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FALL 2011

THE SUN ISSUE

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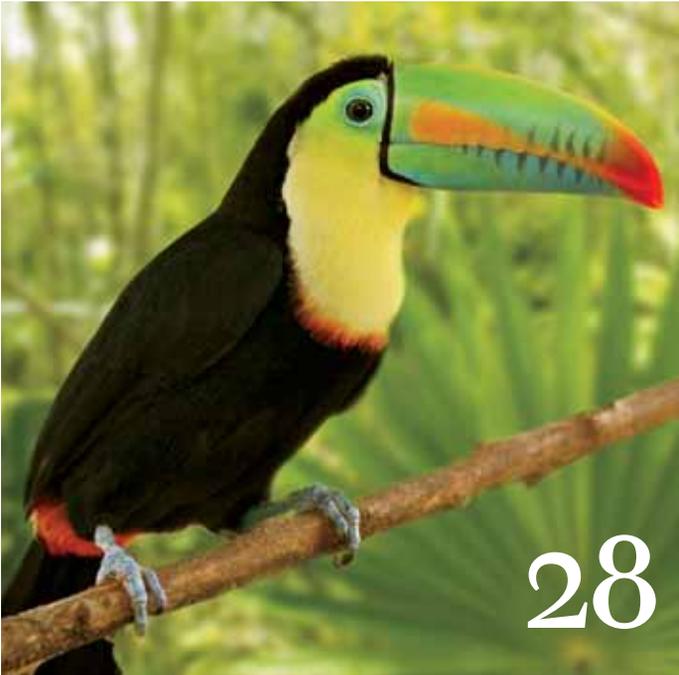




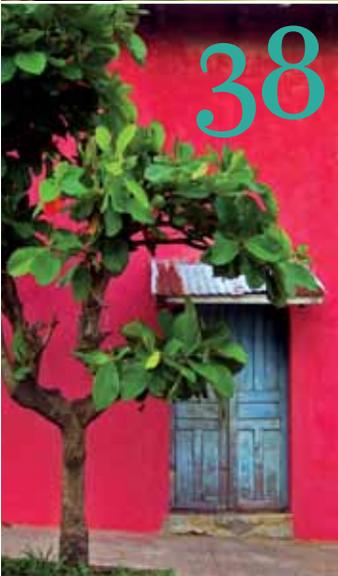
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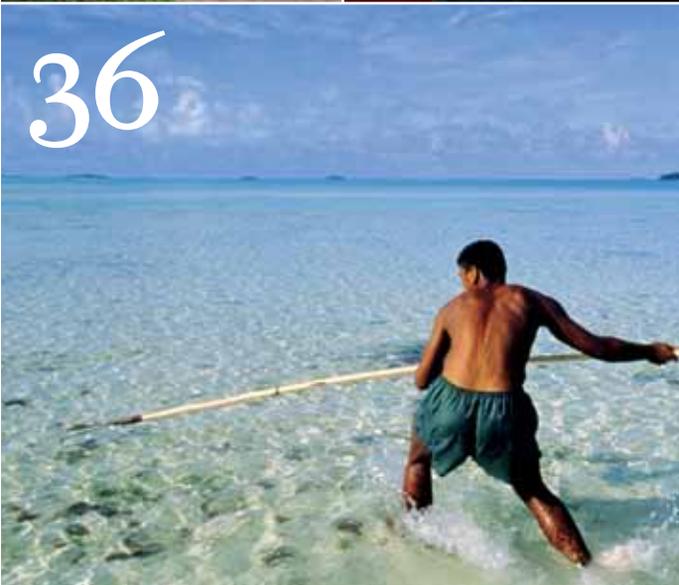
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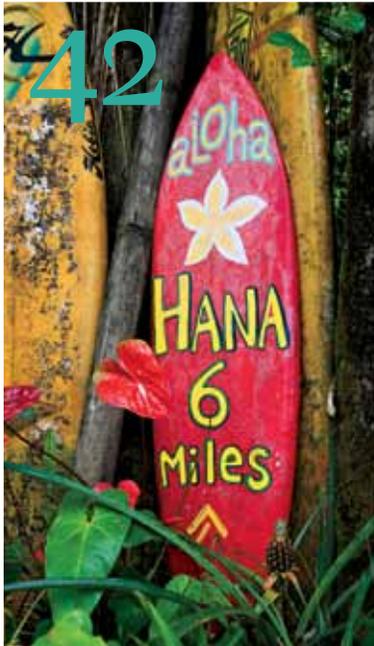
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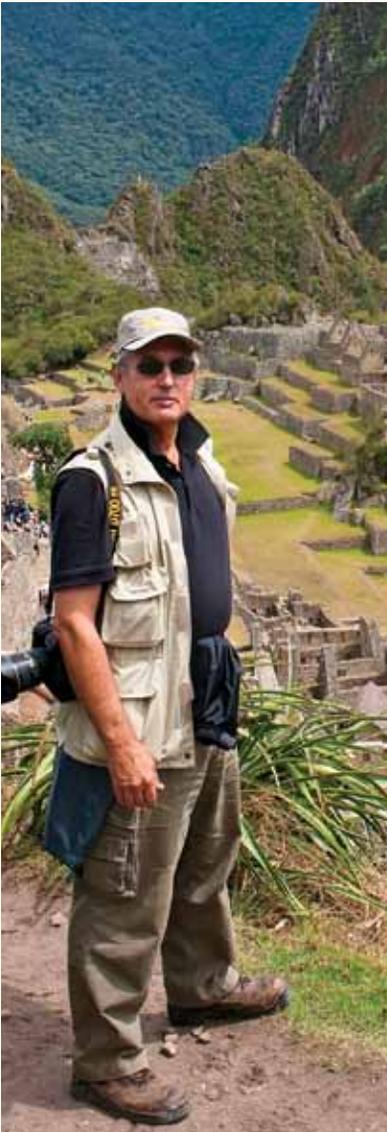
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Toronto writer **Sarah Treleven** has done some pretty interesting things on her travels, which so far have taken her extensively throughout North America, Europe and Asia. From sampling yak milk cheesecake on the Tibetan plateau, flying a plane near Puerto Vallarta and off-roading in Crete, to eating a nine-course snake banquet in Hong Kong, she has enjoyed some pretty unusual experiences. "The opportunity to be one of the first to try this unique sleep therapy program – at a luxury spa in Mexico – really intrigued me," she says. In her spare time Sarah plays badminton, walks unnecessarily long distances, rereads Nora Ephron essays and tries to perfect Delia Smith's recipe for goat cheese, spring onion and potato bread.



Cruising through the steamy Amazonian jungle, feeding wild pink dolphins on the Rio Negro and visiting tiny native villages were some of writer/photographer **Michael DeFreitas**' experiences on his recent Amazon adventure. DeFreitas has written about his travels across seven continents and five oceans for dozens of publications, but this cruise had some unanticipated surprises. "I was expecting to find large swaths of clear-cut jungle," says DeFreitas. "But instead I found that Amazonians are planting lots of trees. For every tree felled, it's customary to plant three to replace it: One for shade, one for food and one to admire."

Elisabeth Oakham is a biologist, outdoor adventure guide, filmmaker and freelance writer who has lived and worked across Canada and travelled extensively throughout the world. "I'm used to outdoor wilderness adventures, so taking on urban adventures for this issue was a new challenge," says Oakham, who spent six weeks in India assisting various charitable groups while also providing media support and project coordination for Omprakash, an organization that networks international non-profits. "Working alongside different folks helping those in need was by turns inspiring, uncomfortable and eye-opening. It gave me the opportunity to examine my own assumptions and values, reach out beyond them and connect with people from different communities."

A taste of adventure



Are you adventurous? Perhaps a better question is, how adventurous are you? The answer tends to sit somewhere along a continuum: some people claim to not be adventurous at all, others may be extreme thrill-seekers, while many of us fall somewhere in between. By its very definition, adventure involves some element of risk or danger – and many people get hooked on the adrenaline rush that it provides. But adventure can have a different meaning for each of us. In everyday life, I'm generally risk averse, preferring a stable stock market, a regular paycheque and a healthy body, with limbs intact. Travel is my outlet for a little adventure, an opportunity to shake things up. Two of my most indelible travel memories involve doing something out of the ordinary: one was whitewater rafting in **Austria**; the other was descending deep into the darkness of a *cenote* in the **Mayan Riviera** where, with only the lights attached to our helmets to illuminate our path, we alternately walked and swam through the sometimes very narrow caves.

For this issue, we've cooked up a little adventure for everyone: from **piranha fishing on the Amazon** – the ultimate adventure destination (page 28) – to **spear fishing and diving in Ambergris Caye** (page 36). We polled some of our Ensemble experts on their suggestions

for adventurous excursions you can add to your next getaway (page 26), and give you the scoop on where you'll find some of the best zip lines, from **Canada** (yes, really!) to **Costa Rica** (page 18).

An altogether different kind of adventure is voluntourism. Elisabeth Oakham's firsthand experience volunteering in **India** provided her with many insights, challenges and new experiences. She shares her acquired wisdom and research to help you navigate the volunteer tourism waters and avoid some of the common pitfalls (page 52).

Does all this adventure make you hungry? Sink your teeth into a three-part ode to **Buenos Aires'** cuisine (page 32), discover **Miami's** culinary gems according to Norman Van Aken (page 56) as well as Japanese- and African-influenced dishes of **Brazil** (page 60). Then wash it all down with a tasty cachaça cocktail, Brazil's iconic spirit (recipe on page 59).

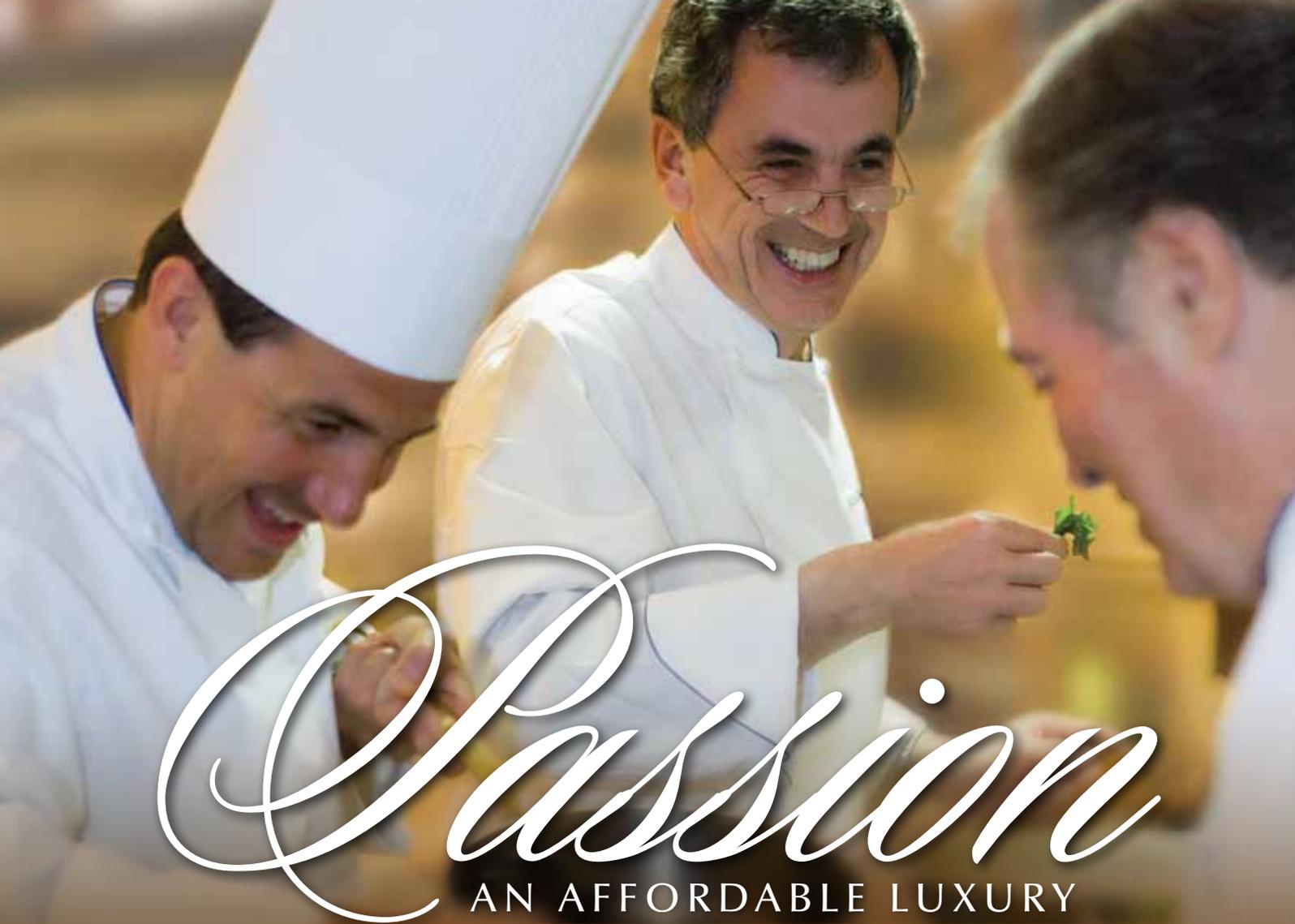
Whether your definition of adventure includes thrills and chills or simply the anticipation and pleasure of sampling a foreign cuisine, we hope this issue inspires you to step outside your ordinary.

So how adventurous are you? **v**



Ensemble Vacations won the Silver award at the 19th annual 2010 North American Travel Journalists Association competition, which honours the 'best of the best' in travel writing and photography for the travel industry worldwide.

FEDERICA MARABOLI, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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Diversions

Innovations and celebrations

Star treks: Where celebrities go on vacation

Machu Picchu, Peru is hot. This year marks the 100th anniversary of explorer Hiram Bingham's discovery of the ancient Inca site. Canadian funnyman **Jim Carrey** scaled the Inca citadel, and then spent the night at the posh **Hotel Monasterio** in **Cuzco**. He hopped to Peru from Brazil, where he was promoting his latest movie, *Mr. Popper's Penguins*.

In **Brazil**, **Ashton Kutcher** was seen playing beach volleyball in **Rio** before starting his new gig on *Two and a Half Men*. The newest hot spot in South America is **Trancoso**, Brazil. It used to be a sleepy village but now it's the primo place to party. Just ask **Naomi Campbell**, **Gisele Bündchen** and **Matthew McConaughey**.



Watch for **Punta del Este, Uruguay** to appear more frequently on the pages of travel magazines. The southern tip of the country has plenty of glamour, with high-end resorts and scenery to match. **Hugh Jackman**, **Shakira** and **Ralph Lauren** have already discovered it.

Meanwhile, stateside, newlyweds **LeAnn Rimes** and **Eddie Cibrian** hit the beach in **Malibu, California**, looking like the all-American couple. **Jennifer Lopez** and her twins Max and Emme visited **Disneyland** in **Anaheim**, as did **Leonardo DiCaprio** and **Blake Lively**. Although they both wore hats to avoid being recognized, Leo and Blake were seen slipping in through the special celebrity door. New lovebirds **Renée Zellweger** and **John Stamos** were also spotted having fun together at the **Magic Kingdom**. It's a small world after all.

Zip advisor: Where you'll find the best zip lines

Want to go higher? Faster? When it comes to thrills, these destinations deliver:



In the **Turu Ba Ri Tropical Park** in **Costa Rica's Central Valley**, this zip line is 1,036 metres of pure adrenaline rush.

South America's longest zip line is near **Cali, Colombia**, where you zip across a 1.2 kilometre-gorge twice.

In **Orocovis, Puerto Rico**, scream your way along 1,446 metres of fun over **Toro Verde Nature Adventure Park**.

The world's longest, fastest, highest and steepest zip line is located in **Sun City, South Africa**. Hang on to your hair – it reaches speeds of up to 160 kilometres per hour.

Perched 85 metres above a rocky gorge is **Canada's** highest zip line, found at **Marble Mountain** in western **Newfoundland**.



Sand practice: Top apps for beach lovers

Which sunscreen should you use? Is the sun shining at your favourite beach? Wonder no more, because now there's an app for that! Check these out:

BeachWeather Find the nearest beach and the weather conditions for your fave hangout, too. This app provides water temperature, wind speed and even high and low tide times. Sunset watchers can even time their arrival perfectly for the best vistas.

EWG Sunscreen Sunburns aren't cool – or fun. Pick the right sunscreen with this app that ranks 500 brands for their effectiveness and safety.

Beach Finder Which way to the beach? This app points you in the right direction to the nearest stretch of sand, from a database of 5,300 beaches in North America, with maps and driving instructions.

That Beach Channel When you can't get to the beach, this is the next best thing. Watch soothing footage of waves lapping against the shore and recall memories of your own sandy frolics. Just say, "Ahhhh..."



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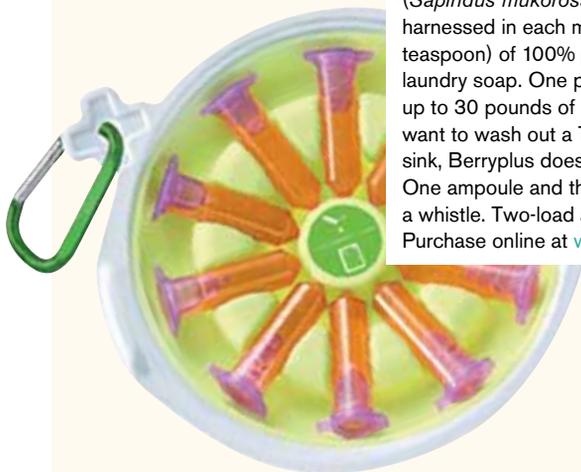
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Packing List

New and notable

Berry Clean

Laundry soap that grows on trees? In India, the soapnut (*Sapindus mukorossi*) does and its cleaning power is harnessed in each microdose (2 ml – less than half a teaspoon) of 100% plant-based, eco-friendly **Berryplus** laundry soap. One packet washes, brightens and whitens up to 30 pounds of laundry. For travellers on the go who want to wash out a T-shirt or undergarments in a hotel sink, Berryplus does the job with just a drop or two. One ampoule and the whole family will be clean as a whistle. Two-load ampoule packs start at \$2.99. Purchase online at www.goneshopping.ca.



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Fight the moisture-sucking effect of plane travel on your skin with **Pure+simple**'s range of organic hydrosols. Mist onto your face to hydrate and refresh or use after cleansing and toning to soothe inflamed skin and strengthen capillaries. Have oily skin? **Organic Lavender Hydrosol** is perfect for balancing oil production and acts as an anti-bacterial. Prices start at \$12.95/50 ml. For a bikini-ready body, try the firming, circulation-improving **Ginger Root Anti-Cellulite Gel**. Lemon peel oil helps balance fluids in skin cells to ensure optimum circulation, necessary in the battle to banish cellulite. Retail for \$34.95/100 ml, available at all Pure+simple spas or at www.pureandsimple.ca.



Probiotic Power

No one really wants to think about it, but at least 30% of intrepid tourists end up suffering through an unpleasant bout of traveller's diarrhea. Reduce the chance of this and keep your tummy on track naturally with new Canadian-made **Bio-K+ CL1285®** Regular or Extra Strength capsules. Boosting your digestion can safeguard your system from pathogens found in food and water. Each regular strength enteric-coated capsule contains 30 billion live bacteria – *L. acidophilus* and *L. casei* – to keep you healthy, happy and enjoying your destination without having to visit every bathroom in sight! \$39.99 for a box of 20 capsules. Available in stores or online at www.biokplus.com.



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Goodbye flimsy, landfill-clogging plastic baggies! Hello **RuMe Reveal!** Finally, a durable, handy carry-on solution to bringing liquids, toiletries or snacks aboard your flight. The RuMe Reveal is a translucent, durable, water-resistant fabric bag that's machine washable and zips up to keep you organized. TSA-compliant and food safe, this green solution to baggies is a wise investment. \$7.99, available online at www.goneshopping.ca.



Trends: Style Notes



Bathing Beauties

Everything old is new again and at the beach that includes maillots, those full-coverage one-piece swimsuits that leave more to the imagination. This little black number is worthy of a starlet's red carpet walk (think Kim Kardashian), except it's a swimsuit. And not just any swimsuit; it's by **Spanx** (\$240 at Sporting Life, sportinglife.ca). The shapewear behemoth has turned its attention to that other aspect of women's lives fraught with insecurity: the bathing suit. Style cues are from the 1940s heyday of Esther Williams and Betty Grable: lower cut legs, sheath stylings and demure necklines. Similarly, **Jantzen's** Vamp-Style Maillot (\$70 at Sporting Life) is based on a design from its 1940s archives. The retro look isn't limited to women – for guys tired of knee-length board shorts there are trimmer, shorter options that still stay far out of Speedo territory. **Brooks Brothers**, the venerable clothier that first introduced the fine Indian fabric to America in the 1920s, offers an array of tailored madras and solid-coloured Montauk swim trunks (\$85) worthy of bygone matinée idols like *A Summer Place's* Troy Donahue.

Star Scent

Lovestruck, starring Leighton Meester, isn't a movie or a new prime-time dramedy. It's fashion maven **Vera Wang's** latest fragrance. "Leighton's beauty, talent and spirit will inspire," Wang explains. "She is the perfect heroine for my tale of romance." *Lovestruck* arrives in department stores in August.



Rubber Sole

Native Shoes are more than just Crocs 2.0. Yes, they're moulded, bacteria-proof shoes for sand and surf but you'll do a double-take because they actually have style – you'll want to wear them on the street. Each comes in a rainbow of shades and with a style inspired by classic sneaker silhouettes (think Vans, Keds and Clarks). The best part? They're Canadian – the brainchild of a trio of entrepreneurial graphic designers from Vancouver. \$45 to \$60, nativeshoes.com.



Trends: Style Notes

Killing Time

While you can't be James Bond, you can at least roll like 007 with **OMEGA's** new **Seamaster Planet Ocean** watch. Worn by the fictional secret agent on the screen since 1995, the Seamaster is the fashionable favourite of divers and aesthetes alike. The new Planet Ocean is powered by the latest generation of OMEGA's co-axial calibre 8500, is water resistant up to 2,000 feet and features a unidirectional rotating bezel with a luminous triangular marker at 12 o'clock, a watertight screw-in crown and a helium escape valve. Because you never know what kind of adventure awaits (\$8,600 at Vancouver Omega Boutique or omegawatches.com).



Tequila Sunrise

Thanks to the HBO series *Entourage*, tequila is having a moment. **Patrón** has Dan Aykroyd, Justin Timberlake's got **901**, Mötley Crüe frontman Vince Neil skills for **Tres Rios** and Sammy Hagar makes **Cabo Wabo**. Sipping tequilas are enjoying a revival and so is **Herradura**, which just got a makeover befitting its features as a sitting spirit, with notes of vanilla, oak and peppery cucumber. Enjoy it as you would a fine scotch. We have a lot to thank Turtle for, including the trip to Margaritaville (\$79.95 at the LCBO).



Lived-In Love

The buzzwords for men's accessories this fall are heritage and workwear, with Canadiana- and Americana-inspired pre-scuffed looks. There's already a patina to the **Hudson's Bay Company's** waxed cotton bagpack (\$175 at The Bay), whereas **Filson** expects you to wear one in through interesting living. Filson's **Rucksack** (\$295, at Oliver Spencer in Toronto and Hills of Kerrisdale in Vancouver, filson.com) and weekender **Sportsman's Bag** (\$325, at Oliver Spencer, Brooklyn Clothing in Vancouver) both come in sturdy canvas trimmed in leather and only get better with age. Shoes, too, are getting the weathered treatment, with **Converse Chuck Taylors** and **Jack Purcells** offering new washed canvas, waxed canvas and distressed leather versions of the classics for the season (from \$65, converse.com).

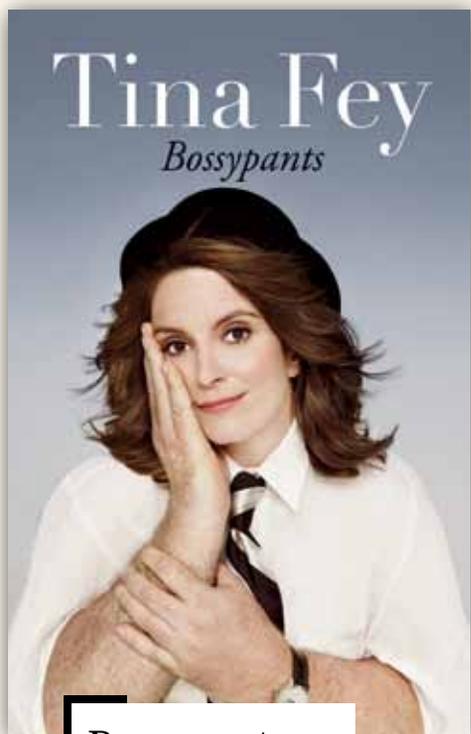
Doors Open

More of our favourite American fashion chains are setting up shop on this side of the border, starting with the classic basics-with-a-twist **J.Crew**. The retailer that creative director Jenna Lyons has made chic again will open its first Canadian store in Toronto at Yorkdale Mall come mid-August. Down the mall aisle, **Express** is planning a 10,000-square-foot store at Fairview Mall, with up to seven more planned by the end of the year. For a stylish fall, snag the **Editor Pant** – Express's bestselling women's trouser – and for him, the **1MX**, a shirt with a signature fit and engineered collar.



Required Reading

Enchanting escapes

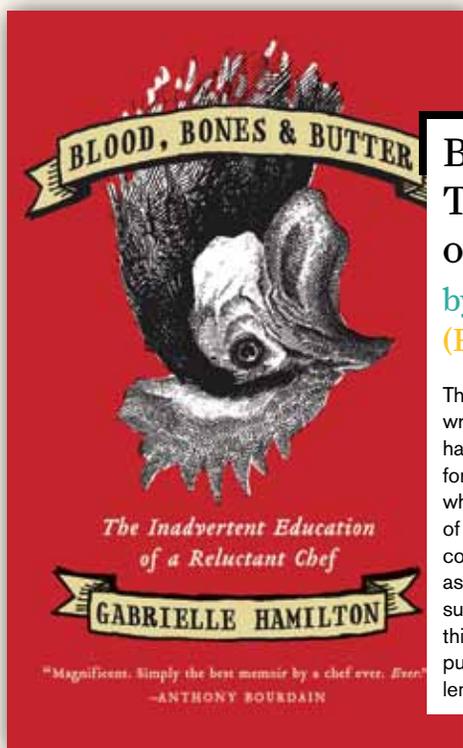


Bossypants by Tina Fey (Reagan Arthur Books, \$29.99)

Tina Fey, the first female head writer at *Saturday Night Live*, the script-writer behind the movie *Mean Girls* and the creator/executive producer of the hit show *30 Rock*, has penned a comedic memoir chronicling her 'nerdy' youth, her once-relentless pursuit of superficial beauty and a full-throttle career interspersed with her signature witty observations. *Bossypants* is laugh-out-loud funny. Just put down your piña colada first to avoid a nasal spray of cocktail all over your beach towel – yes, it's *that* funny!

This Cake Is for the Party by Sarah Selecky (Thomas Allen Publishers, \$22.95)

2010 Scotiabank Giller Prize finalist Sarah Selecky weaves a tight little collection of short stories that wryly observes the goings-on between young men and women whose plans are thwarted and whose hopes are betrayed. *This Cake* has layers of weighty issues, as well as hilarity and poignancy – possibly part of the reason why Selecky is being touted as the “next Alice Munro” by *Chatelaine*. Each story is its own self-contained morsel, perfect for when you have just enough time on the terrace or the beach to enjoy a bite or two.



Blood, Bones & Butter: The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef by Gabrielle Hamilton (Random House, \$30.00)

This is no ordinary lost-soul-turned-chef-who-writes-a-book kind of memoir. It isn't even just for hard-core food lovers. It's for anyone who hungers for a captivating page-turner written by a chef who happens to have an MFA from the University of Michigan in writing fiction. Hamilton is as comfortable penning stories about evocative meals as she is describing the people and places that surround her. Funny, gut-wrenching, sweet and sour, this is one book that you'll find nearly impossible to put down once you start – like a piece of perfect lemon meringue pie.

Cruise News

The Debutantes...



Seabourn Quest Dazzles the Crowds in Barcelona

Blythe Danner, Gwyneth Paltrow's mom and godmother of **Seabourn's** newest luxury ship, **Quest**, added some star power to its recent christening ceremony in **Barcelona** while a live orchestra played under a moonlit sky.

Travel agents who sailed on the pre-inaugural voyage raved about the vessel's luxurious amenities, intimate atmosphere and fine dining options. Mary Jean Tully, Ensemble Travel® Group member, enthused, "The European waitstaff – with their attention to detail – went above and beyond. The cabins were magnificent, from the smallest right up to the suites," adding, "You couldn't want for one more thing."

Aimed at a luxury adult lifestyle, **Quest** boasts an array of restaurants, lounges and other amenities, including the largest spa facility on a luxury cruise ship. Equipped with six treatment rooms, a thermal hydro pool, Kinesis Wall and more, it also features the upper-level **Spa Villa** – perfect for couples who want to spend the day in paradise. The villa has two massage tables, a double bed, private showers and a spectacular wraparound terrace with a magnificent view. And no jungle gyms in sight.

Celebrity Launches *Silhouette*

Silhouette, the newest addition to **Celebrity Cruises' Solstice** class, made its maiden voyage in July. What's new? **The Lawn Club** now features **The Lawn Club Grill**, an upmarket outdoor grill where you can choose your own cut of meat for dinner and work the 'cue alongside the restaurant's chef; **The Porch**, a casual breakfast and lunch venue that overlooks a lush green lawn; and **The Alcoves**, eight private cabanas from which to survey the action. The chic cabanas are fully equipped with Wi-Fi technology and iPads so you can enjoy music, movies, games and magazines – or simply take in the spectacular view of the open sea. The cabanas are available at a daily at-sea rate of \$149 (\$99 for days in port). Included in the fee are fruit platters, bottled water and chilled towels, as well as bragging rights to this luxurious experience. For an extra fee, a dedicated Alcove Attendant will fetch you drinks or even a themed picnic basket.

If low-key is more your style, check out **The Hideaway**, an intimate space made for quiet-time activities like reading,



relaxing and listening to music on an iPod, or **Michael's Club**, which has dropped some of its formality and morphed into a craft beer bar featuring more than

50 international hand-crafted beers. **Silhouette** will sail to Europe and the Caribbean.

Travel File

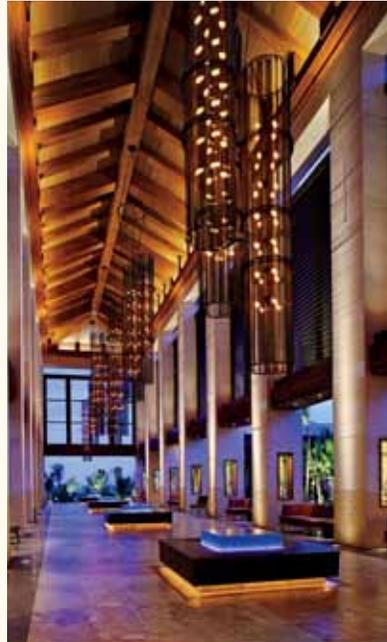
Ensemble® Hotel and Resort Collection



Paradise Found

If bigger is better, then the **Atlantis Complex** on **Paradise Island** in the **Bahamas** is surely one of the best resorts ever. It's easy to see why this island was once the choice playground for jet-setters and why, after a more than \$1 billion expansion, its reputation as among the finest entertainment resorts has been restored. Sitting on a two-mile stretch of pristine white sand beach, the property's selection of accommodations includes three family-friendly hotel towers (**Beach Tower, Coral Towers** and **Royal Towers**), self-catered condominium-style hotel residences at **The Reef Atlantis**, luxurious suites at **The Cove Atlantis** (better suited for couples and adults who want to escape the kiddies) and elegant, private villas at **Harborside Resort**.

One of the main attractions at Atlantis – appealing to young and old alike – is **The Dig**. The world's largest open air marine habitat, it includes several aquariums and boasts many aquatic species including sharks, manta rays, barracudas, sawfish and stingrays. Meanwhile, **Aquaventure Water Park** features eight thrilling body slides (check out **The Abyss**, a 200-foot-long water slide with a 50-foot near-vertical drop



that ends in an underwater *cenote*, or sinkhole), lazy rivers, pools and rapids.

There's no shortage of fun things to do, especially so for younger guests who will find **Atlantis Kids Adventures** club a dream come true. This kids' club is like stepping into a fairy tale where

imagination runs wild. It features everything from a grocery store, a life-size Victorian dollhouse and culinary studio to a theatrical stage set and computer room. For tweens nine to 13 years old, **Club Rush** is the coolest place to be. This state-of-the-art facility offers video games and the latest Hollywood blockbuster movies. But best of all? No parents allowed. Teens 13 to 17 years old will love **CRUSH**, the ultimate dance club and Internet lounge with a bar-like atmosphere, complete with a tasty menu and signature (non-alcoholic) drinks. Boasting state-of-the-art games and the hottest tunes, this 14,000-square-foot entertainment complex is a great place to hang out and meet new friends.

The dining options at Atlantis are equally impressive. You'll find 40 restaurants and bars including such world-renowned names as **NOBU, Café Martinique** and Bobby Flay's **Mesa Grill**.

After an amazing dinner, catch a concert at **Atlantis Live**, watch a movie at the **Atlantis Theatre**, dance all night at **Aura Nightclub**, have a few laughs at **Jokers Wild** comedy club or try your luck at the **Atlantis Casino**.

Finally, if peace and tranquility are what you're after, a stroll along the moonlit beach is a lovely way to end your perfect day in paradise. **■**



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©PETER FAIGE

City Snap Guide: Quito

Tim Johnson

Cradled high in the Andes and situated directly atop the equator, **Quito, Ecuador**'s energetic capital, offers much in the way of natural wonders, from misty mountain views to the strange physical forces said to play out along the line of zero latitude. But in Quito, the outdoors aren't always wild – with wonderful food, culture and one of the world's first UNESCO heritage sites, you'll find plenty of genteel charms, too.



Centro historico

Considered the best-preserved colonial centre in all of Latin America, Quito's old town was honoured as one of the first **UNESCO World Heritage** sites back in 1978. It's not hard to see why, especially after a major \$41 million restoration polished up many of the buildings – which feature a mix of Spanish, Italian, Moorish and Flemish baroque architecture – and returned them to their original glory. The area is anchored by the beautiful **Plaza Grande**, the city's main square, which is dominated by the vast **Carondelet Palace**, seat of government in Ecuador since the 1700s, as well as the adjacent ornate wedding cake of the Plaza Grande Hotel and bustling **Archbishop's Palace**. The latter now serves more as a commercial hub – wander inside to pick up authentic indigenous handicrafts and lovely art pieces, or settle in for a leisurely dinner at **Mea Culpa**, which offers Ecuadorian cuisine and beautiful views of the square which, on any given day, can feature anything from native Quichua dances to boisterous political theatre.

Make some time to wander the old town's cobblestoned streets, especially **Calle de las Siete Cruces** (Street of the Seven Crosses), where hawkers call out their best offer on everything from apples to kitchen utensils to lottery tickets, and home to La Compañía, a stunning Jesuit church dating back to 1605, the interior of which is covered in exquisite gold leaf.

La Mariscal

Part of Quito's modern new town, **La Mariscal** is home to several international hotels, and a prime destination for visitors. Shop and people-watch along dynamic **Avenida Rio Amazonas**, stroll through the lush **Jardín Botánico** and then kick up your heels around Plaza Foch. This square and its adjacent streets are the best place to experience Quito's nightlife – you'll find everything from sushi joints to wine bars to nightclubs, including plenty of places with sidewalk patios.

The heights

Surrounded by majestic volcanic peaks, Quito has no shortage of places to take in panoramic views of the city. The best can be found at the top of the **TelefériQo**, a gondola that climbs the slopes of **Pichincha**, an active volcano. At 13,400 feet, you'll arrive at a complex where, in addition to vertiginous views from a number of different lookouts, you can relax at one of three cafés (something you'll definitely need to do after walking around in the vapour-thin air).

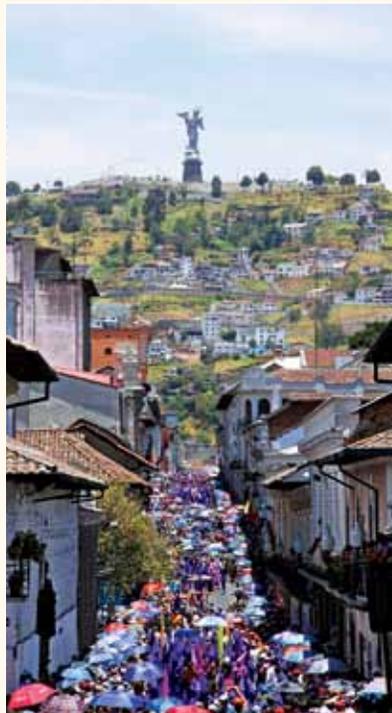
For a view of the city that doesn't require a trip up into the stratosphere, catch a cab to the top of **El Panecillo**, a 600-foot hill crowned by a giant statue of the Virgin Mary, which looms over the colonial old town.

Equatorial wonders

While the entire city of Quito more or less sits on (or near) the equator, the best place to experience its effects is at the **Museo de Sitio Solar Intiñan**. Just a stone's throw from the hulking monument at **La Mitad del Mundo** (the middle of the world), which was built on the spot where surveyors – mistakenly – thought the equator was located until GPS more recently determined its precise position, Museo de Sitio Solar Intiñan marks zero latitude with a bright red line. And that line is used to demonstrate a number of cool phenomena which can allegedly only be seen at the equator, including the **Coriolis effect** (water drains clockwise from a basin just a few feet south of the equator, counterclockwise just north of it, and straight down when positioned right on the line), and the unique condition of gravitational pull at zero latitude, which it is claimed allows an egg to be balanced upright on the tip of a nail.

GET AWAY

Quito lies at the crossroads to two of the world's most famous natural gems. Flights leave daily for **Baltra** and **San Cristóbal** in the **Galápagos Islands** (about three hours, including a stop in **Guayaquil**), and also for **El Cobo** – just 45 minutes by air, this river town serves as the primary staging point for excursions into Ecuador's vast **Amazon basin**.

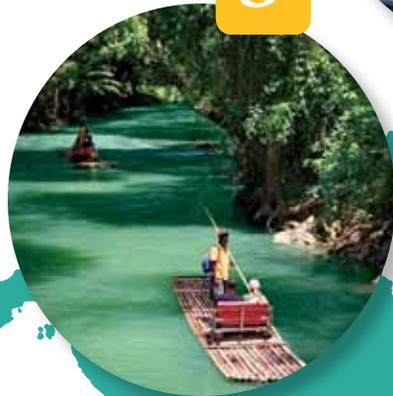


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ON LOCATION

Sure, lying on a beach is nice. But sometimes you want to shake things up, so we asked our Ensemble experts to recommend **four exciting excursions** that will add a little adventure to your next getaway.



1.

St. Lucia Rainforest Zip Adventure

With its unforgettable **Piton Mountains**, palm-fringed beaches and luxurious accommodations, **St. Lucia** is known as a romantic paradise. But it also offers unexpected adventure in a natural setting of cascading waterfalls and unspoiled rainforest. "For anyone seeking thrills, there is little that compares to zipping along 500 feet of cable at heights of up to 50 feet," says Lesley Paull. "Get a rush of adrenaline and enjoy a bird's-eye view of the rainforest canopy as you 'fly' over treetops, across rivers and through lush, tropical vegetation."

2.

Yacht Racing in Antigua

You don't need to have any sailing experience, just the desire to participate in an exhilarating activity. Experience the thrill of high-performance racing yachts in a fun-filled, head-to-head competition. Man the winch, pull a line or simply sit back and watch your crewmates race the yacht to the finish line. "These are small groups – of only about six guests and two professionally trained crew members – so you really get an intimate, adrenaline-pumping experience of yacht racing," says David Harris. After the race, enjoy a glass of rum punch as you sail past the mega-yachts in the picturesque harbours.

3.

Ocho Rios – Rafting on the Martha Brae and Hiking at Dunn's River Falls

"Anyone going to **Ocho Rios** should really consider these two quintessential activities," advises Brenda Sbrozzi. "A trip on a long, two-passenger bamboo raft down a three-mile stretch of the well-known Martha Brae is one of the most exhilarating things to do in **Jamaica**. The waters move at a good clip initially, before slowing down farther downriver, where you can stop at '**Tarzan's Corner**' for a swim in a calm pool. Then, head to **Dunn's River Falls** for a little physical activity climbing these world-famous falls."

4.

Cayman Islands' Stingray City (Sandbar) and Turtle Farm

Catch some rays while swimming among 'rays. Head across the **North Sound** on a private yacht to world-famous **Stingray City**, where dozens of stingrays cluster around a natural sandbar fringed by a colourful reef. "You can snorkel in the warm waters, or feed and even hold these surprisingly gentle creatures," says Federica Maraboli. "They'll swim around your legs and brush up against you from every angle – it really is a one-of-a-kind experience to be so close to them." Stop at the **Turtle Farm at Boatswain's Beach**, the world's only commercial green sea turtle farm, where you will see everything from the tiniest hatchlings to massive adults swimming in the breeding pond.

Sunquest

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**HACIENDA
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Resort, Spa & Nature Park



Nestled in a 326-acre pristine nature park in the Riviera Maya, the Hacienda Tres Ríos offers incredible gourmet experiences with a green twist. At the forefront of sustainable tourism, this Endless Luxury™ all-inclusive resort offers warm hospitality and luxurious settings while at the same time protecting the region's natural beauty and culture.

With 273 elegant suites built using native materials, the resort also features a full complement of facilities and services all designed to create amazing guest experiences. Whether you choose to bask on the private beach, take a cooking class, explore the resort's crystal clear cenotes and rivers or discover local flora at the on-site botanical garden, you are sure to enjoy your stay here from start to finish!

All-Inclusive Features:

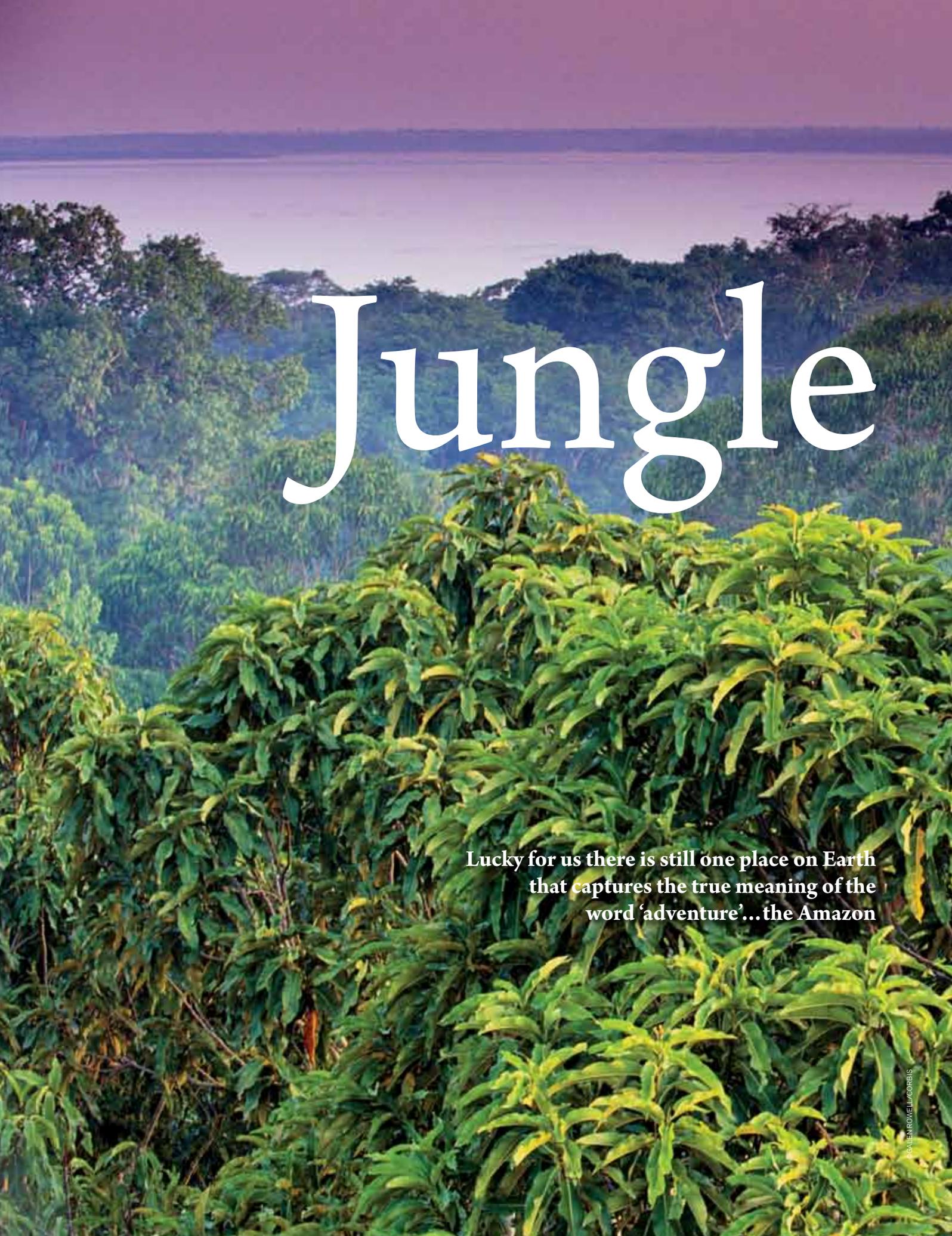
- Buffet breakfast, lunch & dinner daily
- 5 specialty restaurants
- 5 bars
- Domestic & imported premium drinks
- 2 pools (1 adults only) & Jacuzzi
- Welcome party
- Concierge service
- Non-motorized watersports
- Wi-Fi access (in-room & public areas)
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- Full access to a 326-acre Tres Ríos Nature Park
- SenseAdventure Experience
- Botanical garden and plant nursery tour
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A photograph of a dense tropical jungle. In the foreground, there are large, vibrant green bushes with broad leaves. The middle ground is filled with a thick canopy of trees. In the background, a wide, calm body of water stretches across the horizon under a clear sky. The overall scene is bright and verdant.

Jungle

Lucky for us there is still one place on Earth
that captures the true meaning of the
word 'adventure'...the Amazon



Fever

Michael DeFreitas



©ALEX.S.2009

The late afternoon sky was gearing up for another spectacular tropical sunset as we glided slowly up a small feeder stream of the **Rio Negro** toward **Lago Araçari**. Overhead, the trees formed a canopy, making it easier to spot jungle wildlife. Amazon kingfishers darted back and forth across the water, while the calls of squawking blue and gold macaws and raucous howler monkeys echoed through the surrounding dense forest.

We were on a cruise ship excursion and our guide, Jefferson de Cristo, stood on the bow of our skiff and scanned the river ahead for a good place to fish. "I'm looking for a shallow spot with a big submerged tree," he said. "Red-bellied piranha love to hide in the branches and ambush their prey." It seemed we were about to do the same.

As we rounded a bend in the stream, we met an Amerindian man sitting in his three-metre dugout canoe, fishing near the exposed branches of a submerged tree.

"That's the spot," Jefferson said gleefully.

I asked him if the gentleman in the canoe would mind us honing in on his fishing spot, and Jefferson replied, "Don't worry, we'll give him everything we catch, so it's cool."

A few minutes later, Jefferson tied up to one of the exposed branches. The native fisherman, a new straw fedora shading his wrinkled face from the low afternoon sun,

gave us a 'there goes the neighbourhood' glance, nodded and continued fishing. As Jefferson handed out the bamboo poles, one of the passengers yelled, "He's got one." We all stopped to watch the old guy pluck a large red-belly from the water. He paused briefly for photos before turning back to catch his dinner.

"Told you this was a good spot," Jefferson boasted as he retrieved a small blue plastic container from the cooler and passed it around to the passengers. We each took a small piece of raw steak and baited our hooks. Without thinking, I swished my bloodstained fingers in the river. Jefferson quickly warned us not to rinse our hands in the water. He emphasized his point by jokingly holding up his left hand with his index finger half bent back. We got the message.

No sooner had my hook hit the water, my pole tip jerked and I had a piranha. Soon piranhas were hitting the deck faster than Jefferson could unhook them. In less than an hour, our bucket was half-full. The action was so hectic we didn't even notice the old man had slipped away. We caught up with him a few hundred metres upstream. He greeted us warmly from the window of his floating one-room house.

When Jefferson handed him the bucket of fish, his face lit up like a Canada Day fireworks display. After a few more photos, we motored back to our ship under a glorious golden Amazon sunset.

Home to the world's largest tropical rainforest, the Amazon Basin has always been a lodestone for adventure seekers. Roughly the size of the contiguous United States, the region boasts the globe's greatest diversity of life. The engine that drives this vast ecosystem is the approximately 6,400-kilometre-long Amazon River (the planet's largest). It is 14 times larger than the St. Lawrence and a jet takes about half an hour to cross its 325-kilometre-wide mouth.

With few roads and the region subject to annual floods, boats are the main mode of transport. Until recently this usually meant exploring in cramped wooden riverboats, but that all changed when Spain's hotel giant, Iberostar, launched its luxurious *Grand Amazon* river ship.

The 1,525-tonne *Grand Amazon* sails three-, four- and seven-day itineraries on the **Amazon**, **Solimões** and **Negro** rivers. It sports two pools, two restaurants, a fitness centre, 148-seat theatre and 72 spacious cabins with balconies and many amenities.

The ship's professional and knowledgeable Amazonian guides took us on exciting and informative daily excursions up smaller feeder streams for piranha fishing, wildlife viewing, rainforest hikes, visits to isolated native villages and dolphin feedings. Each evening, we anchored in quiet backwaters

close to shore so we could view wildlife from our balconies or from the observation deck. Much of the Amazon's wildlife activity occurs in the forest canopy and the ship's top observation deck is the perfect height to observe parrots and macaws jostling for the best roosting spots, and troops of curious howler and squirrel monkeys that came to the forest edge to check us out.

We also visited four isolated native villages, most with fewer than 50 inhabitants. At each stop, we were greeted with infectious smiles, warm hospitality and beautiful children with big dark eyes and wide grins. One morning we visited a village on the bank of **Lago Janauacá**, near **Aturia**, where an elderly lady invited me into her hut to see family pictures and her new bed.

After touring the village we took turns firing darts at a tree stump. The long blowguns were surprisingly heavy and difficult to shoot and none of us managed to hit the target. However, our efforts did draw lots of laughter from the villagers.

Later that morning, the village chief took us for a fascinating jungle trek. During our foray he pointed out various

medicinal plants and animal tracks. We sampled some wild berries that turned our lips purple, drank fresh water from a cut vine, practised our howler monkey calls and followed a 500-metre-long column of leafcutter ants carrying leaf pieces back to their underground nest. The ants use the cut leaves to feed the fungus they farm for food. Lucky for us they were of the non-stinging variety.

But my most memorable wildlife experience was an encounter with pink river dolphins on the Rio Negro. They're not easy to find, but they can be playful and bold with humans when they get the chance. That chance came on the last day of our cruise, when we visited a small floating café near **Novo Airão**. A few years ago the owner noticed a few pink dolphins hanging around her dock so she tossed them some fish scraps. They returned the next day so she fed them again. When they started showing up regularly, she renamed her diner **Boto Cor-de-Rosa** (Pink Dolphin). Besides tasty fish dishes, her offerings now include dolphin feeding. Such an intimate encounter with these wild, playful creatures was the perfect ending to our exciting Amazon adventure cruise. ▣



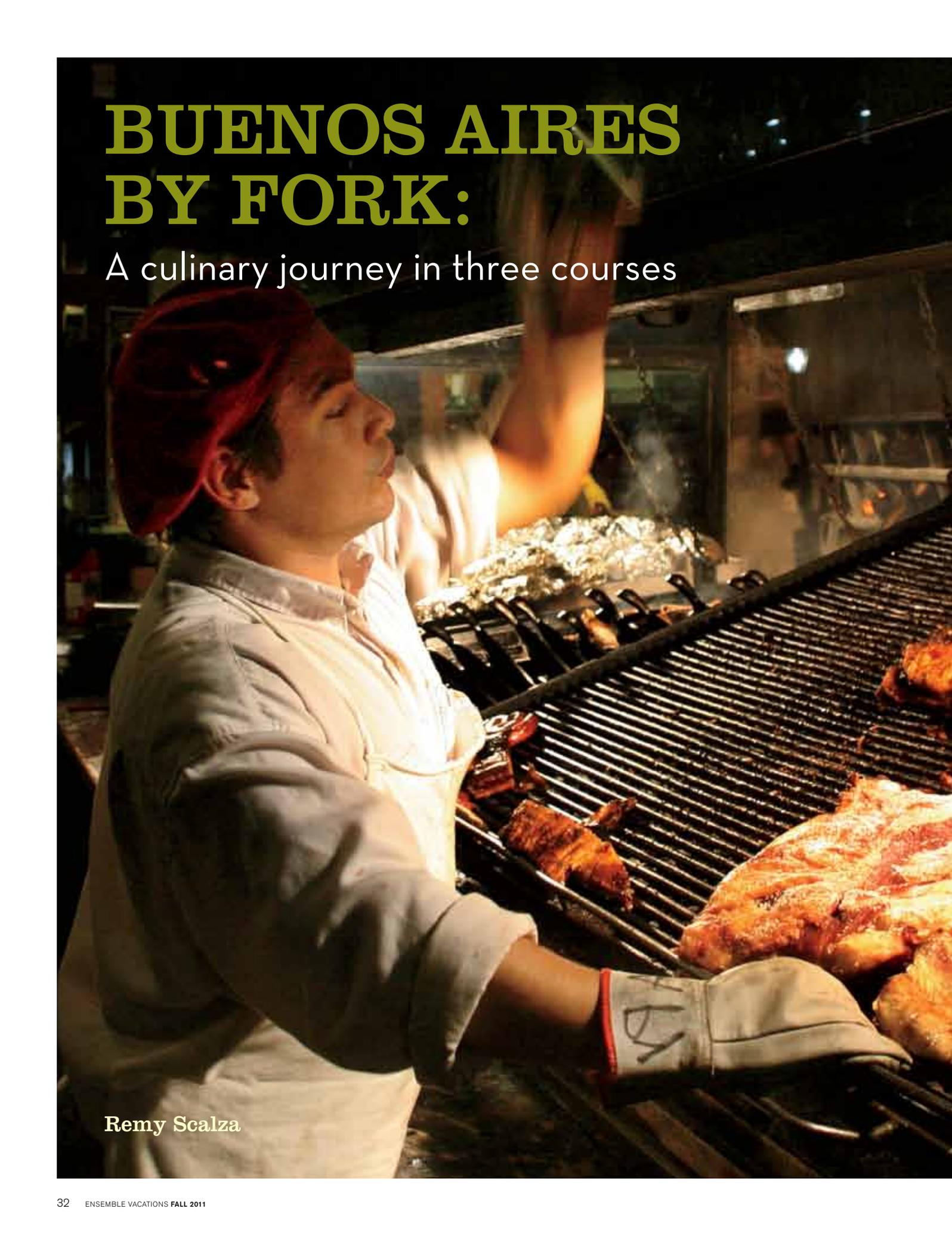
Cruises begin and end at the **Porto Flutuante** pier in **Manaus**, **Amazonas'** capital. Nestled on the banks of the Rio Negro, this former 19th-century rubber town is now home to almost 1.8 million people and is worth taking a couple of days to explore. The government recently declared the city a duty-free zone so bargains abound at shops selling designer labels and local artwork. At the municipal market, you'll find local handicrafts, jewellery and an assortment of Amerindian remedies for everything from backache to impotency (*miranta* is the Amerindian equivalent of Viagra).

The city boasts a good selection of upscale hotels and restaurants and a few historic sites like the **Amazonas Theatre**, commonly referred to as the '**Opera House**.' Opened in 1896, the theatre features a brightly coloured mosaic dome that is visible from almost any spot in the city. Most Manaus residents speak only Portuguese. Although it's safe to explore on your own during the day, it's best to have your hotel concierge arrange for an inexpensive local guide to show you around.

“ ...the ship's top observation deck is the perfect height to observe parrots and macaws jostling for the best roosting spots... ”

BUENOS AIRES BY FORK:

A culinary journey in three courses

A chef in a white uniform and red hat is working at a large grill. The grill is filled with various meats, including a large piece of pork belly and several smaller pieces of meat. The chef is wearing a white glove on his right hand and is looking towards the grill. The background is dark, suggesting an indoor kitchen or restaurant setting.

Remy Scalza



Ribs roast at La Caballeriza, a *parrilla* in Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires' trendiest new neighbourhood. The cook, known as a *parrillero*, is salting the meat.

IT'S NEARLY MIDNIGHT and Rodi Bar, a venerable old restaurant in Buenos Aires' Recoleta neighbourhood, is full, with a line stretching out the door and down the tree-lined street. Inside, bow-tied waiters, grey hair slicked back in fine Old World style, shuffle from table to table balancing plates piled with sizzling steaks, homemade tortellini and bottles of wine. The crowd in the room and the din – an unremitting clamour of clanging cutlery and loud conversations in *castellano*, the regional Spanish dialect – is nothing unusual. For all their tango renown, what locals here really do well, and at all hours, is eat.

The cuisine is hardly revolutionary: an abundance of beef, pizzas and pastas – brought over by Italian forbears – and little else. But it is uniformly good. Ingredients are fresh, recipes are time-proven and – failing all else – the wine is cheap and eminently drinkable. For the traveller, the city can be a veritable moveable feast, provided you know where to look.

PART I > LA CARNE

Just as high-end hotels have their signature scents – that trademark olfactory blend that suffuses the lobby – so does Buenos Aires: and it is the heavy aroma of seared beef. There are literally thousands of steakhouses, known as *parrillas*, in the capital, often packed two or three to a block. With few exceptions, they do a brisk business.

Beef in Argentina is a national passion on par with *fútbol*. Cattle are grass-fed – raised on pastures and not in feedlots – and also hormone-free. The result is a different steak altogether than the bland beef on offer in many North American supermarkets and restaurants. Little surprise that Argentinians consume more red meat per capita than anyone in the world, roughly 150 pounds every year.

Parrilla La Dorita sits on a street corner in Palermo, once a working-class neighbourhood slowly filling up with boutiques and sushi bars. Inside the crowded dining room, the clientele is split between young bohemians, all tight jeans and scraggly facial hair, and old couples who probably remember Evita – the Argentinian First Lady of the 1940s and '50s, not the Madonna musical.

At the back of the room, two cooks in red-stained aprons preside over a massive, wood-fired barbecue – the high altar of the city's carnivorous faithful. One tosses on ribs, steaks, bell peppers and potatoes. The other stirs coals glowing just beneath the grill.

La Dorita's menu lists a baffling array of cuts, from the delicate *bife de lomo*, a tenderloin filet, to the hands-down local favourite *asado*, a meaty rack of grilled short ribs. I settle on the *bife de chorizo*, a sirloin. Served humbly on a worn wooden cutting board, it's a thing of beauty – seared with dark crosses from the heat of the grill but *a punto* inside, still showing just a touch of pink. My knife slides through, and the *bife* is gone much too fast: a steak I still dream about today.

PART II > EL VINO

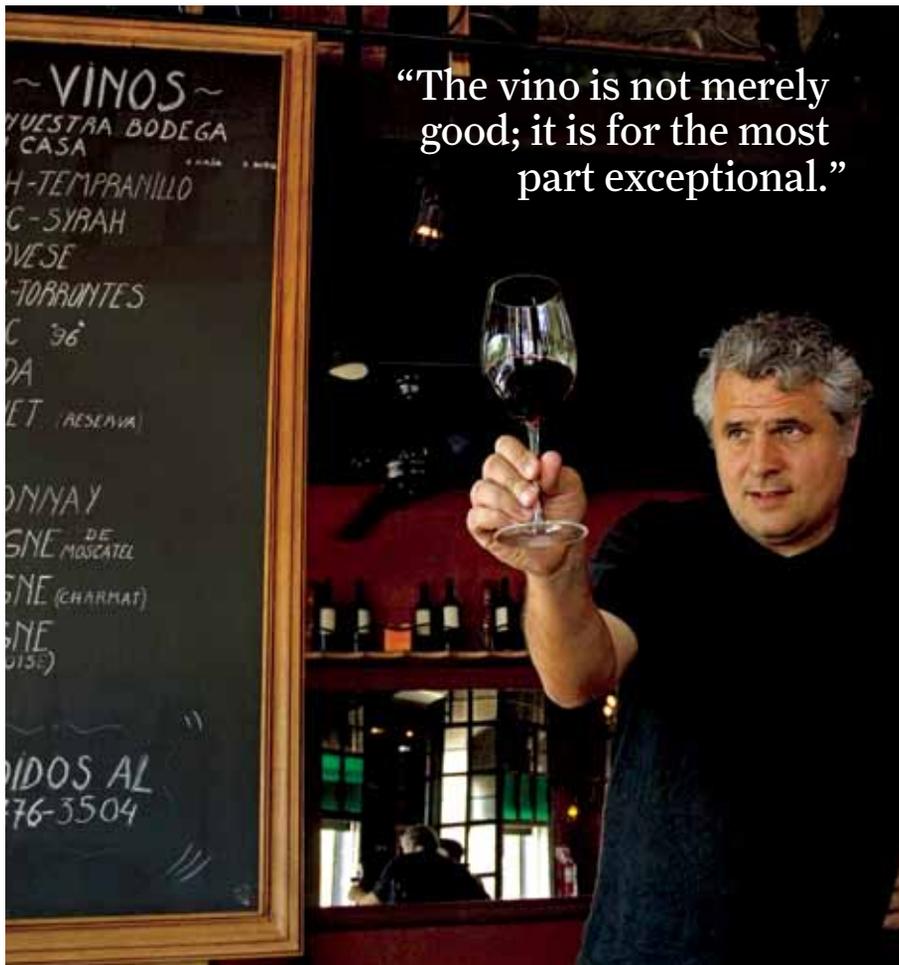
Old-timers in Buenos Aires have a habit. To every glass of red wine, they'll add a shot or two of *agua con gas*, soda water – a holdover from the bad old days when Argentinian plonk was virtually undrinkable and begged to be watered down.

This evening, inside the tiny wine bar and restaurant **Dadá** in the city's gritty commercial centre, no one is diluting anything. Groups of young Argentinians – chic, thin, with a practised, almost European *ennui* – sit gathered around bottles at tables covered with brown butcher paper. Against a soundtrack of American soul music, glasses are filled and refilled. The vino is not merely good; it is for the most part exceptional.

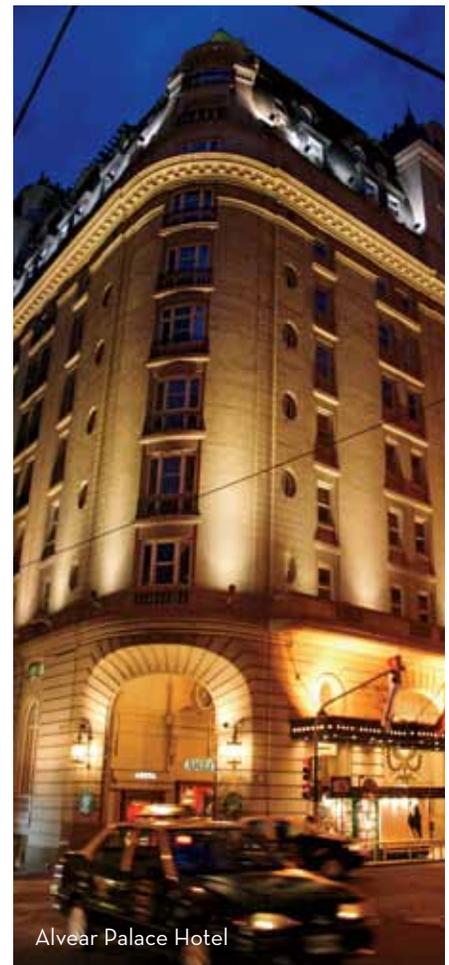
In the late 1980s, after centuries of making cheap jug wine, vintners here finally turned their attention to taming Argentina's signature grape, the notoriously tannic **Malbec**. The result today is a glorious catalogue of dark, complex reds. In the bars and restaurants of Buenos Aires, bottles are available in cheap, splendid profusion. In most places, \$10 buys a decent bottle; \$20 an excellent one – bright, fruit-forward and an optimum complement to the ubiquitous beef.

Back inside **Dadá**, the old zinc bar is filling up with regulars. I spend a few more pesos than usual and spring for a bottle of Malbec *reserva* – the good stuff. In the glass, it's dark, dense, conspiratorial – a Buenos Aires night bottled.

After a very good glass, and then maybe one or two more, I make my way back outside. The downtown is quiet at this hour, shop windows hidden behind steel shutters on a street of handsome old buildings with wrought-iron balconies. From the doorway, a red glow seeps out from the bar onto the dark sidewalk.



“The vino is not merely good; it is for the most part exceptional.”



Alvear Palace Hotel

© MARTIN ZABALA/XINHUA

© REMY SCALZA

PART III > EL TÉ

And for the final course, something unexpected: silver teapots and white-gloved waiters, sponge cake and butter tarts, delicate porcelain cups refreshed with practised grace. In defiance of geography and history, the British tradition of formal afternoon tea is replayed thousands of times a day in Buenos Aires, the vestige of an unusually deep Anglo fetish.

A few thousand enterprising Brits settled in Argentina in the mid-1800s, lured by dreams of striking it rich in the booming railroad industry. They introduced the continent to soccer, founded an English newspaper in Buenos Aires that still exists and even opened a Harrods in the heart of downtown.

They also drank tea, a custom locals – eager to Europify their humble backwater – embraced. Though the 1982 Falklands War with Britain put a damper on tea drinking, formal salons remain vital today. And perhaps none is more storied than the one inside the **Alvear Palace**, the 1930s *Belle Époque* mansion that houses arguably the city’s ritziest hotel.

Under crystal chandeliers, in a room decked out with Louis XV-style furniture, Buenos Aires’ elite privately indulge their inner anglophile. All the Victorian trappings, real and imagined, are here. Harpist playing softly in the corner? *Check*. Mint’s worth of silver polished to a high sheen? *Check*. Scones, jam and crustless sandwiches? *Check*.

The clientele these days is mixed: young socialites who text between sips, businessmen in expensive loafers and tourists sneaking shots with camera phones. But mainly this is the domain of the *señoras*: Buenos Aires’ glamorous silver-haired ladies of leisure. Today a large group is gathered around a table. They wear furs that would trigger protests in North America and jewels that evoke Buenos Aires’ halcyon days of yore.

I work my way through sandwiches of creamed trout, homemade crumpets, cheese puffs, mousses and tarts, sipping daintily all the while. But when the big silver trolley rolls around with its payload of pineapple sponge cakes and strawberry cheesecakes, I draw the line. *No gracias – nada más para mí*. Better to leave some room – there’s a long week of eating still ahead. ▣



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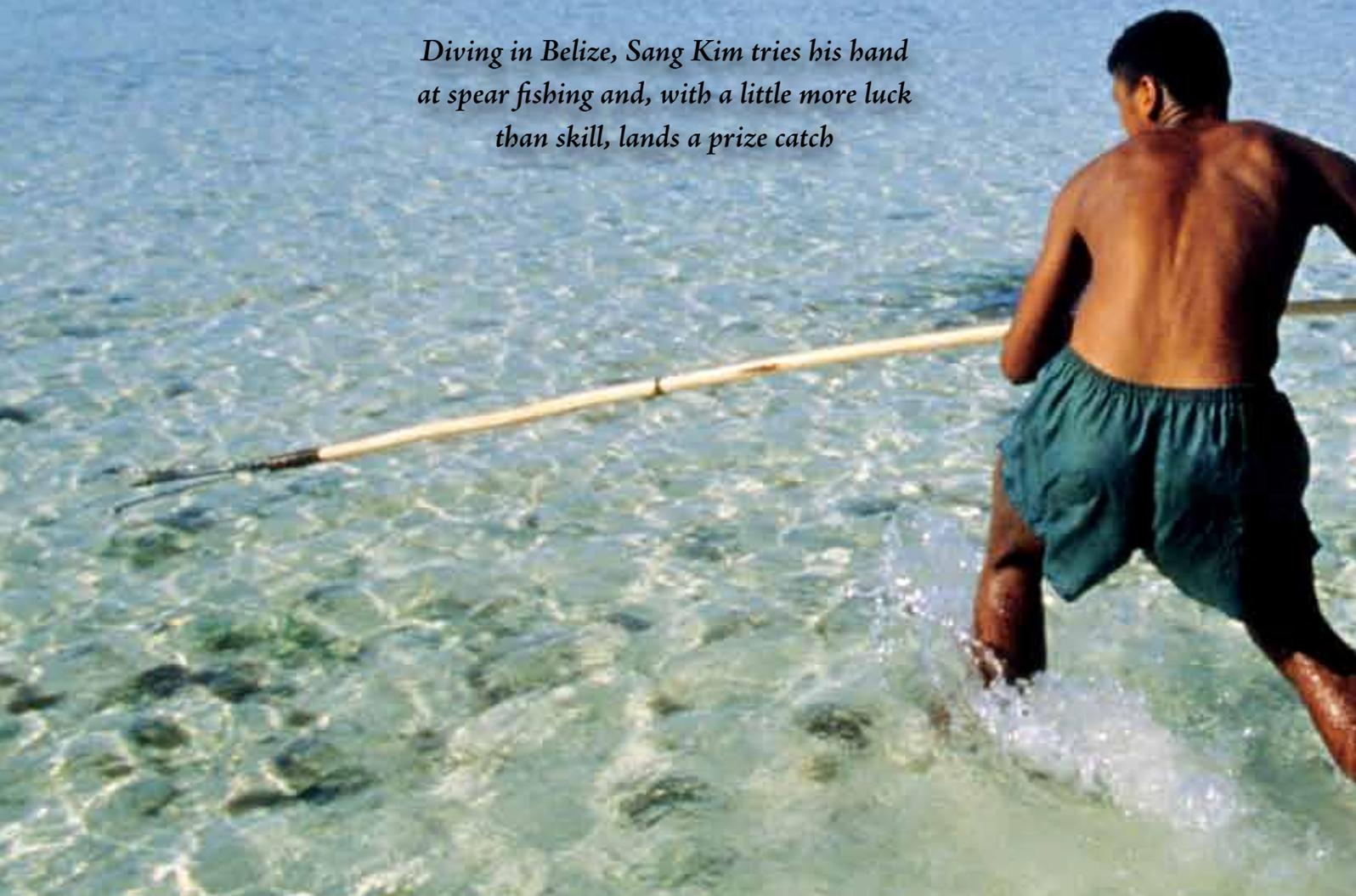

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A SPEAR AND A PRAYER

*Diving in Belize, Sang Kim tries his hand
at spear fishing and, with a little more luck
than skill, lands a prize catch*





TALES ABOUT THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY kindle the imagination. Tales about fish that weren't so lucky require less ingenuity in the telling. After all, the proof is in the frying pan or photograph or eyewitness account. In my case, there are no photographs, but Miguel is my witness. On a perfect summer afternoon, off the northwest coast of **Ambergris Caye** and five feet under the sun-burnished surface of the Caribbean, I caught a legendary fish.

Ambergris Caye is **Belize's** largest island, fifteen minutes by commuter plane from the mainland. At 25 miles long and one mile wide, this string bean of an island is easily traversed by golf cart. We met Miguel on the second day of our two-week trip at his restaurant in **San Pedro**, the tiny town Madonna dreams about in her song, 'La Isla Bonita.' It was late and he was closing up, but he was kind enough to put together two plates of the local favourite: stewed chicken with rice and beans. Over some Belikin beer Miguel told us, in surprisingly fluent English, about the island's history, its people and his own storied Mexican and Mayan ancestry. Unlike mainland Belize with its vast archaeological sites like **Caracol**, or the great city-states of **Tikal** in **Guatemala** and **Copán** in **Honduras**, Ambergris Caye has very few Mayan relics to speak of – even though the rich heritage runs through the blood of its people, many of whom can trace their lineage back to the original Mayan settlers on the island. As we got up to leave, Miguel invited me to go spear fishing with him the following week.

Once a laid-back fishing village, San Pedro has in recent years become a major diving and fishing attraction, with dive operators dotting its beaches and the ubiquitous craft shops all along its three sandy streets. The pace is dreamy, the people are genuinely hospitable and the resorts are small and intimate.

We spent the next 10 days eating conch fritters with locals on the beach or watching indigenous songbirds from the 'People Perch' at **Caribbean Villas** hotel and bird sanctuary, but mostly we went on diving trips out to the immense barrier reef. The clear warm water, coupled with abundant flora and fauna, make the conditions for diving and snorkelling along the reef the best in the Caribbean. There are areas where barracudas are known to shoal, others where stingrays gather in countless numbers and where a lucky diver might encounter one of the wonders of nature – the whale shark. We never managed to glimpse one, but

we did swim alongside giant sea turtles just off the **Turneffe Islands**. On the southern tip of Ambergris Caye is **Hol Chan Marine Reserve**. Meaning 'little channel' in Mayan, this protected sanctuary is an outdoor wonderland teeming with exotic fish and an equal number of masked human spectators.

Our diving excursions culminated in a choppy three-hour boat ride out to the **Great Blue Hole**, an underwater sinkhole 1,000 feet across by 400 feet deep, and one of the world's greatest scuba diving sites. This giant sapphire 'pupil' rimmed by shallow turquoise waters is home to a motley crew of predators including the hammerhead shark, a small school of which circled around us as we drifted behind the dubious refuge of stalactites, gigantic limestone fingers pointing into the depths.

On our second-last day, I met Miguel for our much-anticipated spear fishing trip. Spear fishing is legal in Belize but is not very popular with tourists. It is usually left to the locals, one of the ways they have fed their families for generations.

We moored the *panga* within a fenced-in ancestral fishing site, in shallow water sloping onto a small patch of reef and sand. Miguel dove right in and within minutes came up with dinner-sized snappers speared with great accuracy through the gills. I spent most of the time retrieving the spear from some part of the reef. During breaks, Miguel offered advice on how to sneak up on a fish, but to no avail. The truth was that I couldn't have hit a blue whale if my life depended on it. After three frustrating and aimless hours, I decided to rest on a rock about five feet below the surface. I took a deep breath and submerged. Just as I was about to take my seat, the rock shook violently and shifted a few feet. It was a monster tawny Nassau grouper, at least 40 inches long. I came up for breath and returned with the spear gun aimed directly at the grouper. I fired and although the spear did not pass through the fish, it went deep enough to snag him. Miguel jumped into the water to help me hold the rope. We managed to haul the grouper into the boat with great effort. There was no camera or scale, but I can tell you it had to have weighed about 70 pounds. It was the biggest fish Miguel had seen in a long time at that site. As we headed back to San Pedro, to what I imagined were waiting throngs of admirers, I could tell from Miguel's face that his Mayan forefathers were proudly beaming down at us. ▣

SURPRISING EL SALVADOR

TIM JOHNSON



*Out from the shadow of civil war and very much open for business, **El Salvador** is emerging as a hot destination for the adventurous.*



IN A PLACE THAT ONCE SAW fierce fighting, today they sing songs of peace. Despite the drizzle that has rolled in off the mountains, the mood on this Sunday morning in **Suchitoto** is celebratory. A long line of men, women and children, led by a small group draped in white robes, files slowly beneath the twin bell towers of **Iglesia Santa Lucía**, singing a hymn about angels, while in the square out front, a man launches a series

of *vara de cobete* by hand – fireworks that sizzle and boom to mark Salvadorian special occasions. I stumble over the slick cobblestones to get a better look and find myself joining the procession into a special mass in celebration of Corpus Christi and the confirmations of several of the local kids. Suchitoto – and its graceful town square lined with sidewalk cafés, artisan shops and *pupusa* joints serving up the national dish of stuffed corn

tortillas – is the kind of place that usually draws North American tourists by the busload. But as I follow the priest and his entourage into the lovely sanctuary, I take a moment to look around the church and back into the square: not another *gringo* in sight.

The morning celebration at Suchitoto is typical of travel in **El Salvador**, a nation that presents the visitor with a vast array of surprises, hidden gems and authentic experiences. Although guerrillas and government forces signed the peace agreement that ended El Salvador's bloody civil war some two decades ago, this Central American nation, which borders **Guatemala** and **Honduras**, has had a difficult time shaking its bad reputation, receiving the fewest tourists compared with other nations in the region – which means that you often have the best sites all to yourself.

Although **San Salvador**, the capital, is home to a number of luxury hotels, El Salvador is just now building its tourism infrastructure, so a visit here sometimes requires a sense of adventure. This fact is brought home to me as I ride with Benjamin Franklin Rivera, my indefatigable guide and wheelman with local company **Salvadorean Tours**, from Suchitoto, the nation's cultural capital, to the small nearby village of **Cinquera**. Roaring in a 4X4 over a road that's often little more than a muddy track shared with small herds of cattle, we soon arrive in the village. Seeking to learn more about the war that consumed the 1980s in El Salvador, I meet Don Rafael, a former guerrilla who still looks the part with a green military shirt, canteen and long machete, holstered in a leather scabbard that hangs from his belt.

These days, Don Rafael uses that machete to clear a path for the tourists who visit the woods around Cinquera. A former unit leader for the leftist fighters who battled government forces for control of the village, Don Rafael is now a park ranger who shares his experiences with those who join him on interpretive walks of the surrounding hills that served as home to the townspeople and guerrillas driven out of the village during the war years. He shows me a monument in the town square that features a helicopter shot down by rebel forces, as well as the bell tower of the local Catholic church, still in a bombed-out state. Was this left as a testimony to future generations, I ask? “*Exactamente*,” he responds.

Don Rafael notes that, for all its horrors, the war had a strange effect on the local people, awakening in them a sense of ecological responsibility for the forests that served as their home. He is

now a member of a group of former guerrillas who protect and maintain more than 5,000 hectares of green space. “We’re taking care of the forest – because it took care of us,” he tells me.

Of course, there's much more to El Salvador than the war. The country is home to a number of Mayan ruins, the most impressive of which is **Joya de Cerén**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site often known as the **Pompeii of the Americas**, as it (and the adjacent museum) displays elements of everyday life in a small village, frozen in time by the volcanic ash that covered it and spelled its end around 595 AD.

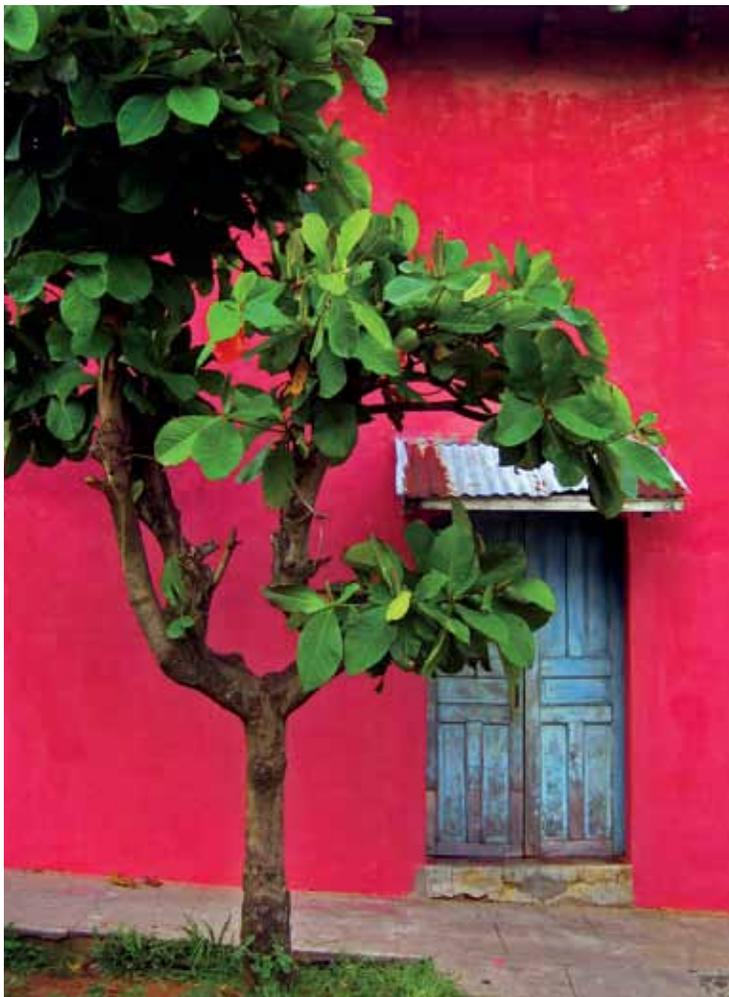
And indeed, El Salvador is a country covered in volcanoes, some active and others long extinct. The **Coatepeque Caldera** is a wonderful example of the latter, now a breathtaking lake surrounded by lush mountains and filled with small wooden

fishing boats and hilly green islands. At nearby **Cerro Verde National Park**, you can scale the summit of either **Santa Ana** or **Izalco**, whose cone is almost cartoonishly perfect (there are shorter nature and interpretive walks for the less ambitious).

Farther along the line of volcanoes, the **Ruta de las Flores** winds for 36 kilometres through the mountains and valleys in the heart of El Salvador's coffee country. Salvadorian blends are some of the world's best, and the plantations here open their doors to curious visitors. At the **El Carmen Estate**, which produces coffee for Starbucks and Italian brand Illy, we take a tour to see the process from coffee cherry to final product, observing the long lines of women who hand-sort the beans for imperfections, and spending time in the roasting room, perhaps the most delicious-smelling place I've ever visited.

We also take in some of the loveliest towns in the entire country, which line the Ruta. In **Juayúa**, we stroll around the bustling town square, scooping up some *semita de piña*, a delicious Salvadorian pineapple cake, and then chat with Claudette, the owner of **Detalles Artesanales**, which makes and sells jewellery made from local tree nuts and coffee beans. And in **Ataco**, a town covered in pastel-coloured murals, we climb up the bell tower of **Iglesia Ave Maria** for a view of the surrounding mountains before browsing the textiles created on antique, hand-operated looms (which they will show you, if you ask) at **Diconte Axul**.

And then we visit the Salvadorian coast. Running for hundreds of kilometres, El Salvador's warm Pacific shores include excellent virgin beaches in the **Oriente**, near **Bahía de Jiquilisco** in the country's east, sea turtle nesting grounds and protected



©STOCK PHOTO/JEFF CHEVRIER



mangrove swamps filled with exotic birds at **Barra de Santiago** in the west, and the legendary surf break along the beaches in **La Libertad**. After a dramatic drive down La Libertad's CA-2 highway, which skirts vertiginous coastal cliffs, winding around sheltered coves and passing laid-back thatch-roofed spots that serve ceviche and seafood cocktails, we arrive at **Playa El Sunzal**, which is home to two nice small hotels (both offer surfing lessons) and a restaurant that overlooks a breathtaking sweep of the rolling ocean.

We then head a minute or two down the road to **Playa El Tunco**, where the vibe is pure hippie beach bum. Walking past a line of small local bars I happen upon a rare pair of foreign tourists: two Aussie surfer girls named Kate and Holly who tell me they've been travelling around Central America for several weeks. "There's nowhere near the number of internationals here compared with other coastal towns in Central America, and that makes it a bit special," Holly tells me. "We came to check it out, and we've been here for three weeks."

Back in Suchitoto, where we return after our afternoon with Don Rafael, we join Benjamin's friend Rene, who owns a local artisan shop and gives tours of the town. We browse a couple of galleries, dine on Salvadorian-French fusion at **Los Almendros de San Lorenzo**, a beautifully restored colonial mansion, and as the gloaming of evening turns into the black of night, Rene announces that he has something unexpected to show us. We walk down an alley to an unmarked home. Rene calls inside, rousing a 90-year-old woman who, he explains, used to run a large cigar-making operation before the war. She still sits on a small stool and hand-rolls cigars every day, and as I take a seat to join her, she shows me how to roll my first, patiently directing me how to make sure the tobacco is in there nice and tight, reassuring me with a broad smile and affirming noises. I speak no Spanish, she speaks no English, and this place doesn't even have a sign. And that's about right. Just another surprise here in El Salvador. ▣



6

Great Reasons to Visit Hawaii



Mark Stevens

©HEEB PHOTOS/ISTOCK PHOTO

Each of Hawaii's six largest islands offers its own unique treasures and reasons to visit

IT'S THREE DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS and we're splashing in the Pacific at Waikoloa Beach on Hawaii's Big Island. The aquamarine water is bathtub warm and gentle waves soothe our muscles, aching from yesterday's hike through a volcanic crater.

Gazing at the shore, we admire enormous palms that ring a pond where the catch of the day was once stored for Hawaiian royalty. Surreal lava landforms – stark, barren, jet black and jagged – are middle ground for this masterpiece. The snow-capped peak of Mauna Kea (4,200 metres high) is in the background.

Our sons are body-surfing; their laughter carries across the water.

"You're right," I say to my wife. "Another good reason to visit Hawaii."

"Good?" she says. "Try *great*."

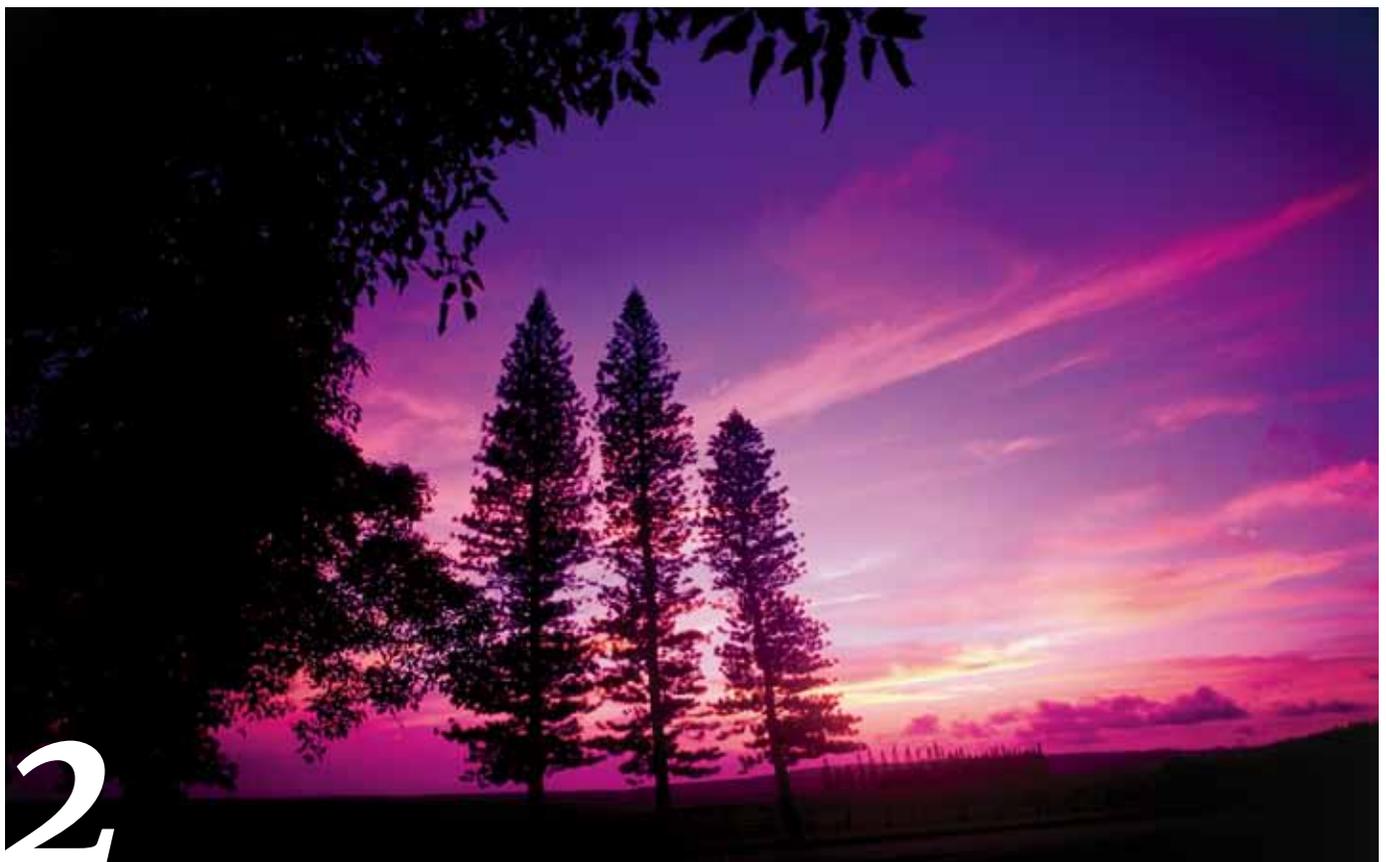
The Big Island: Your One-stop Vacation

Bigger than all the other islands combined, Hawaii – the ‘Big Island’ – is your one-stop vacation destination. From Kona’s seaside bars to Akaka Falls nestled in its orchid-festooned valley, from the Wild West ambiance of Waimea (get a taste of *paniolo*, Hawaiian cowboy culture, at the two annual rodeos on the Big Island) to trail rides through a working ranch and from surreal lava landscapes to the clouds of stars seen courtesy of the world’s largest observatory on the top of Mauna Kea, your Big Island schedule will be full from dawn to dusk – and then some.

Visit one of the world’s most active volcanoes at Kilauea, snorkel at the Place of Refuge, lounge with sea turtles on the black sand of Punalu‘u, play a round of golf at one of the island’s 18 courses or go deep-sea fishing to catch a marlin. And you’ve barely scratched the surface.



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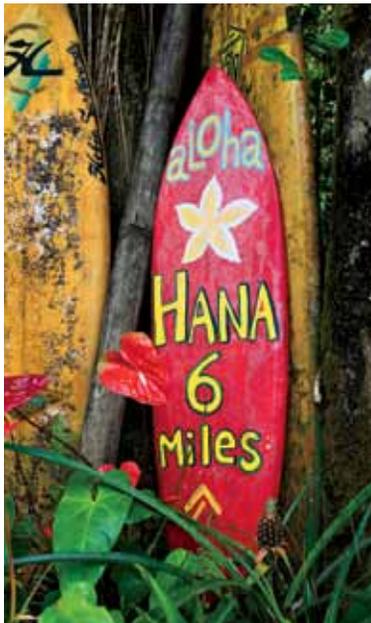
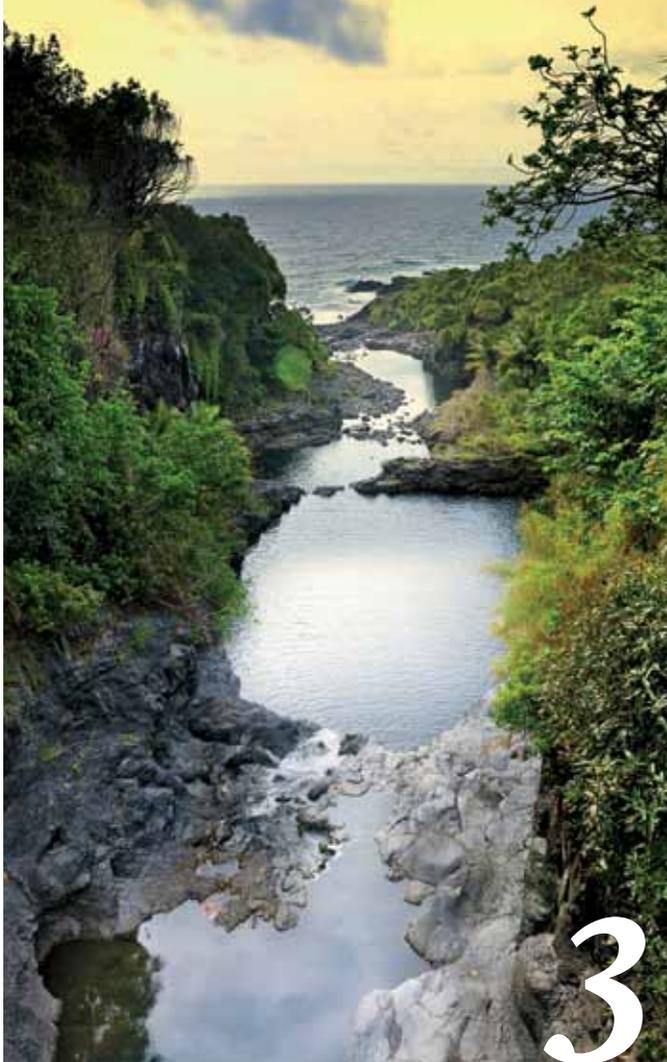
Lanai: A Natural Paradise

If you’ve been to Florida you might experience déjà vu when you arrive at Lanai. After all, those West Palm Beach patios got their inspiration from here. But this island, the most secluded in the chain, isn’t just named after a patio (though that is the translation of *lanai*). A nature lover’s paradise, it’s known as the Pineapple

Island – where the Dole family made its fortune canning the exotic fruit. Take a four-wheel drive to the surreal lunar landscape of Keahiakawelo, the ‘Garden of the Gods,’ a singular experience best timed for dusk when the sun’s glow casts a spectrum of ochre, red and purple on the boulders and rock spires. On Hulopoe Bay, you’ll find one of America’s highest-

rated beaches, as well as two luxurious Four Seasons Resorts and two 18-hole championship golf courses with unforgettable vistas.

Even if rocks aren’t your thing, you’ll still love it here. Just add a pineapple-garnished cocktail and a chaise longue. And a *lanai* with a view of the sunset.



Maui: The 'Best of Both Worlds' Island

Get up in the middle of the night to witness the spectacular sunrise from an eagle's vantage point at **Haleakala National Park**, 3,000 metres above the sea. Make the legendary drive to **Hana**, past rainforest waterfalls and crossing over 54 bridges before kicking back at **Hamo**, reputedly one of the most beautiful beaches in the Pacific. Book a charter to watch humpback whales. The rustic beauty of nature abounds, but **Maui** is as sophisticated as it is beautiful.

Lahaina enjoys a vibrant art scene and is renowned for its market and galleries. Check out Friday night art celebrations, where you can chat with local artists, or visit the **Maui Arts and Cultural Center** in Kahului to see acts from Buffett to Baryshnikov. Or catch a movie at **Celestial Cinema**, an outdoor amphitheatre-style venue that is home to the Maui Film Festival.

Then check into the **Four Seasons Resort Maui** or the **Ritz-Carlton**, surrounded by premier golf courses.

Maui offers the best of both worlds – perhaps why *Condé Nast* readers consistently vote it as 'Best Island.'

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© SIMEA/STOCK PHOTO

Kauai: Ready for its Close-up

Nearly 20 years ago movie producers searched the world for a setting that could stand in as a primeval paradise. The movie was *Jurassic Park*. The setting they chose: **Kauai**.

Sure, Kauai might have changed over 20 million years. But it doesn't feel like it. When you visit, you'll understand why this is Hawaii's most-filmed island and the backdrop for more than 60 movies – from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to its most recent screen credit, the fourth and latest instalment of *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Lush botanical gardens, verdant mountains, state parks, historic towns and intimate beaches all form part of the scenery in Kauai. The island is also home to the only navigable rivers in all of Hawaii, and kayaking is a quintessential activity. Another great way to explore Kauai is on the **Blue Hawaiian Helicopter Tour**. Since 90% of Kauai is inaccessible by road, it's one of the only ways to see two essential highlights: the **Napali Coast** and **Waimea Canyon** – a landmark called the Grand Canyon of the Pacific. You'll also get an eagle's-eye view of **Manawaiopuna Falls**. Just watch out for velociraptors.



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Molokai Must-dos

There are no traffic lights on Molokai and no buildings taller than a palm tree. Its population of only 8,000 – mostly comprised of native Hawaiians – translates into an unspoiled island and an outdoor adventurer's delight.

Ride a mule along the world's tallest sea cliffs as you descend to a village that boasts the grave of Father Damien, a Belgian missionary who cared for natives suffering from leprosy and about whom the 1999 film *Molokai* was made. But this is only one chapter of Molokai's history. The 'home of the hula' is also home to 13th-century fishponds once used to stock the fish that fed Hawaiian royalty – a testament to the Hawaiians' engineering genius and early aquaculture.

Hike in the sacred landscape of **Halawa Valley**, where traditional places of worship lurk in lush glades. Swim in a pool at the foot of the 75-metre cascade of **Moaula Falls** or relax at **Papohaku**, one of Hawaii's largest white sand beaches.

Even so, Molokai is not for the masses. The seclusion that is its charm is also a challenge.

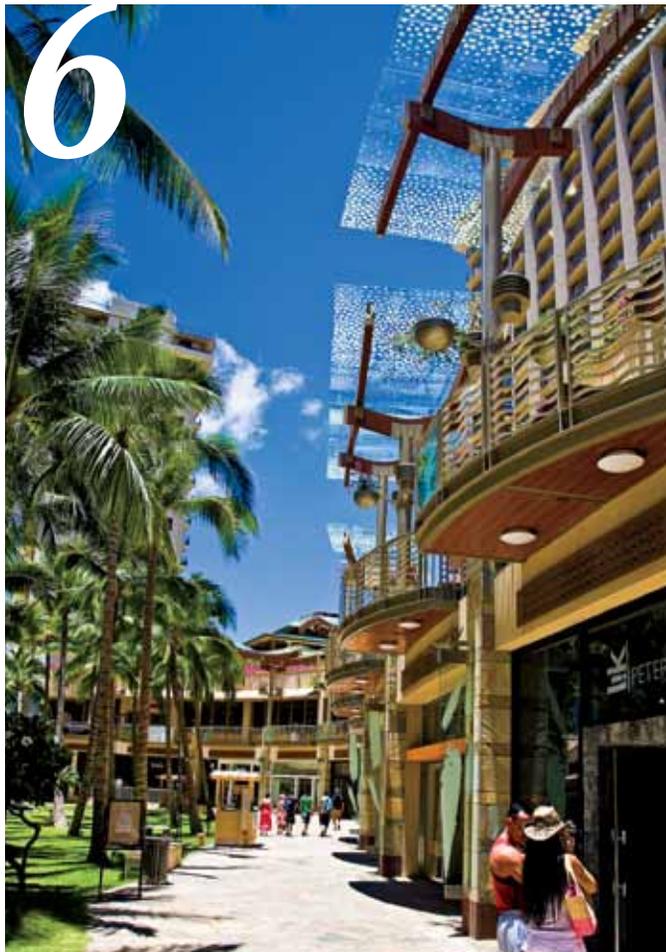
Accommodations may include rustic beach houses or B&Bs. Or bring your own gear, roughing it at a campground at **Palaau State Park** or beachside at Papohaku. Just remember the most important Molokai must-do: go slowly.



*The most important
Molokai must-do:
go slowly.*

5

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Oahu: History, Haute Mode and Hanging Ten

It's early in the morning and the waters of **Pearl Harbor** are as smooth as glass. Green mountains are silhouetted in the rising sun; the atmosphere is serene.

But 70 years ago a fleet of planes blotted out the sun, shattering the peace in a bombardment that destroyed much of the United States Navy. Meditate on this historic event at the **USS Arizona Memorial**, which marks the final resting place of the 1,102 crew members killed during the attack on December 7, 1941.

Also worthwhile is a visit to the historic and eclectic **Chinatown** district, a blend of several Southeast Asian cultures that represents another unique slice of Honolulu's past. Across the bustling 15-block area you'll find everything from a Buddhist temple, Chinese herbalists and flower shops to galleries and a variety of Asian eateries.

Oahu's history, however, is only part of its appeal. Foodies will enjoy the more modern 'pop up' food truck scene, featuring items like organic buttermilk fried chicken and Korean barbecue tacos. Try the sinful Melt of Shame, a hamburger tucked between two grilled Vermont cheddar cheese sandwiches, at **Melt** – run by Lindsey Ozawa, former executive chef at Nobu.

The shopping is equally satisfying. From unique, locally owned stores like **Hound & Quail** or **Chai Studio**, to more mainstream clothing brands like **Kate Spade** and **Coach**, those looking for some retail therapy will not be disappointed. So as my wife shops the designer boutiques along **Kalakaua Avenue** – Hawaii's answer to Rodeo Drive – I hang ten off **Waikiki**. A wave roars toward me. Adrenaline pumping, I stand, balancing on my surfboard. Just another great reason to visit Hawaii. ▣

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UNIQUE SPA THERAPIES

Sarah Treleaven



JAMAICA: HANGOVER HAVEN *Round Hill Hotel and Villas*

We've all been there: You're on a Caribbean island, you have a few too many rum punches one night, and you wake up the next morning feeling as if your face might just slide off your body. Well, at the lovely **Round Hill Hotel and Villas** in Jamaica, they're prepared. The **Round Hill Signature Hangover Massage** offers "the perfect pick-me-up after a fun night out with friends." Using massage oil infused with Jamaican sweet basil, the treatment stimulates the immune system, accelerates toxin extraction and leaves you feeling rested and rejuvenated – just in time for happy hour.

HONG KONG: CAVIAR FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH *InterContinental Hong Kong*

You might know caviar as that expensive stuff the well-to-do spread on tiny pieces of toast. But did you know about caviar's beauty applications? Amid the hustle and bustle of the big city, the elegant **InterContinental Hong Kong I-Spa** offers two related treatments: **Caviar Cell Vitale**, a lifting contour facial massage that minimizes the appearance of fine lines and provides recipients with a protein-rich caviar ampoule for longer-term results; and **Caviar Eye Rescue**, which reduces eye puffiness and helps brighten the appearance of peepers. Both treatments rely on the "powerful age-defying nutrients and firming properties of caviar." Just make sure that the next time you're at a cocktail party, you confine your caviar application to your toast.





INDIA: AUSPICIOUSLY ACCOMPANIED BATHS

Taj Hotels, Resorts & Palaces

India's **Taj** hotel chain is known for its luxurious palace properties, which have retained all of the magic and majesty of their grand colonial origins (peacocks roaming the grounds, anyone?). The Taj's **Jiva Spa** offers signature Indian treatments, including the **Mangal Snan** (or 'auspicious bath'), which provides a treatment traditionally undertaken by royalty before a coronation or wedding. The ritual involves anointment with spices, herbs and oils, followed by saffron and jasmine baths, and then a henna application. But the most amazing part? It's the only treatment in the world that offers live musical accompaniment by Indian musicians – who hopefully know when to avert their eyes.

CHINA: ANCIENT CHINESE MIRACLE WORK

InterContinental Huizhou Resort

Situated in a breathtaking pastoral wonderland, surrounded by small farms and temples, the **InterContinental Huizhou** offers guests a chance to relax and refresh themselves at a beautiful and comprehensive spa. The main draw is Dr. Kim, a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine, who will take your pulse and examine your tongue before submitting your body to rigorous kneading and acupuncture needles. You can also opt for cupping, detoxifying wraps or reflexology. The acupressure treatment – where Dr. Kim presses into tender tissue with his fingers – provides miraculous relief from muscle aches and tension. You might even leave with instructions to eat cucumber skins, count beans before bedtime or take up badminton.

MEXICO: HONEY IN THE HEART

Fairmont Mayakoba

We're all familiar with the sweet taste of honey, but have you ever considered applying it to your body? At **Fairmont Mayakoba's Willow Stream Spa**, which draws on ancient Mayan practices, the **Honey in the Heart** treatment involves being covered in honey – which can leave you looking years younger. Derived from a Mayan Temezcal ceremony and traditional blessing – "all good things, no evil, honey in the heart and 13 thank you's" – this treatment starts with a full-body honey mask, which is then rinsed off by an overhead rainforest Vichy shower, and concludes with a massage. The final touch is a small cup of local honey to drink that helps nourish the body from the inside out.

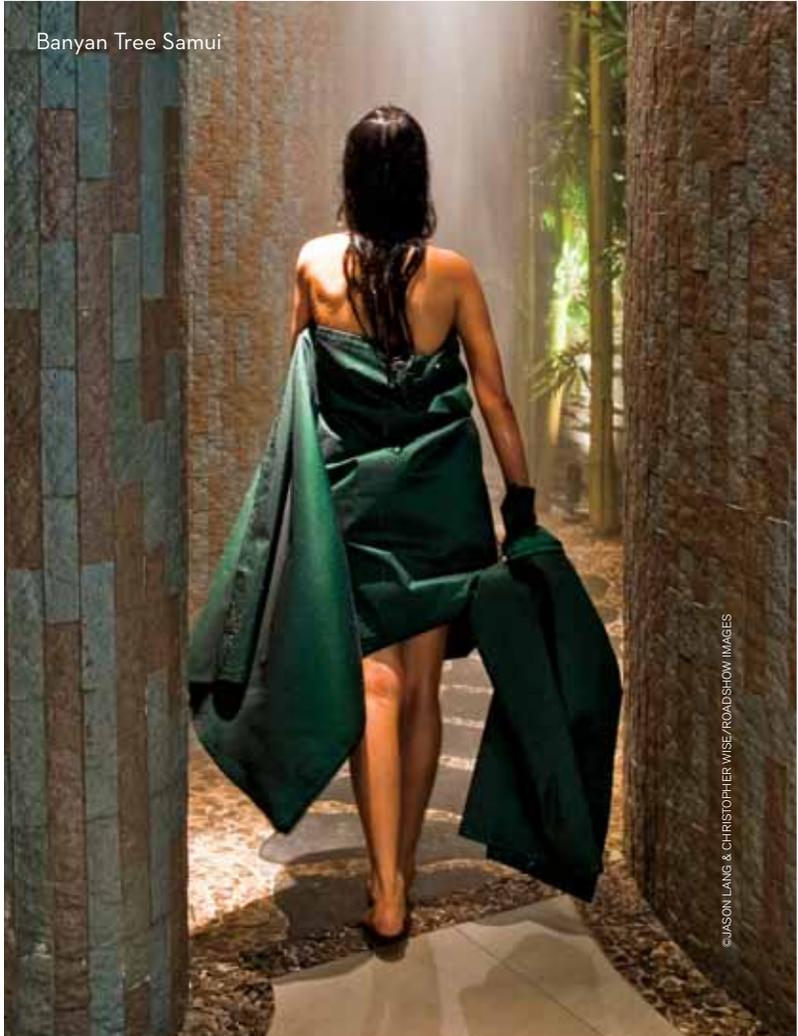
THAILAND: A WALK IN THE RAINFOREST

Banyan Tree Samui

Asian wellness philosophies dictate that water therapy is essential for stimulating and purifying the body, eliminating everyday toxins and helping to rebalance both mind and body. The luxurious **Banyan Tree Samui** offers a unique hydrothermal circuit called the **Rainforest Experience** comprised of several water-based treatments: a 'rain walk' of reflexology stones; a series of warm and cool showers; eucalyptus steam rooms with salt scrubs and full-body mud masks; Finnish and infrared saunas; an ice fountain for a quick cool-down; and a vitality pool with acupressure jets and waterfalls. As an added bonus, the minerals in the water leave skin and hair incredibly soft. ▣



Round Hill Hotel and Villas



Banyan Tree Samui



Getting your ZZZZs

Well ahead of the curve, the luxurious **One&Only Palmilla** in **Los Cabos, Mexico** offers something different for a thoroughly modern problem. Its **Wellness Sleep Therapy Program** is aimed at helping guests achieve a perfect night's sleep. In the midst of a heavenly, secluded five-star resort paradise, guests meet with a nutritionist who assesses dietary habits and offers eating tips to optimize sleep. (Hint: that second glass of wine probably isn't helping.)

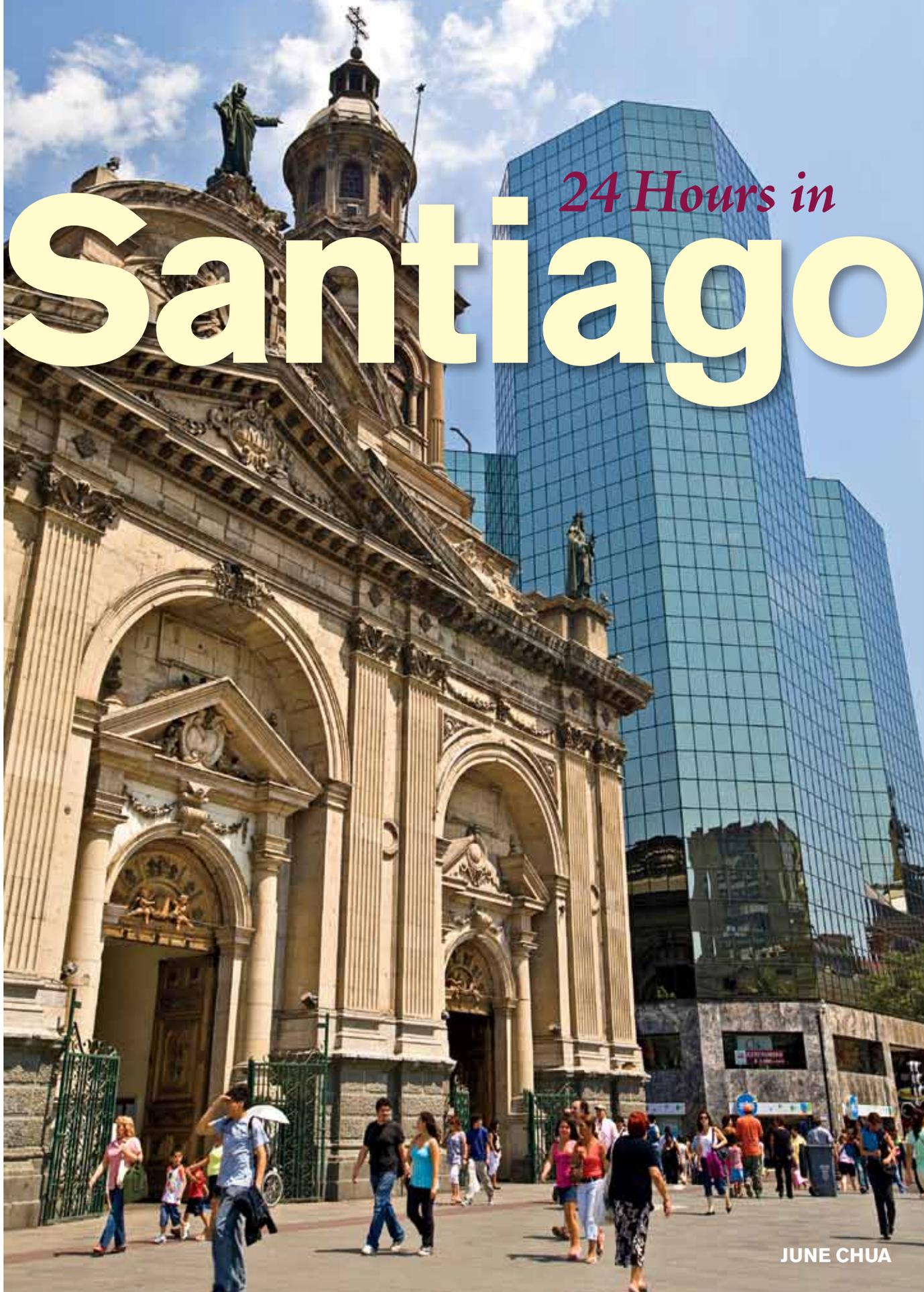
Next up is **Transformational Breathing Work**, where guests are guided through an open-mouth breathing rhythm exercise that lulls them into a meditative state with such encouraging affirmations as "I learn from the mistakes I have made in past relationships."

Also included in the program is **Deep Sleep Aquatic Body Therapy** in the form of 'watsu' massage – shiatsu meets water – which involves being twirled around a warm pool, working against the currents. This is followed by a deep tissue massage.

The last piece is in place when guests return to their rooms at the end of the day. The lights are dimmed and the curtains drawn, an aromatherapy candle is burning and soothing music plays. A light dinner is served, and instructions for meditation exercises designed to induce sleep are left on the turned-down sheets – if you can still keep your heavy-lidded eyes open, that is.

So where else can you find sleep-related spa services? **Canyon Ranch Hotel & Spa** in **Miami Beach** offers a **Sleep Enhancement/Insomnia** session that aims to help patients understand personal sleep patterns and find natural ways to improve sleep habits. At the **Hard Rock Hotel** in **San Diego**, guests can opt for the **Dream Weaver Massage**, which combines aromatherapy (ylang ylang, bergamot and lavender) with Swedish, acupressure, Hawaiian lomi-lomi and Thai massage techniques for a complete 'letting go' experience. And the **YeloSpa** in **New York City** offers unique 20- to 40-minute power naps that take place in a cocoon-like treatment room with a 'zero-gravity experience' chair and customized aromatherapy, sound and lighting.





24 Hours in
Santiago

JUNE CHUA

©RICHARD NOWITZ/GETTY

Earlier this year *The New York Times* named **Santiago de Chile** the number one destination to visit in 2011 – and little wonder. New art spaces, galleries and museums, including the impressive privately owned **Museo de la Moda**, sophisticated restaurants and chic boutique hotels have helped Santiago compete with its sexy neighbours **Rio** and **Buenos Aires**. The sixth-largest city (population six million) in **South America** is an increasingly modern and fashionable destination with charms that will delight. While it's worth spending more time, here's how to get the most out of 24 hours in Santiago.

Central Square

Begin your day with an early morning walk in the bustling **Plaza de Armas**, the spacious central square, and watch the Chilenos whiz by on their way to work. On the outer edges of the square, you'll find the lesser known **Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino**. It's a compact museum consisting of one big floor displaying some of the best artefacts from that period, including intricate gold jewellery, massive Easter Island-like statues and amusing *objets d'art* from the Andean and Central American regions. Lost in time, the museum makes for a pleasant hour's visit.

Casual eateries ring the square, and for a quick meal **Faison d'Or** or **El Rápido** are good choices. Some essential Chilean bites include *empanadas* (meat-stuffed pastries), *humitas* (mashed sweet corn mixed with spices baked in leaves), *cazuela de ave* (a chicken stew with pumpkin, potato, rice and onion) and *chorillana*, which is practically a national dish. I consider it a variation of French-Canadian poutine. This Chilean dish features chips covered in sliced steak, fried onions and scrambled eggs. Plate-scraping good!

Take a 10-minute walk up to the **Mercado Central**. On your way there, slightly east of the square is the excellent (and free) **Museo de Santiago**, covering the city's history from the Conquest to modern times.

Chile is blessed with a wealth of seafood, and since that's what I'm hankering for, I trot over to the **Mercado Central**.

Fish Market

Though its heyday as the main market has passed, **Mercado Central** still has many fishmongers and excellent seafood restaurants housed in its 1860s-era stone building. The market is a nostalgic favourite of Chilenos; it was the setting for the national soap opera, *Amores del Mercado*, a few years ago.

The old standby for lunch is **Donde Augusto**. Simple dishes of fried fish – kingklip (eel), *corvina* (bass), *merluza* (hake) or *lenguado* (sole) – with sides of rice or potatoes are offered, but if you're a big fan of shellfish, order the king crab (*centolla*), which is expertly de-shelled and generously plated with a side salad. Don't miss the other popular dish, *ceviche* – fresh raw fish marinated in lemon juice.

Take an afternoon ramble through **Parque Forestal** along the banks of the **Rio Mapocho**, where you'll find outdoor cafés and the **Museo de Artes Visuales** (MAVI). Head east toward the **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes**. While the pay-what-you-can museum often has great exhibits, I find it a lovely respite from the heat as the building features the soaring ceilings of the neoclassical style.

After a languid cappuccino at the museum café, I take a sharp turn south onto **José V. Lastarria Street** – an adorable, quiet area with cafés, a few clothing stores and some antique shops offering old books and ephemera.

When you hit the end of the street, you'll encounter the main drag, **Avenida Libertador General Bernardo O'Higgins** (**La Alameda** for short). Turn right (west) toward the **Santa Lucía** metro station.

On the south side is a wonderful mini-market, the **Centro Artesanal Santa Lucía**, and if you're a jewellery hunter this is the best place to buy some shiny goods (even locals shop here). The price of silver is cut-rate and I load up on glimmering necklaces (for \$8 each) and key chains in the shape of penguins. Chile is known for its leather goods, rugs, ponchos, earthenware and, most important, semi-precious stones such as the indigo blue lapis lazuli and dark-as-night onyx.

Grasping my little bag of goodies, I walk back up **La Alameda** toward **Plaza Baquedano**, known locally as **Plaza Italia**. Take the bridge over the **Rio Mapocho** and you're in the 'it' neighbourhood of **Bellavista**.

Neruda's Home

The fashionably creative **Bellavista** district brims with bars, cafés and shops, and is also the site of **La Chascona**, one of **Pablo Neruda's** three homes in Chile.

The Nobel Prize for Literature winner in 1971 and an ardent lover of women, Neruda made his name at 19 with *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (*Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*) – a collection of erotically charged verses. His three-storey home, built on a steep hill, is now an historic attraction containing various works of art by the likes of Roberto Matta, Diego Rivera and Fernand Léger. Take a guided tour to learn about the intriguing romance and mystery surrounding this home.

Fortunately, **La Chascona** is also located at the bottom of **Cerro San Cristóbal**. Take the inexpensive funicular up the big hill for breathtaking vistas of the city before 8:00 p.m. and watch the sun set over the **Andes** before heading back down for dinner.

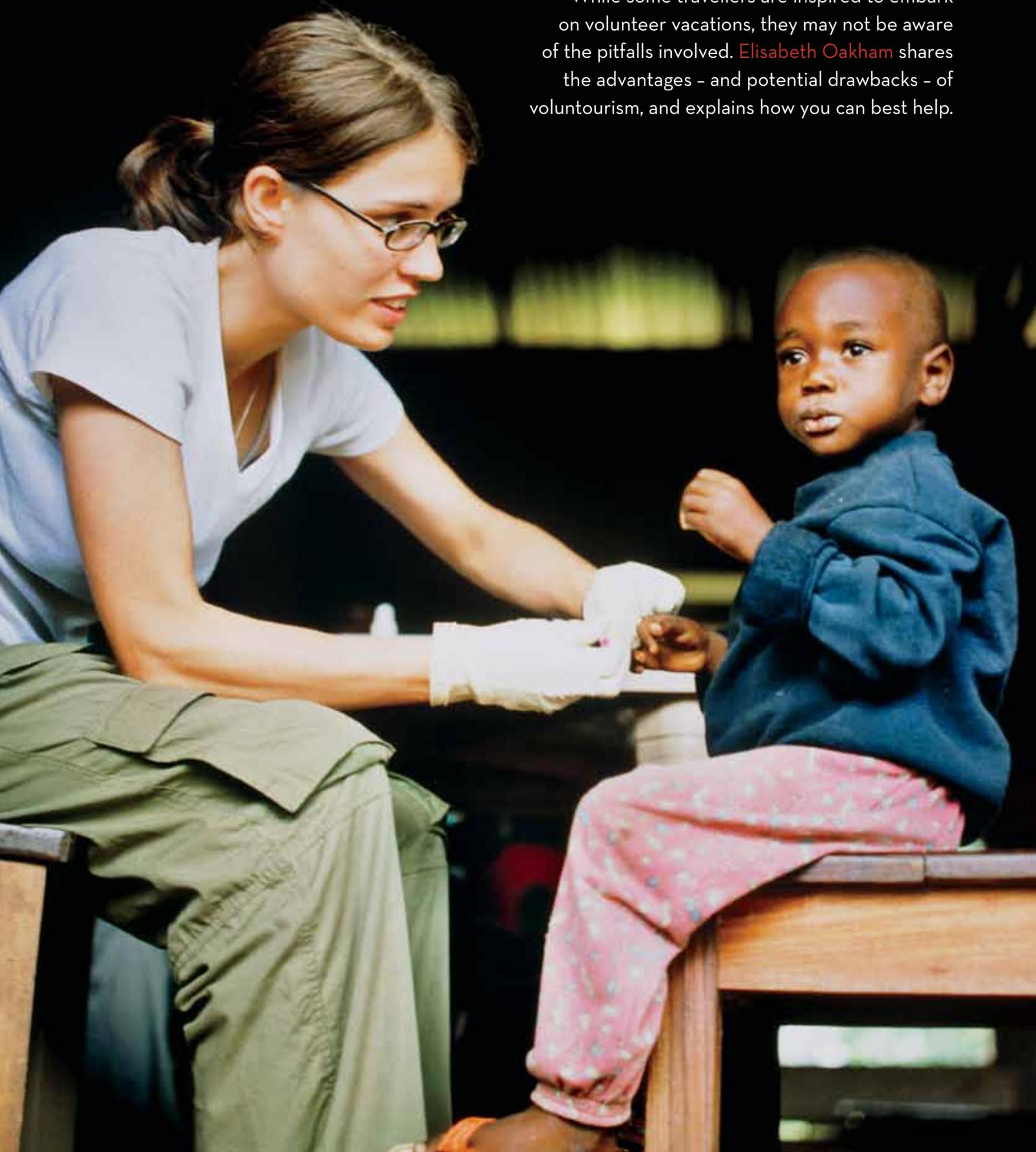
The streets of **Constitución** and **Dardignac** are great for browsing restaurants. **Galindo** is a well-known local hangout with simple Chilean fare. You can get *chorillana*, or *lomo* (flat steak) on fries topped with fried egg but I encourage you to taste the savoury *poroto granado* (a thick soup of beans, corn, pumpkin and onion) or the *sopaipillas y pebre*. As common as peanuts at a bar, *sopaipillas* are fried dough rounds topped with a *pebre* or salsa of chopped tomatoes, cilantro, chilies, onion and olive oil.

Sated, you can round out your evening down the street at **Patio Bellavista** with a pisco sour cocktail (pisco brandy, lemon juice and sugar) and make a toast to 24 hours in Santiago. ▣



Mural in the barrio Lastarria, Santiago

While some travellers are inspired to embark on volunteer vacations, they may not be aware of the pitfalls involved. [Elisabeth Oakham](#) shares the advantages – and potential drawbacks – of voluntourism, and explains how you can best help.



Voluntourism: DOING IT RIGHT

International volunteering can be incredibly rewarding for the volunteer as well as the host community. Participants build international relationships, learn about local customs and come home with a better sense of global citizenship. Communities can receive much-needed support and an infusion of resources into their economy.

However, there are pitfalls. Many volunteer projects cater more to the volunteer experience and less to what the community needs, wasting everyone's time and money. Sometimes inexperienced volunteers can cost an organization more than their help is worth. And volunteer unskilled labour may simply replace local paid labour, crippling a developing economy. To make matters worse, volunteers may have paid administration fees for the experience. Those fees divert their tourism dollars from the local economy into the hands of third parties.

While the goal of 'giving back' to host communities is laudable, it's rarely obvious how to do it effectively. It is, however, entirely possible to do, with a little preparation.

The first step is to be honest with yourself about what you have to offer. By identifying your skill set, you narrow down the search to development organizations that can use you. Be aware, though, that many of the invaluable tasks development organizations need volunteers to complete may not be very glamorous. You may end up filing for a month. But heck, I would be eternally grateful (and probably a few dollars richer) if someone would volunteer to file my taxes!

Next, research the area: familiarize yourself with its history, get caught up on current events, find out what are the major development issues in the area where you'll be working: Logging and environmental degradation? Has there recently been a natural disaster? Does the education system need English-language support? Find out which charities and NGOs work in the area. What are their

focus areas? How long have they been in the region? What are their long-term development projects? How have they used volunteers in the past? Ask to speak to former volunteers. What are the fees and what do they cover?

Lastly, how long do you have?

ONE DAY TO ONE WEEK

This is unfortunately the category in which volunteers often do more harm than good. Organizations have to spend considerable resources to train new volunteers. So when projects offer day or week 'programs,' they usually cater more to the volunteer than the community. Many week-long volunteer experiences include a fee and are likely to be curated by a third-party for-profit company. For example: www.globalvolunteernetwork.org/ or www.volunteerhq.org/.

However, there are ways to give back if your time is limited. Many organizations are happy to receive medical or educational supplies or an in-person cash donation if you're just passing through. Smaller organizations may benefit from high-quality photography or video to increase their online profile. It never hurts to send an email saying "I am travelling in your area next month, is there anything you need?"

A great alternative is to participate in 'responsible tourism.' Use the money you would have given to a third-party voluntourism company to hire an excellent local guide who can help you pursue one of your interests, be it cooking, hiking or architecture. Doing this puts your money straight into the local economy, where it is most needed. By choosing a low environmental impact activity, like bird-watching or art appreciation, you're also encouraging the growth of a sustainable tourism economy.

THREE WEEKS TO SIX MONTHS

There are many organizations that are really well set up to take volunteers for this length of time, and don't charge administrative fees. For example,

Pisco Sin Fronteras in Peru was formed in response to the 2007 earthquake. This organization doesn't charge administrative fees, and offers cheap room and board to its volunteers. The minimum work term is three weeks. These kinds of organizations are experienced in using international volunteers and have already identified tasks that require little training: reading to children, weeding an orphanage's garden or documenting a new project.

Other great organizations with no fees but minimum stays are: www.peruchildrenscharity.org/ www.hands.org/volunteer/ www.sbeltersinternational.org/volunteer.html

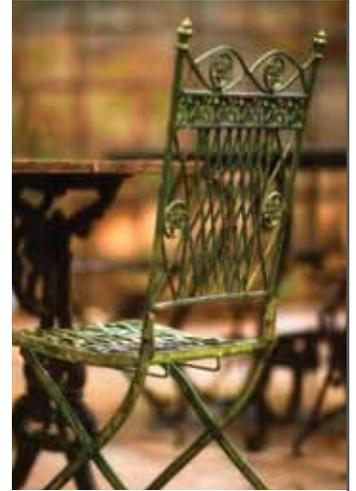
SIX MONTHS OR MORE

It's worthwhile to dig a little deeper and look for less well-established organizations that could benefit from longer-term involvement. These are the ones whose websites are not very polished, that have a small staff and infrastructure, but often make a dollar go a long way. They don't necessarily have the time to supervise short-term volunteers, but often can really benefit from long-term help. For example, many small development NGOs I've worked with have trouble maintaining a web presence. They are so busy working that their websites are not updated often enough to accurately reflect the work they do. International volunteers are really useful when they stay long enough to really get a handle on the organization and use their understanding to collect data, write case studies or improve websites. These organizations may not be as able to 'accommodate' you as those that host revolving armies of international volunteers, but the experience will be one of a kind.

There are a few free databases of organizations of all sizes that host volunteers without charging fees: www.haitivolunteer.org/opportunities www.volunteersouthamerica.net/ www.omprakash.org 

Bon Vivant

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Bon Appétit!



TO LOCATE YOUR BON VIVANT SPECIALIST VISIT:
www.bonvivanttravel.ca



Worldly Delights: Opening Soon

Mary Luz Mejia

Cupcake Craze Continued

Given the title “progenitor of the haute cupcake craze” by the *Los Angeles Times*, **Sprinkles Cupcakes** has been handcrafting the portable treats from scratch since 2005. The LA-based cupcakery (they make *only* cupcakes), helmed by founder **Candace Nelson**, recently opened in New York City (780 Lexington Avenue near Bloomingdale’s) to appreciative urbanites. Fifty flavours including chai latte, vegan red velvet and ginger lemon really put the icing on the cake! www.sprinkles.com



Razor-Sharp Service

Sharp My Knife, a new mobile knife sharpening service in Southern Ontario, comes straight to your home to put the cutting edge back in dulling blades. From kitchen and craft shears, garden blades, serrated bread knives to cleavers and axes, **Andrew Hutchinson** comes to you kitted out with the latest in blade sharpening technology to keep blunt blades out of landfills and to help keep you carving at your table for years to come. Now that’s sharp! For prices and booking: sharpmyknife.com

Eat-iNG

Internationally recognized chef **Homaro Cantu** has opened **iNG** (951 West Fulton Market Street, Chicago), a contemporary Asian restaurant neighbouring Cantu’s molecular resto, **Moto**. iNG honours traditional Asian cooking techniques while creating an innovative interpretation of the cuisine. The menu offers dishes under the headings ‘Heating,’ ‘Cooling,’ ‘Boiling,’ ‘Melting’ and ‘Sweetening.’ True to chef Cantu’s culinary sensibilities, the dining experience at iNG is multisensory and multidimensional, with playful, edgy dishes such as hand-pulled noodles in a dark soy egg broth with pork belly or the chef’s take on Chinese baozi buns.

ingrestaurant.com



Party Like an Islander

In its second year, the **Barbados Food & Wine and Rum Festival** is slated for four gourmet-infused days from November 18 to 21. Barbados has long been considered one of the best culinary destinations in the Caribbean, and this year’s roster includes international heavyweights such as chefs **Marcus Samuelsson**, **Tom Colicchio**, Toronto’s own **Mark McEwan** and Bajan big names like chefs **David Yarde** and **John Hazzard**. Wash their creations down with some locally produced Mount Gay rum and you’ve got the makings of a tropical party. For more information:

www.foodwinerum.com

Mining the Past

In Huntsville, Alabama, chef **James Boyce** and his co-owner wife **Suzan** have created the **Commerce Kitchen** (300 Franklin Street), a modern saloon in an 1800s bank building that serves classic Americana with a gourmet side of comfort. On the menu, generations-old recipes passed down through families and women’s guild cookbooks. Apart from the fresh raw bar, there are down-home charmers such as Gulf shrimp and grits, Carolina flounder with coleslaw and caper butter as well as seasonal fruit cobbblers with a heaping side of ice cream like Mama would serve!

www.thecommercekitchen.com



Worldly Delights: Norman's Miami

Mary Luz Mejia spends a day in Miami with chef Norman Van Aken and discovers the city's hidden culinary gems.



A roadside stand in **South Florida's** farmland country proclaims "Robert Is Here" in bold red letters. I'm told this is the go-to place for tropical fruit and for Robert's famous milkshakes. My husband and I choose a sapodilla (a fruit that tastes like a pear with brown sugar) and banana shake made with fruits from nearby farms. The result is a sweet, antioxidant-enriched 'meal in a glass' that reminds us of how glorious tropical fruit tastes at the source.

Minutes later, chef **Norman Van Aken**, 'the Founding Father of New World Cuisine,' his wife Janet and son Justin meet up with us for a culinary tour

of some of his favourite **Miami** eateries. It's Norman who suggests we meet here, as it was (and is) his love affair with South Florida's bounty of raw ingredients that first seduced his palate when he was a young cook. Today, this culinary icon and author of four books, including *The Great Exotic Fruit Book* (1995), is known for celebrating Latin, Caribbean, Asian, African and American flavours in harmonious balance. He coined the term 'fusion cooking' in a speech he gave in 1988 to a Santa Fe audience and his take on that term is clear.

As we're about to sample our way through mounds of fresh fruit, I notice

a beautiful young lady walk up next to Justin. "This is my fiancée Lourdes," the young pastry chef proudly proclaims. A new round of hugs and congratulatory smiles ensues; Justin proposed to her outside the fruit stand under the canopy of a massive tree just an hour before we met! In a celebratory mood, we slurp just-picked red lychee, fragrant papaya slivers and admire craggy Asian guavas, sugar apples, mamey and passion fruit – all of which have never felt the chill of refrigeration and taste like distilled sunshine!

Our spirits high with fructose and the infectious giddiness of the newly engaged couple, we head to a South Miami staple for lunch – **El Palacio de los Jugos** ('The Juice Palace,' 5721 W. Flagler St., Miami). This is where locals come to take a bite out of Cuban favourites like *lechón asado con mojo* (Cuban roast pork with sour orange and garlic sauce), *conгри* (black beans and rice) and *ropa vieja* (shredded beef in a tomato sauce) to name a few. Inside a multi-coloured, canopied food court with huge fans whirring above to keep diners cool, curious palates are invited to wander from the juice bar (try the *maracujá* or passion fruit juice) over to the sandwich lady or perhaps to the hot food table, where we order lunch.

As we tuck into the luscious *lechón* and *conгри* with a side of *mojo* and little fried corn cakes, Norman tells us, "I discovered this place when I was working in South Beach for a crazy Cuban guy in '92. Let me put it to you this way: When Al Pacino needed a character study for *Scarface*, I have zero doubt he used my former business partner from Cuba," says Norman, adding, "What I love about this place is its raw energy. This isn't some North American temperature-controlled homogenized place. This is part of Miami's history."

Spanish buzzes around the room as families, businessmen and students dive into hearty Cuban fare – food that Norman observes hasn't changed much since the 1950s, with the understanding that perhaps Cubans here don't want it to because it gives them comfort and a taste of their beloved island pre-revolution.

With this in mind, we drive off to **El Brazo Fuerte** ('The Strong Arm,' www.ebfbakery.com) in **Little Havana**,



©MARY LUZ MEJIA

WHAT ELSE TO SEE AND SAVOUR IN THE GREATER MIAMI AREA

Delicias de España (www.deliciasdeespana.com) – for the finest selection of Iberian treats including cheeses, cured meats, oils, wines and even homewares. It's like being at the El Corte Inglés department store without leaving Miami. Don't forget to stop by the shop's café for a Spanish lunch or a piece of *Soufflé Delicias* – its version of a *tres leches* cake studded with chocolate shards and crowned with baked meringue.

Henry Morrison Flagler Museum (www.flaglERMuseum.us) in West Palm Beach offers a sumptuous glimpse into America's Gilded Age. When business titan Henry Flagler built Whitehall mansion as a wedding gift for his bride, he spared no expense in creating their *beaux arts*-style winter retreat. State-of-the-art technology from the early 1900s coupled with furnishings, silks and handcrafted floors from Europe and beyond speak to an age when men like Flagler were self-made and built homes meant to inspire future generations.

The Breakers Palm Beach (www.thebreakers.com) down the road from Whitehall is one of South Florida's most beloved jewels. Built by Flagler as a destination resort, this 540-room, Italian Renaissance-style hotel sits majestically on 140 acres of oceanfront property. Its **Seafood Bar** offers freshly caught mahi mahi, conch fritters and produce from its own organic gardens. If you stay overnight, be sure to book a concierge-included cabana for the day by the relaxation pool, a stone's throw away from the warm turquoise waters of Florida's Atlantic. You'll swear you were in the Caribbean, with every amenity and thoughtful detail at your disposal.

where Justin orders a round of flaky pastries and *cortaditos* – strong shots of sweet Cuban coffee topped with steamed milk. He suggests taking alternate bites of a guava pastry and a white cheese pastry to achieve sweet/savoury balance. I'm only too happy to oblige. Next, a *pastelito* (little pastry) warm from the oven, filled with soft, rich coconut. These are Cuban/Latin American favourites at their best – flaky and decadent, just the way they should be.

We say our goodbyes to the newly engaged couple, off to share the news with Lourdes' parents, and get a few more recommendations from Norman and Janet, who are on their way home to **Key West**. Anthony Bourdain calls Norman "the big dog of Florida cooking," but to me he's a culinary pioneer who has influenced a generation of chefs and respects the boundaries he doesn't mind pushing once in a while – all in the name of good food. **v**

Worldly Delights: Cachaça

The most popular spirit you might not know

Alison Kent toasts Brazil's most iconic spirit

Hands down, **cachaça** (ka-SHAH-sa) is the most popular distilled alcoholic beverage in **Brazil** and one of the top five most widely consumed spirits in the world. The amount of cachaça imbibed on an annual basis in Brazil is currently estimated at a whopping 10 litres per person on average. Impressive.

So why haven't we heard more about this ubiquitous national spirit? While more than one billion litres are produced annually, only 1% of cachaça ever manages to leave Brazil, with **Germany** receiving the lion's share of this miniscule exported amount. You may be excused for not yet catching wind of cachaça – it's still a relative rarity in Canada.

Slowly but surely, that's changing. The craze for Brazil's national cocktail, the **caipirinha** (kai-pur-EEN-yah), is poised to do for cachaça what margaritas did to spur tequila sales outside Mexico some 30 years ago.

Though we have but a small selection of quality cachaça available in Canada, growing interest in this unique, smooth and complex-tasting spirit should mean a greater variety will become more readily available. Let's hope.

Neat, twisted, mixed and muddled

Occasionally, cachaça is erroneously placed in the category of rum. They do share many similarities, but in a Brazilian nutshell, rum is usually made from molasses (a by-product of sugar processing) while cachaça is distilled from fermented sugar cane juice.

There are two different methods of production: industrial, which is distilled in continuous column stills, and alembic- or pot-distilled, which uses more traditional or artisanal methods. There are also two distinct styles: silver (or white) and gold, which is aged. While silver cachaça is often – but not always – bottled immediately after distillation, gold varieties spend at least one year in barrels made of native or imported wood. This, in turn, imparts hues varying from light straw to dark amber, with flavour and aroma characteristics reminiscent of fine aged spirits. Think toffee, coconut, baking spices, ripe banana, pepper, oak and vanilla.

Premium silver cachaça is crystal clear in appearance, with aromas of fresh-cut sugar cane, possibly interspersed with smoke, spice, grass, cucumber, lime blossoms, resin, lilies, dill, celery and mint. Flavour characteristics may include citrus and clean sugar cane (without being cloying or sugary sweet) with peppery and vegetal notes.

Connoisseurs of cachaça advise enjoying the finest of artisanal examples sipped neat, especially gold varieties, while silver varieties can also be enjoyed neat, or poured over ice and garnished with a twist of lime. Silver is also best for cocktails – just don't go using the most expensive one you can find, or the subtle flavour nuances could get, well...muddled.

While the classic caipirinha (lime muddled with sugar, topped with cachaça and served on the rocks) is über-popular the world over, the **batida** (bah-CHEE-dah) is just about as well known a cocktail. Portuguese for 'shaken,' batidas are fruit and sweetened milk-based drinks made with cachaça (see recipe on next page). They are *muito bom!* (Very good!)

Be advised that certain unnamed brands can be quite rough, which undoubtedly helped to earn some cachaça a variety of colourful nicknames, including



arrebenta peito (chest smasher) and, my favourite, *água que passarinho não bebe* (water that birds won't drink). You have been warned.

The history

Cachaça production began during the first decades of colonization in the 1500s. It has been heavily taxed and even banned, and was the symbol of Brazilian resistance against Portuguese rule during the rebellion in the 1700s. Over the years and throughout Brazil's lively history, this beloved liquor has inspired songs, serenades and sambas,

and has come to embody the spirit of the nation.

But not so long ago the idea of a high-end cachaça would have been considered a contradiction in terms, as it was long deemed a peasant drink for those who couldn't afford anything better. In fact, the name caipirinha is derived from *caipira*, meaning an unsophisticated person from the country. But all this is changing, as quality cachaça is now being proudly lauded as Brazil's national drink and is reaching a more diverse audience both in Brazil and abroad.

Dozens of other factors will also influence the final product, including the type of yeast used, which part of the sugar cane is used and at what phase of pressing (of the 'head,' 'heart' and 'tail,' the heart of the distillate is most revered), and the pH of the soil in which the sugar cane is grown; the mountainous region of **Minas Gerais** is most closely associated with cachaça production.

With upwards of 5,000 brands throughout Brazil, all cachaça is most assuredly not created equal. So sample, sip, compare and enjoy – whether straight up or in a cocktail. Still, with 99% of cachaça remaining in the country, a trip to Brazil to visit a *boteco*, snack on *salgadinhos* and experience this iconic national spirit firsthand may well be your best strategy. *Saúde!* 🍷



BATIDA DE COCO

- 2 oz (50 ml) Porto Morretes Organic Silver Cachaça
- 2/3 cup (150 ml) coconut milk
- 1 tsp sweetened condensed milk
- Ice

Fill cocktail shaker with ice. Add cachaça, coconut milk and condensed milk; shake well to blend and chill. Strain and serve over crushed ice or ice cubes.

Makes 1 cocktail

Recipe provided by Mario Cassini, owner and chef, Cajú restaurant, Toronto www.caju.ca

FIND IT IN ONTARIO: LCBO

Porto Morretes Organic Silver Cachaça
\$32.95 per bottle

Thankfully, this artisanal product has made its way back into the Canadian market. Now if only we could get our hands on the equally fabulous aged Porto Morretes Ouro version.

Weber Haus Silver Cachaça
\$39.95 per bottle

This has flavours of banana pudding and meringue, and finishes with a warming wave of peppery spice, cane stalk and plantains in cream. Wow.

FIND IT IN QUEBEC: SAQ

Leblon Cachaça Superior
\$29.95 per bottle

Crisp and light-bodied, this quality brand has vegetal aromas with notes of aloe, cucumber and fresh oak and cedar shavings.

FIND IT IN BRITISH COLUMBIA: LIQUOR STORES

Sagatiba Pura Cachaça
\$36.99 per bottle

This clean, clear spirit has delicate flavours and aromas reminiscent of fresh-cut sugar cane and gentle spice.

Worldly Delights: Brazil

Brazil is a party of landscapes and cultures: from its European south (Rio and São Paulo) to its African-influenced north (Bahia), **June Chua** learns there is something here for every taste.



Walking the streets of **Brazil's** most populous city (population 11 million), I am reminded of Toronto or New York: the modern architecture and diverse crowd provide a familiar vibe. Many of the faces looking back at me are Asian and I realize that if I don't open my mouth, I could comfortably pass for a *Paulista* – a native of **São Paulo**.

I later discover that São Paulo has the largest population of Japanese (1 million) outside Japan, most of whom had settled here by the mid-20th century. Their cultural influence is seen in everything from cuisine to architecture. In one of the city's most unique communities, **Liberdade**, bustling Japanese food shops, restaurants and karaoke bars line the streets. On the sidewalk, the Brazilian-Japanese women don't just walk, they sashay.

After lunching on *polvo* (fried octopus balls in a salty sauce), I take the very clean metro to the **Trianon-MASP** stop and stroll down **Avenida Paulista**, the city's main drag, for a visit to the UFO-like **Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo** with its **Candido Portinari** originals. South of the museum is the upscale **Jardins** district, teeming with boutiques and restaurants.

Looking for respite from the sultry heat, I take a stroll through the leafy oasis of **Parque Trianon**.

CITY BITES

Just minutes away is the **Pinheiros** district where – if you're lucky – you can get a seat at **Jun Sakamoto**. Sakamoto has been known to close his restaurant if he can't find fish fresh enough for his French- and Brazilian-inspired sushi creations. Order the tuna tartare with foie gras or sole flecked with red pepper. Reservations are de rigueur at this popular five-star dining spot. Just remember that in Brazil, dinner starts at around 9:00 p.m.

Notable restaurants in the Jardins include **Esplanada Grill**, for its porterhouse, T-bone and thinly-sliced rump steak (Brazil's cattle are grass-fed) and **D.O.M.**, with its new twists on old favourites such as *robalo* fish with tapioca and cassava.

For a more on-the-street flavour, visit the Belle Époque **Mercado Municipal** and grab a *pastel de bacalhau* (cod and potato pie). A sit-down lunch is available upstairs where, among lively conversations and clinking cutlery, the vibrant café serves hot fish dishes.

The **Vila Madalena** neighbourhood has great shops (check out **Mundareu** for artisanal goods) and bars providing a vibrant nightlife. Round off the evening at **Seu Jorge Bar** or **Zeppelin Bar**.

COLONIAL CALM

Seeking serenity, I buy a one-way bus ticket for a five-hour trip to the bucolic 18th-century town of **Paraty** (par-rah-CHI) – the old section is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site for its classic Portuguese colonial style. To walk on its cobblestones is to step back in time.

There are plenty of *pousadas* – luxury inns, B&Bs and historical buildings – in Paraty. The town is home to a world-famous puppet troupe, the **Grupo Contadores de Estórias**. Exploring themes of sex, love, death and the vagaries of life, the puppetry is both profound and strange.

From the town you can explore 65 islands and 200 beaches along the coast. Schooners leave the jetty around noon and hopscotch around three or four island beaches, returning by 6:00 p.m. Then scoot over to the

PHOTOS COURTESY D.O.M. RESTAURANT



Boa Vista distillery, home of the famed **Quero Essa** brand of cachaça that is used as the base for Brazil's national cocktail, the caipirinha. Take a tour and finish with a tasting.

One local cachaça connoisseur is **Yara Castro Roberts**, who runs the **Academy of Cooking & Other Pleasures** (www.chefbrasil.com). Take a cooking lesson for approximately \$108 per person. It starts at 8:00 p.m., is sprinkled with shots of cachaça and ends with a four-course dinner. The Academy features dishes from the regions of **Minas Gerais**, **Bahia** and the **Amazon** including fish in banana leaf served with grilled bananas, the African-inspired Chicken Xim-Xim – a chicken stew with coriander, ginger, coconut milk and cashews – and sorbets made from exotic fruits such as *cupuaçu* and *açaí*.

Roberts, who trained at Boston University's School of Culinary Arts and l'École Ritz Escoffier in Paris, notes Brazilian cuisine is derived from a "trio of sources – native, African and Portuguese."

"During the course of the class, people discover that manioc [cassava] is the

backbone of Brazilian cuisine, just like rice in Asia. I'd like them to try ingredients that are new to them, so they're excited to reproduce the dishes at home."

AFRICAN INFLUENCE

Three hours up the road is **Rio de Janeiro**, where you can catch a flight to the steamy north, Bahia, and its exciting capital of **Salvador**, once the chief landing point for African slaves brought over by the Portuguese.

It's now a tourist destination for Brazilians and world travellers alike. I find myself more mindful of my personal belongings. Fortunately, it's easy to find a place to relax – Bahia has more than 1,000 kilometres of beaches.

Salvador is where *candomblé* originated, an Afro-Brazilian religion involving choreographed dances, and *capoeira*, a kind of martial arts dance created by African slaves in the 16th century. Impromptu performances around Salvador are common and well worth stopping for – watching *capoeira* dancers perform intricate high kicks within inches of each other's faces is thrilling.

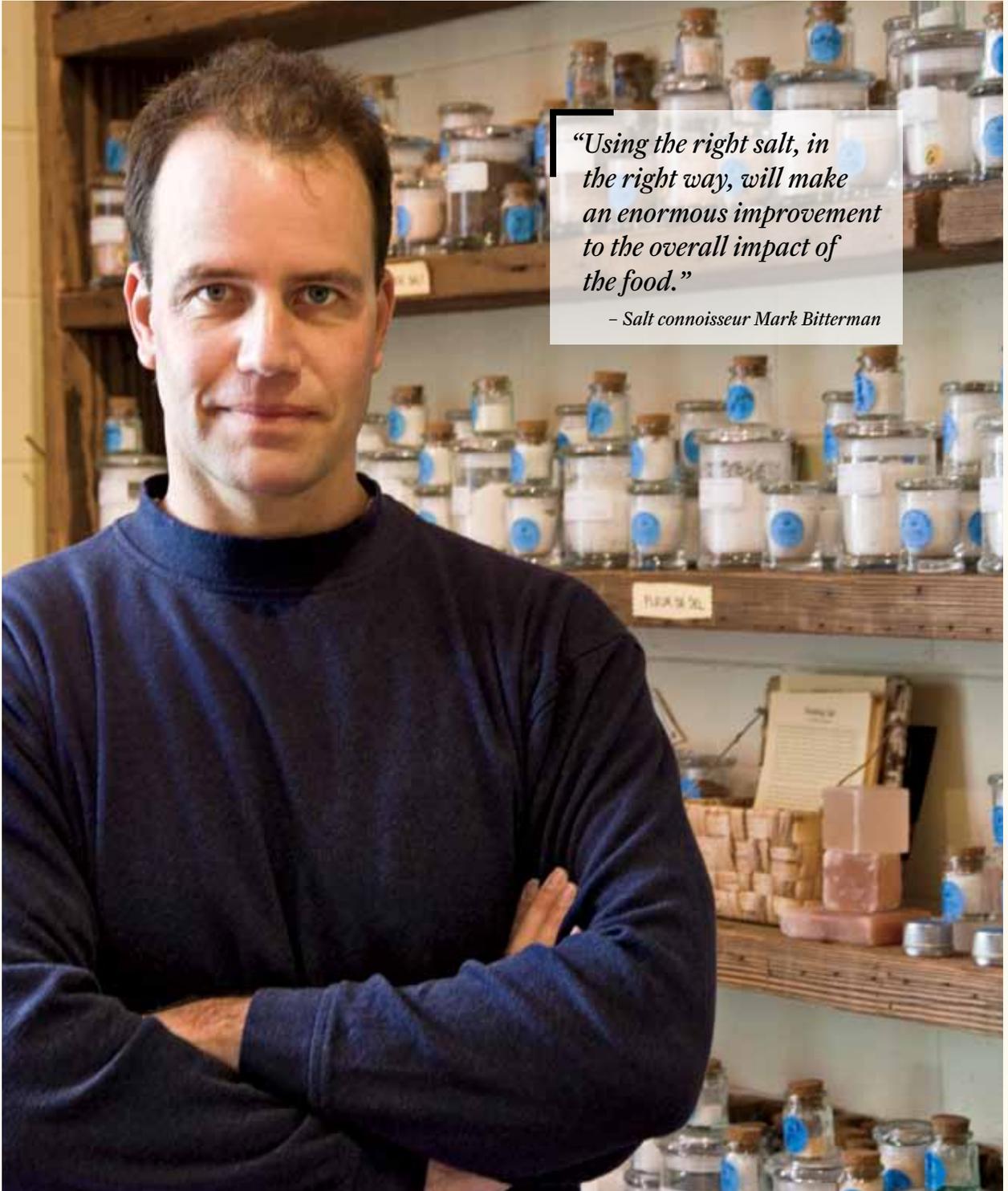
Drop in on the **Santa Casa de Misericórdia**, a mansion converted into an art museum with breathtaking views of the bay, and the **Museu Afro-Brasileiro**.

Bahia's glorious food incorporates such ingredients as palm oil, nuts, coconut and garlic, and is a marvel for the mouth. Be sure to try *moqueca*, a traditional seafood (usually shrimp or fish) stew of tomato, coconut, garlic and cilantro; *vatapá*, a dish made from finely ground nuts, breadcrumbs, shrimp, coconut milk and palm oil; *acarajé*, a deep-fried ball of black-eyed peas that is split and stuffed with a shrimp paste using cashew nuts, and sometimes topped with hot peppers and green tomatoes; and *quindim*, a coconut and egg custard.

Good restaurants include **Aconchego da Zuzu** in the **Fazenda Garcia** neighbourhood, the more lavish **Casa de Gamboa** in the old **Pelourinho** area and **Maria de São Pedro** at the **Mercado Modelo**, where you can gaze out at the sea as you dine on the terrace. **V**

Worldly Delights: Some Like It Salt

Mary Luz Mejia demystifies artisanal salts
one granule at a time



“Using the right salt, in the right way, will make an enormous improvement to the overall impact of the food.”

– Salt connoisseur Mark Bitterman

Much like an intricately layered pastry, today's food landscape is stratifying at a dizzying rate. Where once there were job titles you could readily identify such as chef, butcher and baker, new job categories have sprouted like mushrooms in a damp forest. One of the most intriguing newer food-related roles is that of 'selmelier,' a term coined by salt connoisseur **Mark Bitterman**. Think sommelier (wine expert), only replace the wine with culinary salts – and how these might be used in cooking – and voilà, you've got your selmelier.

If you're thinking "salt is salt, what's the big deal?", chew on this: According to salt aficionados across the globe, the precious stuff that was once traded for twice the price of gold is anything but ordinary. Bitterman, who authored *SalTED: A Manifesto on the World's Most Essential Mineral, with Recipes* (Ten Speed Press) and owns two salt boutiques in the U.S., argues that "salt is the most powerful flavour enhancer for food," adding, "using the right salt, in the right way, will make an enormous improvement to the overall impact of the food, from flavour, texture and appearance to its history and romantic allure."

And he's not alone. James Beard award-winning chef **Vitaly Paley**, who owns **Portland, Oregon's Paley's Place** and beat an Iron Chef on the hit TV series, says there's "plenty wrong" with your garden variety table salt. This is a chef who for 30 years used kosher salt in his cooking and recommended it as the go-to all-purpose seasoning in his *The Paley's Place Cookbook*. So what changed? He saw the salt crystal light and redefined some of his culinary habits.

Paley says industrially produced salts "rob food of its flavour," adding, "all of us look for the best possible ingredients, so seasoning with something subpar makes no sense." He was amazed that the flavour-boosting answer to food was literally under his nose. The transformation given to dishes by using the right salts is, in Paley's estimation, very apparent. "The food just simply tastes better. I will never go back to using kosher salt to season food. Keeping ice from melting perhaps, but that is it."

In more nitty-gritty terms, Bitterman says that mass-marketed salts use an industrial process to yield highly processed, refined chloride products that "bear as much resemblance to natural, artisan salt as a Whiz-style cheese spread to a good Gruyère." In a recent *New York Times* article about sea salts, food scientist **Harold McGee** said, "table salt is more than 99 percent sodium chloride."

So what's the difference? Culinary salts, as McGee points out, come from oceans or underground deposits of ancient seas. Sea salts are obtained through slow evaporation, often in shallow ponds or by rapid boiling over high heat. At the end of the day most salts remain largely sodium chloride but it's the trace minerals inherent in artisanal salts (which are stripped out by industrial refining processes) that bump up their flavour profiles in ways table salt just can't match.

For salt-sprinkling neophytes, the question becomes, what's the difference between a cooking salt and a finishing salt? Paley answers this best: "Finishing salts are like finishing olive oils. They are rare, more expensive and have very subtle flavours that come out much better when they are sprinkled on foods at the end of cooking. If you apply heat to them, their delicate flavours will disappear much in the same way a very fragrant and flavourful extra virgin olive oil will lose all its vibrancy when heated."

I asked Bitterman, Paley and **Mario Di Giovanni** of Toronto salt and spice importing company **Just a Pinch** to outline the main salt varieties, their characteristics and key uses in order to demystify the granules and take your dishes to a whole new sensory level. Di Giovanni believes home cooks should stock their pantry with three to four sea salts because "each salt imparts certain characteristics to your dish, no different than wines having a certain flavour because of the micro-climate of where the grapes are grown."



TOP TO BOTTOM:
Salish smoked sea salt;
Sel gris; Bolivian salt

Worldly Delights: Some Like It Salt



Here's how the salt shaker settles:

The basics include:

Sel Gris (French Grey), a wonderful sea salt made of coarse, granular crystals with a high moisture and mineral content. This is Di Giovanni's everyday salt.

FLAVOUR NOTES: An earthy, high-contrast, penetrating mineral saltiness. A little goes a long way.

USES: For finishing steak, lamb, root vegetables or bold dishes where the salt won't overpower the dish. Paley likes to use this as a salt crust to bake fish.

Fleur de Sel has fine, granular crystals with moderate moisture and a high mineral content.

FLAVOUR NOTES: Expect a slow release of flavour that penetrates deep into food with mineral-balanced saltiness.

USES: Considered the ultimate go-to finishing salt – perfect for eggs, fish, pork, steamed vegetables or even caramels!

Flake salts range from fine to coarse, and they are as the name implies, flaky with low moisture and little to no penetration into food.

FLAVOUR NOTES: Sparkling and then vanish with pungent saltiness.

USES: Great for finishing salads or any dish where a dramatic contrast is desired without overpowering the food's flavour.

Other options include **smoked sea salt** or **flavoured salts**, used in myriad ways and often created by chefs or salt lovers like Di Giovanni.

FLAVOUR NOTES: From intense, earthy and smoky to sweet and herbal, the range is spectacular, as are the uses.

USES: Smoked salts are often used for meat or fish, in rubs or in garnishes. Paley likes to sprinkle lemon flake salt on grilled asparagus, guava smoked salt on roasted potatoes and black diamond salt on sautéed greens. I enjoy truffle-infused salt with pasta and mushroom dishes.

STORAGE TIPS: Salt, the great preserver, has no expiration date. However, our experts suggest keeping your favourite jar of salt well sealed to retain moisture and/or flavour. Flavoured or smoked salts don't go 'bad' per se, but do lose their flavour potency over time.

Bitterman hopes to establish a 'salt university' to train future selmeliers in the intricacies of culinary salts – much like a sommelier course. Until then, you have this handy guide, Bitterman's book, Paley's restaurant and Di Giovanni's salt selection to help keep life enjoyable and well seasoned! **M**

In honour of the sun that helps create these fine salts, we asked our experts for their favourite sun destination sea salt that should be in everyone's pantry. Add a dash of this at your next get-together:

Bitterman

Great Hawaiian salts are excellent on seafood, so I'd pick a Molokai Red for fish, fruit and margarita or Bloody Mary rims!

Paley

Sel Gris de Marmoutier made into a salt crust to bake tropical fish like red snapper is a favourite, as are prawns roasted in spiced Himalayan rock salt.

Di Giovanni

Sea salt from the island of Bonaire is amazing when used as a salt crust to bake a whole chicken!

Worldly Delights: Texas BBQ Trail

In Texas, where everything is big – from cars to hats to boasting – you'd better bring an appetite to match.

Federica Maraboli



If **Texas** were a woman, she'd be the hottest bachelorette, what with her beauty and well-rounded personality. This southwestern state has it all going on: from cool cities, great weather, food, shopping and spas to wineries, dude ranches and beaches. Really, what more could you ask for? But as any smart bachelorette knows, one of the quickest ways to a man's heart is through his stomach and her trump card is what no red-blooded male can resist: meat that's been grilled over an open fire.

The barbeque trail in Texas is not actually a trail per se, but a combination of restaurants and meat markets located mainly in the towns of **Elgin**, **Taylor**, **Lockhart** and **Luling** – all within an easy 40-minute drive from **Austin**. You can count on warm, generous Southern hospitality and finger lickin' barbeque but don't expect any fancy decor; after all, you're coming for good eats and good times! Down-home family-style restaurants set the stage. This is the land of sausage, brisket and ribs – some are seriously brontosaurus-sized – try them all and consider a bib. When ordering, a good rule of thumb is a quarter to a half-pound of meat per person. Remember the focus here: fixin's are generally kept to a minimum – crackers, sliced white onions, pickles or jalapeño peppers – although beans, coleslaw, potato salad and creamed corn are also available. Sauces are an afterthought. If you're keen to witness the entire grilling process, and it's not too busy, ask for a tour. Most of the pit masters will proudly lift their pit covers and show you the grill, give you some invaluable tips and even provide generous tasting samples. And last but not least, pace yourself. Ideally, plan on visiting no more than two or three BBQ joints per day – your stomach will thank you.

Southside Market & Barbecue, Elgin

Located in the state's sausage capital, **Southside** lays claim to "the best sausage in Texas" – the **Original Elgin Hot Sausage**. The menu also includes smoked brisket, pork ribs and steaks, and chicken, all of which are presented – oh so tender and flavourful – on brown butcher paper. Owner Bryan Bracewell is a tall, unassuming man with a friendly smile. Like

calling card. Run by grandson and third generation pit master Wayne, it remains a favourite of locals and visitors alike. Of course, you'll find sausages (original, jalapeño and chipotle) and other items including perfectly marbled rib eye steak and juicy pork tenderloin. Call your orders in early to avoid disappointment. If there's a lineup, your reward upon reaching the counter is a generous sample of brisket. Warm, fresh homemade peach cobbler rounds out your feast. www.louiemuellerbarbecue.com

Black's BBQ, Lockhart

Another institution with a long list of accolades – and with good reason. Located in **Lockhart**, the barbeque

capital of Texas, **Black's** is one of the oldest barbeque restaurants continuously owned by one family. Here, the *pièce de résistance* is Edgar and Norma Jean Black's homemade sausages, which depending on who you talk to, put all other sausage rings to shame. I must say the jalapeño cheddar and garlic varieties are d-e-l-i-c-i-o-u-s: perfectly spiced, juicy and nicely textured. As Black's son Kent demonstrates how to properly cut brisket (against the grain) on his well-worn butcher block, he lops off samples so generous, by the time I sit down for lunch I'm practically full.

As a concession to tourists, Black's recently introduced paper plates, which makes it that much easier to enjoy the

selection of 20 different sides, including macaroni salad, moist cornbread, devilled eggs and sweet potato. It's also ridiculously cheap. You can score a sausage ring for \$2.19, a beef, pork loin or sausage sandwich for only \$3.89 and half a barbequed chicken for \$4.75. Hot sauce fans will approve of the homemade selection: the original pepper sauce, chipotle-mustard pepper sauce or habañero. Satisfy your sweet tooth here with a variety of pies, cobblers, ice cream and puddings. www.blackssbbq.com

A girl can only visit so many BBQ joints in a day. For a complete list and more information on the Texas BBQ Trail, visit www.tourism-tools.com/texasbbq/Welcome.html. 🍴



THE PIT MASTER

Make no bones about it, barbeque in Texas is not a meal – or a topic – to be taken lightly. Folks have been known to get into fights over who's got the best 'cue. And it really all comes down to the man behind the grill, the almighty pit master. This is a title coveted by many a tong-wielding male standing over an open flame, and one that's carried with pride and honour in Texas. So is there any sort of apprenticeship to becoming a pit master? "There is no formal process, but you do require experience to qualify," says Bryan Bracewell, owner of Southside Market. "In Texas, I'd say that everyone grew up as the master of their own backyard pit and most families have the 'go-to' guy who oversees all meat prep at gatherings. But keeping the flavour and doneness consistent daily takes a tremendous amount of time and attention. In my opinion, barbeque is more of an art than a science. We have no thermometers on our flat pits to check doneness – you're just supposed to know! The best pit masters cook by sight and touch alone."

Worldly Delights: Miami Design District

Coming of age: Miami has matured into a cultural hot spot

Mary Luz Mejia



Culture, art and fashion converge seamlessly in this subtropical city by the sea.

When I lived and worked in the **Miami** area, my Canadian friends would sympathetically proclaim, "Great beaches, but there's no culture in **South Florida**." I'd point to the city ballet company, the art deco revival in **South Beach**, the festivals and galleries like **Romero Britto's** headquarters on **Lincoln Road Mall**. They'd be unmoved. But now, even die-hard naysayers will have a tough time shrugging off gems like the ever-expanding **Miami Design District** or the newly minted **New World Symphony** in South Beach, where culture, art and fashion converge seamlessly in this subtropical city by the sea.

In the nightclubbing days of my youth, there was no cooler nocturnal hangout than the **Power Studios** in what was

then a non-gentrified Design District. Street after street of abandoned warehouses stared unblinkingly as we drove past in the inky night to our party destination. That was in the late nineties. Comparing the Design District today with the one I left behind is an exercise in marked contrasts.

On a typical Technicolor Miami day, I meet up with Tiffany Chestler of **Dacra** – the innovative real estate development company behind the revitalization of South Beach, Lincoln Road Mall and now the Miami Design District. We begin our walking tour of the area at the industrially cool **4141 Building** (NE 2nd Avenue, Miami) where the **Haitian Heritage Museum** shares space with retail shops and cutting-edge galleries like **Primary**

Projects. It's here, she explains, that **Books III Bischof** and his partners opened up their own space more than a year ago to curate shows of artists they like and admire.

On our visit, we're greeted by an enormous elephant on display in the middle of the room, made from found objects by local artist **Andrew Nigon**. A gallon water bottle partially comprises the beast's right front knee and a rug makes up his giant ear. Nigon, a film and TV prop master, takes us into a world where, he explains, "seductive and tortured characters permanently exist halfway from somewhere to nowhere."

This is street art with indoor cred. Bischof describes it more eloquently: "Street art and graffiti is the purest

contemporary art form, by definition, that's specific to its region and artists' age group." He pauses, adding, "We influence what's going on out there. This art changes quickly."

In what to me seems like the blink of an eye, so has this district. It used to be called **Buena Vista** and though it's hard to believe today, before the stylized, sleek buildings housing design giants like Italy's **Driade** or France's fashion icon **Christian Louboutin** set up shop this was produce-growing country. By the 1920s, 'Pineapple King' Theodore Moore switched gears and left fruit growing for another kind of business: making furniture for the wealthy who started building homes in the neighbourhood. The refurbished **Moore Building** still proudly stands today – as an event space for special occasions.

By the 1990s, the area had completely lost its former lustre. That's when Dacra's **Craig Robins** stepped in, attracting high-end home designers to set up shop. Now, it's expanded its artistic boundaries and is being touted as the next SoHo for its fusion of fashion, art and culture.

The same can be said of nearby South Beach – long known as the epicentre of the never-ending party and parade of bodacious bodies. SoBe has matured, however, and now boasts the stunning New World Symphony (newworldcenter.com) under artistic director Michael Tilson Thomas, designed by Canadian-born starchitect Frank Gehry. Part 'laboratory for musical education' where only 30 out of a thousand applicants from around the world are accepted as fellows, and part performance centre, this symphony is like no other.

Live performances are broadcast free of charge in the adjacent park via a 7,000-square-foot wall cast projection system in surround sound. Inside, guests are also treated to a state-of-the-art experience with multiple HD cameras and projection 'sails' to stimulate the senses. "We're working on attracting a younger audience," says symphony director of sales Sabrina Anico, adding, "It's our hope that a child watching an outdoor performance will fall in love with music and enjoy it for the rest of his or her life!"

TRAVELLERS' TIP: Outdoor concerts start in November at 7:30 p.m. and run through the winter. The symphony also offers mini half-hour indoor concerts during the winter months for \$2.50 – less than a cup of coffee!

Anyone who says that Miami is a cultural wasteland clearly isn't venturing beyond the outlet malls, the clubs or the beaches, because this city has grown up in ways that should make any culturally inclined visitor pack something a little more sophisticated than Bermudas and a pair of flip-flops.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MIAMI DESIGN DISTRICT:

Michael's Genuine Food & Drink (www.michaelsgenuine.com), **Sra. Martinez** (sramartinez.com), and **Sugarcane** (www.sugarcanerawbargrill.com)

are all delicious dining or cocktail hour choices. Michael's Genuine (for modern American) and Sra. Martinez (with an Iberian/Latin influence) both offer exceptional brunches and dinners. Sugarcane's global sharing plates on its terrace make for a sexy finish to any art-filled day. It doesn't hurt that Michael Schwartz, Michelle Bernstein and Timon Balloo are the stellar, award-winning chefs behind these respective eateries.

Y-3 (150 NE 40th Street) Yohji Yamamoto's high-end fashion meets athletic/street wear is given a U.S. outlet in collaboration with adidas. Yamamoto is a long-time favourite of A-list celebs, and his first stateside store features apparel, accessories and footwear.

Friends With You (www.friendswithyou.com) A think tank, retail shop and creative hub of Miami artists Samuel Borkson and Arturo Sandoval III. From whimsical toys and furniture to massive art installations, this artistic duo creates here and continues to exhibit around the world, including Toronto's 2010 Luminato Festival.

TRAVELLERS' TIP: The second Saturday of each month, a **Gallery Walk** is held from 7:00 to 10:00 p.m. Art galleries and design showrooms welcome the public – a perfect way to get an overview of the area if you're short on time and big on wanting to take it all in! For details, go to the events section of miamidesigndistrict.net. 📍



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Cultural Close-up: Puerto Viejo

Christopher P. Baker

Costa Ricans tend to be an industrious lot, prone to rising at dawn to kick-start their work day with strong brews of fresh-picked local coffee. Life along **Costa Rica's Caribbean coast**, however, is lived at an easier pace. What few villages lie along the sandy shores are laid-back places. During the late 19th century, English-speaking Jamaicans arrived to build the **Atlantic Railroad** and work the banana plantations, infusing the local dialect with lilting patois, the local cuisine with West Indian spices and the lifestyle with a bit more chill. Now things are stirring, thanks to a hip new vibe centred on **Puerto Viejo**, where chic boutique hotels, restaurants and lounge bars are sprouting like mushrooms on a rainforest log.

Caribbean Calm

To catch a Rastafarian vibe, walk Puerto Viejo's grid of funky dirt lanes (only the main drag is paved) lined with gingerbread-trimmed houses painted in tropical ice-cream pastels. Stop at Puerto Viejo's main beach, where fishing boats are drawn up on the sand and local fishers mend nets beneath coconut palms. Pick up handmade jewellery of coral and shells at an informal street market along the beach and take a tour of **Chocorart**, a hillside cacao farm near **Playa Chiquita**, to learn all about cacao production from the bean to the chocolate bar. Need more? Pamper yourself with a decadent chocolate body rub and cacao butter massage at **Pure Jungle Spa**.

Wave Action

Legendary among die-hard surfers is the wild storm-generated wave called the **Salsa Brava** (best experienced in November and December). The narrow coastal strip is lined with surf-washed beaches – golden, white, even black – that unfurl south to the Panamanian border. The beach break at **Playa Cocles** is a great place to learn to surf, courtesy of the more than a dozen surf shops in town.

It's Natural

Mother Nature gets star billing around Puerto Viejo. For a primer on tropical fruits and plants, head to **Finca la Isla Botanical Garden**. Trails lead through



the rainforest where toucans, sloths and monkeys are frequently spotted. Next, rent a bicycle and ride south to the **Jaguar Rescue Centre** at Playa Chiquita to get a close-up of critters from howler monkeys to venomous snakes. See them in the wild at **Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge**, which protects tropical rainforest, mangroves, wetlands and the nation's largest coral reef. Marine turtles crawl ashore to lay their eggs, and manatees and *tucuxí* dolphins swim in freshwater lagoons.

Local Eats

Locals swear by **Bread & Chocolate**, where you can sit on an open wooden deck and enjoy cinnamon oatmeal pancakes, crispy sautéed potatoes with jerk barbecue sauce and brownie sundaes. For a taste of local Caribbean fare (such as 'rundown' – spiced fish stew simmered in coconut milk), head

to **Jammin'**, a roadside restaurant with tree-trunk stools, Bob Marley posters and chill reggae beats. After sundown head south to **Punta Cocles**, where ebullient Italian expat Ilario Giannoni conjures up divine Italian dishes at **La Pecora Nera**, one of Costa Rica's hottest restaurants outside **San José**.

After Hours

Puerto Viejo has an infamously wicked nightlife, so don't plan on getting to bed early. Warm up at **Tex-Mex**, a rustic open-air bar serving oversized mojitos and orgasmic cocktails, plus three-times-nightly Hollywood movies screened al fresco. Check out the sophisticated **Baba Yaga** lounge or, next door, **Oshi's Lounge**, an intimate bar with live calypso. The late-night party spills onto the beach at **Johnny's Place**, where torches and even the occasional beach bonfire draw patrons to this main dance bar. ▣

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THE PLACE YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW

Toronto-based **Ken Gangbar** is a mixed-media artist whose innovative sculptures, installations and creative concepts grace the walls, halls and rooms of notable locales across the globe. Gangbar's inspiration comes from nature – its elements, forces and cycles. He calls his creative process “intuitive and playful,” and it results in a unique collision between the natural and the industrial. Fluidity is a theme that asserts itself through the use of multiples in Gangbar's work. Incorporating porcelain, glass, metal and wood, his approach is open and invites light and shadow to work their wonder. Clients include international architecture and design firms, and Gangbar's work can be admired at NOBU restaurants in Athens and Moscow, Alain Ducasse's Adour in New York City's St. Regis Hotel, The Cosmopolitan Hotel in Las Vegas and Canyon Ranch Hotel & Spa in Miami Beach, to name a few.

What does art mean to you?

It means exploration, experimentation and expression – like a breath. It's intuition, mystery and wonder.

Who inspires you?

My mother and her early passion for pottery, my Uncle Jimmy for his woodwork, children and the German photographer, sculptor and educator Karl Blossfeldt.

What in your opinion would be the greatest misfortune?

Someone not reaching his or her full potential and greatest ability to contribute.

If you couldn't create art any longer, what would you do?

There have been many times when I thought I needed to leave art and do

something else. Each time I came up blank and felt my only option was to persist. Perhaps, if I had to choose, I would work with youth again.

A person is truly rich when he or she has...

...love, friendship, health, happiness, joy and the ability to contribute and give.

What place do you most wish to visit?

Italy.

Who are your real-life heroines?

My sisters Natalie and Ruth; I couldn't do it without them!

What is your personal motto?

It's not *if* but *how*.

What is your greatest fear?

Not getting off the fence.

What is your greatest achievement?

Every time I come up with a creative concept I get excited about, I think it is a huge achievement!

When and where are you happiest?

In a canoe in the wilderness, around a fire, on a path, on a lake, among nature with friends and family.

What is your most treasured possession?

A stone that found me. It's full of silent stories and endless years. It emerged from the dirt and my jaw dropped. Sculpture at its purest! 