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SPRING 2011

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Spain's Silver Route

Impressions of Portugal

Amore d'Abruzzo

City Guide: Bilbao

WORLD CRUISING

The Spirit of Silversea

36
HOURS IN
ISTANBUL

Plus

On Stockholm's Trail

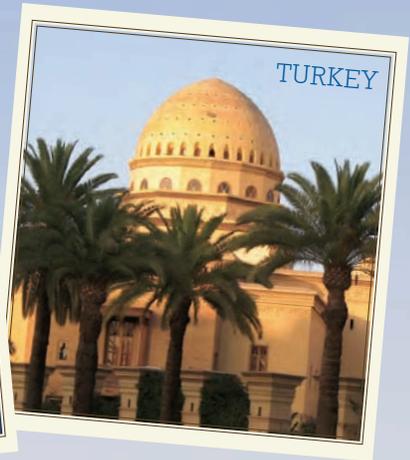
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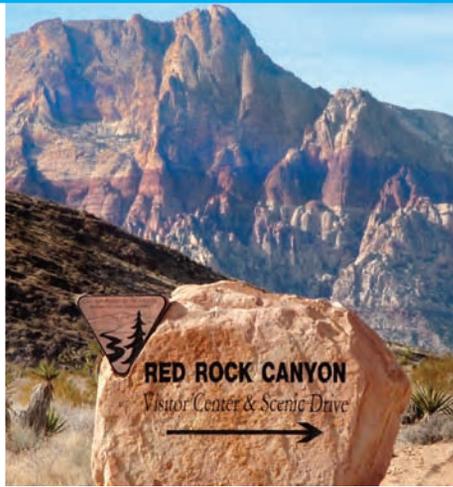


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Publisher
Ensemble Travel® Group

Editor-in-Chief
Federica Maraboli

Assistant Editor
Mary Luz Mejia

Copy Editors
Maira Ruskell, Peter Macmillan, Moveable Inc.

Contributors
Christopher P. Baker, Niurka Barroso, Tim Johnson, Nick Keukenmeester, Mary Luz Mejia, Toby Saltzman, Michele Sponagle, Mark Stevens, Margaret Swaine, Nancy Wigston

Art Direction
Federica Maraboli, Frank Viva

Design
Viva & Co.

Layout
Martina Weigl, Moveable Inc.

Image Work
Jennifer Malloy, Moveable Inc.

Production
Liz Scull, Andy Thomas

Marketing & Advertising
Franca luele
Ensemble Travel® Group
franca@ensembletravel.ca
1 866-442-6877 x 242

Ensemble Travel® Group
Executive Vice President & General Manager
Lindsay N. Pearlman

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Christian mosaic: ©HAZLAN ABDUL HAKIM/STOCK PHOTO
Judean mountains: ©GKUNA/STOCK PHOTO

CONTRIBUTORS



A former professional jazz and classical musician, Toronto writer **Mark Stevens** also spent time in the Caribbean as a sailing instructor and skipper after he fell in love with that idyllic part of the world. Mark has garnered journalistic recognition ranging from Caribbean Tourism Organization awards for excellence in Caribbean travel writing to several Canadian Tourism Commission's Northern Lights Media Awards. He has written travel articles for the *Toronto Star*, *Washington Post*, *Cottage Life*, *Canadian Yachting* and *Men's Fitness*. Mark's beats include Canada, the Caribbean and Europe. He works and travels extensively with award-winning photographer Sharon Matthews-Stevens, whose ancestral home they visited in 'Amore d'Abruzzo' – a poignant look at a family's journey to Italy in search of maternal roots.



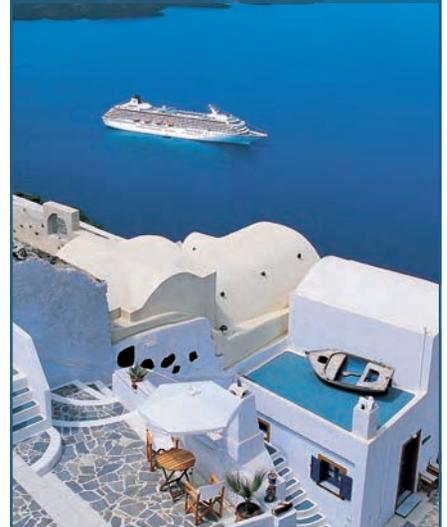
Winner of a prestigious 2010 Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Award, **Toby Saltzman** has travelled the world in pursuit of her passion for exploring places rich in arts, culture, and historical and environmental importance. Despite all the delights of cruising on a luxurious vessel, Toby says her first cruise – along the Inside Passage of Alaska – had the most lasting impact. "I realized that ports are gateways to spectacular adventures. After hiking through the rainforest, heli-flightseeing over misty fjords, fly-fishing in northern streams, and then returning each day to cushy comfort, delectable meals and entertainment, I was hooked on the ease and value of cruising." Since then, Toby's cruises have taken her to see the Moscow Ballet, the Tasmanian wilderness and golf courses in Wales. Her work appears in *The Globe and Mail*, *Global Traveler Magazine*, *Zoomer Magazine* and *travelterrific.com*, among other publications.



Freelance photographer **Niurka Barroso** graduated from Havana University with a degree in classical languages and worked for 12 years for Agence France-Presse (AFP). From 1998 to 2007, she exhibited in nearly a dozen solo photography shows in Austria, Canada, Cuba and Spain as well as participating in several group exhibitions in Canada, the United States, Mexico and Europe. In 1998, she received the Casa de las Américas Award for Documentary Photography. Recently, Portugal has become the focus of her lens, the results of which can be seen in our pictorial spread on page 30. "Portugal is a captivating blend of tradition and modernity; a visual, socio-cultural and gastronomic paradise – it's my hidden treasure, and my main photographic destination."

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Eternally enchanting



This past December, I spent a day in **Brussels**, whose main square was recently voted the most beautiful in Europe in a survey by a Dutch website. I can see why. Making the short walk from the train station to my hotel, I followed the narrow, cobblestoned streets to the **Grand Place**, where an enormous, 59-foot decorated tree stood in the centre, the imposing spires of the Town Hall rising behind it. Groups of children gathered around and called out excitedly to each other in sing-song French, people took pictures of the life-sized nativity scene and couples strolled hand-in-hand across the square as snowflakes gently fell. Christmas merriment was palpable everywhere. That moment encapsulated for me all the things that matter most: joy, hope and the warmth of close ties with family and friends.

Born to Italian parents, I am perhaps biased when it comes to Europe. There has always been something about its architecture, tempo and aesthetic that resonates with me. And as much as I love travelling to other places far and away, it is that continent that feels most like a second home. So it is always with great anticipation that our spring Europe issue is pulled together. For the first time we feature a pictorial on **Portugal** (page 30) and let its beauty speak for itself through

the captivating images. We take **Istanbul** by storm in 36 hours (page 28), followed by a leisurely stroll along **Spain's** Silver Route, a 2,000-year-old road that stretches from **Gijón** to **Seville** (page 34). With family travel on the upswing, one writer's personal search for his wife's Italian roots is both timely and poignant (page 38).

Anyone who enjoys books has surely read the Millennium Trilogy. The late Swedish author Stieg Larsson's trio of books, set in **Stockholm**, has made it one of the hottest cities this year, with special tours following in the footsteps of his fictional characters. We sent our writer to check it out firsthand (page 46).

If you've ever secretly dreamed of packing it all in and heading to a charming villa in **Tuscany**, you'll find inspiration in 'Romancing the Stone' (page 64) – a story about a Canadian couple who did just that and now runs a successful *agriturismo* in the Chianti region. Of course, look for our usual great food and wine pieces including a Tuscan recipe, a review of Spanish brandies and news on the latest food trends.

I hope you enjoy this issue as much as we did putting it together. ▣

FEDERICA MARABOLI, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
editor@ensembletravel.ca

ANYWHERE ELSE
THIS WOULD JUST BE AN OLD CITY.



BUT THIS IS JERUSALEM This is where the stories we grew up with happened; where the events that have most profoundly affected humankind took place. No city in the world can match its power to bring the past to life. It is one of the many wonders of Israel – where the history that makes us who we are still lives.



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ISRAEL

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Diversions

Innovations and celebrations

Shop stops



North America is well known for its abundance of outlet malls, but Europe is nipping at its heels as a destination for savvy shoppers. Here are a few favourites among all the outlets that have sprung up across Europe:

Bicester Village in Oxfordshire, U.K. has great deals on international and British brands. Highlights include Burberry, Dunhill, Paul Smith, La Perla (for sexy, elegant intimates), Versace, Molton Brown, Jimmy Choo, Waterford Wedgwood and Ferragamo. Just in case you really score

big, there are Samsonite and Tumi stores where you can buy new luggage to accommodate all your purchases.

When in **Rome**, try **Castel Romano Designer Outlet** located about 25 kilometres south of Italy's capital. It has an A-list range of top design houses, like Dolce & Gabbana, Valentino and Zegna. Kitchen stuff is a smart buy at factory outlets featuring beautifully designed essentials by Alessi (located in Milan) and Lagostina stainless steel cookware and tableware in the Piedmont area.

Have your credit cards handy at **Switzerland's Villeneuve Outlet**. You'll find well-priced watches from European names like Swiss Army and Wenger, as well as plenty of ready-to-wear from names like Yves Saint Laurent, Puma, Cerruti, Adidas, Nina Ricci and Diesel.

Art smarts

This year will be a blockbuster one for art and a number of European museums will feature fantastic limited-time exhibits well worth visiting:

Hermitage Amsterdam. The inaugural exhibit in the summer of 2009, devoted to the life of Russian royalty, opened this new museum with a bang. The momentum continues with *Splendour and Glory: Art of the Russian Orthodox Church*. More than 300 artifacts will showcase the riches of the church, with plenty of gold, silver and precious jewels on display. March 19 to September 16, 2011.



Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Fashion followers will love this installation devoted to Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto. It's a retrospective of his 30-year career, one that has often provoked and inspired the fashion world. March 12 to July 10, 2011.

The spotlight is shared by three influential artists, Picasso, Miró and Dali, at an exhibit at the **Palazzo Strozzi in Florence.** *Angry Young Men: The Birth of Modernity* shows the early works of these masters and how they shaped painting before the advent of surrealism. March 12 to July 17, 2011.

Extreme makeovers: hotel edition

Vintage properties have undergone extensive changes to keep up with the times, while new properties are sprouting from buildings with sometimes infamous histories. Here are a few fabulous places to bed down for the night.

Stockholm's Nobis Hotel, built in 1886, once served as a private residence before turning into a bank. Fast-forward to 1973 and it was the site of the infamous bank robbery and hostage taking that inspired the term 'Stockholm Syndrome.' In its latest incarnation, the stunning



stone building is a luxury hotel designed to be a peaceful and soothing oasis after a day of exploring the city.



The Augustine, housed in the former St. Thomas Monastery in **Prague**, is a five-star hotel created from seven buildings, some dating back to the 13th century. Check out The Brewery Bar, located in a cellar that still has centuries-old stalagmites and stalactites. The Augustine has already won numerous awards for its lively hotel bar, its hospitality and its participation in the Slow Food movement.

The Savoy in London has a long history as the place to be. Monet spent months painting in a suite there, and the who's who of celebrities, from Marilyn Monroe to Noël Coward, drank cocktails in its bar. After a £100-million renovation, its luxe factor has been amped up with gorgeous Edwardian-style suites facing the Thames, and art deco-style rooms overlooking the Strand. Brilliant!

Packing List

New and notable

Sip It

Perhaps you're taking a charter flight overseas and want to drink your way to vitality, skipping the high-fat snacks and sugar-laden drink options usually offered mid-flight. If you'd rather sip something healthy, try **Intuition's My Vitality: Wild Strawberry with a Kick** energy drink, complete with energy-boosting herbs. These on-board approved size tubes are just the ticket to help combat jet lag and reduce stress. Dilute the all-natural caffeine- and sugar-free concentrate in a glass of water and say hello to your holiday! Starting at \$5.99 for a three-pack, available online at www.drinkintuition.com.



Stylish Slumber

Any time is lights out with this pretty, all-silk sleep mask to protect delicate eyes. Infused with lavender to relax and soothe the senses, the butterfly-patterned mask is designed by **elizabethW** and will ensure you drift off into a deep slumber at 30,000 feet. \$25, available online at www.pioneerlinens.com.

Skin Armour

From the same laboratory that's behind the ultra-luxurious **La Prairie** skin products comes **SWISSTEC™**, a premium skin care line developed in the Swiss Riviera by renowned chemist **Dr. Jacqueline Hill**. Prepare, protect and pamper your skin this winter while slowing the signs of aging and reducing the appearance of wrinkles and pores with the line's organic and eco-friendly ingredient complexes. From serums and day creams (with SPF) to clarifying elixirs, you'll look Riviera-worthy yourself in no time. From \$38-\$159; available at physicians' offices and select spas across Canada. To locate the one nearest you, call 1-800-668-5236.

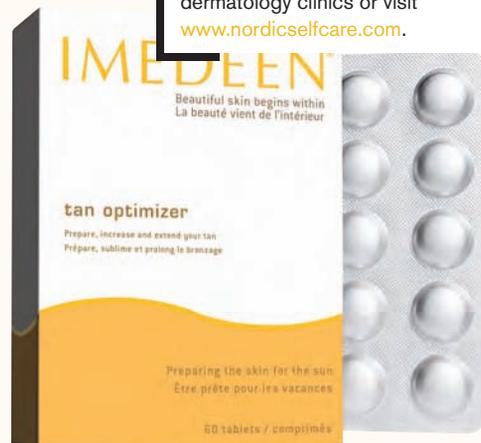
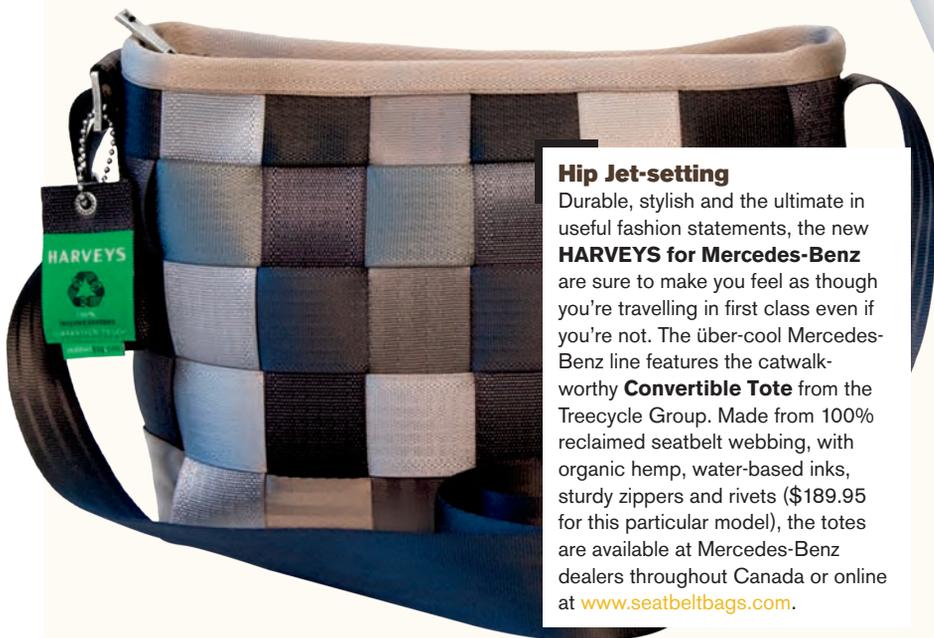


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Hip Jet-setting

Durable, stylish and the ultimate in useful fashion statements, the new **HARVEYS for Mercedes-Benz** are sure to make you feel as though you're travelling in first class even if you're not. The über-cool Mercedes-Benz line features the catwalk-worthy **Convertible Tote** from the Treecycle Group. Made from 100% reclaimed seatbelt webbing, with organic hemp, water-based inks, sturdy zippers and rivets (\$189.95 for this particular model), the totes are available at Mercedes-Benz dealers throughout Canada or online at www.seatbeltbags.com.



Trends: Style Notes



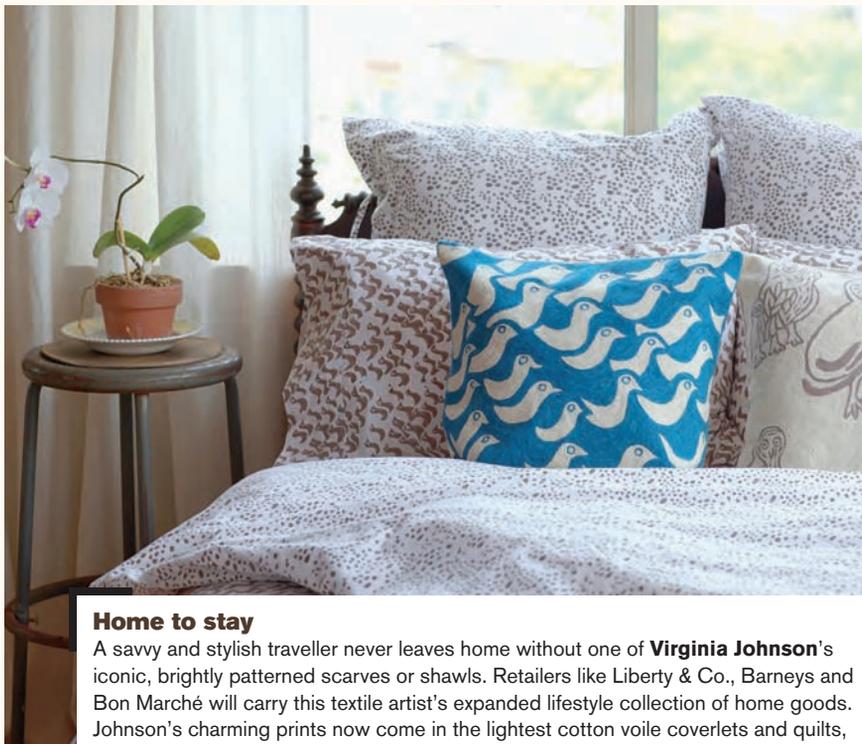
Take a Seat

Starting out in 1923 in Milan with one simple wooden chair design, the proudly made-in-Italy **Calligaris** label went through its modernist, man-made materials period in mid-century before coming full-circle back to solid woods like walnut and beech (the new woodpecker logo says it all). Stocked by nearly 50 authorized retailers across the country and hundreds around the globe, Calligaris is now in its third generation of the same family ownership and has just opened its first dedicated Canadian showroom in Toronto. The airy two-storey space stocks the *de rigueur* clear and colourful acrylic chairs the brand has become known for, as well as the full range of wooden and soft furnishings, from dining tables to sofas. For a bit of whimsy, we love the **Wien chair** designed by Paolo Lucidi and Luca Pevere (\$422–\$483) and the curving **Parisienne** by Archirivolto (\$285). 170 King Street East, calligaristoronto.ca



King Louis the First

Louis Vuitton, arguably the most recognizable brand of the behemoth luxury company **LVMH**, has more than 450 stores across the globe, but only 10 it designates as 'maisons.' So it's big news when that rare moniker is bestowed upon a Canadian store. Canada's first and only **Maison Louis Vuitton** celebrated its opening in the newly renovated **Hotel Vancouver** this past December. It carries both core and fashion accessory collections including its signature **Damier** and **Monogram** canvas bags displayed on a two-storey wall, shoes, ready-to-wear and timepieces, and even features a permanent stairwell installation by Vancouver artist Steven Shearer. The store also boasts such rare custom work as a trunk (if you need to ask the price, well...) and lavish gem-encrusted selections from the latest fine jewellery collections. The brand also plans to open a stately *haute joaillerie* flagship in **Paris's Place Vendôme** later this year.



Home to stay

A savvy and stylish traveller never leaves home without one of **Virginia Johnson's** iconic, brightly patterned scarves or shawls. Retailers like Liberty & Co., Barneys and Bon Marché will carry this textile artist's expanded lifestyle collection of home goods. Johnson's charming prints now come in the lightest cotton voile coverlets and quilts, with accents like chain-stitch owl pillows. From a duvet cover with dalmatian spots that reverses to ducks in a row, to leaf and waffle print crib sets (bumper, fitted sheet and baby quilt), and with rugs and chain-stitch decorative toss cushions to match, they cozy up both city and country living. virginiajohnson.com

Trends: Style Notes



Fashion Makes Scents

Historic Parisian label **Chloé** is one of the most influential fashion houses in the new decade thanks to creative designer **Hannah MacGibbon**. She has a knack for distilling the zeitgeist of the age into trousers and blouses, and most recently, the collective return to simplicity in dressing (enough of the overwrought bells and whistles, she said). Accordingly, the house's new **Love, Chloé** perfume (\$90 at Holt Renfrew, The Bay and Murale) is a return to classic perfumery, combining light and powdery floral notes with musk. Quite simply, it's pretty, like the Chloé clothes everyone covets. Meanwhile, all that high-low collaborating with H&M seems to have given luxury shoemaker Jimmy Choo co-founder and chief creative officer **Tamara Mellon** a taste for marketing to the masses. This month she launches **Jimmy Choo: The First Perfume** (\$95). The vintage-inspired bottle, which is shaped like a grenade, positively bursts with sensuality and comes in an exotic animal-print carton that resembles those coveted towering heels.



Son Glasses

This season marks the début collection of upscale sunglasses by **Jérémy Tarian**. Who is he and why should you care? Tarian is the son of Alain Mikli, the father of cool modern eyewear. Tarian's collection, a scant six styles, spanning classic to cutting edge, riffs on the idea of those 'missed connections' personal ads. One look has a bold retro line sweeping across the temple; another is a clear smoky retro aviator-shield. And they're all handmade in France using polarized lenses. You couldn't ask for a better pedigree. Exclusively at Josephson's (josephson.ca and jeremytarian.com).



European Exhibitionism

As the stately **Drawing Fashion** exhibit comes to a close on March 6 at the **Design Museum London**, a retrospective of more than 60 years of Wim Crouwel's typographic design lights up the emerging computer and space-age graphics of the 1960s from March 30 to July 3 (designmuseum.org). And across the pond in Paris, take in **An Ideal History of Contemporary Fashion Volume II** for the best from the Belgians and Japanese (and other experimental modern designers). Time your visit well (the exhibitions overlap) so that if your partner gets bored, you can send him to browse the adjacent **Art of the Automobile** exhibition, which features rare automotive masterpieces from Ralph Lauren's collection (such as a Jaguar XKD). He'll be content for hours! Both exhibits are at the **Decorative Arts Museum** at the Louvre until May 8 and from April 28, respectively (lesartsdecoratifs.fr).



The Getaway

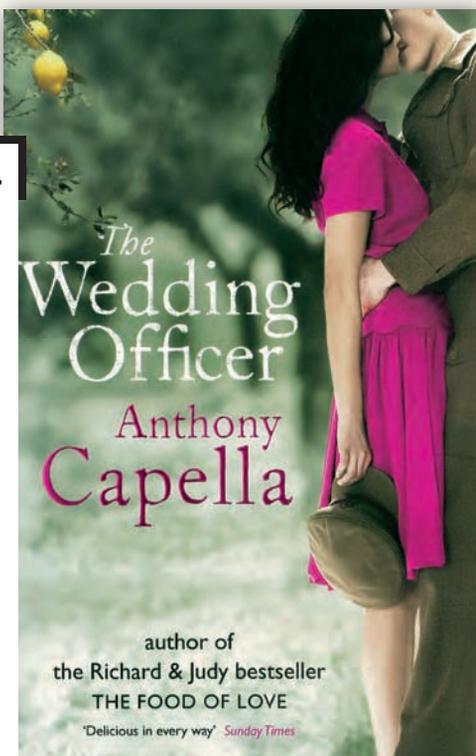
When the opportunity arises to throw things into a bag for an impromptu getaway, which bag do you reach for? What type of weekender are you? A rough-and-tumble, ready-for-anything explorer wielding the **Intrepid**, a canvas and leather number inspired by a well-worn WWII utility bag (\$225 at tilley.com)? Or one who appreciates a more civilized form of travel and who favours the stately deerskin weekender bag and a fine Madeira nightcap? (\$2,200 at Brooks Brothers stores in Calgary, Toronto and Vancouver, brooksbrothers.com.)

Required Reading

Enchanting escapes

The Wedding Officer by Anthony Capella (Random House, \$12.00)

During the Second World War, the war-ravaged but still captivating city of Naples plays host to British Captain James Gould and country cook Livia Pertini. It's there that Livia meets and cooks for James and his army colleagues. He's the newly appointed 'wedding officer,' whose job entails discouraging British soldiers from marrying their Italian loves, many of whom are forced to turn to prostitution to survive. Amid the chaos of bombs and immense personal sacrifice, these two unlikely souls find infinitely more than they ever imagined among shelled-out buildings and the lava flow of nearby Vesuvius. Livia's rustic Italian cooking, so tantalizingly brought to life by Capella, will kick your salivary glands into overdrive, and their love story will inspire at least a *sospiro* or two.



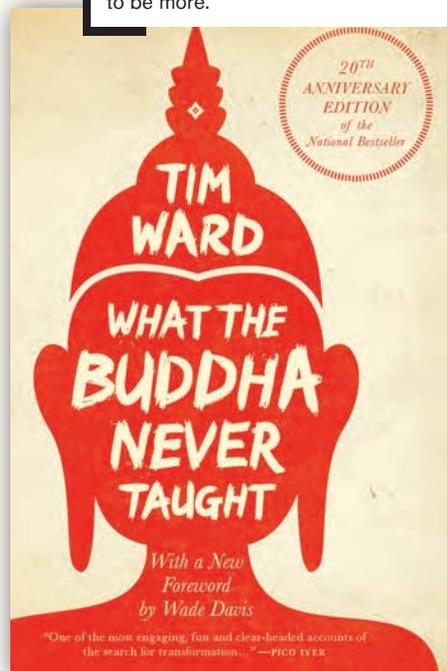
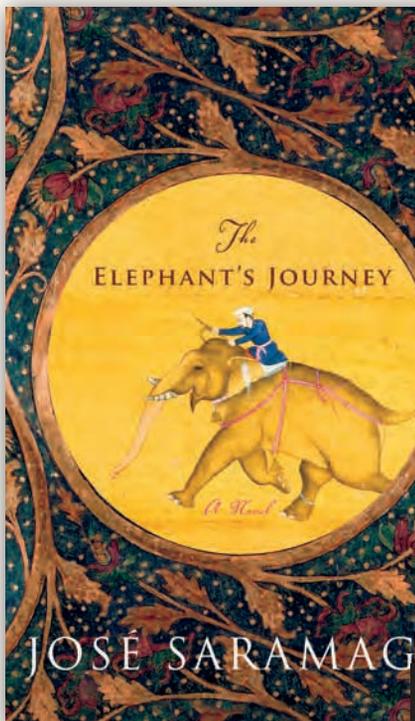
What the Buddha Never Taught by Tim Ward (Thomas Allen Publishers, \$19.95)

Long before Elizabeth Gilbert went on her transformational journey, Canadian Tim Ward departed for Asia on his. This printing is the 20th-anniversary edition of a national bestseller that still enralls today. In the jungles of Thailand, Tim lived according to 2,500-year-old Buddhist monastic rules. With grace, humour and eyebrow-raising honesty, Tim chronicles his time at the Wat Pah Nanachat monastery. He takes us on his spiritual journey to what Buddhists call enlightenment and recounts how this is all "easier said than done." Along the way, he learns to live with a coiled cobra behind the toilet door, scorpions, tarantulas and the burning desire to be more.

The Elephant's Journey

by José Saramago
(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$24.00)

The Elephant's Journey, by Nobel Prize winner José Saramago, is a wonderfully quixotic adventure that takes the elephant Solomon and his keeper Subhro deep into the heart of humanity. Based on a true story, in which Portuguese King João III gave the Austrian Archduke Maximilian an elephant as a wedding present, the tale begins as Solomon walks from Lisbon to Vienna with Subhro in tow. Along the way, the two meet royal guards, lords and ladies, as well as common folk who often mistake Solomon for a fairground entertainer. Often told from the elephant's point of view, Saramago's book is witty, irreverent, poignant, ironic and insightful all at once. It's a story that will sweep you up in a river of flowing observations, one shifting landscape at a time.



Cruise News

Alaskan grandeur and immense *Allure*



Rediscover Alaska on *Regatta Oceania Cruises* is setting sail for Alaska in 2011 with four unique itineraries aboard *Regatta*, a luxurious small ship with lavish suites and staterooms, 70% of which feature private verandahs. **Frontiers and Glaciers**, one of the few round-trip itineraries from Vancouver, is a 10-day voyage north to Kodiak, with ports of call at Sitka, Wrangell and Ketchikan (May, June and August). The 12-day **Glacial Wilderness**, from Vancouver

to Anchorage, combines highlights seen on both **Inside Passage** cruises and **Gulf of Alaska** voyages (June and July). **Majestic Alaska**, a 14-day voyage from San Francisco, is the only cruise to offer Vancouver as a destination, so guests can take advantage of the city's cultural treasures, including the esteemed Museum of Anthropology and upscale boutiques in the historic Gastown district (May, June and August). Last but by no means least, the 12-day **Alaskan Grandeur**

is a multicultural voyage that makes a rare call at Oregon's historic Astoria, the oldest American settlement west of the Rockies (May, June and August). Aboard the elegant and charming *Regatta*, guests enjoy open seating dining in four unique restaurants, a world-class fitness centre and spa, eight lounges and bars and a casino, with attentive service provided by 400 professionally trained European staff members who will look after every detail to ensure a most magnificent voyage.

When bigger really is better

Allure of the Seas, **Royal Caribbean's** newest addition to its Oasis class fleet, is the world's largest cruise ship, with a capacity of 5,400 passengers. This floating city shares similar elements with sister ship *Oasis of the Seas*, including seven distinctly designed 'neighbourhoods.' Take a walk through **Central Park**, a public space featuring gardens of lush tropical plants and trees, or visit upscale restaurants, a tapas and wine bar, exclusive boutiques and an amazing selection of nightly shows. But *Allure* also features some new firsts for both adults and kids, including Starbucks at sea and the DreamWorks® Experience – a variety of DreamWorks characters, including favourites from *Shrek*®, *Madagascar*™, *Kung Fu Panda*® and more. A dream come true for families, the experience features many entertaining programs for kids of all ages, including the Adventure Ocean® youth program and the How to Train Your Dragon™ Ice Show. Imagine story time coming to life with Shrek characters or dance parties hosted by the Madagascar crew. And to top it off, you know it's a good sign when *Allure of the Seas* has made it to the list as one of 'Oprah's Ultimate Favorite Things' for 2010.



Travel File

Ensemble® Hotel and Resort Collection



Eat, Pray and Love Italian-style at Castel Monastero

In a small medieval village, surrounded by chestnut forests and long rows of cypress trees, sits the former monastery of **Castel Monastero** – Italy’s version of an ashram.

Perfectly preserved 11th-century architecture reflects authentic rustic Tuscan décor that also features all the modern technological toys. Tempting as it might be to linger in your room, it would be a shame not to discover every nook and cranny of this historic property. Two lavish pools with relaxing waterfalls and spectacular views of the Tuscan countryside are sure to reduce your stress levels. **The SPA at Castel Monastero**, one of the most innovative in Italy, was created by Europe’s most renowned wellness experts, whose properties include the prestigious spa at Harrods. Recently, Castel Monastero has collaborated with Dr. Mosaraf Ali, personal physician to Prince Charles and a host of other luminaries, to create a series of three- or seven-day holistic treatment programs that blend ayurvedic medicine and naturopathy. Each program starts with a full medical check-up and personalized schedule of spa treatments, Marma massage, daily walks, cardio classes and the Aque Monasterii treatment, a detox program exclusively patented for Castel Monastero. Dr. Ali has also consulted with chef Gordon Ramsay, who is in charge of the hotel’s restaurant menus, to create a customized menu specifically designed for guests undergoing treatment.

As a pampered guest, you’ll enjoy the tranquility and old-world elegance of this magnificent property, as well as the warm hospitality for which Italians are renowned.

Hot style in the city

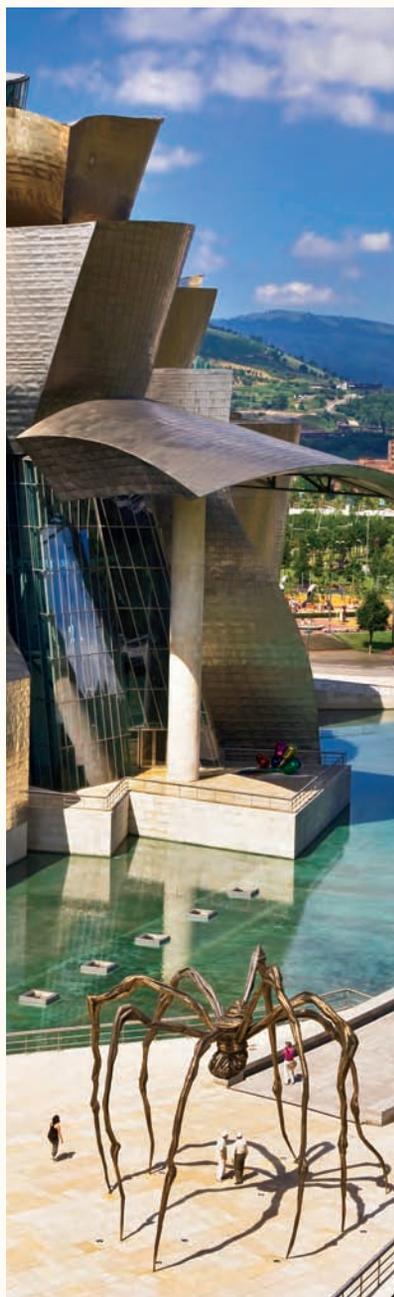
Part of the luxurious Rocco Forte Collection, known for its distinctive boutique properties and stylish design, **Hotel Amigo** is the jewel in the crown of Brussels’ hotels. You couldn’t ask for a more central location. Tucked behind the famous Grand Place, the city’s social and cultural hub, Hotel Amigo is only steps away from pretty much everything – shops, restaurants and bars, antique markets, museums and even the Manneken-Pis, the much loved bronze ‘fountain’ statue that is one of the city’s most popular tourist attractions. (Chocolate fiends alert: the Valrhona store is just across the square.) Although the original building has been completely refurbished, its scale and architectural style blend in with the streetscape and cobblestoned lanes, providing the intimacy of a home-away-from-home – a feeling echoed by the warm and friendly service. Paintings by the likes of Magritte hang in the impeccably stylish rooms, all of which are equipped with amenities to please the business traveller (WiFi is also available in public areas), and you’ll even find pocket maps for suggested short or long running routes. After a day of wandering, sip a cocktail in the comfortable, modern ambiance of the **Amigo Bar** and go no further than the hotel’s Bocconi Ristorante for award-winning Italian and Belgian cuisine. Don’t forget to avail yourself of a glass of grappa from the restaurant’s ample selection.



City Snap Guide: Bilbao

Margaret Swaine

Founded more than 700 years ago, **Bilbao**, a port city in northern Spain, is undergoing an exciting rejuvenation. This great economic icon of the Basque Country experienced a profound crisis at the end of the 20th century, when its steel, iron and shipbuilding fortunes declined. Today, the city has focused on urban regeneration, transforming old industrial areas into appealing tourist attractions. You'll love Bilbao's museums, art galleries and shopping, not to mention its cuisine – Basque food is considered some of the best in Spain.



Bar hopping

Pintxos is the Basque word for tapas, small dishes usually enjoyed with a drink – but here, unlike in some parts of Spain, you pay for them. If you want to do as the locals, bar-hop (called *poteo-ir-de-pinchos*, or 'searching out morsels on toothpicks') and snack your way around town. Winners of the 2010 contest to find Bilbao's best *pintxos* include several bars in the **Old Town**, namely **Zuga**, **Sasibil**, **Gatz** and **Irrintzi**. Others are **Bitoque** on Calle de Rodriguez Arias, **Café Estoril** in Plaza Emilio Campuzano, as well as **Bar Lekeitio** and **La Viña del Ensanche** in Calle Diputación. (Spaniards don't think about eating dinner until at least 10 o'clock at night, hence the *poteo* ritual.)

Modern arts

Frank Gehry's impressive **Guggenheim Museum Bilbao**, featuring modern art, which opened in 1997, and the **Euskalduna Concert Hall** have become icons of the new Bilbao. After touring the museum, dine on good Basque cuisine available at a bargain price at the **Guggenheim Restaurant**. The Guggenheim was a catalyst for the regeneration of central Bilbao, where top new restaurants, the **Bilbao Fine Arts Museum** and numerous art galleries make the heart of the city a great place to tour.

Boutique bests

Bilbao's Old Town has been a shopping mecca since the 14th century, when merchants sold goods from cities as far away as Bordeaux and Bruges. Nowadays you can splurge to your heart's content in this area of pedestrian-only cobblestoned streets at any of the more than 800 shops or at one of the largest covered city markets in Europe. And there's no end of bars, pubs and restaurants selling delicious Basque fare.

The Basque effect

Bilbao is within the **Basque Country**, a region that maintains a distinct national and cultural identity from the rest of Spain. Euskara, the Basque language, is one of the oldest in Europe but its origins are unknown, as it's not an Indo-European language. From the south of France to the banks of the **River Ebro**, and from **Santander** to the **Pyrenees**, Euskara is the soul of the ancient Basque Country. Once banned, it's now promoted as the official language in education and public administration.

GET AWAY

Follow the river road from Bilbao past the old industrial areas that once powered the city. You will see the still-active transporter bridge of **Bizkaia**, the oldest bridge of its type in the world, which carries traffic in a gondola and links the towns of **Portugalete** and **Getxo**. Continue through the neighbourhood of **Neguri**, with its old mansions once owned by rich industrialists. When you reach the coastal village of **Bakio**, drive along the wild coastal road to **San Juan de Gaztelugatxe**, a rocky islet with the old hermitage of San Juan perched on top. Next, stop at the fishing town of **Bermeo** and then **Mundaka**, with its magnificent views of the **Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Conclude your tour at the village of **Gernika** to view the famous **Gernikako Arbola** oak tree, a symbol of Basque nationalism.



*Imagine exploring and experiencing Alaska with your own guide and the finest amenities available! With a private vehicle, your personal driver-guide and the day's schedule at your command, you'll encounter adventures and destinations so spectacular and so far off the beaten path that it will feel like your very own primeval playground. Ensemble Vacations spoke with **Mark Télió**, our On Location expert in Alaska.*

Ensemble's On Location expert in Alaska

What makes Entrée Destinations unique?

At Entrée, we want not only to show our guests the unparalleled beauty of our destinations but also add relevance to the experience by including personal encounters with individuals who lead an authentic **Alaskan** or **Canadian** lifestyle. While everyone appreciates stunning scenery, we believe the most memorable moments are the personal ones. An afternoon spent with an artist who has painted at every location in Alaska for the past 40 years, or visiting the home of a four-time Iditarod champion and holding one of his new puppies – these are the things our guests will remember.

What's the best part of focusing on Alaska and Canada as destinations?

Geographically they are two of the most diverse locations in the world. Experiences range from sitting in a boat witnessing a grizzly bear feed her young to dining in a five-star restaurant in the heart of a thriving international city. We really can cover it all.

What is the most important recommendation you would offer tourists who are coming to Alaska?

Be open to new ideas (caribou sausage anyone?); be prepared for a new definition of luxury (yes, we discuss toilets...); be flexible and prepared for adventure (keeping in mind that weather doesn't always cooperate); and be prepared to feel something about a place you have never felt before. At the risk of sounding too mystical, the word we use to describe Alaska is 'ineffable,' which essentially means you can't describe it, you just have to *feel* it.

What are the hottest trends for visitors to Alaska?

Definitely experiential travel, where guests are not just visitors but participants. Travellers today don't want to just watch the Iditarod; they want to ride in the sled. We want our guests to be surrounded by icebergs or whales, or pulling up crab traps to prepare their bounty for dinner. 'Creating' life experiences has become our business.

What is the most exciting vacation package you have put together?

One of the most interesting packages was for a couple who wanted to see as much wildlife and culture as possible and were particularly interested in remote Native Alaskan villages. We planned a three-week trip to some of the more popular destinations, such as **Denali National Park** and **Katmai National Park**, and we were also able to send them to the far north, above the **Brooks Range**, for caribou viewing and up to the **Bering Sea** to a tiny Aleut (Aboriginal) village to watch the annual whale festival, where residents set out in search of their winter's food supply.

What is the quirkiest request you have had?

To see the Northern Lights in the summertime, which isn't possible due to the 20 plus hours of daylight each day. That... and almost any request that comes from Russia. We won't even mention the requests for introductions to Sarah Palin! ▣



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Istanbul

36
HOURS

CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER



Istanbul Museum of Modern Art



“CHRISTOPHER, YOU MUST COME!

Istanbul is so *cool!*” my Turkish friend Nurşen Kaya pleaded.

Cool?

I hadn't imagined **Istanbul** to be avant-garde hip. My images of this exotic city had been fired by childhood tales of sultans' harems and Crusades against **Constantinople** and, ever since, **Istanbul** has beckoned as insistently as the calls to prayer from a minaret. Intrigued, when the chance came to shoehorn a three-day visit into a European trip, I seized the opportunity as eagerly as one would a morsel of Turkish delight.

Driving into downtown from the airport causes whiplash as Nurşen speeds past opulent 21st-century steel-and-glass towers and malls to join the throngs of BMWs and Porsches crawling past minimalist townhomes and über-chic sidewalk cafés. We're barely a mile – yet worlds away – from the Byzantine- and Ottoman-era mosques rising above the silver-blue **Bosphorus** – the legendary strait that separates Europe from Asia.

It's an instant insight into why one of the world's most ancient cities is today hailed by many as the coolest city in Europe. Down-at-the-heels neighbourhoods have been reborn as bohemian enclaves where swank restaurants and bars serve appetinis to the sounds of hip-hop and Lady Gaga. And traditional Anatolian houses have been transformed into exciting boutique hotels to rival the best of New York or London. All juxtaposed against ancient archaeological treasures and a variety of lifestyles that reflect Istanbul's exciting *meze* of cultures and styles.

DAY ONE Our first day is dedicated to **Sultanahmet**, Istanbul's ancient quarter. Pencil-thin minarets point us toward the **Sultan Ahmet Mosque**, or 'Blue Mosque,' named for its vast, serene blue-hued interior, its tiles adorned with delicate *cloisonné*. Outside, families picnic on lawns. Women in head-to-toe *chadors* sweep past fountains and pools that mirror the **Aya Sofya**, a huge mosque (originally a church that was once the centre of global Christendom) whose sea of domes and minarets became Istanbul's iconic religious template.

Next comes the **Topkapi Palace**, once the heart of the Ottoman Empire. Allow at least two hours to visit, ideally in early morning, when the peaceful courtyards are filled with the cooing of doves. I unveil its secrets on a tour

of the harem chambers, while the royal treasury holds me spellbound with jewels to outsparkle Aladdin's Cave.

Entering the **Grand Bazaar**, I sense the full magic of Istanbul's ancient mystique. It's easy to imagine camel caravans pushing through the teeming and dimly lit warren, cool beneath soaring arched roofs. Eager salesmen throw carpets at our feet as we pass. Others hawk jewellery, silk slippers and *nargiles* (water pipes). Tantalizing aromas of coffee, lavender and spices perfume the air, sweetened by mountains of Turkish delight.

My head is spinning like a whirling dervish after so many cultural treasures. Still, we add the 450-year-old **Çemberlitas Hamami** (perfect for a cleansing steam bath and massage), the **Cistern of 1001 Columns** and **Beyazit Camii** (one of the city's oldest mosques) to complete our exploration of the long-vanished past.

DAY TWO Crossing the **Golden Horn** from historic Constantinople is a form of time travel. Old (Eastern) meets new (Western) in trendy **Beyoğlu** – epicentre of Istanbul's gentrification.

Antique trams trundle by as Nurşen and I stroll **Istiklâl Caddesi**, a wide pedestrian boulevard lined with music shops and upscale fashion stores. I laugh watching elastic-like ice-cream being drawn into a metre-long rope with the tips of swords by vendors dressed in blood-red fezzes and embroidered vests.

Don't miss **Çukucuma**, Beyoğlu's old quarter, stuffed with dusty antique stores; and **Fransız Sokagi** (French Street), a short, steep, cobbled lane packed with charming cafés and open-air bars. Gas lamps and terraces spilling over with bougainvillea add to its Parisian air.

Downhill next, to the 62-metre-tall **Galata Tower**, built by the Genoese in 1348 and a great place to watch belly dancers in its restaurant-bar. The tower anchors a piazza-like square at the heart of this revitalized quarter overlooking the **Galata Bridge**, the umbilical cord across the Golden Horn linking Galata to **Sultanahmet**.

Turning west onto **Necatibey Caddesi**, follow this snaking shorefront avenue past the **Istanbul Modern Art Museum**, the sumptuous **Dolmabahçe Palace** and the exquisite **Ortaköy Mosque**. Allow half a day. Buses and trams serve the route.

DAY THREE There's no better way to admire Istanbul's famous skyline than by taking a nostalgic cruise on a steamboat

down the Bosphorus and into the **Sea of Marmara**. Depart the **Beşiktaş** ferry terminal. Destination? **Büyükkada**, the last and largest of the nine **Princes' Islands**. It's a serene 90-minute journey.

The ferry is full of lovers and families alike escaping the city bustle for the pine forests, deserted sands and bucolic calm of **Büyükkada**, an old-fashioned island where mid-nineteenth-century summer mansions trimmed with gingerbread lend the ambiance of a Mediterranean Martha's Vineyard. Only bicycles, donkeys and horse-drawn carriages ply the hilly streets – no cars are allowed. We lose ourselves in the moment, freed from decisions other than which of the many seafront restaurants to lunch at.

On the leisurely journey back we snooze on wooden benches, our arrival perfectly timed to enjoy dinner at a waterfront restaurant (try **Poseidon**) serving mouthwatering *meze* appetizers and delicious seafood. We wind up a perfect day with cocktails at **Reina**, a blinged-out lounge with killer views of the **Bosphorus Bridge** floodlit in a lumière of disco colours. The songs of Kanye West mingle with the distant chants of the *muezzins*. As the moon rises behind the floodlit minarets and mosques of Sultanahmet, I sense how this seamless melding of the secular and the spiritual, of East meets West, old and new, has transformed Istanbul into the European capital of culture for 2010.

WHERE TO STAY For an ultra high-end splurge, you can live like a sultan during your stay at the **Çırağan Palace Kempinski**, the only Ottoman imperial palace by the Bosphorus. The **Sultan Suite**, the second-largest in Europe at 376 square metres, has hosted such guests as the King and Queen of Jordan and Oprah Winfrey, and offers a handmade marble *hammam*, a private steam room, unique masterpieces and 180° views of the Bosphorus. Old-world **Hotel Yeşil Ev**, in the heart of Sultanahmet, is a mere *muezzin* call away from the mosques. Furnished in palatial style with antiques, ornate chandeliers and gilt moulding, the rooms whisk guests like a magic carpet back to the era of the Orient Express. To feel like a sultan of swing, check into the **W Hotel**. Blending Turkish with avant-garde Western styling, this chic *seraglio* anchors a two-block cluster of 19th-century townhouses transformed into an enclave of fashionable apartments, boutiques and cafés. The W's bathrooms are really mini-*hammams*. ▣

A Pictorial *Poema de Amor* to Portugal

Images: Niurka Barroso | Text: Mary Luz Mejia



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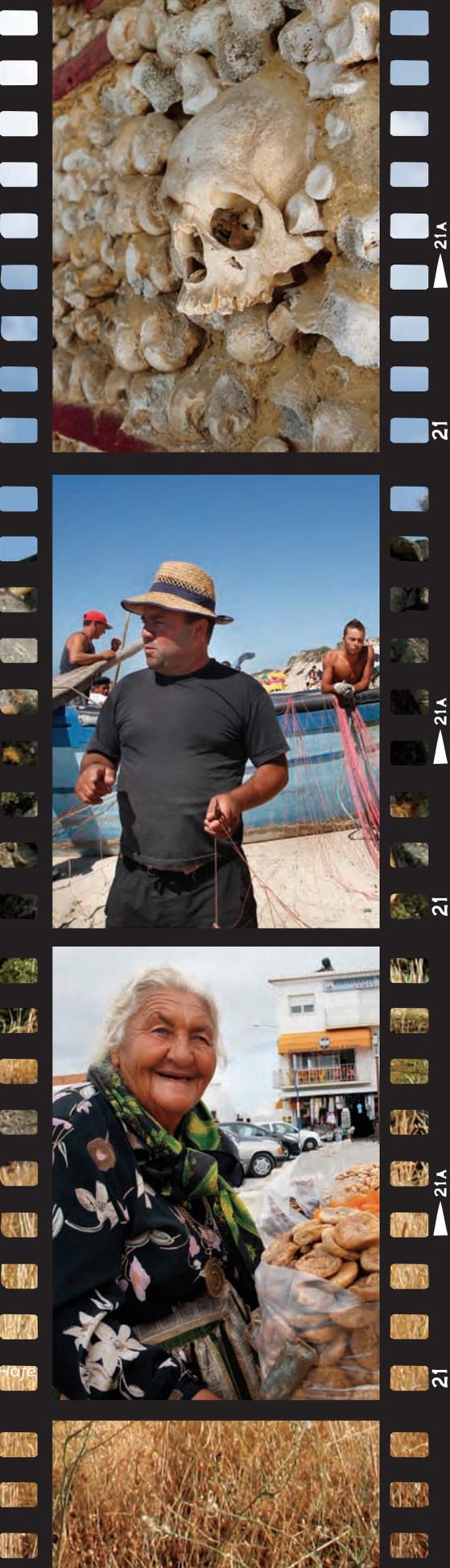
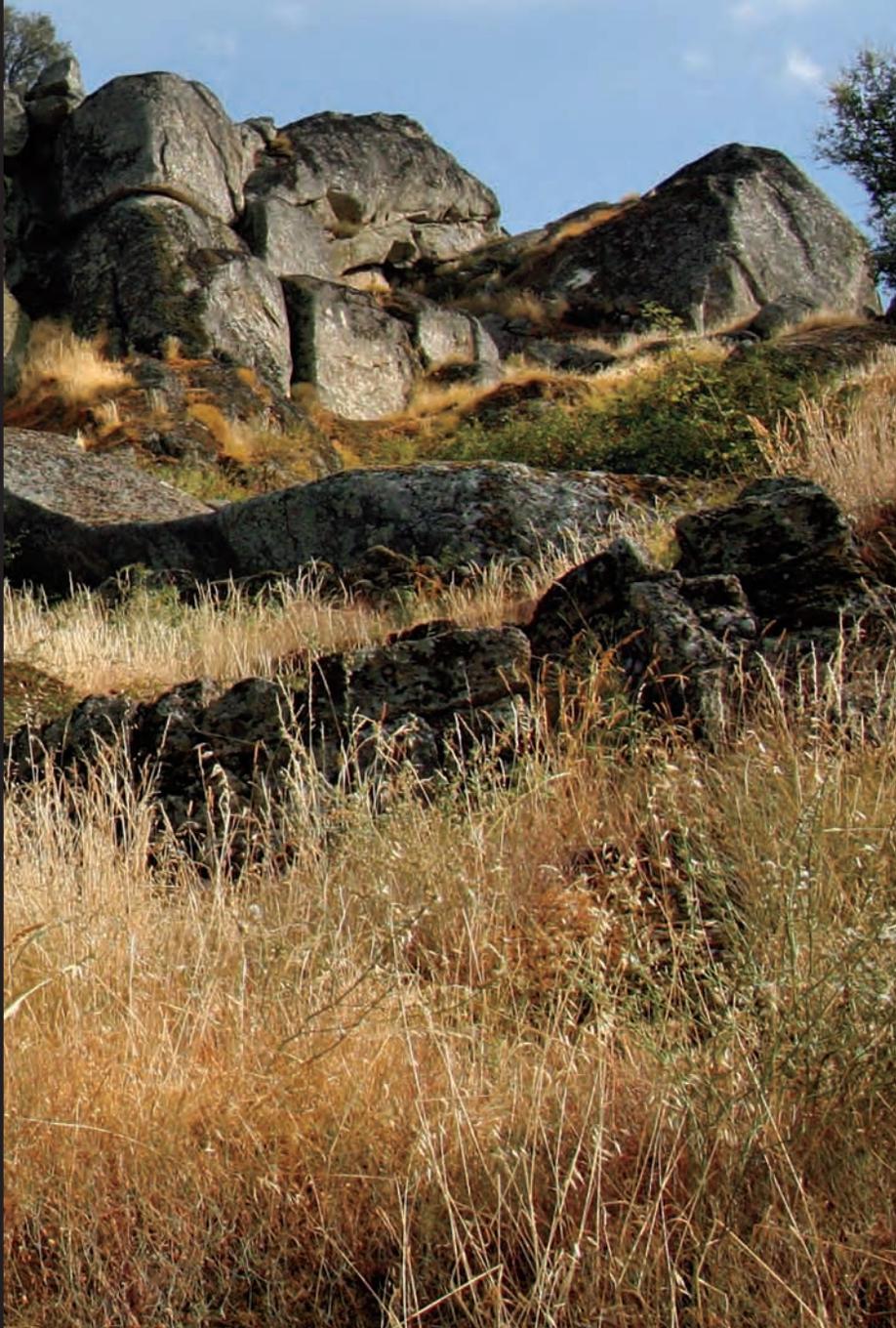
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Born in Cuba, award-winning photojournalist and photographer **Niurka Barroso** says she found her spiritual home in the rugged serenity of Portugal. After climbing roads leading to medieval towns perched atop boulder-strewn hills and wandering through tranquil fishing villages hugged by azure waters, Barroso fell in love with this small European nation. And as you'll see through the images she captured there, tradition is the binding thread.



"Salt-laden sea, how much of all your salt is tears of Portugal!" That heartfelt sentiment was written by Fernando Pessoa in *Mar Salgado*. Salt or *ouro branco* (white gold) has been hand-harvested in Aveiro by *marnotos* since the 10th century. Portugal was the main supplier of salt to Northern Europe during the Middle Ages, making it a wealthy country at the time. At the Salina of Trancalhada salt marsh, the secrets to producing the finest sea salts are passed down by the family's men from one generation to the next. João Bamca, aged 56, repairs a tool required by his craft, while 17-year-old Rui carries the salt to a collection stop during harvest season. Portuguese *flor de sel* is said to be as fine as French *fleur de sel*.

In so many ways, it seems time stands still in Portugal. History is woven into the very fabric of daily life; from the time-honoured colourful layers of the seven skirts that the fisherwomen of Nazare still wear, to the Xávega art, an artisanal technique of fishing that is still practised on the Silver Coast. But perhaps one of the most visceral clues of this is found in Faro's Capela dos Ossos (Chapel of Bones). Tidy rows of 1,245 monks' bones and skulls line the walls and ceilings, seemingly to remind visitors to honour the past but, perhaps more important, the bones represent an unspoken admonishment to enjoy the present.





Barroso photographed Portugal in its most flattering light and, in return, the people she met invited her into their daily lives. Isaura Chicharo keeps the image of her deceased husband Manuel on her earrings, another Portuguese tradition in Nazare. A woman knits at the entrance to Obidos, a medieval town offered as a wedding gift by princes to their brides since the 13th century.



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The Road Less Travelled: Spain's Ruta de la Plata

Nancy Wigston



A GENIAL SPANIARD on our Toronto to Madrid flight kindly explained the meaning of **Spain's Ruta de la Plata (Silver Route)**. "That's the route taken by the conquistadors bringing back New World treasures."

An excellent story – yes, there were conquerors, but alas, they were Roman. The road they built 2,000 years ago in the land they called Hispania not only glittered like silver (*plata* in Spanish) but was also paved. Stretching from **Gijón** in the north to **Seville** in the south, sections of the Silver Route intersect with the **Camino de Santiago de Compostela**, or the Way of St. James, the world's oldest Christian pilgrimage route.

You needn't walk, however. Silver Route towns are accessible by smooth-as-silk highways. And be prepared for wonders. This road less travelled reveals a Spain rich in history and personality. Our five-day tour began mid-point, in the 'golden city' of **Salamanca**, where soaring medieval cathedrals and a reputation for the purest form of Castilian spoken anywhere lure students to

Salamanca University, founded by Alfonso IX in 1218.

Fortified by warm beignets purchased for a few euros from a beaming octogenarian, we stride across the Roman bridge above the **River Tormes**, imaginary scholars' robes flying. Not surprisingly, this town honours its teachers. A statue depicts Fray Luis de León, jailed in 1572 for teaching the Song of Solomon; freed five years later, he began his post-Inquisition class with a line for the history books: "As I was saying yesterday."

Centuries later, Professor Miguel de Unamuno defied Generalissimo Franco's bullies: "You will vanquish but you will never convince." Such are the souls revered in the city known as the **Florence of Spain**. Salamanca was also the birthplace of the anonymous creator of the *picaro*, the 16th-century fictional rogue Lazarillo de Tormes. Undeniably, the place has a sense of humour: failed students exited the 'donkey's door' and one cobblestoned street is named for a runaway bull: 'Stop You Idiot!'

We idiots take the hint, stopping at **Hoja 21** – a cool, chic establishment where Castilian fare highlights the usual five-course midday meal of crab crêpes, mushroom risotto, beef cooked in red wine and pineapple cream for dessert. Our glasses are filled with local red wines or white wines from nearby **Portugal**, setting a pattern of leisurely meals and lots of wine for our trip.

Folks linger over late-afternoon lunches as we drag ourselves off to test-drive that venerable Spanish tradition known as the siesta. After Salamanca, Silver Route towns shrink to walkabout size. Our next stop is **Béjar**, an hour's drive south through a lush landscape of rolling green hills and grazing cattle. (No wonder the region's cheeses are so spectacular.)

In Béjar we discover the **Moss Man**, star of the town's annual **Corpus Christi Festival**. Legend has it that 12th-century Arab conquerors were frightened away by local lads clad in green moss. Our Moss Man is one handsome dude, despite the moss suit and accompanying large mossy club.

Roman bridge and cathedral, Salamanca





Roman road, Baños de Montemayor



Plasencia's Parador Hotel

Saying adios to this medieval superhero, we duck into the **El Bodegón** bar-café. Downing powerfully restorative espressos, we notice a wall hung with old keys. We're told that during the Inquisition, expelled locals kept their house keys there, hoping to return someday. Béjar also boasts one of Spain's three **Sephardic** (Spanish Jewish) museums, located, with exquisite irony, in the home of a Grand Inquisitor.

Twenty minutes away, at **Baños de Montemayor** – a stop on the Camino – we actually stand on a sloping section of the Roman-built road, misty hills in the distance. When not building roads, imperial Romans enjoyed nothing better than a nice hot soak; today, visitors and townsfolk flock to enjoy the Roman thermal *baños* in the town's centre. A bullfighting ring appeared in 1706 and bullfights are still held in the 3,400-seat ring, as are musical concerts.

No Silver Route village embraces its **barrio Juderia** (Jewish quarter) as enthusiastically as tiny **Hervás**. Fleeing Jews were welcomed by the reigning duke in 1391; the quarter where they lived for a century remains beautifully preserved: warrens of cobblestoned streets, adobe-brick houses, decorative Moorish tiles and flowering plants spilling over chestnut-wood balconies.

At **Sabores Lejanos**, we savour a meal of mildly spiced Sephardic food, prepared by Abigail Cohen and her husband José Vera. "You're going to like it," announces Abigail of a menu inspired by her Syrian grandmother's recipes. What's not to like? Motherly Abigail attends to our every need. "I like to share the ingredients because that's how the recipe lives." She pauses. "Except for the cheesecake – that's my secret."

Hervás celebrates a yearly **Fiesta Converso**, featuring a play about star-crossed lovers based on a local legend and performed on the grassy banks of the **Ambroz River**. "The whole town gets involved, with everyone in medieval dress," explains Abigail.

In **Plasencia**, 35 minutes from Hervás, we overnight in a hotel that started life as a 15th-century monastery. Immense paintings dominate long passageways; vast chandeliers illuminate stone walls; corridors are dotted with wine-velvet chairs and chests of painted wood. At night a jazz group performs in the central courtyard, serenely observed by black storks nesting atop tall chimneys.

Plasencia opens a window onto Spain's vanished empire. Inés de Suárez, the

conquistadora who successfully defended Santiago in 1541, hailed from here; colonial gold adorns the **Old and New Cathedrals**; an ecclesiastical museum overflows with religious floats and figures; costumes with eye cut-outs and pointed hoods prove a tad unsettling. In a stone passageway we spot a wreath hung in homage to Miguel de Cervantes, Spain's premier satirist and author of *Don Quixote*, considered to be the first modern novel.

Our final Silver Route stop is the town of **Cáceres**, a medieval gem that frequently entices moviemakers to its hilly streets. The annual **Bird Festival** is in full swing. How many towns can boast a guidebook devoted solely to its birds? We are deep in bird country; indeed, we've spotted city-dwelling storks – their nests weighing as much as 23 kilograms – in every Silver Route town.

One magical afternoon we explored nearby **Monfragüe**, a vast national park famous for black storks, imperial eagles, owls, herons and vultures, plus lynx, deer, wild boar and wolves. Hiking in the fresh mountain air on shepherd's paths was exceedingly pleasant; it restored our appetites for the park restaurant's fine tapas-style lunch.

In Cáceres, birds and romance share legendary status. One tale became my favourite: a blinded-by-love Moorish princess divulged the secret entry to her father's palace to her Christian lover. When the city subsequently fell, punishment came swiftly. Every year, on the **Feast of St. John**, the lovelorn princess's ghost is said to be seen walking the streets – sometimes disguised as a chicken.

Something in the air of multicultural Cáceres lifts the spirits. Roman statuary and mosaics highlight the museum; brass markers set in cobblestones signal the Sephardic Quarter; a Roman arch and Moorish tower distinguish the old town. A sign states that 13th-century **San Mateo Church** was built on the ruins of an 8th-century mosque. Now the venerable church has a new neighbour: Michelin-starred chef Toño Perez's latest eatery, **Atrio**.

After loading up with boxes of fragrant almond cookies baked by closed-order Carmelite nuns, we repair to the plaza major for some excellent café con leche. Nearby a local is strumming flamenco guitar and singing. Mesmerized, we pause by a 12th-century wall; the young man's lusty voice brightens the morning, promising a splendid day ahead. ▣



*Griffon vultures,
Monfragüe National Park*



*Royal Monastery of
Santa María de Guadalupe*





MARK STEVENS

Photos by Sharon Matthews-Stevens

AMORE D'ABRUZZO

*For my family this is the
culmination of a quest – a spiritual
journey to Roccasasale*



The medieval village of **Roccacasale** clings to the slopes of **Monte della Rocca** (Fortress Mountain) like a mountain goat.

From our perspective at the foot of the **Peligna Valley** in Italy's **Abruzzo** province, the buildings perched on the Dolomite slopes resemble a toddler's scattered building blocks. Helter-skelter, houses are built on houses built on houses every which way. The road leading to Roccacasale reminds me of a black diamond ski run. And not a guard rail to be seen.

Towering above the village are the ruins of a castle built around 1250. During the Crusades the castle protected the area from marauding Saracens. Seven hundred years later Napoleon's troops conquered it. Looking at the landscape, it strikes me that the castle is superfluous; constructing the village of Roccacasale was a miracle in itself.

My heart flutters and my palms sweat as I turn on the ignition in the rental car we picked up in Rome just over a hundred kilometres west of here. My wife Sharon begins weeping silently. My elder son Shaun, in his third year at university, lays a hand on her arm. Adam, who will start his first year in two weeks, squeezes her shoulder. I feel a sense of sadness because this is sure to be our last trip as a family. But I get a warm feeling from these gestures of support. It's nice – their empathy for their mom, and for my anxiety about driving this vertiginous road.

For me, Roccacasale is a fascinating glimpse of history; a stunning array of ramshackle stone façades and narrow, winding passageways through arches crowned by wrought-iron balconies.

For my family this is the culmination of a quest – a spiritual journey to Roccacasale, though this is the first time any of us has visited. Local blood flows through the veins of my wife and children: when she was 16, Sharon's mother, Lucia, left this village to move to Canada. Lucia has since been back to visit, but now she is too ill to make this trip. We sorely feel her absence.

At the first piazza we reach (there are more piazzas higher up – the town's main square, for example), I watch a delivery truck grind and wheeze up the slope. That convinces me: from here we will walk.

The elevation is so high the light seems to have a blue tinge. Pumpkin-coloured tiles cap the roofs of homes that have stood for a millennium. The tower of the church of **Michael the Archangel** dominates the village, its bell as silent as the alleys we traverse. The distant **Apennines** are indigo. In the valley below, the orange roofs and sky-scraping steeples of **Sulmona** – a medieval showpiece in its own right – are misty mirages.

The temperature is 40° Celsius. The streets are empty but for an old woman on her balcony, hanging sheets to dry. Sharon studies the crumpled photocopy-of-a-photocopy of a photograph of the Pizzola ancestral home and then looks around, bewildered. We're not going to find it without help.

Two men recline on lawn chairs in the shade. I approach them with the picture. "*La casa della madre di mia moglie,*" I say in my heavily accented Italian. My wife's mother's house.

They look at me, then at each other. They shrug, but they are smiling. Then one man's eyes light up.

"Ah, Eleuterio." Eleuterio was Sharon's grandfather.

His companion nods. "Pizzola. I remember. A shoemaker." That's him.

The first man stands. "I show you."





Around a corner, through an arch, into a passageway. And there it is. Sharon compares the picture to the building with the crumbling stone step. She notes the lion's head doorknockers in the photo, and the ones on the weather-beaten doors. The sudden expression of joy on her face is a wonder to behold, even if her cheeks are damp with tears. Shaun and Adam rush to embrace her. I get a lump in my own throat. This place has become my birthright too.

"Grandma lived here?" whispers Adam, his voice filled with awe.

"We found it," says Sharon.

But the quest continues. "I need to go to the cemetery," Sharon says. "I have family there."

"I take you," says Domenico, one of the older gentlemen.

"You follow." He hops into a pickup truck. His hospitality – and that of his compatriots – is famous. It is an idiosyncratic grace that characterized my mother-in-law for the 30-plus years I'd known her.

During World War II there had been a prisoner of war camp in nearby **Sulmona**. When the Allied prisoners escaped, Roccacasale hid many of them. One day German trucks rumbled up these roads and took 30 hostages. They shipped nine off to Germany. Only three returned.

That hospitality lives on, I reflect, as our car clatters down the road to the cemetery.

We march through the cemetery, past houses of the dead topped with those ubiquitous tile roofs, guarded by slender sky-reaching pines standing at the gates like Roman guards.

"Pizzola, Pizzola," muses Domenico. "We will find them."

Sharon accelerates her pace, full of quiet desperation. She seeks her grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins. Her own roots. There are lots of Pizzolas, but not the right ones. Sharon's eyes glisten with tears. She negotiates the paths between the graves. Adam studies the inscriptions on the mausoleums. Domenico strolls beside her, crouching periodically to examine a marker.

"I promise we won't leave until we find them," says Shaun.

And then we find the graves that Sharon seeks. As she finds part of herself, my boys also find a part of themselves.

Later that day Sharon and the boys climb to the castle. I stop at a bench to rest and reflect. Halfway up his climb, Adam turns back and deposits himself on the bench beside me.

"I can't believe this is where grandma was born," he says.

"Feels weird to be here."

Half an hour later Sharon and Shaun trudge back. "Mom used to play with her dolls up there," says Sharon. "I feel close to her here," says Shaun.

Later still we encounter an old man in a silk suit and a Panama hat. He waves and we stop. He asks for a ride to Sulmona. His English is good. "I used to live in Florida," he explains, then introduces himself: his name is Pizzola. Sharon starts visibly and says her grandfather's name.

"Ah, Eleuterio. Yes, maybe fifth cousins." He pats Adam on the shoulder. "I must go to Sulmona. I run for election. When you return to Roccacasale maybe I will be the mayor, *cugina mia*." My cousin.

My children will remember this day, this moment, forever.

Two weeks back in Canada, Sharon signs up for Italian lessons. She practises with Lucia, who takes great delight in her mispronunciations. Once Lucia stops correcting Sharon we know that she is fading. Four months almost to the day of our trip to Roccacasale Lucia passes away.

In my heart I know that she has returned to her beloved hometown. ▣

WE WERE HOVERING OVER AN EERIE LANDSCAPE, where clusters of mountains rose from deep valleys, when Jim, our helicopter pilot, deftly manoeuvred the whirring bubble to descend on a fingertip of land. “Hop out,” he urged. “No worries. This high in the sky on a sunny day, we’re blessed by Mother Nature.” To our jaw-dropping delight, we found ourselves facing a mountainous otherworld. Centuries ago, this vision of **Aoraki Mount Cook** – the highest peak in all of **Australasia** at 12,316 feet, its tip perennially swathed in a cumulous billow – inspired the first arriving Maori tribes to call New Zealand **Aotearoa**, meaning ‘Land of the Long White Cloud.’ Visiting Mount Cook would be the pinnacle of our flight-seeing excursion from **Christchurch**. Our day began as we stood on deck, watching *Silver Spirit’s* jaunty prow glide into **Lyttelton Harbour**, the calm water reflecting the rising sun like a sheet of pink glass. Our waiting driver, organized by **Silversea’s** concierge, shouted the traditional local greeting – “*Kia ora!*” – as we piled into his 4x4 for an expedition through the rainforest. After seeing the indigenous flora, brilliant birds and ancient rock art left by early Maori moa hunters, we stopped at a clearing to lunch on delectable green-lipped mussels (a Kiwi specialty) and local Sauvignon Blanc just as Jim flew in. Aloft in the chopper, Jim summarized New Zealand’s history as we soared over the tapestry of changing landscapes: dipping into emerald vineyards and valleys, where turquoise rivers meandered past remote villages, and ascending from foothills banked by purple lupines high above snowy alps to land on the **Tasman Glacier**, its icy surface sparkling in the sunshine. After a thrilling walk we returned, exhilarated, in time for the ship’s sail-away party. Sipping Champagne as the sun slipped beneath the horizon, revealing innumerable stars in the indigo sky, we couldn’t resist raving about our **Silversea World Cruise** itinerary for providing yet another privileged day in paradise.

Privileged aptly describes the sensation of a **Silversea World Cruise**. Mingling awesome sights and adventures as the itinerary proceeds through 60 destinations in 25 countries – from sailing **Vietnam’s** exquisite **Halong Bay**, where karst mountains rise like obelisks from the sea, to transiting the engineering marvel of the **Suez Canal** en route to touring **Egypt’s** antiquities and **Jordan’s** ancient rose city of **Petra**, to circum-navigating the **Channel Islands** on the

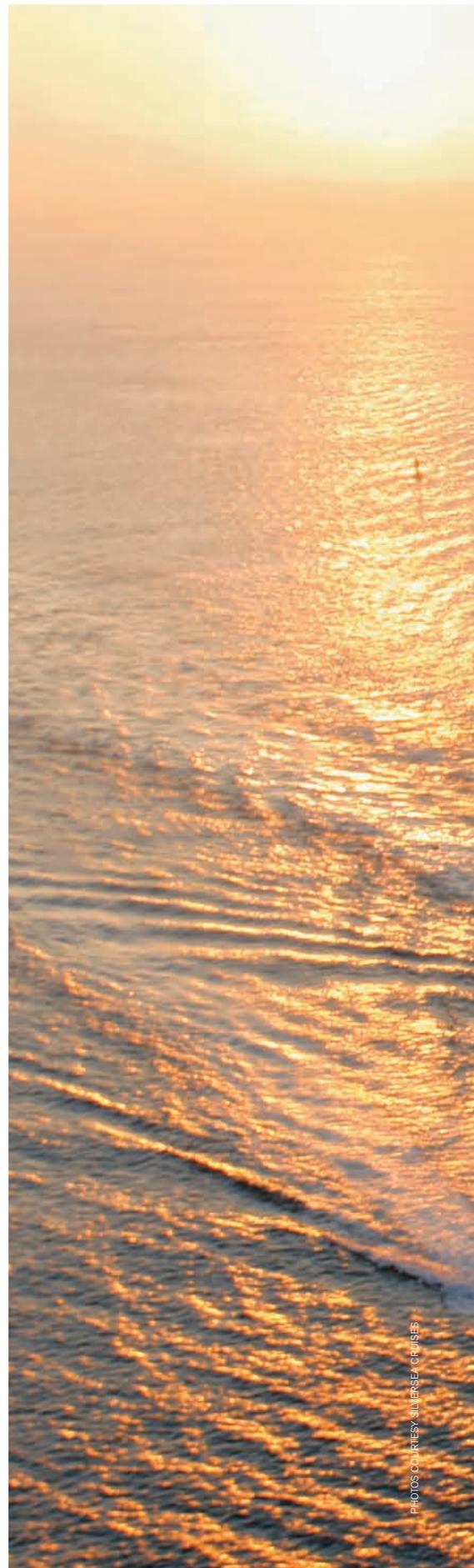
way to **Southampton** – **Silversea** introduces a world of geographic and cultural curiosities enriched by exclusive complimentary events, world-renowned speakers (like former newscaster **Dan Rather**) and awesome ‘**Silversea Experiences**.’

Myriad memories and priceless images come with the complimentary treats on *Silver Spirit’s* 119-day **Spirit of Discovery** voyage, including excursions to vineyards and wine-tastings in **Australia’s** prized wine country; overnighting in **Bangkok’s Shangri-La Hotel** before a private tour of the dazzling **Grand City**; rumbling on safari through **Dubai’s** desert dunes to an Arabian Nights bash enlivened by belly dancers and belching camels; sipping fragrant tea at a private viewing at **Barcelona’s Picasso Museum**, not to mention adventures like snorkelling in **Australia’s Great Barrier Reef**. Along the way, your cultural IQ will surely improve as you sail alongside families living in junks in the **Mekong Delta**, witness Hindu rituals and elephant dances on **India’s Gundu Island** and watch Polynesian artisans ply their crafts in the **Marquesas Islands**.

Meanwhile, for those craving deeper experiences, **Silversea** provides precious opportunities to disembark for several days, from **Ho Chi Minh City** to the UNESCO World Heritage Site at **Angkor Wat**; or from **India’s Port Cochin** to **Agra** and the **Taj Mahal**; or from **Spain’s Málaga** to explore **Madrid**.

Wherever the port, *Silver Spirit’s* guests feel privileged indeed, considering everyone enjoys a private verandah and butler.

Designed like an elegant yacht, the 540-passenger vessel exudes sophisticated style at every turn – its gleaming wood interiors accented by hues of burgundy sunsets and warm beaches, its lounges rich with plush sofas and chairs. Full of places to luxuriate in on days at sea, *Silver Spirit* has a well-equipped gym and posh 8,300-square-foot spa (offering massages, therapies and beautifying cosmetic procedures like Botox and dermal fillers), but its *pièce de résistance* is out of doors: on the two decks surrounding the pool, glass walls allow passengers vistas of the sea as they bask in the sunshine; and on the aft deck, designer chaises and canopied beds provide solace from the sun. Enhancing all of this, state-of-the-art stabilizers provide surprisingly smooth sailing for the 36,000-tonne *Silver Spirit* in even the roughest of waters.



PHOTOS COURTESY SILVERSEA CRUISES

The Spirit of Silversea



Every day on board *Silver Spirit's* around-the-world paradise is a privileged one, as **Toby Saltzman** discovers



With *Silver Spirit's* six eateries, and a gregarious sommelier eager to offer a wide choice of complimentary wines, there's no chance of culinary boredom. Besides traditional dining at **The Restaurant** – where specials include filet mignon, duckling, seafood and assorted fresh fish – guests can sample fine dining at an Italian trattoria, a Japanese restaurant or the exclusive **Le Champagne**, featuring gourmet Relais & Châteaux cuisine with vintage wines to match. For casual dining, guests at the al fresco grill can cook their own meals on sizzling hot rocks, or savour multi-course meals of delectable bites of lobster, fish or steak while enjoying a live jazz performance at **The Stars** nightclub.



❧

*Silversea introduces
a world of geographic
and cultural curiosities
enriched by exclusive
complimentary events*

❧

After a day of adventure or a day at sea, we loved slipping into private luxury. Life was comfortable in our mid-ship, 376-square-foot suite – with its separate living-bedroom areas, two flat-screen TVs (featuring free interactive video plus 505 movies on demand), a walk-in closet and marble-clad bathroom with separate tub and shower stall. Admittedly, though, we saw the value of upgrading to twice the space in a **Silver Suite** for a World Cruise, if only to linger on its wide terrace for romantic dining under the stars. Never mind: best of all was rising each morning after a sensuous sleep at sea to witness the sun cast its rosy glow on a new destination. A privilege, indeed. **v**

THERE ARE PLENTY OF WAYS TO GET TO VIENNA. BUT ONLY ONE WAY TO TRULY ARRIVE.



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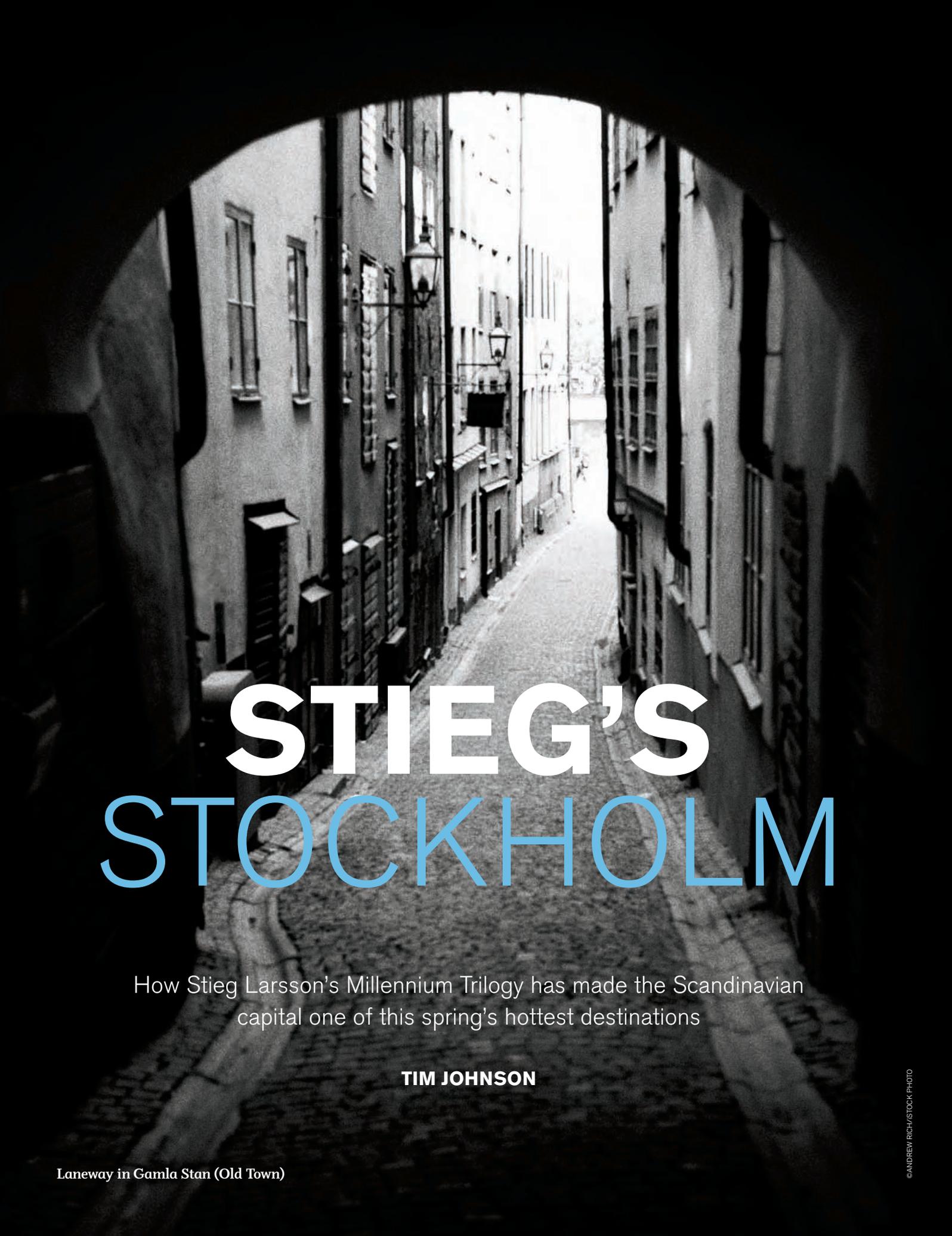
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STIEG'S STOCKHOLM

How Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy has made the Scandinavian capital one of this spring's hottest destinations

TIM JOHNSON

Laneway in Gamla Stan (Old Town)

IT WAS ON SÖDERMALM, Stockholm's southernmost island, where I followed in the footsteps of Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander, the protagonists in Stieg Larsson's wildly popular *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The island provides the setting for much of the action that takes place in the book and its two sequels, which unfold to reveal a city filled with cozy coffee shops, rollicking beer halls and low-key restaurants, where cobblestoned back lanes play host to late-night pursuits on foot.

Larsson's three books – known collectively as the Millennium Trilogy – have become a worldwide phenomenon. Translated into dozens of languages, they have sold an astonishing 21 million copies worldwide and have inspired no less than six movies – three Swedish films plus a trio of major American productions currently shooting in Sweden and featuring a number of Hollywood heavyweights. The books and films place Stockholm front and centre and have made it a hot destination, attracting much attention – and many tourists – to the largest city in Scandinavia.

But Sweden's capital is, of course, about more than just Millennium. Built on 14 islands, Stockholm is a lovely city, with shining waterways separating its many different neighbourhoods, each of which has its own vibe and character. **Gamla Stan** (or **Old Town**) is the city's original quarter and home to the **Royal Palace**, a medieval village right in the heart of the city, with tiny passageways, colourful buildings and charming little shops. Neighbouring **Riddarholmen** (the **Knights' Islet**) features beautiful palaces and churches that date back several centuries. And just to the north lie the three islands (**Norrmalm**, **Ostermalm** and **Kungsholmen**) that form the city's bustling downtown.

But it's the southernmost island – Södermalm (which can be loosely translated as **South Island**) – that Stieg Larsson called home. Having roamed its streets for decades, Larsson chose actual addresses and real landmarks in **Söder** as his principal backdrops for the Millennium Trilogy. I choose the **Hilton Stockholm Slussen** as my base, a hotel that is actually mentioned a couple of times in the books and, more important, sits just a few minutes' walk from many of the significant sites. To orient myself, I walk the streets of Söder with Gabriella Cerchiari, a guide with the **Stockholm City Museum**

who leads many of their Millennium tours. "Stieg Larsson doesn't really describe Stockholm so much as he just names places in the city. These tours give people more context," she says.

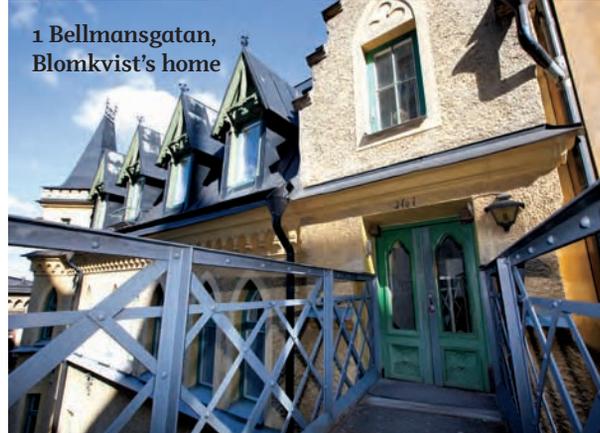
Södermalm, she tells me, was once one of the poorest areas of the capital, in part because its formidably sheer cliffs were for a long, difficult walk home for dirt-poor labourers. With roads, bridges and an ultra-modern subway system (called the

tunnelbana), plus a sleek pedestrian elevator, steep staircases are no longer an issue, and the area's well-preserved 18th-century buildings now house an eclectic mix of little pubs, bars, galleries and shops selling local handicrafts. "It's a very cool island. The wealthy live alongside working people and artists, and their kids all go to the same schools," Gabriella explains.

We visit the buildings that Larsson selected to be the homes of Salander and Blomkvist, the latter a lovely place in **Bellmansgatan**, which Blomkvist covets in the books for its view of the medieval roofs of Gamla Stan, the shining waters of **Riddarfjärden** and the dramatic tower of Stockholm's imposing city hall. We later stop for a coffee at **Mellqvist Kaffebär**, a tiny spot that Larsson frequented with his beloved laptop, and which features prominently in the trilogy. We finish our tour at **Kvarnen**, a high-ceilinged 102-year-old beer hall that roars into action on Friday and Saturday nights and, naturally, serves as a hangout for some of the book's main characters. Today, on a Sunday afternoon, it's extremely quiet, and after enjoying its traditional Swedish smorgasbord, I chat with Mark the bartender who tells me that everyone from high-profile politicians to university students come in for a pint. "Sooner or later everyone ends up at this place," he says, including Millennium fans, adding, "They take lots of pictures. You can see it in their eyes that they're reliving the books."

Gabriella has recommended that I visit an area of Söder called **SoFo**. Just a few years ago SoFo (shorthand for the rather unwieldy "Södermalm south of **Folkungagatan**") didn't even exist as a cohesive neighbourhood.

A few trendy shops and cafés moved into this formerly drab set of streets, and the area rapidly became one of Stockholm's coolest 'hoods. Now these few square blocks are lined with bright design boutiques featuring hip Scandinavian creations, homey cafés



"But Sweden's capital is, of course, about more than just Millennium."

where coffee drinkers sit sipping and playing backgammon, tattoo parlours, vintage shops and even an artisan T-shirt shop that shares space with an indie-pop record label. This is all centred around a little park where people gather on the grass to share picnic lunches together under the sun.

“In the beginning, people used the term ‘SoFo’ ironically; it was kind of a joke. But then real estate agents started using it in their ads, and the name stuck,” says Jonas Pelz, one of the owners of **Grandpa**, an ultra-cool vintage furniture and retro fashion shop he founded with

two friends seven years ago, which also sells games the three owners invented themselves. I chat with him at a cramped table in a tiny secret chamber that Pelz reveals by popping a latch on a wall of Chuck Taylor high tops. “People talk about SoFo being the most trendy neighbourhood in Stockholm, but I don’t like that characterization. It’s friendly here, like a small town within the city,” he says.

Pelz notes that many writers and actors live in the area, including Stellan Skarsgård, a frequent customer who has been cast in a supporting role in

the American version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. He says that apart from an increase in guided tours and tourists the books haven’t changed Söder, and he approves of how they have raised Stockholm’s profile. “It’s pretty fun if a book can do that,” he says. It’s well after dark when I leave, and as I walk back to my hotel room I can almost see Blomkvist and Salander ducking into the cobblestoned lanes as I pass – Södermalm’s most famous fictional citizens roaming the streets of a real and very charming place. **v**



Café on Götgatan in the SoFo district of Södermalm

Stockholm for Families

Sweden’s capital is one of Europe’s most family-friendly cities, with attractions and a transit system offering free or deeply discounted rates for children, and most museums featuring special exhibitions directed toward young patrons. A number of places geared to families are conveniently clustered on the island of **Djurgården**, which can be reached by bus or streetcar, although it’s more fun and scenic to take the small ferry that leaves from a dock located between Slussen and Gamla Stan.

On Djurgården, families will find **Gröna Lund**, a large amusement park located right on the water, an aquarium, plus **Junibacken**, a children’s museum dedicated to bringing Swedish kids’ books to life in whimsical fashion. There’s also **Skansen**, a giant open-air museum of historic structures that features costumed docents who demonstrate the work of tanners, shoemakers and other period professions, as well as a zoo with a variety of Swedish animals, including bison, moose, brown bears and otters. And while you’re over there, don’t miss the remarkable **Vasa Museum**, which houses a huge warship that sank in 1628 – the world’s only (almost) intact 17th-century ship.

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Israel's CULTURAL

MENORAHS, WITH THE FIRST OF EIGHT CANDLES LIGHTED, GREET US on our first night in Israel. I'm in **Jerusalem** – the **Holy Land** – at a holy time of the year, the first day of Hanukkah. As we drive past the beige limestone façades of Jerusalem's neighbourhoods toward dinner with Pini Shani, the Israeli Ministry of Tourism's deputy marketing director, we see the glow of menorahs through apartment windows. We reach **River Noodle Bar**, a modern Israeli-Asian kosher restaurant, and begin our journey into the contrasts that define Israel today.

Israel is infinitely more than religious pilgrims, sacred sites and disputed territories. It's a land of marked juxtapositions where the new shines brightly beside the ancient. Over grilled salmon with stir-fried vegetables, our group of international

writers expects diplomatic PR from Shani. Instead, we get straightforward responses that we all find refreshing. "Here, I don't have to explain who I am as a Jew. I'm not particularly religious but that doesn't matter here. I don't feel like I am an outsider. This is my home – where I belong," says Shani with a sweep of his arm.

His sentiment is shared by many who now call Israel home – Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. And while fascinating, I'm not here to wrap my head around the real or perceived ethnic, religious and territorial tensions. It's my first time in Israel and what I want to do is drink in the culture and immerse myself in a land only just a bit larger than the State of Massachusetts, but big on heart.

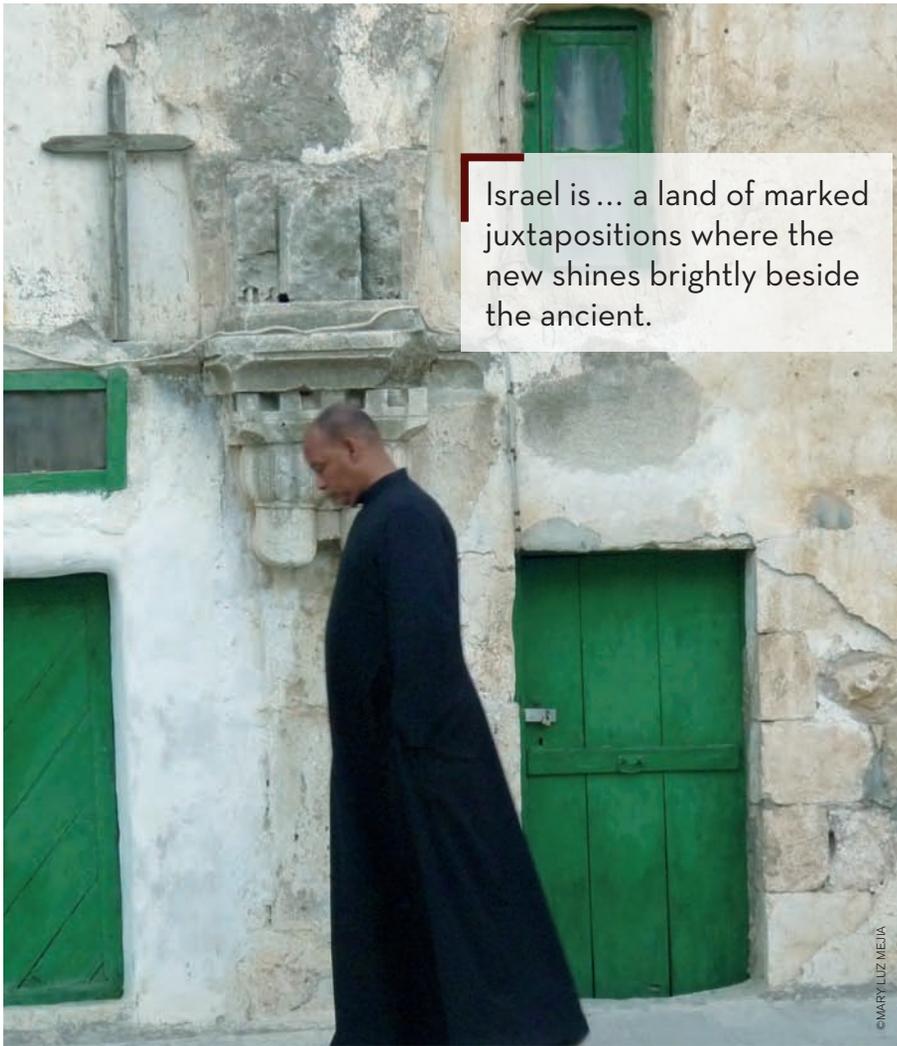
CONTRASTS

As a kid growing up in a Roman Catholic household, it was one thing to go to Catholic school, read the Bible and attend Sunday Mass. It's quite another, however, to actually visit the site where many believe Jesus was crucified, to see the nails embedded in the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre's** doorway and to touch the Stone of Anointing, believed to be where Jesus' body was prepared for burial by Joseph of Arimathea. Seeing this first-hand literally raised the hairs on the back of my neck!

As we walk past the light burgundy-coloured slab, I notice three teenaged boys in designer gear, all kneeling with their arms outstretched over the stone, foreheads resting on it, deep in prayer. Not your usual depiction of religious pilgrims - but then Israel is full of surprises. Even if you're not religious, the Church

of the Holy Sepulchre and its maze of rooms filled with historical artifacts will make you stop to marvel at what makes us tick.

We leave the church and wander through the walled **Old City's Arab Quarter**. It's there that I have my first glass of freshly pressed pomegranate juice. Crimson red, tartly sweet and thirst-quenching, it's infinitely better than anything bottled. We continue down narrow, hilly cobblestoned alleys and peer into shops selling 2,000-year-old Roman glass jewellery. After all, this was once Roman territory, so it's no wonder that excavated glass shards in arresting shades of luminescent blue-green can be found here. *Caveat emptor* though: while all shops claim to sell the real deal, that's not always the case. Roman glass jewellery isn't cheap - so if the price is too good to be true, it likely isn't.



Israel is... a land of marked juxtapositions where the new shines brightly beside the ancient.



As dusk falls, our Israeli guide Yosef drives us through the ultra-Orthodox (**Haredi**) Jewish neighbourhood of **Mea Shearim**, or **Hundred Gates**. In this enclave, time seems to stand still. There are no televisions, laptops, radios, cellphones or even newspapers in Haredi homes. To get their news, residents read the posters listing the events of the day plastered along building walls.

Most Haredi men are bearded and wear dark suits or long jackets and black wide-brimmed hats. The women favour long skirts (no slits), long-sleeved shirts with high collars and some sort of head covering such as a hat, scarf or wig. Modesty is key because the Haredi see their dress as a means of ensuring their identity. I notice some of these men in the walled Old City and at the **Wailing Wall**, where another Hanukkah candle is ceremoniously lit. When the men walked past me, they looked down at the ground. I ask Yosef why and he responds, “Because this is their religion. You are not their wife, their daughter or their mother.”

It’s at the **Yad Vashem** campus, and in particular, the architecturally stunning and emotionally riveting Holocaust museum, where Yosef tells us his mother’s concentration camp bed is housed. Her number is still etched into the frame. As I walk around the exhibits, I bump into young soldiers – conscription in Israel is mandatory for those aged 18 to 21. I observe their solemn expressions as they take in the words of their guide. To say that the **Holocaust History Museum**, the largest of its kind in the world, is a powerful experience would be a gross understatement. Video interviews with survivors, pre-World War II Third Reich newsreels, letters written by resistance fighters, suitcases and reconstructed Jewish ghettos are woven into the fabric that surrounds you like a heavy cloak as you move through the halls.

I find a stool and gratefully sit, only to notice that I’m in front of a glass floor with an exhibit of old shoes in every shape, colour and size. These shoes were worn by those entering concentration camps and were confiscated. It’s amazing how something so simple, so commonplace, has such an immense impact. It’s there, in front of this

symbolic burial site, that the enormity of everything I’ve seen comes crashing down around me, like the pile of shoes before me.

While Yad Vashem is undoubtedly a heavy experience, it’s not all doom and gloom. There’s evidence of hope, resilience and strength throughout – much like the Israelis themselves. These are people who live intensely, perhaps like those who live at the foot of a volcano and declare, “One life lived here is worth ten lived elsewhere!”

This world view might help explain the saying “In Jerusalem you pray, in **Tel Aviv** you play.” And they mean it. The two cities are like long-lost cousins. The former is conservative, pretty and pious. The latter is fun, flirty and likes to dress up. In Tel Aviv, there’s something for everyone – from gay- and lesbian-friendly establishments, a vibrant nightlife and a seaside party scene, to shopping, historic quarters and high-end design.

In the nearby city of **Holon**, we find the newly minted Ron Arad-designed **Design Museum**. Design aficionados

©YOSSEI BEN-DAVID



will marvel at the metal ribbon façade made of bands of Cor-Ten steel that swirl around the building as if frozen in a rhythmic gymnastics routine. Inside the dramatic structure, two main galleries house an evolving roster of beautifully curated exhibitions. We catch ‘Mechanical Couture: Fashioning a New Order’ that explores the role machines play in redefining haute couture. Fashion design heavyweights such as Dai Fujiwara, Shelley Fox and Marloes ten Bhömer are featured. For me, it’s an aspirational look at what I wish hung neatly in my wardrobe, while for design buffs it’s a look into the future.

Tel Aviv is also home to a number of independent designers who produce beautiful garments, shoes, housewares and interiors. A stroll down **Shenkein Street** yields hours of people watching, shopping, café hopping and merry-making. And don’t miss the recently refurbished former Hatahana train station near the Tel Aviv port. Chic shops, cafés and galleries fill the open-air square with a touch of Europa.

My most enduring memory of Israel, however, is the day we spent in the **Judean Desert** – the world’s smallest, in fact. Bordered by the Judean mountains to the west and the **Dead Sea** to the east, this 1,500-square-kilometre piece of land is truly magical. It’s here where some 2,000 years ago, the Maccabees lived on large, natural plateau fortresses such as **Masada** (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Built by Herod, king of Judea, as a palatial fortress in grand Roman style, a revolt broke out here led by a rebel group called the Sicarii (so-called because of the curved *sica* dagger they carried). Today, Masada is seen as the last bastion of Jewish freedom fighters, where 963 defenders battled against some 8,000 Roman legionnaires. After three months of resistance, the Romans finally broke through the Sicarii defences only to find everyone, save for two women and five children, dead. They chose to kill themselves rather than become Roman slaves. You could say that Israeli intensity has historical roots.

It’s no surprise, then, that when we later meet Desert Tour operator Gil Shkedi for a drive through the stunning landscape, he chooses to heighten the experience by blaring Puccini’s classic *O Mio Babbino Caro*. Clever fellow, because the contrast of Puccini’s gentle composition set against the midday sun beating down on chalk hills, salt-encrusted cliffs and jagged canyons is simply brilliant! There’s no better way to enjoy the view of the Dead Sea, with Jordan glistening like a mirage on the other side.

We end the day back at our hotel on the Dead Sea with a salt-water infused mud pack. Clad in our bathing suits, my colleagues and I slather on the mud, pose for a few photos and slip into the cool waters of the Dead Sea. The salt content of 35% means I’m careful not to get any in my eyes though some seeps into my mouth. Liquid salt! But I float like a yogi, cross-legged and immersed, not even having to tread water. As I lie back and float effortlessly in the jade-green water that reminds me of the **River Jordan**, I feel as if I’ve taken a mere sip from this country’s cultural chalice. I want a long draught and for that, I know I’ll have to come back. I’ll likely start here, where I left off, floating in rejuvenating water that makes you feel blessed just to be alive. ▀

The Evolution of Escorted Touring



Mary Luz Mejia

discovered at a young age the joys
and benefits of escorted motor coach travel,
and traces its evolution over the years

I OWE ONE OF MY FONDEST TRAVEL EXPERIENCES in part to Mr. Thomas Cook. The Englishman, who made travel affordable to the middle and working classes, organized the very first group travel excursion in 1841. Cook's bold initiative sowed the seeds for future escorted tours of every stripe. Before then, travel was largely the domain of the wealthy or the aristocrats – and even then, they travelled independently. Luckily, Cook claimed his stake in the travel industry, so that by the time I turned 16 my parents generously rewarded me (mostly for having done well in school) and the family with an escorted motor coach tour through **Europe!**

My parents, practical to the core, decided that something like seven countries in 12 days ought to cover it. “We’ll see some of the most spectacular cities in Europe, not worry about missing the big ticket sites, and let someone else do the driving” declared my father. Made sense and still does, but guided motor coach travel has covered a lot of evolutionary mileage since it first hit the road.

The concept began to crystallize in 1928 when Antonio Mantegazza decided

to share his love of **Lake Lugano in Switzerland** with visitors. He started ferrying passengers in his rowboat across the lake to nearby villages. From rowboats to eventually motor coaches, Mantegazza solidified the escorted motor coach touring genre and called his new venture **Globus Viaggi**.

Post-World War II saw Americans discovering Europe firsthand, with **London** as the accessible, English-speaking primary starting point for multi-week adventures. Then it was au revoir to London with a ferry crossing over to **France**, followed by a drive to Switzerland, usually ending with a stop in **Venice**. The idea was to cram as many iconic sites as you could into your itinerary for a quintessential and panoramic overview of some of the continent's ‘must-sees.’ And because air travel was pricier back then, these trips were usually indulged in only for special occasions, perhaps once in a decade.

By the ‘60s and ‘70s, more European gateways had opened up, but the typical escorted motor coach tour still looked very different than it does today. Driving days were much longer, roads weren't quite what they are now and itineraries

had to be designed very carefully to ensure maximum site viewing during business hours. The tour directors of yesteryear were more focused on schedules and logistics rather than experiential subtleties. And let's not forget those cavernous basement hotel dining rooms – often located well outside the city core – serving omnipresent North American-style ‘rubber chicken’ meals that bore no reflection of the host country's cuisine.

By the 1980s, when I enthusiastically jumped aboard a **Globus** coach with my folks, things had improved. Our hotels were a bit closer to the city centres and the beginnings of more regional tours began to take shape. My parents, however, opted for the *If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium* kind of experience, recalling the 1969 film starring Suzanne Pleshette, where a whirlwind tour of countries was the name of the game. Our group of about 30 or so consisted of Canadians and Americans. To a 16 year old, seeing the Eiffel Tower for the first time and having French boys honk their car horn and blow kisses was the height of sophistication. The boys – all five of them – were crammed into a bright yellow Citroën; *très* cool to my adolescent self!



By the 1990s, tour operators responded when travellers said “we want to explore a region instead of getting multi-country whiplash” and the regional tour was born. Escorted coach tours slowed their pace to give visitors a chance to explore an area – from a region’s art and natural wonders to its cuisine. The emphasis was now on enjoying the sensory aspects of a destination, which included dining in local restaurants, staying in quaint villas or downtown hotels within walking distance of major attractions, and soaking up the lifestyle. Baby boomers became the primary clients and, on average, they were willing to stay as long as 17 days in one location to order to immerse themselves in the local culture.

Today, most people opt for shorter trips, so tours are on average eight to 11 days in length. With the increasing affordability of transatlantic sailing, people are choosing to cross the pond more than once a year. The biggest shift in travel today is that visitors now go to a country or region with a purpose: to become part of the culture or at least understand it more intimately rather than taking a slew of ‘I was there’ bragging rights photos. Once again, escorted tour operators have listened,

because tourists can now pinpoint their area of interest – fine art and museums, adventure, culinary tourism, family-friendly vacations or relaxing, high-end getaways with their beloved – while staying on budget.

Most important, today’s tour directors have become *experience creators*, many hired locally to give you an authentic and unique insider’s view of a destination. On **Trafalgar Tours’** ‘Hidden Treasures’ itinerary, for example, the tour director points out secret finds or illuminates a subject in a way that only a local can

by revealing the kind of jewels that are not even mentioned in guide books. So as you drive away from the Eternal City, your guide might stop in the Roman hills near a cluster of 17th-century buildings. He might ask you to step up to a beautiful, weather-worn wooden door to peer through its sizeable keyhole. And laid out before you is a perfectly composed view of St. Peter’s and the surrounding Vatican City, as seen through a column of towering cypress trees. Now that’s a picture perfect memory no one on that tour will ever forget! **■**

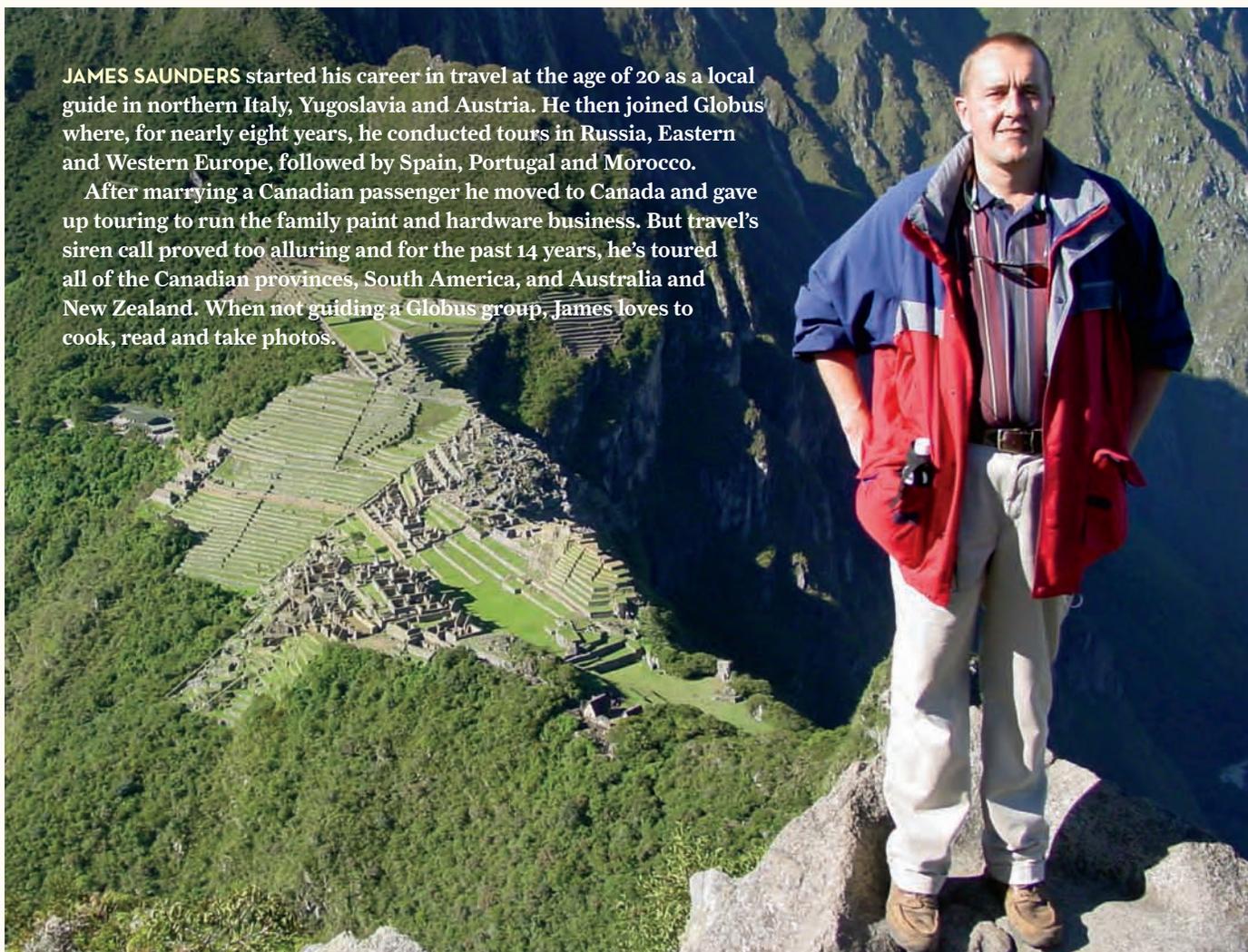


| | GLOBUS FAMILY OF BRANDS | TRAFALGAR | INSIGHT VACATIONS |
|--------------------|---|---|---|
| WHO IT IS | Globus, the <i>grande dame</i> of escorted tour companies, was founded in 1928 by Antonio Mantegazza. Although escorted tours are still the focus of the Globus Family of Brands, the company has added several categories that offer a variety of vacation options, from fully escorted to independent city stays, regional tours focusing on specific countries or areas, and river cruising aboard Avalon Waterways vessels. | Trafalgar is another well-known name in the escorted tour market and recently celebrated its 60th anniversary. It offers a full portfolio of tours ranging from Discovery Tours – ideal for first-time visitors who want to take in the main sights; Regional Experiences offering a more leisurely pace and a focus on a specific region; and Free & Easy tours for experienced travellers who want to explore on their own. | Europe’s premier escorted tour operator, Insight Vacations was launched in 1978. It boasts small, select groups, carefully planned itineraries, quality hotels in convenient locations and a ‘Golden Age of Travel’ philosophy. While its primary destination is Europe, it also has a unique portfolio of tours focusing on ancient civilizations, as well as a program in Canada and the United States. |
| WHERE IT GOES | Africa, Asia, Australia and New Zealand, Europe, North America and South America | Africa, Asia, Australia and New Zealand, Europe, North America and South America | Britain and Europe, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Canada and the United States |
| TYPES OF TOURS | Panorama (multi-country); Regional Discoveries; Vignettes (slower pace, multi country); Independent Vacation Packages through Monograms | At Leisure; Discovery (multi-country); Regional Tours; City Breaks; and Free & Easy | Discovery Tours (multi-country); Easy Pace Tours; Country Roads (off the beaten path with more local flavours); Select Choices (independent); and the Insight Gold Collection (deluxe category regional and cruise-tours) |
| EXCLUSIVE FEATURES | More than 80 years of experience, regional highlight dinners | The Be My Guest dining option lets you dine with local families in their home or go to unique dining venues for a real taste of local culture; local wine pairing dinners in North America | Smaller groups, more legroom on coaches for each guest and an exclusive dine-around program. New for 2011: guest lecturers offering informal talks on a range of specialized topics, from the culture and conflicts of the Balkans to Sicilian mafia folklore and superstitions. |

Tour Director

JAMES SAUNDERS started his career in travel at the age of 20 as a local guide in northern Italy, Yugoslavia and Austria. He then joined Globus where, for nearly eight years, he conducted tours in Russia, Eastern and Western Europe, followed by Spain, Portugal and Morocco.

After marrying a Canadian passenger he moved to Canada and gave up touring to run the family paint and hardware business. But travel's siren call proved too alluring and for the past 14 years, he's toured all of the Canadian provinces, South America, and Australia and New Zealand. When not guiding a Globus group, James loves to cook, read and take photos.



What's the wackiest thing that ever happened during one of your tours?

As far as something that can be put in print, I once had to change a flat tire on a tour bus in rural Russia (then the USSR), clad only in my shoes and a pair of underwear. My driver had a very bad back and was unable to do it, and I was not going to mess up my clothes. I'm 6'3" and he's 5'5", so his overalls didn't fit. And of course, it was raining.

What's your most memorable experience on the road?

I once had Pope John Paul II on my coach and he asked me to introduce him to the other tour directors and drivers. I had met him once before and he actually remembered.

What's the craziest question you were ever asked by a tourist regarding a location?

In Pompeii, after my introductory information and subsequent two-hour tour, a little old lady asked me, "Whose bombs did it? Theirs or ours?"

Finish the following sentence: On the road, my day would always start off with...

...a clear explanation of the day's program and then some humour to remind people they are here to have fun.

By the time we hit the middle of the tour, I always...

...have a good feel for my people so the information and commentary are more attuned to what they are interested in.

At the end of a long day of travelling, I like to...

...go to my room, sit on the throne of great learning, have a shower and watch mindless TV.

I'm most diplomatic when... someone is most rude.

What's the best line you ever gave a troublesome passenger?

The one I use all the time is, "There's no place like home - I can help you get there."

What's the best thing about being a tour director?

Too many to mention, but meeting new people, learning from them and enjoying their company are some. ▣

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Royal Britain, 10 Days

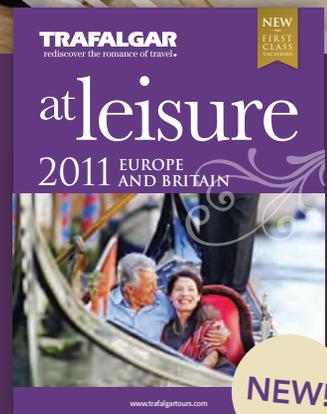
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Worldly Delights: Opening Soon

Mary Luz Mejia

California Dreaming

Food Network celebrity chef Tyler Florence is doing his part to further entrench northern California as a gastro-tourism hotspot. His recently opened **Wayfare Tavern** (558 Sacramento Street, (415) 772-9060) is an ode to American cuisine in downtown San Francisco. Next up is **Tyler's Rotisserie & Wine** (710-740 Main Street, (707) 254-8500) in Napa, set to open near fellow culinary guru Masaharu Morimoto's **Napa Morimoto** (610 Main Street, (707) 252-1600). And soon Florence's partnership with rocker Sammy Hagar will yield a new, casual San Francisco eatery, with a focus on the state's fine wines.



Liquid Gold

For Canadian celebrity TV chef and author Christine Cushing, there's nothing that proudly proclaims Greece in all its glory more beautifully than the country's olive oils. Putting her money where her heart is, Cushing has recently launched a new USDA-certified organic extra virgin olive oil called **Christine Cushing's Vibrant**. "My Vibrant oil is from the coastal Peloponnese region of Mani on the mainland. The rugged terrain, fertile soils and plentiful water there produce an oil that is medium-bodied, forwardly fruity, round with grassy and floral notes," says Cushing. Vibrant is the best way to put a little *opa!* into almost any dish. Available online at www.christinecushing.com.

Fro Yo North

The hottest American frozen yogurt chain has just landed in Canada. **Menchie's** is the go-to spot for much of young Hollywood looking for a sweet treat without the added fat or calories. Made from Canadian milk, the fat-free, self-serve fro yo concept is winning over Canucks. With a rotating roster of 100 fun flavours, it's no wonder Justin Bieber hits up Menchie's on date nights. There are two stores in the Greater Toronto Area, with shops set to open across the country throughout 2011. Go to www.menchie.com for details.



Online-Offline Bar Lounges

Johannesburg's MiWorld Bars are taking the power of social networking and combining offline with online in chic, club-like surroundings. Guests are asked to register for MiEvents (Mi stands for Meaningful Interaction), giving them access to special happenings, launches, parties and gatherings that are technologically plugged in. Bar tables are kitted out with touch screens that allow you to interact on social media sites and with other registered users in case you need to flash mob it asap! <http://mi-world.co.za> for the high-tech guru in you.

Daniel Does It Again

Maitre of French cuisine, chef Daniel Boulud opens another of his eponymous **db Bistro Moderne** eateries, but this time he's headed south to Miami, Florida. The French-American restaurant includes a new stylish bar/lounge and is located in the JW Marriott Marquis Miami in the city's downtown core. It's a welcome addition for nearby office workers and urbanites looking to lunch with panache in the city by the sea. Go to www.danielnyc.com/dbbistromiami.html#intro for more details.



©MARY LUZ MEJIA

©A. TAMARGO

Worldly Delights: Street Eats

By now, you've likely noticed restaurants of every stripe morphing their menus into something more approachable. The economic slump put meatloaf and mac 'n' cheese back in high rotation at almost every eatery, replacing more high-end dishes with the kind of comfort food that help assuage Wall Street-induced jitters. Recently however, chefs have become bored with straightforward home-style comfort food, opting instead to reinterpret these dishes with just about every gourmet trick in the pantry. The same is true for humble street eats like tacos and hot dogs. It's the redefinition of these foods that's making waves across the continent and the tsunami of flavours is washing up on every shore.

In cities across North America, the proliferation of burger bars has been one of the most pronounced food and dining trends. **Toronto** is now home to dozens of indie burger shops offering organic, steroid- and hormone-free beef burgers topped with gourmet fare including balsamic caramelized onions and artisanal cheeses. But it's in **Los Angeles** where the ultimate burger reigns supreme – and I'm not talking about Fatburger or In-N-Out Burger, although these still have a special place in some gastro-tourists' hearts. LA is now home to what some food critics are calling the "head spinning and mind-expanding" ground zero of the quintessential burger, found only at the four-store chain **Umami Burger** (850 S. La Brea Avenue).

Adam Fleischman is the flavour-obsessed burger guru behind these Japanese-inflected creations that focus on umami – the 'fifth taste' after sweet, sour, bitter and salty. Japanese scientists swear by it and now, so does Fleischman. He's reconfigured everything from the bun (egg washed soft Portuguese roll) to the secret sauce (which includes hits of miso, soy, dashi and anchovies). Where's the beef? All six ounces of it are mostly American Wagyu, ground onsite, ring-form packed and cooked medium rare on a flat griddle. You can top that with savoury umami-boosters like Parmesan tuille or a little melted sherry-nuanced cheese.

Up north in **Vancouver**, food savvy entrepreneur **Noriki Tamura** took the

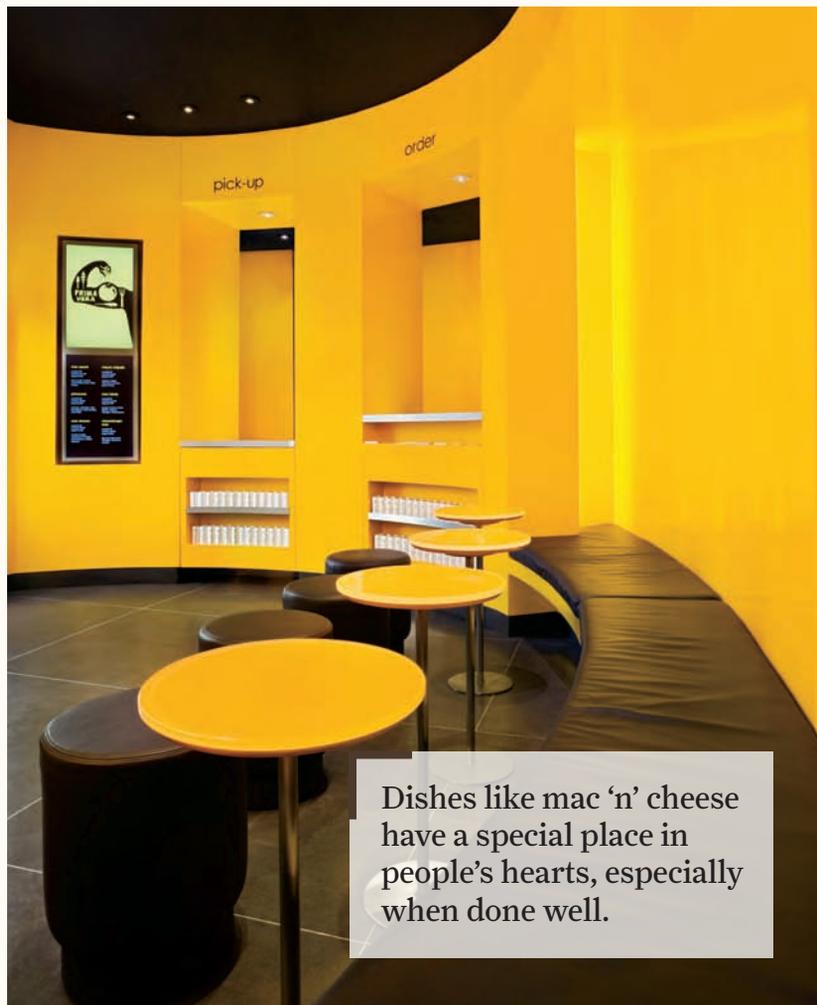
Low-brow goes uptown

Mary Luz Mejia

whole umami concept up a notch by giving the tried and true street meat – the hot dog, an haute Japanese makeover. Today, that city's food lovers rush to **Japadog** stands and its sole permanent location (530 Robson Street) for Kobe beef, turkey, vegetarian or Berkshire pork tube steaks (to name a few) with lashings of bonito flakes, soy sauce, green onion or Japanese mayo. The choices are as wild and wacky as a Japanese game show, only more delicious. Japadog has been named one of the '101 Things to Try Before You Die' by *Vancouver Magazine*. American rapper Ice Cube is a fan, but he won't have to visit the Canadian city to get his fix for

long, because Tamura has his sights set on opening a U.S. outpost in 2011.

Across the continent in **New York City**, the city that never sleeps is busy making the mundane marvellous. Take, for example, chef **Yuhi Fujinaga**'s spicy fried Spanish green olives breaded with crushed Doritos. The chef at **Bar Basque** (839 6th Avenue) was inspired after seeing a chef in Spain doing something similar. He figured Americans would find his spin on the bar snack interesting. He was right. "People are willing to try new things," says Fujinaga, adding, "As long as we are innovative and keep on creating, I don't see any sign of this trend slowing



Dishes like mac 'n' cheese have a special place in people's hearts, especially when done well.



© MIAMI BURGER

down, unless you're full." Up next, Bar Basque's own house-made Cheetos. Now that's a snack I want to try with a *caña* of Spanish beer, *por favor*.

In another part of town, chef **Michael Ferraro** woos diners with one hot dish at **Macbar** (54 Prince Street); yep, you guessed it, gussied up mac 'n' cheese. But this is no regular homemade casserole; it's the mac lobsta' that has fans swooning over his sophisticated take on mom's classic. Tender chunks of lobster enrobed in tarragon, mascarpone and cognac take the comfort food staple from good to exceptional. Ferraro explains, "Comfort food is something that will never go away. Dishes like mac 'n' cheese have a special place in people's hearts, especially when done well." He adds that chefs are going back to simple, straightforward dishes with crisp, clean flavours that focus on superlative ingredients and technique.

When it comes to fish and chips, Ferraro's observations are spot on. There's nowhere to hide when all you're dealing with is a piece of fish, batter, salt, pepper, oil and potatoes. **Shawn Hartwell** of **Simple Fish and Chips** (118 Downie Street) in **Stratford**, Ontario is ingredient-focused. So much so, that his fish is Ocean Wise-approved (ensuring the health and sustainability of our marine ecosystems), impeccably fresh, lightly battered and made to order. From North Pacific cod, yellow perch and pickerel to haddock and halibut, the offerings at Simple are simply spectacular. The tartar sauce and coleslaw are made in-house, the fries are fresh-cut and fried in non trans fat oil, and the batter options range from regular to lemon pepper or Cajun. When I lunched there next to a Scotsman, he declared this to be better than anything he'd had in the U.K.! I second the motion – light, crisp, hot

and fresh, the way fish and chips were meant to be made.

On **Vancouver Island**, **Kunal Ghose** is taking sustainable seafood to a whole new level with his 'tacone.' A Japanese hand roll/Mexican fish taco hybrid, Ghose's tacone is reason enough to visit **Red Fish Blue Fish** (1006 Wharf Street, Victoria). Qualicum Bay scallop, Fanny Bay oyster or BBQ wild salmon tacones are greedily enjoyed by adoring fans who want a wallop of flavour with a guilt-free side of eco-smarts. But it's the creative, fresh flavours foodies from across the globe chase when they drop in for tempura cod dogs or the famous smoked tuna belly 'bacon' BLTs. "Caringly crafted" is how Ghose describes his food, and if the line-ups outside Red Fish Blue Fish are any indication of how much people want gourmet comfort and all that this entails, then these chefs have found their golden ticket. 🍷

Worldly Delights: Spanish Brandies

Nick Keukenmeester says sí to the spirits of Spain



Brandy de Jerez remains the finest Spanish brandy produced

We tend to associate brandy with the regions of **Cognac** and **Armagnac** in southern **France**. This is not a bad thing, since both places have a great pedigree and history to match. There is, however, a place that has been making brandy longer than those regions but that, until recently, has not been recognized for the great quality of its spirits. That place is **Spain** and, more specifically, **Jerez** in the southern province of **Cádiz**.

Ironically, it was the Moors who brought the art of distillation to southern Spain and hence to the rest of Europe in 711. When they invaded Spain, they conquered a land widely planted with vines, but their religion forbade them from consuming wine. The wine was therefore distilled to make perfumes and medicines. Thank goodness for the Moors. Without them we would not have Spanish brandy, or any European spirit or fortified wine for that matter.

IN ONTARIO: LCBO

Lepanto Solera Gran Reserva Gonzalez Byass Brandy de Jerez
\$74.95 per bottle

These grapes are actually the locally grown Palomino used in sherry. Fifteen separate *criaderas* are used in the *solera*. That's serious stuff. Intense in flavour, it is a favourite of this writer.

Soberano 5 Solera Reserva Gonzalez Byass Brandy de Jerez
\$23.95 per bottle

IN QUEBEC: SAQ

Lepanto Solera Gran Reserva Gonzalez Byass Brandy de Jerez
\$67.95 per bottle

Gran Duque d'Alba Solera Gran Reserva Brandy de Jerez
\$63.95 per bottle

Williams & Humbert uses oloroso sherry casks to impart a deep golden mahogany colour and nuttiness to its brandy.

IN BRITISH COLUMBIA: LIQUOR STORES

Fundador Solera Reserva Brandy de Jerez
\$23.95 per bottle

This was the first brandy to be marketed internationally as Brandy de Jerez in 1874.

(By the way, 'Moor' is a European term used to refer to the Muslim Berber and Arab conquerors of North Africa and Iberia. It is not a term used by any cultural groups to define themselves and some people feel it is pejorative. We're just saying.)

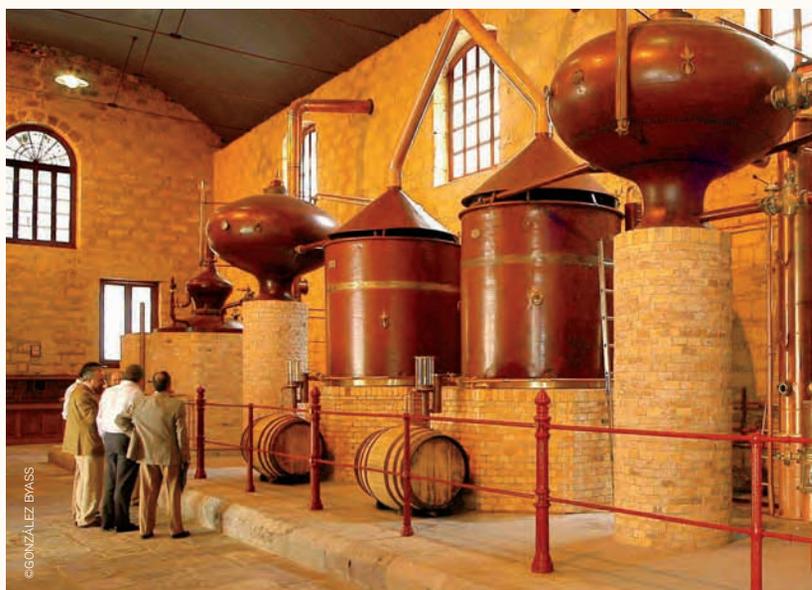
Exactly 1,300 years later, **Brandy de Jerez** remains the finest Spanish brandy produced. Why? To make a good brandy you actually need a boring, flavourless

grape variety because it's the distillation process and the oak aging that should create the flavour and aroma profiles. The Spanish are lucky, because the most widely planted grape in Spain – and the world for that matter – is just such a variety. The bakingly hot central plains of Spain are called **La Mancha**, and it is here that the Airén grapes (as well as Don Quixote), flourish. However, it is not the origin of the grapes that makes Brandy de Jerez special, but the place where it matures. The wine is distilled and matured in Jerez along with the fine sherry we associate with this wonderful region.

Brandy de Jerez: The rules

All aging of Brandy de Jerez is done in American oak butts (barrels) that have previously been used to age sherry. Aging is done using the *solera* system. Are you ready for this? Here goes. There are multiple groups of barrels (or *criaderas*) housing wines of the same age. The oldest of these *criaderas* is referred to as the *solera*. When some brandy needs to be bottled, they take an equal amount (never more than a third) from each barrel in the *solera*. The *solera* is then topped up with brandy from the second-oldest *criadera* and that in turn is topped up with spirits from the next oldest *criadera*, and so on and so on. There are normally six or more *criaderas* to work with.

This serves the purpose of creating consistent quality and character every year. In theory, with this system, every bottle will have an (increasingly diminishing) amount of the first spirit the distillery ever made. The downside is



that it is labour intensive and requires the producer to have considerably more spirits than they are ready to bring to market, and that's costly. This is another reason why the low price of these brandies is so hard to comprehend.

If the brandy has Gran Reserva on the label, then the youngest spirit in the blend has been aged for at least three years. In practice it is normally much longer and the oldest spirit can be decades old.

What to expect:

Brandy de Jerez tends to be deep mahogany in colour due to the oxidizing nature of the *solera* system. It also has a softer and sweeter character than the equivalent cognac. An unopened bottle

will stay good for years, but it doesn't improve in the bottle. So what's stopping you? Drink up.

How to drink it:

The brandy balloon is a big, round glass. It has a stem, but unlike a wine glass, the balloon is best cupped with the hand. This allows your natural body heat to warm the brandy to the perfect serving temperature of around 17° Celsius, bringing out the aromas and flavours without causing undue evaporation and increased alcohol flavour. That means you taste the brandy rather than just the booze.

Eighty million bottles per year are produced and most of these are consumed locally. Still, a few are showing up around the country to whet your appetite before that next trip to **Andalusia**. ▣



©GONZÁLEZ BYASS

Worldly Delights: Romancing the Stone

Mary Luz Mejia **unearths a Tuscan treasure**



It took years of roaming the globe for the discerning couple to find a property that spoke to them. It had to be self-sufficient, it had to have architectural integrity and be environmentally sound. After much searching, they found what their hearts and souls longed for in a magnificent 165-acre property once inhabited as far back as 700 BC by the Etruscans. **Susan McKenna Grant** and **Michael Grant**, the couple in question, can't help but smile when they explain that **La Petraia** (or the 'Place of Stone'), was brazen in her seduction. Amid the lush, rolling hills of **Italy's Chianti Classico** region, the two Canadians now call the pristine property home, and they're only too happy to share it with appreciative, hungry guests.

The La Petraia you see today is the result of years of sweat, love and dedication. From day one, McKenna Grant saw the possibilities in the rugged place. She wanted to create a high-end,

quality agriturismo property where, she says, "Guests are treated to a fine dining experience and luxury accommodation on a working mixed farm." At La Petraia, almost everything guests savour comes from the property itself and is raised according to strict organic and biodynamic principles. Forget the 100-mile diet; in this corner of **Tuscany**, you're looking at the 100-metre diet! Organic vineyards, olive groves, fruit orchards, gardens as well as forests inhabited by wild boar, deer, hare and pheasant are all part of Susan's generously stocked pantry.

If you've ever been to Tuscany, then you likely know that the best-kept secrets are usually located a few kilometres off dusty, winding country roads. It's a long way from the bustling streets of downtown Toronto where life before La Petraia saw McKenna Grant working to build a different kind of venture. She was one of the founders of Alias,



the Toronto-based company that developed high-end animation software for blockbusters like *Toy Story*. Michael was an award-winning filmmaker and TV producer/director whose job often took him to sets around the world. More than a decade ago, McKenna Grant sold her share of Alias and left in search of something special with Michael. And they've been making La Petraia an exceedingly special place ever since.

The experience begins to work its magic when you drive up the cypress tree-lined road, through the wrought-iron gates. A beautiful, rambling farmhouse that the couple painstakingly restored majestically greets visitors at the top of its hilly perch. While you feast your eyes on the farmhouse and the meticulously manicured landscape, you'll soon notice that the air is sweetly perfumed by rows of lavender, traces of which you'll find in the bath soap in your gorgeously appointed

room. When my husband and I stayed for one memorable evening, we were greeted with a bowl of voluptuous purple figs and grapes from the farm, house-made lavender meringue *baci* (or kisses) and herb-flecked crackers.

Apart from farming, managing the property and staff as well as hosting guests like Michael Pollan for a week of eating and good food discourse at the property's **La Petraia Sessions**, McKenna Grant is also the stellar in-house cook. She studied cooking and pastry-making in France and Italy, lending both her food sophistication and earthiness. She calls her cuisine "La Petraia-inspired" and it can range from a 'Study in Red' lasagnette using vine-ripened tomatoes and handmade pasta, to perfectly grilled pork medallions of the Italian Cinta Senese heritage breed pig, with rosemary and vegetables from the *orto* (garden). That night, we dined al fresco on a beautiful

patio off the side of Susan's kitchen, where we were treated to a multi-course sensory exploration that began with an aperitivo of Italian prosecco with blackberries, accompanied by house-made potato chips, chicken liver pâté, sesame bread and hummus, followed by an *amuse-bouche* of zucchini blossoms with fried sage. To say that this prelude to dinner was exquisite would be a gross understatement.

I wander into the kitchen with my camera to find McKenna Grant stirring the risotto all'acqua di pomodoro (risotto with tomato water) until it reaches that creamy point of perfection. As I watch Susan work, brow furrowed with concentration, it dawns on me that this apparently idyllic existence, despite my romantic notions, doesn't come easily. To an outsider, including this urbanite with the requisite stresses of career, family and home, Susan's life appears dreamy, wrapped in Tuscan sunsets and starry nights. When I share this with her, she smiles and patiently explains, "My husband always says, La Petraia is like a movie: easier to watch than it is to make."

She's right of course. As the visionaries behind this fabled place, getting to the point of flawless execution means countless hours of planning, preparation, pruning, weeding and harvesting, for starters. In a word: work – and lots of it! Would she change any of it? "No regrets," says Susan adding, "La Petraia is the most important teacher I've ever had and my biggest inspiration."

The couple invested a sizable sum from their life savings into making their dream a reality they willingly choose to share with discerning travellers. McKenna Grant wants their guests to be touched by the magic of this corner of the world, of this 'Place of Stone,' and most important she wants them to be glad they came. She says, "People thought we were crazy when we told them what we were planning to do here. Every step of the way has been scary. But I figure nothing worth doing is ever really easy." One step around the Etruscan-style terraced gardens or one bite of her perfectly made fresh fig tart and you know that all the effort is well worth it. **14**

Worldly Delights: Recipe

Fonduta, Truffle, Sage

Fonduta is the Italian version of fondue and usually consists of melted cheese, eggs and fresh cream. Susan McKenna Grant writes, "At **La Petraia** we make *fonduta* with our own eggs and the cheese we produce using our sheep's milk." McKenna Grant suggests using the richly comforting sauce in the following ways: eaten on its own with some crusty bread as a cheese course, using it as a sauce to liven up steamed vegetables like asparagus, cauliflower or broccoli, stuffed into ravioli or as a condiment for fresh pasta or risotto. "The classic combination served in the fall in the northern Italian region of Piedmont is *fonduta* with white truffles. The sage in this version gives this classic dish a Tuscan touch."

If you are lucky enough have fresh truffles on hand, shave some over the top of this delicious *fonduta* for a more authentic Tuscan flavour.

Ingredients:

2 sage leaves – cut into a chiffonade
½ cup cream
1 egg yolk
½ cup finely grated Parmesan cheese
Fresh truffle (optional)

Directions:

Add the sage to the cream and bring to a boil. Remove from the heat and let steep for 10 minutes. Pass through a sieve to extract the sage and then squeeze the leaves over the cream to release their essential oils before discarding. Whisk in the egg yolk and the Parmesan cheese and return the pan to a low heat. Stir until the cheese has melted and the sauce coats the back of a spoon. Remove from heat and strain once more to remove any solids.

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Eye on England

The Royal Wedding, Act II



©TERRY COLICHI

Royal Roads

Royal watchers are no doubt all atwitter about Prince William's upcoming marriage to Kate Middleton on April 29, 2011. There is no better way to experience the magic of this momentous occasion than with the eight-day **Royal Wedding in Luxury Tour**, an exclusive privately guided tour of London. For US\$7,560 per person, you'll get to stand along the procession route and watch as the wedding party travels from **Westminster Abbey** to **Buckingham Palace**; take private guided tours of the sites dear to the British monarchy including **St. Paul's Cathedral**, where 750 million people around the world watched as Prince Charles wed Princess Diana in 1981; enjoy a private viewing of the crown jewels; a Champagne ride on the **London Eye** and private guided tours of **Windsor** and **Stonehenge**. The tour features luxurious five-star accommodation, a private expert guide, chauffeur and ample time for the theatre or shopping. Ask your Ensemble Travel agent for details.

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Buckingham Base

Be right in the middle of the action at **41 Buckingham Palace Road**, the most desirable address in London and also one of the 'Best Places in the World to Stay' according to *Condé Nast Traveler's* Gold List 2011. Overlooking Buckingham Palace Mews, the hotel features 30 unique rooms and suites, each with its own stylish look. Upon arrival you'll be greeted with a welcoming drink and if you're feeling peckish, you can plunder the pantry and enjoy snacks throughout the day. Pretend you're a royal and enjoy the luxury private car service that can take you anywhere you need to go around London. Home, James...



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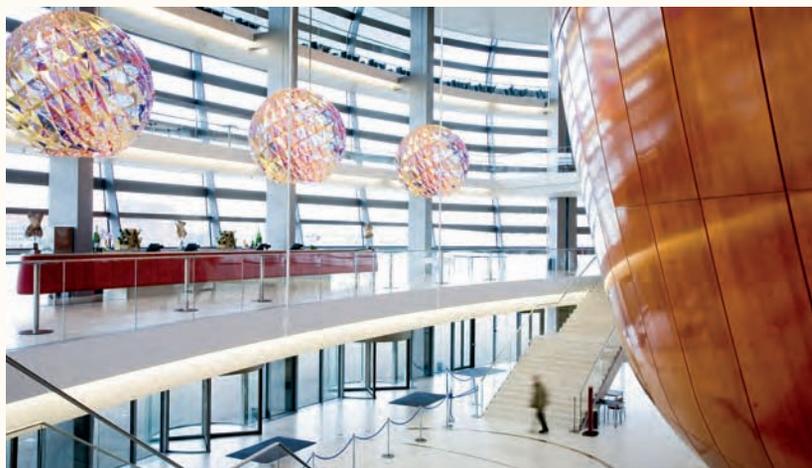
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Cultural Close-up: Copenhagen

Tim Johnson discovers what makes Danes great

This year, **Denmark's** 5.4 million residents were once again named the world's happiest people in an international Gallup survey – a distinction they've enjoyed for a number of years. Any visitor to the capital city, **Copenhagen**, can easily see why: dramatic towers and beautiful canals crisscrossed by pedestrian-only streets and an impressive network of bicycle paths help make Copenhagen a place populated by fit (almost 40 percent of residents ride their bikes to work), healthy (shoppers here buy organic more than most) and joyfully content people (the city has been identified as one of the world's cleanest and most livable, with a culture that values equality and a high quality of life).

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Danish Design

But perhaps more than anything, Copenhagen can be described in one word: cool. A long-time trendsetter in international art, architecture and especially design, Danish creations can be found in galleries and living rooms the world over. A great place to get oriented is at the **Danish Museum of Art and Design**, which traces the nation's decorative arts from the 16th century to the present. An entire wing of the museum is devoted to 20th-century design trends, from avant garde to Danish modern, and two galleries are dedicated to the works of national icons Poul Henningsen and Arne Jacobsen. Continue your design immersion at the **Danish Design Center**, which displays each year's winner of the **Danish Design Prize** and has a fascinating permanent exhibit on the design of everyday life (everything from LEGO to chairs to vacuum cleaners).

Retail Therapy

Both museums have gift shops, but if you're looking to do some serious shopping, Copenhagen offers plenty of choice. The city is home to **Strøget**, the longest pedestrian shopping street in Europe. Running from **Rådhuspladsen**, the city's grand town hall square, to the **Kongens Nytorv** traffic circle, the street offers both mainstream but fashionable stores like H&M and Zara to such exclusive brands as Gucci, Hermès, Burberry and Louis Vuitton. Two solid department stores – **Magasin du Nord** and **Illum** –

are nearby and sell stylish housewares and a broad selection of clothing (including great European brands like **Paul Smith**, **Marc O'Polo** and **Tiger of Sweden**). For earthier finds, check out **Istedgade**, a semi-seedy street that runs west from the central train station through the recently gentrified **Vesterbro** neighbourhood, and which offers an eclectic mix of antique, vintage, cycle and skate shops, as well as local clothing and shoe stores.

Get Outside

No visit to Copenhagen would be complete without spending some time enjoying the city's outdoor spaces. Take advantage of one of the many racks of free bikes (which require only a 20 kroner deposit), or go for a walk in **Christianhavns**, a beautiful little island bisected by a picturesque canal lined with cheerful, colourful buildings – although mere steps from the centre of the city, the neighbourhood still enjoys a laid-back vibe. Have lunch at **Christianhavns Bådudlejning og Café**, which sits on a floating platform on the canal, then work it off by renting one of the little boats for a spin on the water. And for dinner, make a reservation at **Noma**, one of the world's hottest restaurants. While the food is excellent, sous chef **Samuel Miller** believes that Noma's popularity has a lot to do with its informal, friendly approach, stripped-down atmosphere and amazingly personal service – the chefs greet guests and also serve the food.

Café Culture

And after a busy day, Copenhagen invites visitors to revel in a bustling night; the city buzzes with numerous enticements and attractions. Take a stroll through the **Tivoli**, an amusement park that has been entertaining visitors since the 19th century and offers everything from thrill rides to old school carnival games (*Whack-a-Mole*, anyone?). Copenhagen also boasts a vibrant café culture. Visit the **Paludan Bogcafé** in the centre of town, a combination gallery, antiquarian bookstore and café/restaurant (which serves Danish favourites) – think Harry Potter's library serving coffee, with a hip art space in the back.

After Hours

But if it's more fortifying liquids you're after – and you're feeling edgy – head back to Vesterbro's meatpacking district. White-coated butchers pulling the night shift still actually pack meat in industrial plants that sit alongside ultra-cool bars like **Jolene**, **Kødbyens Fiskebar** and **Bakken**, where most of the bartenders also happen to play in some of Copenhagen's best up-and-coming indie bands. If leather pants aren't really your thing, check out **Café Intime**, an intimate jazz joint in the **Frederiksberg** neighbourhood, or **Bang & Jensen**, a former pharmacy (its long wooden bar used to serve as the dispensary counter) that now provides a great place to tip back some Tuborg and chat with friends. ▣



*Jeff Wilner,
Kensington Tours*

Having visited more than 70 countries and counting, you could say intrepid explorer Jeff Wilner truly is a citizen of the world. The Congo-born, Toronto-based serial entrepreneur took his business and IT savvy to the next level by creating Kensington Tours in 2002. Wilner's success is largely based on a proprietary technology platform he created that allows Kensington Tours to design, manage and deliver private guided tours and bespoke travel experiences at an unrivalled value. The son of missionaries, Wilner believes in 'giving back' – especially to Africa. This led to the launch of Kensington Cares, the company's charitable initiative that supports education-based projects for disadvantaged children in developing nations.

What does it mean to be an explorer?

Being an explorer means finding things that are new and by new I mean they can be new to me as much as they are to civilization. Exploring can be geographical; it can also be experiential, like the time I was in Dallas. They were selling bungee jumps off a crane so I paid \$50 and went for a bungee jump for the first time in my life, 25 years ago.

Does this differ from being a tourist or traveller?

'Traveller' suggests an activity, someone who is going from one place to another. And as much as tourism gets criticized for cultural insensitivity, I prefer to believe that anyone who chooses to travel has something brave about them and a willingness to be open to see another part of the world. I believe that travel is

important, irrespective of how that happens. It changes a person.

Who inspires you?

My inspiration comes from people who have shown great determination to do things that they believed in strongly.

What do you value most in friends?

Loyalty to each other.

What in your opinion would be the greatest misfortune?

A blind drive toward some objective in the absence of real facts. I grew up in Congo and witnessed an entire region get torn to pieces with well-meaning foreign government intervention and floods of capital. Travelling around the world, I've seen the same borne out: the path to hell really is paved with good intentions.

What is your preferred mode of travel?

By air. I went to university and became a licensed aircraft mechanic. In fact, my first job was fixing Boeing 707s in Detroit. I've had an absolute love affair with aircraft since I was a kid.

What is the most important thing in life?

Family for sure, and having just enough.

What is the best quality in a human being?

Generosity and selflessness.

What is your personal motto?

To not accept the accepted wisdom and to take it as far as it can go.

If you were to come back as a person or thing, what would it be?

I'd like to be Neil Armstrong – I would have liked to have been the first man on the moon. ▀



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