](https://explorajourneys.com)

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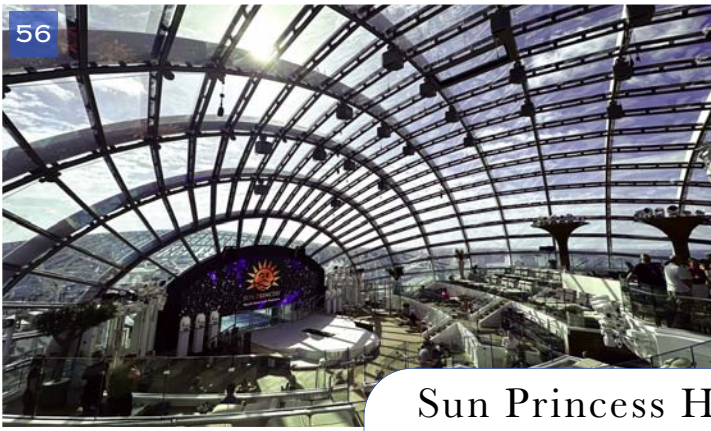
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Sun Princess Hits Home (*Run*)

Article and photography by Michael Morcos



The Caribbean breeze gently kissed my face as I approached the gleaming Sun Princess, a radiant jewel resting in her new winter homeport. After a summer spent gracefully cruising the Mediterranean, she was now ready to welcome passengers for an unforgettable Caribbean season. The excitement of stepping aboard such a majestic vessel was palpable, and I couldn't wait to uncover the wonders awaiting me.

From the moment I arrived, the seamless boarding process hinted at the thoughtful precision with which the Sun Princess operates. Smiling crew members directed me to my stateroom—a haven of comfort and elegance. The cabin offered ample space and a balcony with panoramic views of the turquoise waters that stretched endlessly into

the horizon. Even the bathroom, often overlooked on some ships, exuded luxury with its smart layout.

Exploring Public Spaces

Once settled, I set out to explore what would be my home for the next week. Every inch of the Sun Princess seemed designed to delight the senses. At the heart of the ship lay The Piazza, an elegant atrium flooded with natural light. I found myself drawn to its inviting charm, whether for enjoying live music, sipping coffee, or simply people-watching in its vibrant yet calming atmosphere.

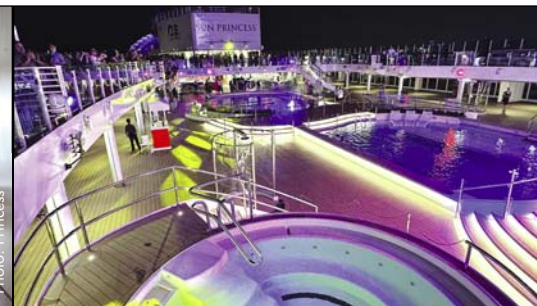
On Decks 17 & 18 forward is The Dome, an architectural marvel inspired by the terraces of Santorini. By day, it's a bright, airy space with a retractable roof for lounging or admiring ocean views, and by night, it transforms into a

vibrant entertainment venue with a spectacular light shows including the breathtaking acrobatics productions of Cirque Éloize.

The Princess Casino is the perfect spot for those seeking thrills, offering games for both seasoned players and first-timers. Nearby, Princess Live! keeps the energy high with interactive shows and live entertainment.

Guests can indulge in retail therapy at The Shops of Princess, which features luxury boutiques and duty-free shopping.

For relaxation, the main pools, spa, and exercise room cater to every need, offering opportunities to unwind, rejuvenate, or stay active while at sea.



A Culinary Journey at Sea

As a food lover, I was eager to experience the much-lauded dining options onboard, and the ship did not disappoint. At the helm of its culinary program was Chef Rudi Sodamin, a visionary whose reputation preceded him. The menu carried his signature touch: a fusion of creativity, fresh ingredients, and bold flavors.

I had the pleasure of dining at Alfredo's Pizzeria, where I met the award-winning pizza chef Tony Gemignani. Watching him in action was like witnessing an artist at work. Every pizza was a masterpiece—thin, crispy crusts topped with rich tomato sauces, fresh mozzarella, and toppings that tasted as if they had been picked that morning.

For a hearty Irish-inspired meal, O'Malley's was the perfect choice. I savored their signature dishes while enjoying the warm, pub-like atmosphere. In contrast, Love by Britto is a vibrant dining venue inspired by the bold, colorful artistry of Romero Britto. Known for his iconic pop art style, Britto's influence is seen in the restaurant's vibrant decor and presentation of its fresh, flavorful dishes, creating a feast for both the eyes and the palate.

Seafood lovers like myself would find Makoto Ocean restaurant a dream come true. The delicate flavors of freshly caught fish and shellfish were complemented by stunning ocean views.

The Umai Teppanyaki restaurant offers an exciting, interactive dining experience where skilled chefs prepare meals tableside with flair. Featuring premium ingredients and bold Asian flavors, this venue combines entertainment with exquisite cuisine, making it a must-visit for foodies seeking unforgettable culinary moments at sea.

For a touch of Italian tradition, Sabatini's Italian Trattoria provided hearty, authentic dishes. And when it came to my daily caffeine fix, the coffee and tea stations scattered across the ship never failed to impress, serving perfectly brewed beverages that felt like a small luxury.

Spellbinding Entertainment

As the sun set, the Sun Princess transformed

into a hub of world-class entertainment. Cirque Éloize left me awestruck with their acrobatics and storytelling, while Spellbound by Magic Castle brought an air of mystery and wonder. The comedy acts on board had the entire audience roaring with laughter, proving that there was something for everyone.

For world-class performances, the Princess Arena sets the stage. This state-of-the-art theater hosts Broadway-style shows ensuring every evening is unforgettable. Whether it was a musical extravaganza or a soulful singer backed by an orchestra, the energy was infectious. Every seat felt like the best in the house, and the productions were on par with anything I had seen on land.

Serenity at Sea

For moments of tranquility, I found solace in the Sanctuary Club. Nestled in a quiet corner of the ship, this adults-only retreat offered plush loungers, attentive service, and an atmosphere of complete relaxation. It was the perfect place to escape the lively energy of the public spaces and simply let the gentle rhythm of the waves lull me into serenity.

A Home Away From Home

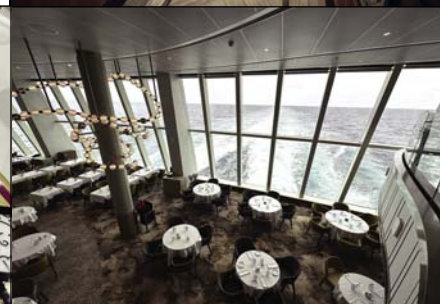
The Sun Princess wasn't just a cruise ship; it felt like a floating city. Its public spaces were designed to foster connection and comfort. Whether I was enjoying a cocktail at a chic bar, mingling with fellow passengers in the atrium, or simply finding a quiet spot to read, there was a sense of community onboard.

Even the elevators, often a source of frustration on larger ships, were a marvel of efficiency. Programmed to minimize waiting times, they ensured I spent more time enjoying the ship and less time waiting to get from one deck to another.

A Journey to Remember

As I disembarked, I left with a heart full of memories and an eagerness to return. Perhaps next time, I'll follow the Sun Princess back to the Mediterranean. But for now, the Caribbean chapter of this floating paradise remains etched in my soul. The new Sun Princess didn't just swing for the fences, it hit a "home run"! ■

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Norwegian Aqua - April 2025



Viking Tonle - July 2025



Viking Vesta - July 2025

2025



Royal Caribbean Star of the Seas - August 2025



Disney Destiny - November 2025



Celebrity Xcel - December 2025



Viking Cruises

Unfiltered Danube

A River Cruise Aboard Viking Ullur Through Eastern Europe's Past and Present

Article by Judi Cohen, photography by Judi Cohen and Viking

My husband and I recently embarked on an 11-day cruise along the Danube River aboard the 190-passenger Viking Ullur. The Passage to Eastern Europe itinerary, took us through five countries—Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary—in regions we knew little about before our trip. Unlike the well-traveled parts of Western Europe, the Eastern stretch of the Danube offered a more authentic experience, from medieval castles and remnants of communism to vibrant modern cities and deeply rooted traditions.

Life Aboard Viking Ullur

The Viking Ullur served as a comfortable and stylish home with its chic Scandinavian design and understated elegance. Our Veranda stateroom (Cabin 227) was bright and spacious, providing ample storage and counter space in both the bedroom and bathroom. We spent little time in our cabin during the day, preferring to take in the passing scenery and panoramic views from the airy Aquavit Terrace, the Lounge, or the Sun Deck.

Meals were served in the Dining Room, featuring floor-to-ceiling windows and a choice of family-style seating or smaller tables. We often chose to dine in the more intimate Aquavit Terrace and quickly became friendly with other guests who frequented the space. The food was beautifully presented by attentive staff and reflected the flavours and traditions of the countries we visited along the way.



Viking Cruises



Viking Cruises



Viking Cruises

Captivating Romania: Bucharest and the Iron Gates

We began our journey in Bucharest, a city that surprised us with its vibrant energy and eclectic mix of architecture. From grand boulevards lined with neoclassical buildings to communist-era apartment blocks and modern skyscrapers, the city's diverse landscape reflects its complex history. The Palace of the Parliament was a highlight—an imposing symbol of the Ceausescu regime's excesses. As one of the largest and heaviest buildings in the world, it was both impressive and sobering, a stark reminder of the country's recent past.

In contrast, Bucharest's Lipscani district, the old town, felt charming and lively. Narrow cobblestone streets were lined with cafes, boutiques, and street performers. We also visited the Jewish Quarter, where we found well-preserved synagogues and libraries filled with photos and documents from before World War II. It was a moving experience, providing a glimpse into the once-thriving Jewish community.

Sailing through the Iron Gates, a series of dramatic gorges between Romania and Serbia, was one of the most breathtaking experiences of the cruise. We rose early to watch Captain Vladimir navigate the Iron Gate 1 Lock, the largest on the Danube. Steep cliffs rose majestically on either side of the river, covered in dense forests. The Decebalus sculpture, a massive carving of the last king of Dacia, towered over the river, bearing silent witness to the region's ancient history. A shore excursion to the Golubec Fortress by foot capped off a spectacular day of cruising.

Off-the-Beaten-Path Destinations

Our itinerary featured several lesser-known stops that are often bypassed by other European river cruises. In Vidin, Bulgaria our Viking city tour took us by the Baba Vida Fortress—the only fully preserved medieval castle in Bulgaria, while we made our way to the Belogradchik Rocks and Fortress for an invigorating hike. Later that day we visited a

beautifully restored former synagogue. Once a vibrant center for the Jewish community, it is now a community center. Standing inside, surrounded by artifacts, paintings, and religious books, I was reminded of the cultural heritage that existed before World War II.

The Scars of Conflict in Croatia

Our visit to Osijek, Croatia, offered a powerful look at the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars. The historic Citadel of Tvrda, with its cobblestone streets and Baroque architecture, stood in sharp contrast to surrounding buildings still marked by bullet holes and shattered windows.

Discovering Serbian Culture in Belgrade

Belgrade, the lively capital of Serbia, was a city of contrasts. Its bustling markets, vibrant cafes, and energetic nightlife contrasted with the somber remnants of its war-torn past. We visited the Kalemegdan Fortress, perched high above the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers, as well as the majestic Church of Saint Sava.

In the evening, we explored Skadarlija, the Bohemian District, on a Viking shore excursion, enjoying traditional Serbian dishes accompanied by live music. The sounds of accordions filled the air as locals sang and danced, creating an atmosphere that was both joyful and welcoming.

Hungarian Heritage: From Kalocsa to Budapest

Our journey continued into Hungary, where we stopped in Kalocsa, a small town known for its paprika and vibrant folk art. We toured a local museum dedicated to paprika, learning about its significance in Hungarian cuisine. The embroidered floral tapestries reminded me of growing up in a traditional Hungarian home in Canada.

The grand finale of our cruise was our arrival in Budapest. The city's stunning architecture, a mix of Gothic, Baroque, and Art Nouveau styles, captivated us instantly. We toured the Castle District, admired the



colorful roof of Matthias Church, and took in the spectacular view of the Parliament building from Fisherman's Bastion.

Our visit to the former Jewish Ghetto was a powerful reminder of Hungary's rich but tragic Jewish history. In the National Art Gallery, we viewed a special exhibit titled *My Story: Early Memories of the Holocaust* in the Works of Eyewitness Artists. The stories of survival and loss were deeply moving and provided a somber yet important perspective.

Reflections on a Raw and Honest Journey

This Danube cruise was unlike any we had experienced before. It wasn't the fairy-tale journey of castles and palaces we had imagined. Instead, it was an authentic exploration of a region shaped by conflict, political turmoil, and cultural resilience. The remnants of communist-era life gave our trip a deeper meaning, offering a unique view of a less polished but real part of Europe.

Travel isn't always about seeking picturesque views; it can also be about confronting the challenging aspects of history and gaining a deeper understanding of the places we visit. Viking Cruises provided the perfect base for this thoughtful exploration, with its signature comfort, outstanding service and exceptional learning opportunities, making our experience memorable and meaningful. ■

WWW.VIKING.COM





UnCruise Adventures Appeals to Active Travelers

by Randy Mink

UnCruise Adventures is a small ship cruise line that's all about fewer faces and open spaces. For globetrotters with a spirit of adventure and a passion for cultural immersion, UnCruise merits a serious look.

This is not mass tourism. Forget the lines and the crowds. Accommodating anywhere from 22 to 86 passengers, UnCruise's nine intimate expedition vessels go to places where the jumbo ships don't. Passengers spend their days hiking, kayaking or wildlife watching rather than shopping, lounging by the pool or tempting Lady Luck in the onboard casino.

"We are the antithesis of your typical cruise," says Monica Sagisi, vice president of marketing & sales. "When you UnCruise, you're immersing yourself in nature and the culture, and having a true connection with the destination."

Because of the small passenger capacity, it doesn't take long for guests and crew to get to know one another. An open-bridge policy encourages passengers to chat with the captain.

Active Days Outdoors

Each ship is equipped with top-of-the-line gear for kayaking, paddle boarding, snorkeling and hiking. Binoculars are available, too.

Members of the expedition team exhibit an infectious enthusiasm for connecting with nature; many have advanced degrees and can speak in detail about subjects ranging from whales to fungi to geology.

Destinations: Temperate to Tropical

Though there are set itineraries, Mother Nature leads the way on these cruises, and in-the-moment changes will happen. No two departures are ever the same.

In Southeast Alaska, UnCruise operates seven different itineraries. Sea of Cortez outings explore remote islands off Mexico's Baja California Peninsula. The 7-day "Hawaiian Seascapes" program visits four islands—Molokai, Lana'i, Maui and Hawaii. Also available are 7-day cruises in Ecuador's Galapagos Islands, a bucket-list destination inhabited by animals found almost nowhere else. ■

WWW.UNCruise.COM



Amadeus River Cruises Showcases the Heart of Europe

by Randy Mink

Though less known to North Americans than other lines, Amadeus River Cruises has been operating on Europe's great waterways for more than 40 years. In fact, the family-owned Austrian company was the first to offer overnight river cruises on the Continent.

Having hosted travelers in its own backyard for decades, Amadeus has earned a reputation for offering a superior product honed to perfection by travel experts who know Europe best.

The Amadeus Fleet

The company boasts one of the youngest fleets on the rivers of Europe and continually invests in upgrades. It has introduced a new ship every year since 2016.

Public areas on the line's 17 ships include the Panorama Restaurant, Panorama Bar and Lounge, Amadeus Club (coffee and tea available 24 hours a day), and Cafe Vienna for Viennese coffee specialties and confections. The glass-shielded River Terrace is the perfect place to sip a drink and watch the scenery parade by.

The Sun Deck has lounge chairs, awnings for shade, a bar, golf putting green, giant chess board, shuffleboard court and heated pool.

Cabin Comforts

Amadeus guests can expect generously proportioned outside cabins, most with a French balcony or panoramic drop-down window. Suites have a walk-out balcony.

On Shore

Guided excursions employ a digital audio system that makes it easy for even stragglers to hear every word of the tour guide's commentary. For independent exploration, passengers have complimentary use of bicycles.

Cosmopolitan Flair

As Amadeus cruises are marketed around the world, the clientele is truly international. The common language spoken on board is English, and North Americans account for about 50 percent of guests.

Where Amadeus Ships Go

Cruises range from 5 to 16 days. Destinations include:

- Rhine, Main and Moselle Rivers
- Danube River
- French Rivers (Rhône, Saône, Seine)
- Dutch and Belgian Waterways ■

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Photo: MSC Cruises

Winter Warmth Island Style Aboard the MSC Opera

Article and photography by Lisa TE Sonne

The fascinating Canary Islands off west Africa were once major historic supply stations for the explorers, adventurers, and traders of the "Old World," as they helped connect Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Nowadays, these compelling Spanish Isles -- the so-called "Hawaii of Europe" -- annually supply millions of tourists and travelers with sunshine, fun, and relaxation.

The archipelago of seven main islands and many satellite islands has year-round temperatures ranging from 60 to 80 degrees F. It boasts white and black sand beaches tucked between volcanic cliffs and green oases in deserts not far away.

Some people come, as one tour guide said, "to fly and flop" -- whether on beaches, cruise decks, or massage tables. Others go for activity -- from good eating and shopping (with less VAT) to hiking forests in biosphere reserves, and from exploring local cultures and museums to heading out for water sports and whale watching.

My husband and I chose the European, privately-owned cruise line MSC for a more cosmopolitan experience enroute. Passengers are diverse. Announcements are made in English, French, Spanish, German, and Italian.

The 13-story Opera makes a continuous weekly loop among four of the captivating

Canary Islands and, to the north, Funchal, the capital of the lovely Portuguese island of Madeira. Travellers can start and end their round trip at any port of call, keeping the passenger capacity of 2,600+ a dynamic mix.

Madeira

My husband and I started in Madeira, after days with lush tropical gardens, a UNESCO-designated forest of serene beauty, and salt-water lava pools to swim in. We had visited Europe's tallest skywalk, diverse museums, and a dramatic, vista-rich tramway. My husband's favorite was a unique tourist attraction continuing an old tradition -- "tobogganing" down streets on steep hills.



Boarding and checking-in to our balcony stateroom was easy. Our hall steward made us feel very welcome, and our first evening included good dining, a circus-like theater show, and making new friends. We slept comfortably to a rocking ship plying the Atlantic.

Lanzarote

Our first port of call was Arrecife, in the south of the island of Lanzarote, only 125 kilometers from Africa. Ship excursions for the adventurous included hiking in "Martian-looking" orange desert landscapes and ebony lava tubes or a "moonscape trek" in the Timanfaya National Park. Other options included surfing lessons, fishing villages, off-road forays, and shopping. We chose to go to the North of the island, where Spanish artist Cesar Manrique combined man's and nature's architecture. "Mirador Del Rio" is embedded at a high point in lava peaks and is designed with panoramic views from inside and out on dramatically high platforms.

We also visited a Manrique-designed restaurant, bar, and concert hall underground -- created around the natural skylights and a seawater lake that are part of the "Tunnel of Atlantis," the world's longest submerged lava tube. Due to super moon high tides, to reach the food setting and gardens, we needed to take off our shoes and roll up our pants to walk on a submerged path along a cave wall through the lava tube. In these Jameos del Agua caves we were also able to observe the tiny albino, sightless crabs that are endemic, and endangered.

Tenerife

We woke the next day in the port of popular Tenerife of Santa Cruz, known for its celebrities and sun, hot night life, and the third largest volcano on earth.

For a long time, though, I had wanted to visit Tenerife's one-of-a-kind, indoor-outdoor museum about cultures, botanicals, and human migrations -- the great explorer Thor Heyerdahl's Guimar Pyramid Museum. We rented a car from a shop right on the ship's wharf and drove about 30 minutes south to the ethnographic museum and botanical gardens built around the lava step-pyramids that inspired Heyerdahl to live on the island of Tenerife.

There are exhibits on the similarities between Egyptian and Meso-American pyramids and cultures, about Canarian life, and re-creations of the Kon Tiki and Ra, boats that Heyerdahl boldly crossed oceans in to test theories about how people and cultures migrate.

Heyerdahl's work on Easter Island and information about Polynesian cultures make up only part of the exhibits. There's an area on poison plants, an interactive area on the dangers of plastic in the oceans, a café, and a children's play area. We had not planned to spend the entire day there, but the indoor-outdoor museum was that engaging.

Gran Canaria

In Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, we opted for a Hop On-Hop Off bus to get us to the vegueta, or "Old Town." We walked the winding ways and settled at a café on the palmed plaza of the Cathedral of Santa Ana that took 400 years to build. We observed local life, and watched tourists pose next to the statues of seven Canario Presa dogs, representing the seven islands. They are a distinct canine breed that evolved on the islands.

Nearby, the home where it's believed Christopher Columbus slept on three or four of his historic journeys is now a museum about his life and voyages. The highlights included artifacts, log entries, and maps of what people toward the end of the 15th century thought the world looked like.

The beaches that night were buzzing, with block after block of outdoor cocktails and dining on the boardwalk, multiple sand volleyball games, and plenty of music and laughter underway. A colorful sign in many languages read, "One Beach, a Thousand Cultures."

Fuerteventura

The next morning, the Opera was docked in Puerto Del Rosario, on the intriguing island of Fuerteventura. We jumped on a bus excursion tour to the northern fishing village and sea caves of Aju. I greatly enjoyed a dramatic walk along the black beach, past a few colorful wooden fishing boats, up a cliff, and then down into a large cave extending far back in time and size.

We also bussed up a steep windy road, past stark orange and desert landscapes, lava wall terraces, and little oases with quiet windmills, to the village of Betancuria, once the capital of the island. Now, it's a locale for visitors to get Canarian crafts, enjoy some refreshments, or visit a new archeology museum.

Back in San Rosario, at the suggestion of a local, we enjoyed fried goat cheese and goat meat along a lovely beach with the Opera in view. Soon, I was walking into the warm waters and floating on liquid turquoise.

At Sea

The island-hopping had felt a bit like we were bees flitting from flower to flower to gather pollen. The quick immersions on each island were like enjoying Spanish tapas or Hawaiian pupus -- exploratory taste bits to arouse the senses, but not sate a fuller appetite. On each island, there was always more to explore, but this travel method did provide many tempting introductions.

For me, there was an excitement at seeing these islands from a ship in the water, the way voyagers did hundreds of years ago --except we were enjoying vastly, mindbogglingly more comforts.

In-between shore times, my husband and I appreciated sitting on our balcony enjoying the wind and air -- sometimes with the view of a bustling port, other times with that expansive feeling of just seeing sea and sky, and tasting the travel, massaged by the winds.

On our day at sea, heading back to Madeira, we pried ourselves from the balcony and walked the decks of the ship, hearing many languages, seeing people playing ping-pong and cards, swimming in the pools, or just "flopping" to enjoy the sunshine. Inside, people pulled handles in the casino, headed to the beautiful spa, listened to live music, read books, and clinked glasses. Everywhere were the happy faces of people enjoying their holidays.

The Canaries were once called the "Fortunate Islands." Indeed, we left them feeling very fortunate. ■

WWW.MSCCRUISES.COM





Exploring East Greenland Aboard Vikingfjord: A Journey with Secret Atlas

by Olivia Liveng
photography, Paul Goldstein



The first glimpse of East Greenland through the windows of our chartered Icelandair flight from Reykjavik was unforgettable. Snow-capped peaks rose like jagged teeth, piercing the Arctic sky. Vast, untouched fjords stretched below us, their icy waters glittering in the pale light of a far-northern autumn. For me, this wasn't just another trip—it was the adventure of a lifetime. I was about to spend several days aboard the MV Vikingfjord, a 12-person expedition vessel, exploring the remote wilderness of East Greenland with Secret Atlas, a company known for its intimate, eco-conscious micro cruises.

What is a Micro Cruise?

Micro cruises, such as the one I embarked on with Secret Atlas, offer a unique and exclusive experience. With a small group of like-minded travelers, usually no more than 12-15 passengers, these cruises take you on an immersive, low-impact journey to some of the world's most remote and fragile environments. This is not a typical cruise with shopping malls and crowded decks; instead, it's a profoundly personal and sustainable experience. Every activity feels exclusive, and each moment in the landscape is fully appreciated without the rush of mass tourism. On the Vikingfjord, this small size allowed us to disembark quickly onto the fjords and glaciers, and we could explore areas that larger ships could never reach.

Beyond the logistics, the intimacy of a micro cruise fosters a deeper connection to the environment and wildlife. There is no fighting for space or time to get a good view; everyone can enjoy the landscape in their own time. For photographers, this smaller group dynamic means more opportunities to capture that perfect shot—whether it's a fleeting glimpse of Arctic wildlife or the ever-changing hues of the sky at sunset.

Life Onboard the Vikingfjord

Once aboard the Vikingfjord, I was struck by the ship's atmosphere. Unlike the large, commercial cruises that whisk hundreds of people through the Arctic with schedules that feel more like theme park itineraries, Vikingfjord offered something different: space, quiet, and deep immersion in the landscape. Secret Atlas prides itself on low-impact travel, and this ethos was palpable from the start. The small group size meant that every disembarkation, every photo opportunity, and every wildlife sighting felt personal and unrushed. More importantly, it was a constant reminder of our responsibility to the environment and the importance of conservation in our travel experiences.



One of the photography guides for the trip was Virgil Reglioni, an award-winning polar landscape and Northern Lights photographer and conservationist with much experience in polar regions. Before joining the trip, I had read about his energy and passion, but nothing could have prepared me for what I experienced. Virgil's enthusiasm was infectious. He had an uncanny ability to spot wildlife in the distance, often long before the rest of us could. And his commitment to his craft was relentless—if the light were right, we would be out on deck at all hours, braving the chill Arctic wind to capture that perfect shot.

What set Virgil apart, though, was his dedication to teaching. Whether you were a seasoned photographer or a novice with a smartphone, Virgil's goal was to help you see the landscape—and its inhabitants—through a new lens. He encouraged us to think about composition, light, and perspective and to push ourselves beyond the obvious. "Take risks," he would say. "That's where the magic happens." More than once, I found myself lying on the frozen ground or precariously balancing on rocks to get a unique angle, following Virgil's guidance with trust and excitement.

Chasing the Northern Lights

One of the moments that will stay with me forever was our first night aboard the Vikingfjord. The sky was clear, and there was a buzz of anticipation. We all knew what we were hoping for: the Northern Lights. As we sailed further into the fjord, the cold night air bit at our skin, but none of us seemed to care. We were bundled up, cameras ready, eyes scanning the sky.

And then, slowly, the show began.

At first, it was a faint, greenish glow on the horizon, almost imperceptible. But soon, the lights grew stronger, weaving and twisting like cosmic ribbons across the sky. The auroras danced above the fjord, reflecting off the icy waters below. I was mesmerized. I tried to capture it on camera—the long exposure shots allowing the colors to come alive—but more than anything, I just wanted to stand in awe of the natural spectacle unfolding above me.

Virgil was there with us, offering tips on photographing the auroras, but he also reminded us to take it in with our eyes and hearts, not just through the lens. "Sometimes," he said, "the best memory is the one you don't capture."



And he was right. The Northern Lights were more than just a beautiful phenomenon—they were a reminder of how small we are in this vast, majestic world.

An Adventure Aboard in the Greenlandic Arctic

Our first full day on the water began early, with a thin veil of mist clinging to the fjord as we cruised deeper into the wilderness. The air was crisp, the sun still low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the mountains. Icebergs, some the size of small buildings, floated silently by, their surfaces glowing blue under the morning light. The stillness was profound—no engines, no human noise, just the occasional crack of distant ice shifting in the fjord.

On the second day, we first encountered Greenland's wildlife. As we navigated a particularly narrow passage, our expedition leader spotted movement on a distant rocky shore—two musk oxen, their shaggy coats blending perfectly with the rugged terrain. We immediately dropped anchor, hopped into the small inflatable zodiacs, and headed ashore. This was my first time seeing musk oxen in the wild, and I was struck by their sheer size and ancient, almost prehistoric appearance. We were reminded to stay downwind and move slowly to avoid disturbing the animals, who continued grazing, seemingly unaware of our presence.

The thrill of being so close to such creatures in their natural habitat was indescribable. With only 12 passengers, our group moved quietly and respectfully, taking time to appreciate the wildlife and the vast emptiness surrounding us. It felt like we were the only people on earth.

Our days aboard the Vikingfjord followed a flexible routine—no rigid schedules, just a general sense of moving with the rhythms of nature. Some mornings, we woke to the ship anchored in the middle of a fjord, where towering cliffs rose steeply on either side, creating a cathedral-like atmosphere of solitude and grandeur. Other times, we would head out early in the zodiacs to explore hidden inlets, where waterfalls tumbled down icy slopes and the autumn colors of Arctic flora clung vibrantly to the landscape.

One of the most striking features of East Greenland is its glacial landscape, and no trip here would be complete without visiting the region's iconic glaciers. On one particular day, we approached the edge of a massive glacier that crept slowly toward the sea, its crevasses gleaming in the sunlight. As we got closer, the scale of the glacier became almost overwhelming, a reminder of nature's sheer power and the impermanence of even the most seemingly eternal landscapes. The sound of ice calving—chunks of the glacier breaking off and crashing into the water—echoed through the fjord, a stark reminder of the effects of climate change in this fragile environment.

Photography was a constant theme throughout the trip, with Virgil always providing tips, feedback, and encouragement. But for me, the experience was about more than just capturing the perfect shot—it was about slowing down, being present, and truly experiencing the beauty of this remote part of the world. Whether I was photographing the delicate light of an Arctic sunset or simply sitting in silence on the deck, watching the landscape pass by, I felt a profound connection to the place.

The Magic of the Arctic

In the evenings, after long days of exploration, we would gather in the cozy standard room aboard the Vikingfjord to share stories, review our photos, and discuss the day's adventures. The small group size created a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose. We weren't just tourists—we were travelers, adventurers, and, in our small way, stewards of the Arctic. Conversations would often turn to conservation, and the expedition leads spoke passionately about the need to protect these remote regions from the impacts of climate change and over-tourism. It was clear that for them, this trip was not just about photography or "checklist travel"—it was about raising awareness and inspiring others to care deeply for the polar regions.

When we returned to Constable Point, I felt changed in ways I hadn't anticipated. The journey had been physically and mentally demanding, but it had also been deeply fulfilling. I had learned so much—not just about photography, but about the fragility and beauty of the Arctic and the importance of being mindful and respectful in such an environment. The small group size, the expert guidance of Virgil and the expedition leaders, and the pristine wilderness of East Greenland had combined to create an experience that felt intensely personal and transformative.

As we flew back over the ice-covered fjords, I thought about the lessons I would take home: to slow down, look closely, and appreciate the quiet beauty of the world's wild places. The Vikingfjord may have been small, but the memories it created will stay with me for a lifetime. ■

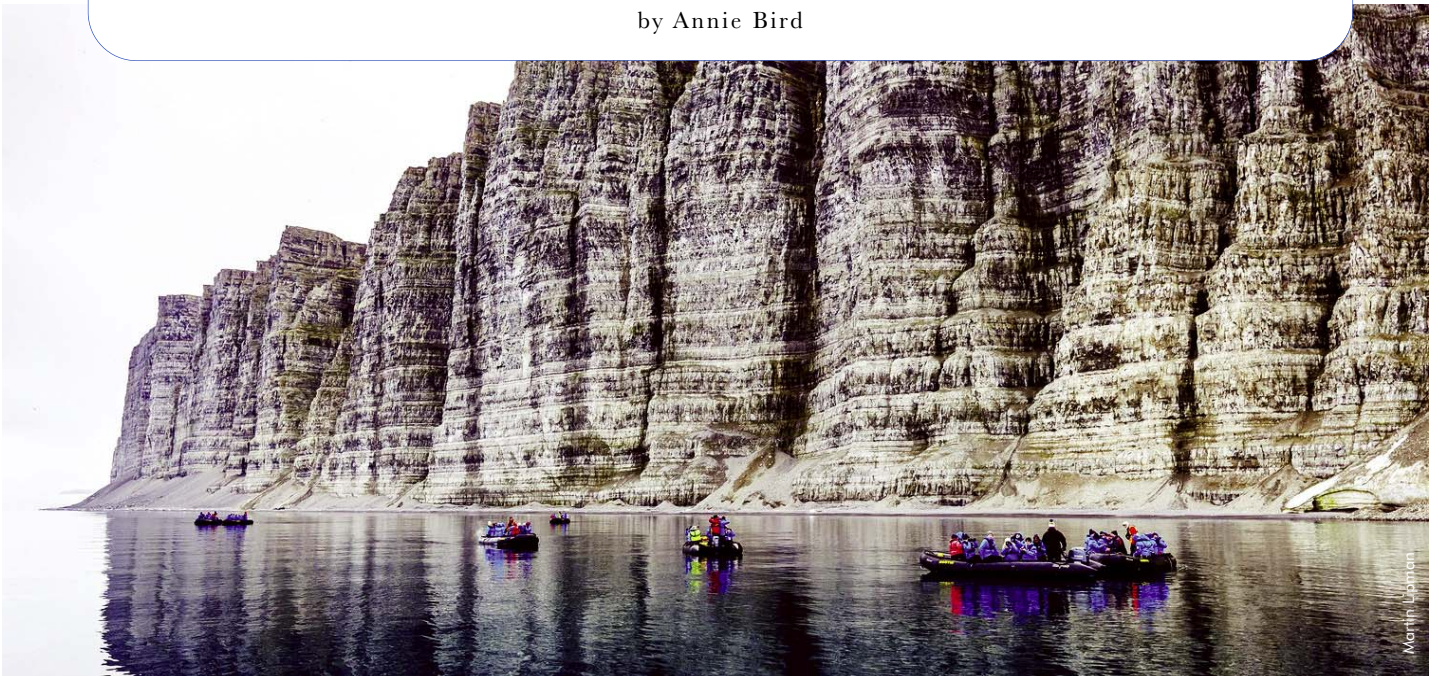
WWW.SECRETATLAS.COM





Sail the Northwest Passage with Adventure Canada

by Annie Bird



It is 6am, and my fellow expeditioners and I are being gently woken by our expedition leader John Blyth - "Good morning, good morning, good morning" – he trills in a sing song voice. Normally, this pre-dawn cheer is something I would not abide, but today I jump eagerly out of bed because today, we visit Beechey Island. As I peer out the ship's portholes I smile, it's sunny and clear, a rarity at this location the expedition team tells me. Although I'm pleased, I'm not surprised. We've been lucky with weather so far on this expedition – probably because my fellow passengers and I have refrained from whistling on the ship (more on that later).

Beechey Island, one of the key historic sites in understanding the history and folly of the notorious Franklin Expedition, normally falls into the category of "inaccessible" as the site lies high in the Canadian Arctic, in what is today called Nunavut. But I have the privilege of visiting this site, and many others in the Arctic, as a passenger on Adventure Canada's Into the Northwest Passage – a 17-day journey that explores the high Arctic travelling from Greenland to Nunavut in the footsteps of early European explorers and Inuit who have lived on this bountiful land since time immemorial.

After an early, hearty breakfast in the dining room we disembark for Beechey Island to explore Beechey Island National Historic Site of Canada. The site includes what remains of the over-wintering site of Sir John Franklin's ill-fated Northwest Passage Expedition used from 1845-46 before the expedition party became stranded in sea ice off the coast of Qikiqtaaluk (King William Island) the next year. After this unlucky turn of events, all of Franklin's men perished, and the series of events remains shrouded in mystery to this day. The site itself has become synonymous with early European exploration of the Arctic and the search for the Northwest Passage, many other expedition parties used the site for overwintering in their quest to find the passage and map the Eastern Arctic. Today, we visit and learn about the graves of four who perished at Beechey Island and the remains of Northumberland House – the wreck of a

small store house erected by a search party and stocked with provisions for the lost Franklin crew in case they returned to the Beechey Island site after being lost for over 7 years. Some guests even take up the challenge of hiking from the landing site to one of Franklin's message cairns on the other side of the peninsula, led by a watchful bear guard, of course. The wind whips my hair as I return by Zodiac to the ship, a curious seal bobbing in the water as we pass. The highly anticipated day did not disappoint.

Although Beechey Island stands out as a special day of our expedition, others also come clearly to mind when I recall the epic, 17-day journey from Kangerlussuaq, Greenland, to Kugluktuk, Nunavut. As I reflect, I realize most of them were incredibly unexpected being plan "B" options offered by the dogged expedition team in response to fog, or rain, or bears. Expedition travel, and travel to the North in general, necessitates flexibility. I think particularly of a cloudy day in the Kitikmeot Region of Nunavut where we sit quietly for hours to watch Beluga play in the shallows of a bay and curiously examine bear tracks (big and small), in the sand along the shore. One of our Inuit Cultural Educators, Wayne Broomfield, estimates there could have been over 1000 whales, resting, playing, feeding, and rubbing (did you know that Beluga whales molt?!) in the protected bay. This beautiful moment was possible thanks to the creativity of our expedition leaders and a sleepy polar bear that foiled our plans to land at a different site.

In addition to near daily landings that offered opportunities to hike at different levels of ability (leisurely, medium, hard), search for wildlife, take photographs, explore cultural and significant archaeological sites from European and Inuit presence in the Eastern Arctic, we enjoyed fantastic on-board programming to keep us entertained and engaged throughout our travels. Adventure Canada complements each itinerary with a hand selected expedition team – experts in their fields who are there to enhance each journey through their presence, knowledge, and craft – and this, in my opinion is where Adventure Canada really



shines. To name but a few, we had the privilege of travelling with Dr. Marc St Onge, a passionate and prolific professor and Geologist and fellow of the Geological Association of Canada, Aleqa Hammond, an Inuit cultural educator and former Prime Minister of Greenland, and Steve Burrows, a birder-murder mystery writer and enthusiastic ornithologist. Onboard programs included such cheeky topics as "Ways to Die at Sea and What to do About It" with Steph Robertson where we learned that whistling while at sea will bring bad weather and certain death, as will clinking glasses in cheers. We also greatly enjoyed interactive sessions like trying our hand at Inuit games with Inuit cultural educator Peter Porter and taking part in water colour classes with one of many of the artists onboard. Of course, more standard lecture-style presentations were available and engaging, ranging from the experiences of Modern-Day Inuit Youth in Greenland with Johannes Ostermann, an Inuit cultural educator and Greenland youth himself, and tales of her incredible expedition travels as an archaeologist with Aka Simonsen.

Our floating home for the 17-day expedition was Adventure Canada's Ocean Endeavour, a no frills but comfortable vessel that more than met our needs with a library, sauna, lounges, and dining room. The food was fantastic, with chef Javier serving up an imaginative and comforting menu with buffet options for breakfast and lunch and served 5 course meal for supper. We were particularly impressed with the options for those with special dietary needs. ■

ADVENTURECANADA.COM





Timeless Elegance at Istanbul's Pera Palace Hotel

by Nicholas Kontis

When the first travelers aboard the famed Orient Express railroad arrived at Istanbul's Sirkeci Station in 1889, Turkey's metropolis did not have a single hotel that could match the elegance of the rail cars. The sophistication and refinement the passengers had enjoyed aboard the train left them as soon as they stepped off the platform in ancient Constantinople.

Six years later, the Pera Palace Hotel thoroughly remedied the shortcomings. Today, the historic special-category hotel and museum epitomizes luxury, and comfort, and a pampering experience in the crossroads city.

Among the luminaries who have graced the iconic landmark include Agatha Christie, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Mata Hari, Alfred Hitchcock, and Ernest Hemingway,

Today, new arrivals are greeted to a colonnaded hall of white Carrara marble by an enthusiastic team of valets in dove-gray uniforms. Throughout the property, original 19th-century fixtures hearken to a bygone era. Exquisite Murano glass chandeliers accent the marble floors, handsome wood paneling, and wrought-iron details. The time-skip-

ping Tarihi Asansor elevator is the first made of wood and cast iron in the country.

The property boasts 115 guest rooms, including 16 suites, all with antique furnishings. Thirty-nine rooms have balconies overlooking the Golden Horn; 44 deluxe rooms and nine studios have views of the surrounding Pera area. All are furnished with hand-woven carpets, Turkish and Italian fabrics, and artwork.

The British tradition of afternoon tea persists at the Kubbeli Saloon & Tea Lounge. Here, where sunlight glimmers through colorful stained-glass windows, sippers may socialize with Istanbul's cultivated elite as pianists perform on the Schiedmayer grand piano. Patisserie De Pera is a solace private coffee house and lounge with an ambiance of a bygone era. The fashionable place to be seen, the Orient Terrace, is an outdoor bar and dining area.

A stay at the Pera Palace is like lodging at a magnificent museum. History is recalled in every nook and cranny. immediately. ■

[HTTPS://PERAPALACE.COM/](https://perapalace.com/)



Hotel Evelyn, NYC

by Nicholas Kontis

The quiet, solace boutique Hotel Evelyn is a stone's throw from the bright lights of dazzling Broadway and bustling Times Square. Set in New York's boho-chic NoMad neighborhood, once the epicenter of the iconic city's Roaring Twenties Jazz era, it takes its name from 20th-century actress, chorus girl, and model "It Girl" Evelyn Nesbit.

Guest Quarters

The recently remodeled 159-room nostalgic Evelyn Hotel has room categories including Deluxe Double Double, Deluxe King, Superior Queen, Deluxe Queen, NoMad King Suite, and, for those with special needs, Accessible Deluxe Queen. Features include Frette Italian sheets, heated floors, rainfall showerheads, custom vanities, flat-screen TVs, eco-friendly toiletries, luxurious robes, and hair dryers. Flaunting time period accents like jazz-inspired pieces, Lefroy Brooks fixtures, plush beds, and antique-style furnishings. The NoMad King Suite comes with a porcelain tub with whirlpool jets.

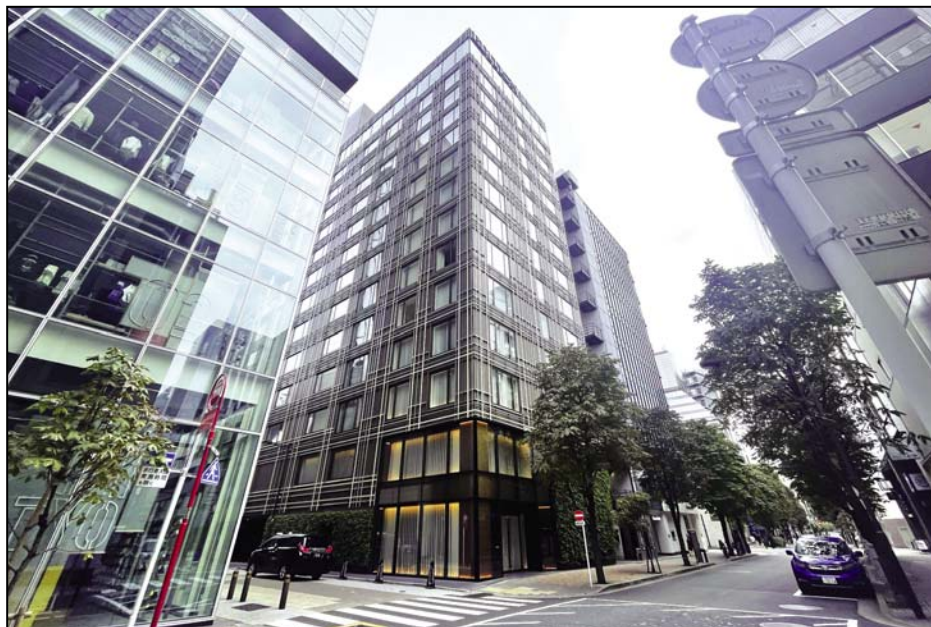
Around the Property

On the lobby's ground floor is a comfy art deco-inspired seating area. Also on the ground floor is a well-equipped fitness facility. The Evelyn is pet friendly, with a contactless check-in option and valet parking.

Eat & Drink

Keeping up with its early 20th-century heyday, open from 4pm to midnight, the intimate Tusk Bar tucked away on the end of the ground floor is a dimly lit Art Deco-inspired oyster and cocktail bar-lounge perfect for a nightcap. Opening in mid-2024 in the same space of Tusk is BRASS Restaurant, an American take on brasserie. At the hotel entrance, currently run as a pop-up grab-and-go bakery coffee shop, will be Ninepin Café for casual all-day small meals. ■

WWW.THEEVELYN.COM



The Tokyo Ginza Edition Hotel: A Comforting Experience

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

The Japanese term “Omotenashi” refers to ‘hospitality, mindfulness, and treating others with respect’. It perfectly describes the customer service ethic of The Tokyo Ginza Edition. Eric Annaheim, the Director of Rooms, referred to it as “unscripted service,” treating guests and visitors kindly and respectfully. When we arrived at the hotel, we were warmly welcomed, invited to sit on the lobby sofa for the check-in details, and treated to coffee and cookies with soft, classic jazz music playing in the background. From that point forward there were greetings and smiles from all the staff throughout our stay.

The 5-star, 86-room boutique property opened in December 2023 and has already established a reputation for repeat book-

ings with ‘high net worth individuals and families’ traveling for leisure from North America, Asia, and the Middle East. They are looking to stay in Ginza, and the location is pretty unbelievable. Next-door and just-around-the-corner neighbors include Adidas, Bulgari, Itoya, Cartier, Chanel, Rolex, Prada, Louis Vuitton, YSL, and the Matsuya and Mitsukoshi department stores. Hotel guests can leave their purchases at the store and arrange for the hotel to collect them.

Three subway lines are a few minutes walk away (as is the Nissan Crossing futuristic car showroom). And for those who wish to explore the Imperial Palace and beyond, the hotel will arrange bicycles.

While some clients buy out entire floors for their family stay (there are nine rooms per floor), most guests stay in one of the Kengo Kuma/Ian Schrager-designed rooms or suites. There are 10 suites; however, some clients prefer to combine two penthouse rooms to create a closed-off suite. There are 10 twin rooms, with the remainder King rooms. Our Superior room was a massive 45 square meters (484 square feet). It included two Queen beds, a flatscreen television, lots of outlets for charging phones and laptops, a large bathroom counter with Le Labo amenities, a shower, a bathtub, and the hotel’s signature black tea, next to a photo-worthy crafted traditional teapot. The beds and pillows were very comfortable.

We were at Sophie’s bright and early for a delicious breakfast included with the room, which featured absolutely ‘perfect’ eggs Benedict.

Other relaxing places in the hotel include the Rooftop Bar, the Scissor Grand Stairs (where people just come by to pose for photos), and the Punch Room, a super cool bar with cozy blue-satin couches, chairs, and more of the hotel’s personalized service.

Eric described the hotel atmosphere as “the place to be; eat, sleep, entertain and enjoy a taste of Japan in an international environment”.

We noticed a throw on the couch in the lobby and on the beds in the suites and rooms. We were told that this is one of Ian Schrager’s signature touches, dating back to his childhood comfort (security) blanket. He wanted to impart that same sense of comfort to hotel guests. In a word, he did. The Tokyo Ginza Edition is a truly comforting experience in an unrivaled Ginza location. ■

WWW.EDITIONHOTELS.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.

The Caribbean's Premiere Golf
& Beach Resort Community
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EXPERIENCE LIFESTYLE

At Puntacana Resort & Club

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



PUNTACANA®
RESORT & CLUB

For more Information visit: www.puntacana.com



The Scottsdale Plaza Resort & Villas

by Alexandra Cohen

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.

With over 70 hotels and resorts, offering travelers a plethora of options, I chose the Scottsdale Plaza Resort & Villas (scottsdale-plaza.com), and stayed in a beautiful two-story villa. The hotel is incredibly well-located, where you are a 10 to 15-minute drive from all major shopping malls as well as Old Town Scottsdale and the many nearby golf courses.

Our villa featured a private entrance as well as an upstairs bedroom with two queen-sized beds, and a main floor which included a living room, dining room, and kitchenette. There was a bathroom on each floor, as well as a balcony on the upper level and a patio on the main floor, where visitors may choose to eat outdoors. The unit also has a fireplace for those wishing to get cozy on one of Arizona's rare chilly evenings.

One thing that I was looking forward to about my visit was the opportunity to lounge at the pool and enjoy the lovely weather. The Scottsdale Plaza offers visitors a total of five temperature-controlled pools to choose from, including an upper and lower deck main pool, a villa pool, courtyard pool, and casita pool (for those wishing for a quieter experience or those preferring to walk shorter distances from their more peripherally located rooms).

For an elevated pool experience, you can rent one of the hotel's private shaded cabanas, which come equipped with sofa seating, two reserved lounge chairs, as well as an umbrella. The cabana also comes with a mini fridge which contains water bottles and snacks, a dedicated server, chilled towels infused with aromatherapy oil, as well as a complimentary round of select canned seltzers or beers.

For those who are a little bit more athletically inclined, the property also offers tennis

courts, which I often saw guests using to play both tennis and pickle ball. The court neighbors the property's 24-hour state-of-the-art fitness center, though given the beautiful weather, some may prefer to exercise outdoors by going for a walk or run across the 40-acre property. Naturally, there are also many nearby trails for those looking to hike.

Moving back in the direction of relaxation, I had the opportunity during my stay to visit the Scottsdale Plaza's Salon & Spa, located directly next to the main pool. While the spa offers a large menu of options, I chose the 50-minute Shea Butter Melt Massage, which I would absolutely do again on my next visit.

For any dining needs while on-site, the property has a market for grab-and-go needs, two restaurants and a café at poolside which we happily took advantage of each day. We were able to sample many tasty menu items, including the crispy cheese quesadillas, the chicken tenders served with kettle chips, and the turkey club wrap. We also enjoyed several of their cocktails. ■

WWW.SCOTTSDALEPLAZA.COM.

WWW.EXPERIENCESCOTTSDALE.COM



Visit a souk in Tozeur
Enjoy dinner in the Sahara in Douz



INSPIRING
Tunisia



Paradise Found: The Conrad Hilton Rangali Island

by Daniel Smajovits

Known throughout the world for its stunning waters and pristine beaches, at the heart of the Maldives is a resort like no other: the Conrad Hilton Rangali Island, where nature and luxury coalesce into perfection. With 151 beautiful villas and suites, the Conrad redefines extravagance. Regardless of choice, five-star amenities, stunning views and the utmost in privacy awaits you.

The Staff: Greeting you with a hand over their heart, your island hosts will treat you like family. Whether you're enjoying a meal, on a nature walk or exciting excursion, you feel the love that the staff have not only for their jobs, but for every guest and naturally, the country they call home.

The Villas Perched on stilts above the Indian Ocean, a sanctuary awaits at your over water villa. With direct access to the crystal-clear ocean, a private sun deck, an infinity pool and either sunrise or sunset views, these villas define the Maldives. In fact, it's natural to

pinch yourself to ensure you are not dreaming.

Perfect for families, the resort's beach villas are built into the island's lush vegetation, blending indoor and outdoor living spaces that are serene, private and spacious. With white sand and the warm ocean steps from your bedroom, the natural beauty of the Maldives surrounds you.

World Firsts: If unparalleled beauty is not enough, the Conrad is also home to two-world firsts.

Built five meters below sea level, Ithaa is the world's first undersea restaurant where you can marvel at panoramic views of a vibrant coral reef while dining on five-star cuisine. With a capacity of 14 guests, Ithaa offers three daily seatings: lunch, dinner or a unique Viewing Hour.

For a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience, the Muraka is the world's first undersea residence. Beginning at \$9,999 per night, the Muraka is

a three-bedroom, two-level residence with a master bedroom submerged over 16 feet below sea level. The experience includes a 24-hour butler, a private gym, private seaplane dock and much more.

Food: The resort is home to 12 unique five-star dining concepts which offer unparalleled variety and quality. For more on the various dining experiences, please read our article on page 26.

Wellness: With relaxation top-of-mind, the Conrad has dedicated itself to caring for both your mind and body as well. Two award-winning spas with personalized wellness packages provide a range of treatments that combine traditional and modern technique and world-class instructors await you for a variety of yoga or fitness classes.

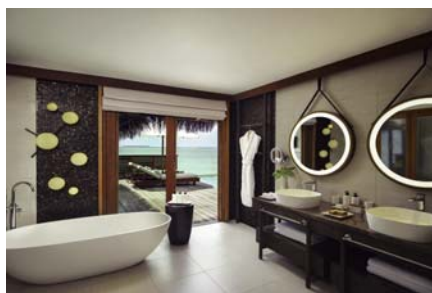
Adventure: If adventure is on your to-do-list, join an unforgettable Whale Shark (year-round) or Manta Ray excursion or try your hand at fishing, scuba diving or renting a fly-board and soaring above the Indian Ocean. If you'd like to stay closer to the beach, all guests have free access to non-motorized watersports and can borrow snorkeling gear to enjoy the resort's private coral reef at their leisure.

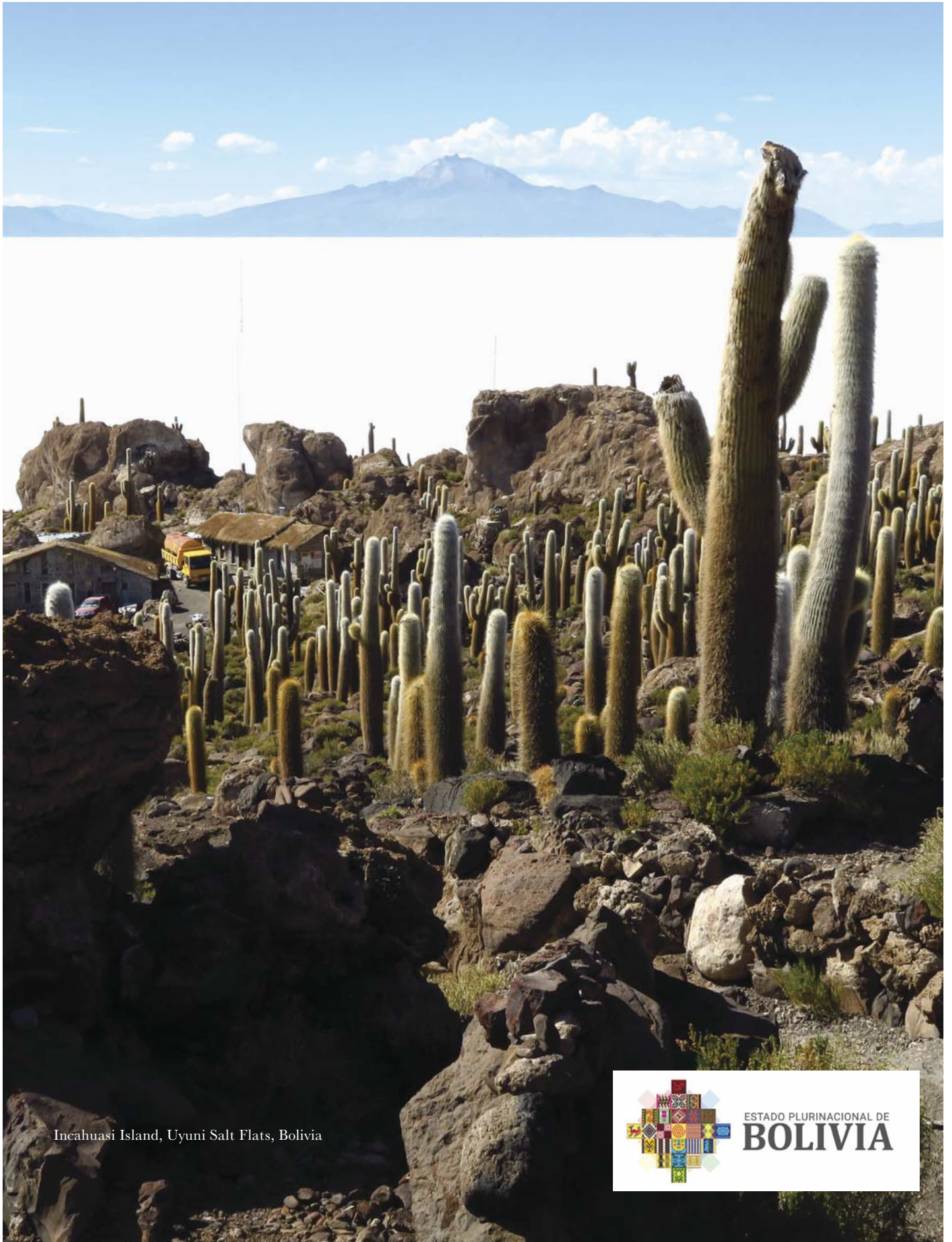
A Resort for All: If your children are lucky enough to join you in paradise, they will have access to either the Majaa Explorers Hub, complete with a splash park, or the Furaavaru Teens Club. On land and in-water activities are led by a team of instructors and it will keep them busy throughout the day while you enjoy some much-needed alone time.

Travel with Purpose: Critical to the Conrad's mission is Hilton's Travel with Purpose program which includes a commitment to the local culture, environment and sustainability. Immerse yourself in the local culture through Nerulhu Auah, an in-resort cultural village built to celebrate the Maldivian people with a diverse range of activities, exhibits, dining experiences and performances.

A timeless natural charm awaits you at the Conrad. The two islands coalesce into one sanctuary where indelible experiences are curated and true tranquility is unlocked. ■

WWW.CONRADMALDIVES.COM





Incahuasi Island, Uyuni Salt Flats, Bolivia



ESTADO PLURINACIONAL DE
BOLIVIA



Photo: Janu Tokyo

a heated marble treatment table, and Banya, a wood-clad sauna. Each includes a living area, daybed, cold plunge, hot bath, and outdoor terrace.

The hotel's open-kitchen restaurants reflect a hybrid European-Asian motif: Janu Mercato (Italian), Hu -Jing (Chinese), Ilgura (sushi and sashimi), and Sumi, a Japanese sumibiyaki (charcoal fire) grill. The Janu Grill specializes in meats and seafood, with the entrance in the middle of two impressive wine cellars, one for whites and one for reds. This is where breakfast, included for all guests, is served. The Janu Bar, designed by famed mixologist Shuzo Nagumo, offers signature cocktails named after popular Tokyo neighborhoods (Azabudai, Ginza, Shinjuku, etc.). A sense of relaxation is conveyed by the giant lampshades and cozy couches in the Janu Lounge, where afternoon tea is served. And the outdoor Garden Terrace has excellent views of Azabudai Hills and the Tokyo Tower.

The Janu Patisserie is also a go-to spot, featuring Taruni, a picture-and-taste-perfect mousse and jelly pastry that means 'rose' in Sanskrit.

The Janu Hotel has 122 rooms in warm, comfortable colors, including 41 Suites and 81 Standard Rooms. The minimum room size is an impressive 55 square meters (592 square feet). It's pretty incredible to enter one of the 105 sqm (1130 Square feet) Tower View Suites and find the Tokyo Tower staring back at you! All rooms are tastefully decorated in the Japanese minimalist style and feature large bathrooms with a soaking tub and walk-in wardrobes. Many have private balconies.

The Janu Tokyo philosophy refers to "a trinity of connection, inspiration and exploration", where spaces are designed to fulfill the needs of guests seeking a unique luxury hotel experience with the energy of the neighborhood, along with relaxation, wellness, gastronomy, and peace of mind. It's good for the soul! ■

WWW.JANU.COM

Janu Tokyo Hotel, Azabudai Hills, Tokyo: A Soul-Full Experience

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

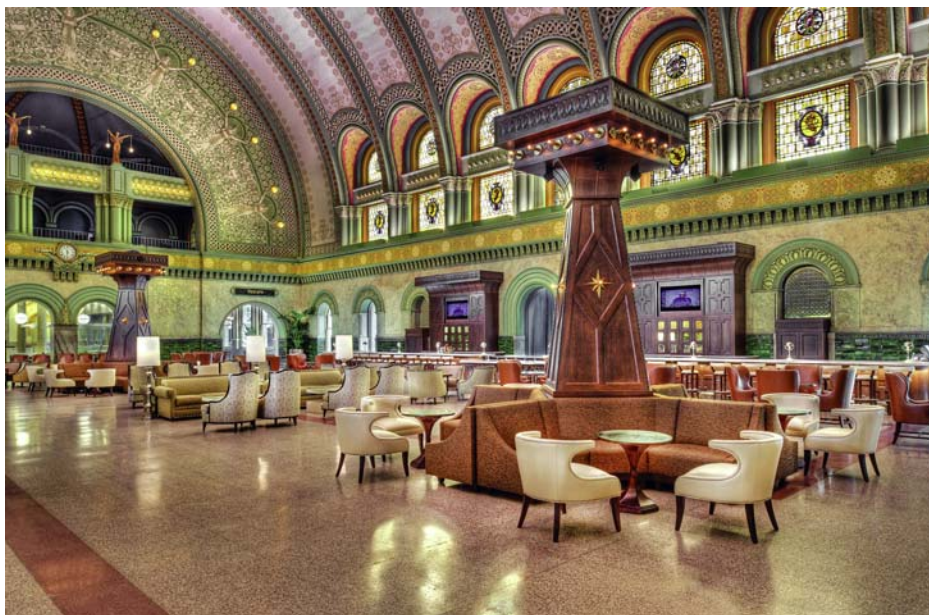
The first Janu Hotel in the world opened in March 2024 in Tokyo's Azabudai Hills, an architectural showpiece of towers, residences, parkland, art galleries, and shops. The hotel is only steps away from the incredible, immersive teamLab Borderless Digital Art Museum, one of Tokyo's most visited attractions. If hotel luxury, service, and location are essential, there is no need to look further.

Janu means 'soul' in Sanskrit. Jean-Michel Gathy, the renowned Aman Resorts architect (Aman is a sister brand to Janu) responsible for interior design, explained, "Janu Tokyo's DNA exudes a youthful energy, brimming with liveliness and playful-

ness." The eight open-kitchen restaurants, immense wellness center, unique spa houses, incredible views from the Tower Room Suites, and customer service ethic reinforce the vision that Janu represents a new concept in luxury hotels.

At 4000 square meters, the hotel has one of the biggest Wellness Centers in Tokyo, complete with a 340 Square meter gym plus studios designed for golf, boxing (a first for Tokyo hotels), spinning, private training, Yoga, Aerial Yoga, Pilates and Meditation. The 25-meter heated swimming pool has a large poolside area for relaxed socializing. There are two private spa houses, Hammam, a steam room with





Missouri Hotel Preserves Golden Age of Rail Travel

by Randy Mink

Grand it is.

The glorious, barrel-vaulted Grand Hall of the St. Louis Union Station Hotel, once the main waiting room of the world's largest and busiest train terminal, wows anyone who enters for the first time.

Arguably St. Louis' most magnificent public interior, the sumptuous lobby lounge is a symphony in gold leaf, marble, wood carpentry, stenciling and stained glass. Intricate mosaics, ornate plasterwork, graceful archways and green glazed terracotta bricks from Italy enhance the splendor.

Accompanied by music, nightly 3D light shows projected onto the 65-foot-high ceiling dazzle guests relaxing in armchairs and sofas or seated at the long marble bar. During my recent stay, I caught kaleidoscopic shows themed around train nostalgia and marine life (a nod to the St. Louis Aquarium,

one of several attractions in the Union Station complex).

The Grand Hall is the centerpiece of the former station's castle-like headhouse, a National Historic Landmark that stretches an entire block along Market Street. Constructed of Indiana limestone in 1894, the Romanesque-style "fortress" sports gables, red-roofed turrets and a clock tower patterned after architecture in the medieval walled city of Carcassonne, France.

Train-Themed Guest Rooms

Guest rooms pay homage to Union Station's history with artwork depicting railroad themes. On Floors 3 and 4 in the headhouse, high-ceilinged nests in the premium Grand Hall and Clock Tower room categories are named after famous railroads or legendary trains like The Texan, Dixie Flyer and Wabash Cannonball. Vintage Pullman advertisements touting the luxury of passenger rail travel adorn the hallways.

Besides the fancier digs in the headhouse, the 539-room Curio Collection by Hilton property has modern, six-story wings surrounding a courtyard garden under the steel girders of the massive 11.5-acre train shed. Once the world's largest roof span, the sprawling piece of real estate held 42 tracks. The courtyard's swimming pool operates from May to October.

Union Station's History

At its peak during World War II, Union Station handled 300 trains and 100,000 people a day. The last Amtrak train departed on October 31, 1978.

The station reopened in 1985 as a mixed-use complex with a hotel, retail shops, restaurants and event spaces. For two decades a popular spot for tourists and locals alike, the mall eventually began to lose tenants and sat empty for a number of years. Lodging Hospitality Management (LHM), the current owner of Union Station, bought the site in 2012 and began a multi-year overhaul that started in 2016.

Attractions and Restaurants

Today, St. Louis Union Station thrives as a downtown tourist magnet with attractions like the aquarium and St. Louis Wheel, an observation wheel with 42 climate-controlled gondolas. Steps from the wheel you'll find a mini-golf course, a carousel and the Koi Pond, where vending machines dispense pellets for feeding the fish.

Facing the lake are three full-service restaurants—Landry's Seafood, The Train Shed and St. Louis Union Station Soda Fountain, a diner renowned for its Instagram-worthy ice cream creations.

The complex's newest eatery is The Pitch, a soccer-themed pub. It resides across the street from Citypark, home of the new St. Louis City SC soccer team.

In the hotel, the Station Grille occupies the elegant confines of the former Fred Harvey restaurant, one of the 80-some Harvey Houses that served passengers during the heyday of rail travel. ■

WWW.STLOUISUNIONSTATION.COM



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

Santa Barbara

an all year destination

Article and photography by

Nick Kontis

California is a treasure trove of historical backdrops and natural abundance. Its mild Mediterranean climate features 840 miles of coastline and 61 cities and enclaves within its coastal zone. Recently, I revisited the unique blend of history and modernity in Santa Barbara. Nestled between the dramatic Santa Ynez mountains and the azure Pacific Ocean, idyllic Santa Barbara boasts 300 days of sunshine. The first time I visited, I was struck by Santa Barbara's unique blend of historical charm and modern vibrancy, starkly contrasting to other affluent beach settlements in California.

The jewel by the sea is not just a natural paradise; it's also a celebrity hotspot. Known as "The American Riviera," this laid-back community, where locals remain unfazed, has attracted the attention of Hollywood moguls. The central coast gem has been a magnet for the rich and famous, from Oprah Winfrey and Kevin Costner to Tom Cruise and George Lucas. Even Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, and Meghan Markle have found their haven in the adjacent picturesque Montecito.

History

The history of Santa Barbara is a rich tapestry woven over thousands of years. It's a place where the first natives, the Chumash people, arrived on the central coast region of California around 13,000 years ago. By the 18th century, there was a population of around 18,000 people scattered between Malibu to the south and as far north as Paso Robles, each contributing to the vibrant cultural landscape of the region. The Spanish Crown's strategy to build a colonial society in California began when Franciscan Friars arrived in 1592 on a crusade to convert Indigenous Peoples to

Christianity. The California Mission era began in 1769, but Mission Santa Barbara, founded in 1786 as the tenth of 21 Franciscan Missions, is the only one that has been operating since its establishment.

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one that has been operating since its establishment.

Today, Santa Barbara is a happy hamlet that blends a university town with retirees and accepts all takers into its web of natural and carefree beauty. It's a place teeming with lifestyle accommodations and excellent dining options. You can find everything from restaurants, bars, street musicians, art galleries, and boutique shopping all along the walkable epicenter of State Street's spirited atmosphere. The locals are known for their laid-back atti-



tude and respect for the environment, so embrace the local culture and customs during your visit.

Things to do

Santa Barbara offers diverse activities catering to culture vultures, city dwellers, and beach-combers. Santa Barbara has something for everyone, whether you're interested in exploring the city's rich history, enjoying the vibrant arts scene, or simply relaxing on the beach. Indoors and outdoors, you could spend a week in this sublime Shangri-La and still not experience all the stimulating settlement has to offer.

The crown jewel, Old Mission Santa Barbara, nicknamed "Queen of the Missions," has been a spiritual gathering place since its inception in 1786. The Mission Church flaunts gorgeous neoclassical architecture and original 18th—and 19th-century paintings and statues. It is one of the 10th of 21 California missions founded by the Spaniards led by Father Junipero Serra.

Stellar museums abound. The Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History is the oldest in the region, just up the road from the old mission. It features 3.5 million specimens of native natural history. The Santa Barbara Maritime Museum is one of the best nautical museums, featuring interactive maritime exhibits. The Santa Barbara Museum of Art features Greco-Roman antiquities, Asian works of art, and prints, drawings, and drawings. MOXI, The Wolf Museum of Exploration is Santa Barbara's science and technology museum.

Minutes from the old mission, the stunning Santa Barbara Botanic Garden showcases California's rich biological diversity with a mission to conserve native plants and habitats. The garden features hiking trails of various skill levels, and you can spot multiple local wildlife, from colorful birds to unique plant species. It's a must-visit for nature enthusiasts.

The Spanish-Moorish-styled Santa Barbara Courthouse, built in 1929, is a centerpiece of the city's downtown. The magnificent Spanish Colonial Revival structure and setting feature a sunken tropical garden, hand-painted ceilings, giant murals, and wrought iron chandeliers, along with a rooftop tower with sweeping 360-degree views of the city and as far away as the nearby Channel Islands.

On the 1100 to 1300 blocks of State Street, visit the Art District, which features visual art

and live performances. The two iconic Granada and Arlington theaters flank the district. On the first Thursday of each month, participating galleries offer free access to art openings, live music and dance, and wine tasting.

For an overview of the landscape, consider a Santa Barbara trolley tour or rent an electric bike at Santa Barbara BCycle, which created the first bike-share program in the city. Rejuvenate at Salt featuring salt caves crafted from 45 tons of 250 million-year-old Himalayan crystal salt. Visit the Funk Zone, an old manufacturing hub now a buzzy district of murals, coffee shops, restaurants, and galleries. The Santa Barbara Zoo houses more than 500 animals on 30 acres. Several operators offer kayaking and winter whale watching in the nearby Channel Islands. The nearby towns of quaint Summerland, a mecca for interior design, Goleta with a popular beach hiking destination, and the understated luxury of Montecito are well worth a visit.

Elevated accommodations

The recently remodeled Courtyard by Marriott Santa Barbara is different from what one might expect from the hotel chain. The property opened in 1959 as a classic mid-century modern motor inn and has been awarded historic landmark status. Fronting a quiet block of upper State Street and offering 62 rooms, the Marriott property adheres to its architectural design and style. Next to the pool is the chic Saint Remy Bar & Restaurant, which features a sharable menu. Happy Hour is from nine until closing.

The original building of Historic Hotel Santa Barbara dates back to 1876 and has survived many changes. Situated in a prime location on a bustling block of lower State Street, the storied venue is dog-friendly and a stone's throw from the restaurants, bars, boutiques, and museums. It is also half a mile from coastal sunsets on Stearns Wharf. Ornate bespoke guest quarters feature custom carpets and throwback photos of the city's past.

Culinary cachet & liberations

Dining in Santa Barbara is a delightful experience, with a diverse range of restaurants that passionate locals swear by, and visitors are thrilled to join in. The local diners offer a unique blend of flavors and culinary styles, making it difficult to choose where to dine. The Bananas Foster's French Toast flambeed in rum at D'Angelo Bakery is a must-try if you

have a sweet-tooth. Indulge in culinary delights at Scarlet Begonia, one of the early adaptors of market-driven, seasonal-organic cuisine. The diverse dining options in Santa Barbara are sure to excite your taste buds.

Opal Restaurant & Bar, located in the ARTS district, is a creative fusion of California cuisine with Mediterranean and Asian influences. It is a casual venue with elevated al fresco dining. From the starter menu, black-pepper-crusted ahi tuna and Asian glazed flash-fried calamari.

Mains such as herb-crusted filet mignon, grilled Australian lamb chops, and wild mushroom risotto are among the local favorites. A wood-burning oven whips out mouth-watering pizza.

Brophy Bros Restaurant & Clam Bar is a casual seafood institution with fresh catch of the day fish with harbor views. Vibrant Stearns Wharf, California's oldest wooden wharf, flaunts Santa Barbara Shellfish Company, a favorite of Julia Child when she resided in the area.

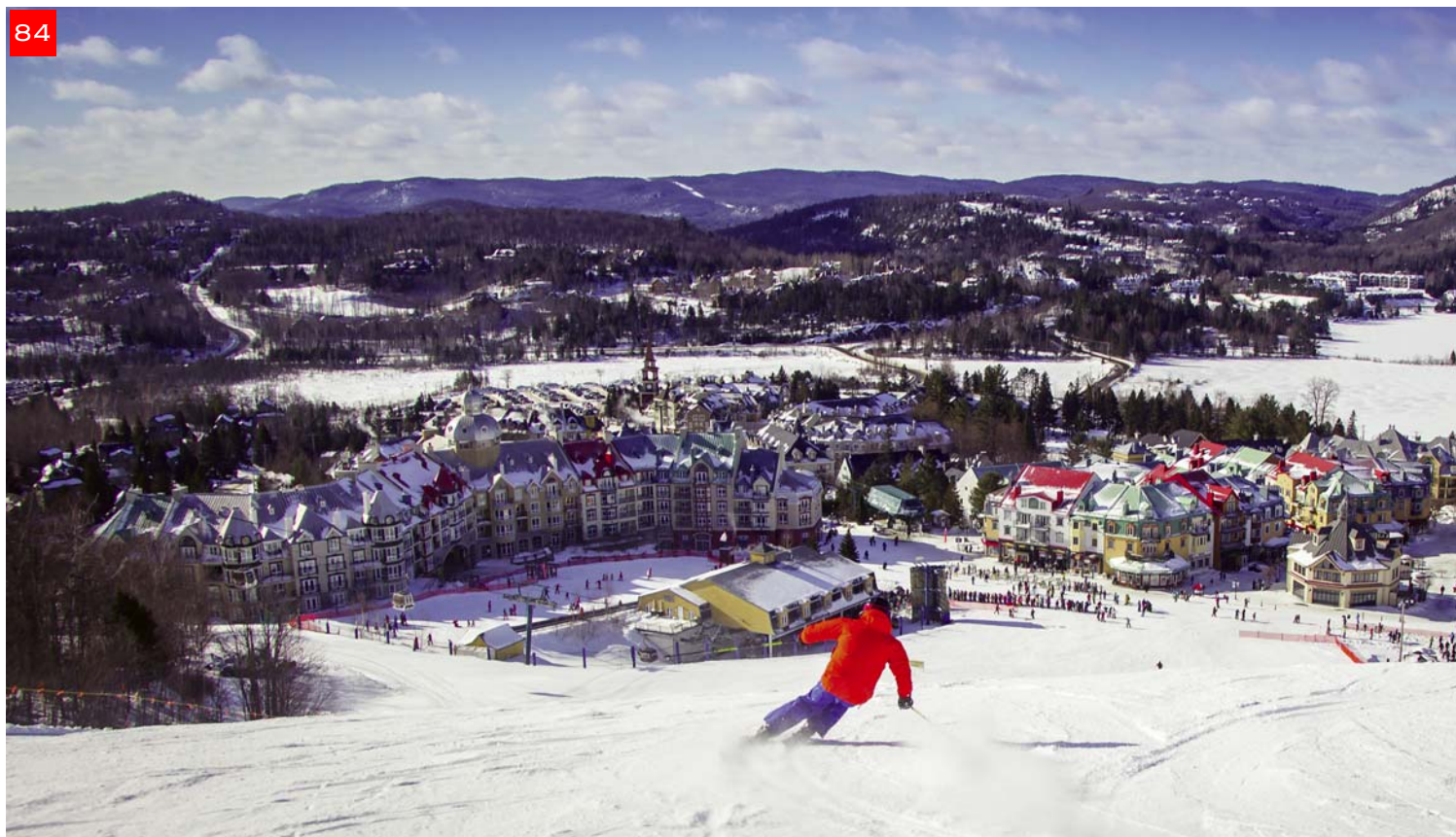
Since 1949, McConnel's Fine Ice Cream has been creating delectable small-batch ice cream made from scratch with grass-grazed milk and cream and seasonal ingredients. Dairy-free options are also available.

Happy Hour is a large part of the friendly local landscape, with many establishments offering reduced-priced drinks and small bits. The Boathouse at Hendry's Beach offers happy hour with sunset views. The Cruisery is on an ideal corner of State Street with patio dining. Dargan's Irish Pub & Restaurant serves savory pies and fish and chips. The Brewhouse Restaurant & Brewery is the oldest craft brewery in town.

Surrounded by the omnipresent Santa Ynez mountains, rolling hills, forests, wetlands, and a magnificent sun-splashed coastline, "The American Riviera" is a scenic 90-minute coastal drive from Los Angeles. The region has an appealing year-long Mediterranean climate. Enjoy the best weather with fewer crowds, and consider visiting from April to June or September to December. The best bargains occur in the low season from December through February. ■

WWW.SANTABARBARA.COM





Winter Family Fun at Mont Tremblant, Quebec

by Jennifer Merrick, photography Mont Tremblant

Best vacation decision ever? Taking our kids skiing when they were young. We all took lessons. The kids excelled, and over the years, progressively improved and tackled more challenging runs. I floundered, and even now 15 years later, I only cautiously navigate the easiest of slopes. But I absolutely love it.

Challenging yourself at any level is thrilling and the exhilaration is amplified by the mountain scenery. It turns out snow is beautiful when you're not shoveling it, especially when you're high above the clouds, and it blankets the slopes and the trees. It's taken

my frosty breath away and left me awestruck on many occasions. It's a vacation that's as much fun when the kids are young as when they're teens and beyond. Each can have their adventures on the slopes and share their stories over lunch. And then there's the apres-ski. Ski resorts and slope-side villages are fabulous spots to spend time when you're not on skis whether you're gazing at the stars in an outdoor hot tub, savoring local cuisine, snow shoeing through snow-covered forests, listening to live music or roasting marshmallows around a fire pit.

But not all ski resorts are created equal. And one of the best family ski vacations we've had was in Mont Tremblant, Quebec, which has been recognized by National Geographic as a top ski town and consistently named #1 in the North America East by Ski Magazine.

What makes a Mont Tremblant family ski vacation stand out?

Les Pistes (the slopes) – At 2,871 feet, Tremblant's summit offers phenomenal views of the Laurentian Mountains. The ski area itself covers 755 acres with 102 ski trails for all levels. I particularly loved that even as a novice skier, I could take an enclosed gondola to the top with my family and then glide down a gentle, but incredibly scenic route down. The Nansen run should take about 25 minutes to descend, but it





took me longer. This was not only because of my slow pace, but also because every curve revealed another view that looked like it belonged on a Hallmark holiday card. And, of course, I had to stop to snap a picture.

Le Village – The festive ambiance is palpable in this cobblestoned European-like pedestrian village. Many of the buildings, including the Chapelle Saint-Bernard, are original, which adds to the authenticity. A multitude of features make this ski town special: A free cabriolet (an open gondola) that whisks you high across the village, boutiques, art galleries, restaurants, and a stage where live bands perform regularly providing musical accompaniment to the diners, strollers, and gatherers warming up by firepits.



La Cuisine – The village has a multitude of restaurants, eateries and snack bars, each with their own flavours on offer. We enjoyed SoCal for their Californian inspired dishes and cozy atmosphere. Their housemade Gravlax (cured salmon) and crafted cocktails were particularly noteworthy. La Forge Bistro Bar and Grill featured a steakhouse on the second floor and more casual food on the main floor. Despite 22-degree Fahrenheit temps, we were perfectly comfortable on their heated patio, where we indulged in a sirloin beef sandwich while soaking in the festive village atmosphere. For our final night at Mont Tremblant, we cheered to our fab family ski getaway with a craft brew at Microbrasserie La Diable. They make all their beer varieties on the premises and serve up pub grub in a lively atmosphere. Note: their fish and chips are considered the best in the village.

Other classic tasty treats to enjoy in the village are the maple taffy at the Cabane a Sucre, sweet and savory crepes at La Maison de la Crepe or a cheese fondu at La Savoie.

Le Foret (the forest) – With its rounded mountains, mix hardwood and evergreen forest, and more than 9,000 lakes, the Laurentians are a nature-lovers dream-come-true. Mont Tremblant is in the midst of it all, and because the resort borders Mont Tremblant National Park, one of Quebec's oldest and protected areas, there is access to over 80 miles of trails and 400 lakes. On the resort itself are hiking/snowshoeing trails, which you can traverse on your own or take part in a guided experience. We joined the randonneur masqué (masked hiker) for a two-hour guided snowshoe tour called 'Homme de feu' (man of fire). Our fiery masked hiking guide, Richard, shared his knowledge of the region and pointed out animal tracks as we trekked in the forest. He invited us to feel the energy of the forest and hugged one of the mature maple trees. Catching the spirit, we did the same. Other memorable moments were spotting a flock of wild turkeys, admiring the chilling beauty of a frozen waterfall and building a fire. We gathered dried branches and pieces of wood before sitting down on



the 'sofa' AKA a fallen log. The man of fire lived up to his name and expertly got flames roaring in a couple of minutes. With the fire crackling, Richard pulled out a harmonica and proceeded to play a toe tapping Quebec folk tune. We finished our forest outing with marshmallows and a greater appreciation of the nature around us at Mont Tremblant.

L'hotel – With thousands of units in the vicinity from complete houses and condos to hotels and youth hostels, there's a lot of choice when it comes to accommodation. But if you're looking for a real treat, the Fairmont Tremblant is unbeatable. Its location in the village at the foot of the mountain means guests can ski in and out and enjoy all apres-ski activities at their doorsteps. Many of its 312 rooms and suites feature views of the mountains, and the units come in a variety of sizes, many with sofa-beds and some with full kitchens. What really distinguishes the Fairmont Tremblant though is its luxury amenities like its 15-treatment-room spa, gym, billiards room, game room, cinema and indoor/outdoor pool.

We particularly appreciated the ski rentals right in the hotel itself, so we could avoid the long waits at the outfitter in the village. They also kitted us out the night before, and so we were ready to hit the slopes first thing in the morning. And everyone loved the newly renovated outdoor terrace spanning over 16,000 square feet with water features that included a heated pool and hot tub on the massive outdoor terrace. Overlooking the village, this grand steamy pool under the stars was the ideal place to soothe our tired muscles. Looking around, there were people of all ages from couples around the fire with flutes of champagne in hand to multi-generational families with young children having fun without a screen. It brought back nostalgic memories of our family's first ski trips.

Best vacation decision, ever. ■

WWW.TREMBLANT.CA





Uncorked! The full-bodied Taste of Aguascalientes, Mexico

Article and photography by Steve Gillick

El vino es la respuesta... ¿Cuál era la pregunta? Wine is the answer... what is the question?

The simple message on a blackboard sign stood next to one of the French Oak barrels at the entrance to Santa Elena, one of the 50 wineries along the Ruta del Vino in the Mexican state of Aguascalientes.

The "question" resonates in a very personal way. It could relate to the discovery and fun of wine tasting and the conviviality of shar-

ing a bottle made from one or more of the 15 varietals in the region that account for 250 different labels. It could also describe the ambiance, personality, and calming, subliminal messaging of each winery's location. Picture yourself, with glass in hand, mesmerized by the view of a distant range of volcanic mountains at Santa Elena, or the chirpy sound of Vermilion Flycatchers in the vineyards at Bodegas Origen, or the dreamy, serene sunset scenery at the aptly named Tierra Tinta.

On our late summer visit, the exuberant celebration of wine crossed over into Catas Urbanas, the "Taste in the City" festival in downtown Aguascalientes City, the state's capital. Musical performances complemented the joy of celebrating red, white, and rosé wines, with local vintners and sommeliers offering tastes and pairing advice related to the satisfying mouthfeel of Tempranillos, Syrahs, Merlots, Cabernet Francs, and more.

Taste bud bliss also relates to the region's traditional dishes. Chile Aguascalientes, a dish that originated at the Alameda Grand Hotel (our accommodation for three nights), featured local ingredients: Grapes, almonds, pear, chili, brown sugar, and ground beef, stuffed into an Ancho Chile and covered in a creamy, guava-based, nutty-flavored cinnamon sauce. So good!



The sensory experiences continued. At Campeonato 2024, a seasonal event held at the new Arena San Marcos, the equine competitions featured Charro, Mexican Cowboys, and Escaramuza, Cowgirls sporting traditional full-circle riding skirts. Teams from different parts of Mexico and the U.S. compete in synchronization and rodeo challenges: lassoing, roping, and galloping full speed before coming to a sliding stop.

Alex Garrido, a Charro, noted that Campeonato visitors can learn about the roots of Mexico and share in the passion felt by competitors and the local spectators. Natalie De Lo Peña, an Escaramuza from Guadalajara, excitedly spoke about the Campeonato's family and community traditions. "These are the things I love about Mexico".

And visitors can immerse themselves in Aguascalientes' traditions and ties to the colorful past. At Barrio de la Estación, one of the four historic neighborhoods in the city, Plaza de las Tres Centurias is a celebration of the Indigenous people (the Chichimeca) who lived in the area when the town was founded by the Spanish in 1575. The Plaza also serves as an homage to the trains in the early 20th century that followed the old silver route from Santa Fe to Mexico City, bringing people and industry to Aguascalientes. Today, the featured attractions include the dancing fountains, the old Railway Station, several boardable train cars, and train workshops that have been re-imagined as art galleries, museums, and a Convention Center.

San Marcos is probably the most famous of the neighborhoods due to the annual Feria Internacional de San Marcos, which draws upward of 8 million visitors. The 3 to 4-week event features bullfighting, cockfighting, livestock shows, and a casino. Celebrations begin about 10 days before día de San Marcos on April 25, the feast day of San Marco, the city's patron saint.

Traditions also abound at Plaza Patria, the downtown square outside the twin-towered Catedral Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción (a.k.a. Aguascalientes Cathedral),

dating to 1704. We enjoyed a unique skyline view while standing beside the 10-ton Bell in one of the towers.

Close by is the red and pink Palacio de Gobierno (Government Palace), dating to 1665. Inside the former Rincón Gallardo family home are the colorful and dramatic political murals of Chilean artist Oswaldo Bara Cunningham, a student of famed muralist Diego Rivera.

However, the most celebrated artist in the city is José Guadalupe Posada, an illustrator and cartoonist who published a graphic in 1913 called "Calavera Garbancera". The skeletal image was created to satirize Mexican women who, when traveling abroad, wore European clothes, thereby denying their Mexican heritage. But it wasn't until 1947, when Posada's cartoon was incorporated into one of Diego Rivera's murals, that the female skeleton figure, now referred to as "La Catrina", became an iconic symbol in Mexico and an integral feature of the Day of the Dead celebrations.

Mexico's MuMu (Museo Nacional de la Muerte) carries on this imagery by showcasing Mexico's relationship with the dead and how death is celebrated and commemorated around the world. Our guide, Aldo González, said visitors should come to the Museum to discover new ways to regard the dead... "not a dark way, but a more friendly way. Death is a part of life". And he added, "We're the only country where we come back from the dead for drinking and parties".

But Aguascalientes is also a place to relax and unwind in the hot springs, after which the town was named. The Ojocaliente baths near the Alameda Hotel are the most popular.

Still, the hotspot for those craving something different is 45 minutes west of the city in the Magical Town of Calvillo, where visitors and locals flock to the Chuy Bombas Bar. For 100 pesos, Ephraim Bombas will prepare one of the namesake drinks (Bombas) with an 'O-be-joyful' medley of Grenadine, Vodka, Brandy, Rum, local Red Wine, Lime Juice, and Ice.

Calvillo's attitude toward sampling different refreshments and food seems to be summed up perfectly by the motto of Alejibre Delicas Mexicanas in the downtown area. "Tripa Vacía...corazon sin Alegria"; "If your stomach is empty, your heart is without joy".

And joy is abundant in Calvillo, known as the world capital of guava, with a gastro-nomic scene incorporating guava in soups, moles, salads, meat dishes, and pizza. At Terraza Grada Noventa & Seis, mixologist Daniel Huerta González will even prepare a yummy Guava Mimosa.

The Bar is located by stair #96 of the 115 steps that lead to the top of Las Graditas, a colorful contemporary residential block that offers panoramic views of the city. But at the Monument Santa Cruz, a more dramatic vista reveals the valley where the city rests, dotted with guava and avocado farms and surrounded by the Sierra Fria mountain range.

A visit to FrutLand puts the exclamation point on other creative ways to enjoy guava. At this farm-kitchen-showroom, three generations of the Landeras family offer guava samples as tea, fruit salad, chili, jam, mole, wine, smoked, and more.

Calvillo's vibrant, historic town square features the colorful city sign, positioned by the Templo del Señor de Salitre, a 200-year old baroque-style church named after the town's patron saint. Nearby is the Museo Nacional Pueblos Magicos, featuring the natural, historical, and cultural heritage of Mexico's 177 Magical Towns.

The state of Aguascalientes, the capital city, and the Magical Town of Calvillo provide a memorable sensory experience for visitors. It's a feast for the eyes, mind, imagination, and taste buds, with a special full-bodied call-out to the region's exemplary wines and all the smiling and friendly people you meet along the way. ■

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Discovering the Hidden Treasures of Shikoku, Japan

Article and photography by Michael Morocs

Travel often transforms the soul, but Shikoku—Japan's smallest and least-visited main island—offers something more profound. It's a journey of contrasts, where ancient traditions blend seamlessly with breathtaking landscapes and thrilling adventures. My time in Shikoku, framed by serene temples, invigorating hikes, and authentic cultural experiences, was nothing short of transformative. This is my story of discovery, relaxation, and enlightenment in this hidden gem of Japan.

Kobe to Shikoku - The Adventure Begins

Starting my journey in Kobe, we would drive the Seto Inland Sea to Shikoku. Our first stop

along the way was Awaji Island, a charming rest spot known for its blend of natural beauty and creative attractions. Here, I experienced Nijigen no Mori, a unique theme park combining Japanese pop culture and immersive experiences. The highlight? The Godzilla Interception Operation. Suspended on a thrilling zipline, I flew straight into the mouth of a colossal Godzilla replica. Equal parts exhilarating and surreal, it set the tone for the adventure ahead.

From there, we made our way to Koshu no Ya, a quaint shop and bar filled with hand-crafted goods and local sake. It was the perfect place to unwind and get a taste of the

region's artisan culture. Later, we enjoyed a sumptuous sushi lunch at Aonoya-Seikaiha (that had a spectacular theater like setting with sweeping views of the sea). Each piece was a revelation of fresh, oceanic flavors—a reminder of how Japan elevates food into art.

In the afternoon, we headed to Zenbo-Seinei for a meditation session. Set amid lush greenery, the minimalist Zen space invited stillness. Guided breathing exercises helped me clear my mind, connecting deeply with the tranquil surroundings. This moment of mindfulness proved to be a fitting prelude to our next activity.



Indigo Dreams and Ancient Puppet Theatre

Shikoku is renowned for its indigo dyeing tradition, and I had the chance to try it firsthand at Ainoyakata. Guided by local artisans, I created my own vibrant patterns on fabric, immersing myself in a centuries-old craft. There's something magical about seeing your hands bring life to a tradition so deeply tied to the region's identity.

The evening brought us to the Awa Jurobe Yashiki, home to the traditional puppet theatre art known as Ningyo Joruri Bunraku. Watching the skilled puppeteers manipulate their intricately crafted figures was mesmerizing. Their performances, accompanied by soulful chanting and shamisen music, told timeless tales that left me spellbound.

We ended the day at our hotel. Dinner was a sumptuous buffet of Awa's local cuisine, and later, we watched the lively Awa Odori dance performance—a joyful celebration of movement and rhythm.

A Pilgrimage Across Time

The following morning, I donned a traditional pilgrimage costume at Monzen Ichibangai and set out on a spiritual journey along the Shikoku Henro, a revered pilgrimage route. Our first destination was Reizan-ji Temple, the first of 88 temples on this sacred trail. Nestled in a serene forest, the temple exuded a quiet power, its ancient halls resonating with the chants of monks and the soft rustle of leaves.

From there, we embarked on a 20-minute hike to Gokuraku-ji Temple. The short trek, surrounded by towering cedar trees, was invigorating. Lunch followed—juicy Asan Beef Roast Steak that melted in my mouth, fueling me for the next leg of the pilgrimage. A 40-minute hike brought us to Konsen-ji Temple, and then we faced the most challenging stretch: a 90-minute trek to Dainichi-ji Temple. Each temple visit felt like a step back in time, each more serene than the last.

Our day concluded at the luxurious Iya Onsen, tucked deep within the remote Iya Valley at the Hotel Kazurabashi and accessible only by cable car, the open-air baths offered panoramic views of verdant mountains and misty valleys. As I sank into the warm waters, the beauty of Shikoku came to mind and we still had many great days ahead of us and I could not wait.

Exploring Shikoku's Mountain Trails and Rivers

With the guidance of the experts of Shikoku Tours, the next chapter of my Shikoku adventure would take me deeper into its rugged beauty and cultural richness. This was a day built around the kind of slow exploration that truly lets you connect with a place—cycling through mountains, hiking to breathtaking viewpoints, and paddling down crystal-clear rivers. The journey revealed the natural wonders of Shikoku while offering more of its delicious cuisine and artisan traditions.

Cycling the Ishizuchi Skyline Hill Climb

Our day began early as we geared up for the Ishizuchi Skyline Hill Climb, one of the most scenic cycling routes in western Japan. Mount Ishizuchi, rising to 1,982 meters, loomed majestically in the background as we set off. These assisted bicycles were a blessing on the steep inclines, allowing us to focus on the stunning views rather than the strain of the climb.

We took a break at Dogoya Terrace for lunch. Nestled among the hills, this cozy spot served a pasta dish that perfectly captured the region's essence—rich, savory wild boar sausage paired with handmade noodles. The meal was hearty yet refined, and the perfect way to recharge for the next stage of the journey.

Cycling along the Niyodo River

After descending from the mountain ridges the next day, we found ourselves following the Niyodo River, one of the clearest and most beautiful rivers in Japan. Known for its brilliant emerald hues—often referred to as "Niyodo Blue"—the river was a tranquil companion as we cycled downstream.

We stopped for lunch at Mizube no Eki Ainosato, a riverside restaurant specializing in local cuisine. The dishes reflected the bounty of the region, from fresh river fish to seasonal vegetables. It was a meal that felt deeply connected to the landscape, each bite echoing the flavors of the surrounding hills and waters.

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Stand-Up Paddleboarding on the Niyodo River

The highlight of the day was a stand-up paddleboarding excursion along the Niyodo River. For two to three hours, paddled through the calm, crystalline waters, surrounded by the serenity of nature. The river wound its way through lush forests and steep cliffs, with sunlight filtering through the leaves to create a dappled effect on the water.

The Art of Washi Paper Making

We visited the Ino-cho Paper Museum and the Tosa Washi Workshop, where I had the chance to learn about Shikoku's renowned washi paper tradition. The process of making washi, a delicate and durable handmade paper, was mesmerizing. Using a wooden frame, I scooped a slurry of water and plant fibers to form thin sheets of paper.

As my hands moved through the process, I couldn't help but marvel at the centuries-old craftsmanship that went into this art form. The finished paper was exquisite, with a texture that spoke of its organic origins. This was more than a souvenir—it was a piece of Shikoku's cultural heritage that I had helped create.

Ayu Fish and Cycling to the Pacific Ocean

For lunch, we stopped at Uokane, a riverside eatery specializing in ayu fish, a seasonal delicacy from the Niyodo River. Grilled to perfection over charcoal, the fish had a delicate, slightly sweet flavor that captured the purity of the river it came from.

Our final stretch of cycling took us from the river to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean. The transition from the calm, narrow river to the vast expanse of the ocean was awe-inspiring. As I pedaled along the coastline, the salty breeze and the sound of crashing waves felt invigorating. This was the perfect way to close the cycling portion of the trip—a journey that had taken me from mountains to sea, revealing the full spectrum of Shikoku's landscapes.

A Sake Brewery Tour at Kameizumi

Our last cultural stop was a tour of the Kameizumi Sake Brewery. The brewery, known for its innovative techniques and high-quality sake, offered a fascinating look into the art of sake-making.

The tour began with a walk through the brewing facilities, where I learned about the metic-

ulous process of fermenting rice to create this iconic Japanese drink. The highlight was, of course, the tasting session. Each sake had its own distinct flavor profile, from light and fruity to rich and umami-packed. The brewers' passion and dedication were evident in every sip.

On to Kochi

Before leaving Shikoku, I made a last stop to Kochi, a vibrant city rich in history and buzzing with life. At its heart stands Kochi Castle, one of Japan's rare original castles that has survived since the Edo period. Walking through its imposing gates and ascending its wooden stairs, I marveled at the exquisite architecture and panoramic views of the city below. The castle grounds were equally captivating, filled with elegant, mature trees.

A Feast to End the Day

For dinner, we indulged in a Tosa Shabu Course at Tosaryori-Tsukasa Main Store, a restaurant renowned for its authentic Tosa cuisine. The centerpiece of the meal was shabu-shabu, a hot pot dish where thinly sliced meats and fresh vegetables are cooked briefly in a boiling broth.

The ingredients were of the highest quality, and the interactive nature of the meal added to the enjoyment. As we dipped the meats and vegetables into the bubbling broth, the aromas filled the air, promising flavors as rich as the experiences we'd had throughout the day.

The Essence of Shikoku

Reflecting on the trip, I realized that it encapsulated everything I had come to love about Shikoku: its unspoiled natural beauty, its deep cultural traditions, and its warm, welcoming people. From cycling through mountain ridges to paddling along emerald rivers, from creating handmade washi to savoring the freshest local cuisine, every experience felt authentic and meaningful.

Shikoku is a place that doesn't reveal itself all at once. It invites you to explore at your own pace, to uncover its secrets one by one. As I prepared to leave this enchanting island, I knew I was taking more than just memories with me—I was leaving with a piece of Shikoku in my heart. ■

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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.

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