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SUMMER 2009

EXOTICS

Treasures of India

Close-up on Shanghai

After the Flood:
Cruising the YangtzeAdventures on
the Andaman

WHAT'S HOT IN CRUISING NOW

7

Best Things
to Do in Bangkok
on the Cheap

SPECIAL SECTION
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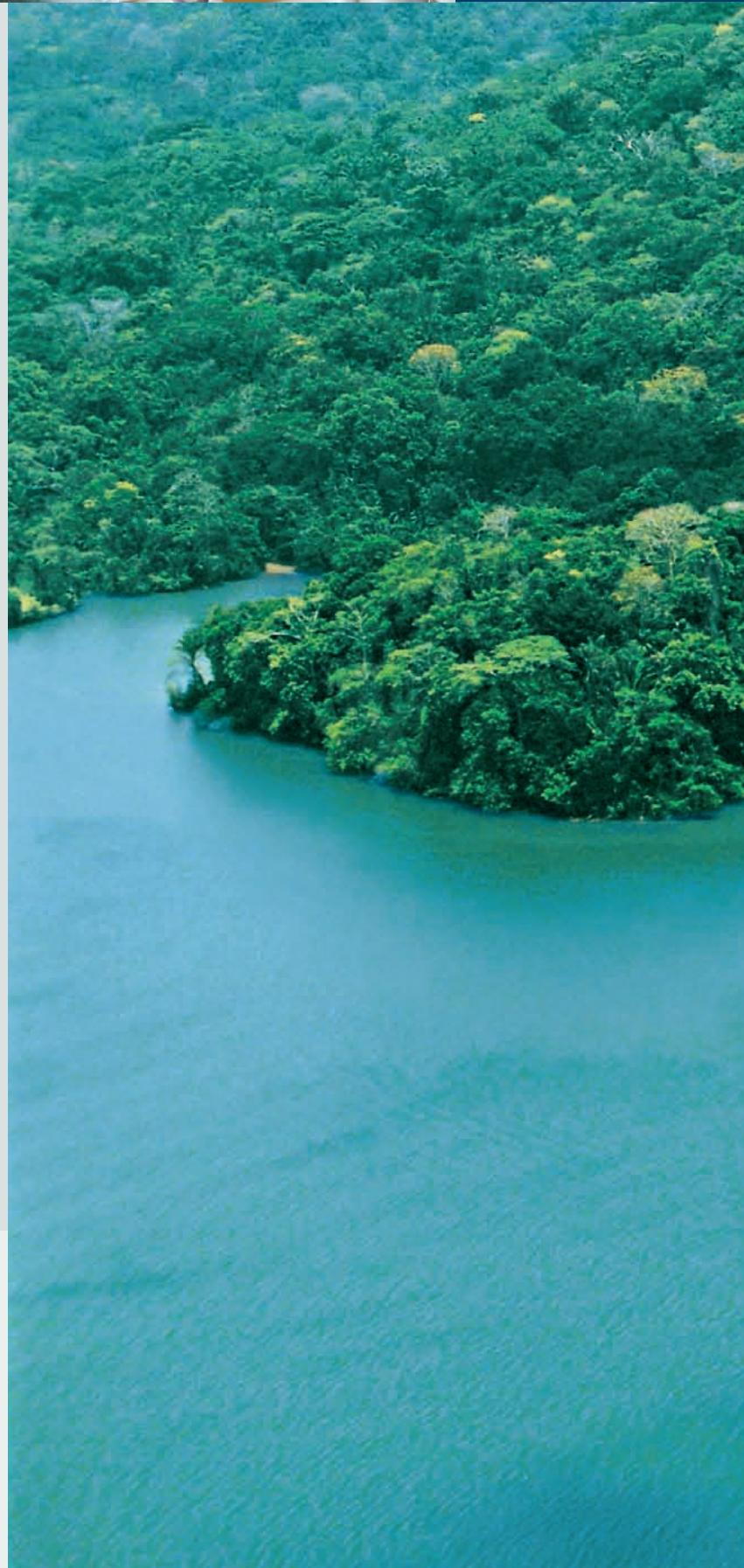
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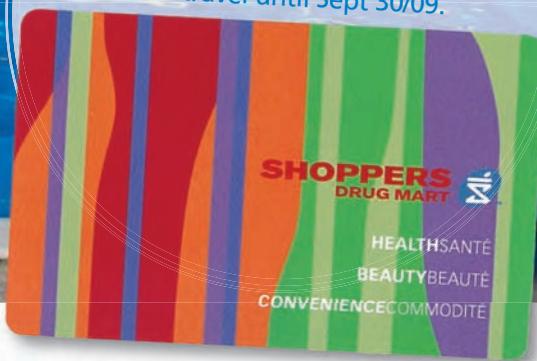
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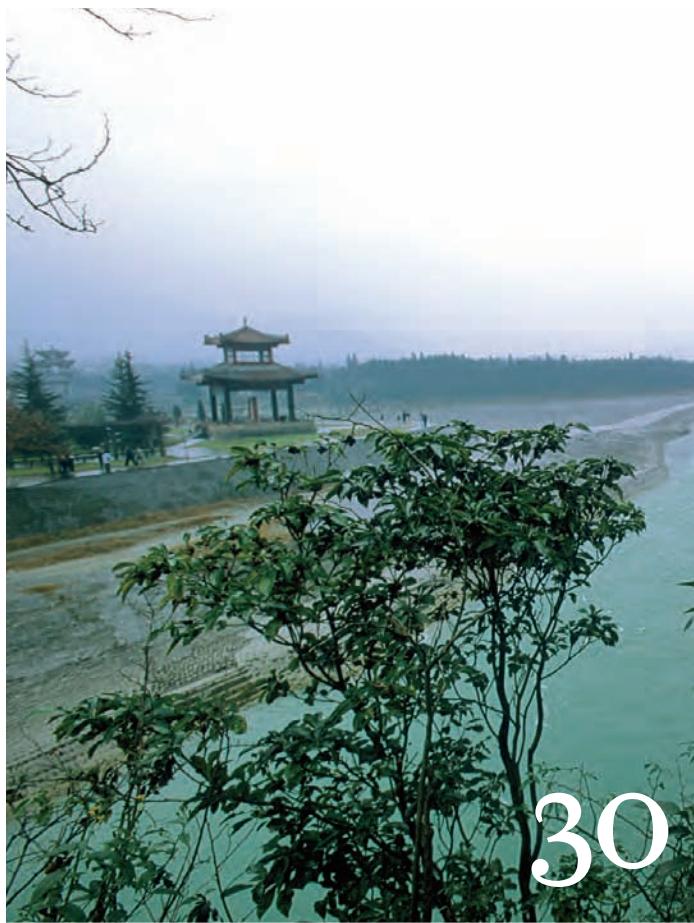
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AIR NEW ZEALAND 
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STAR ALLIANCE 

Exotics, etcetera...

I've always had a fascination with the idea of the original, luxurious Orient Express. My vision of it is romantic, mysterious and exciting, with a dash of intrigue, complete with beautiful misty landscapes and old Louis Vuitton travelling trunks. Unfortunately for me, that train left a long time ago.

One thing we all share, as Canadians, is a desire to travel in search of new and exotic destinations, or – at the very least – sunshine and heat. Perhaps now more than ever our collective wanderlust is in overdrive, our minds filled with dreams of escaping our everyday to discover the mystery and intrigue of faraway lands.

This issue of *Ensemble Vacations* is all about places on the 'bucket list', and there's no better time than now to start crossing some of them off. If one can find a positive in the current economic situation, it's that there are plenty of opportunities to be had and travel is no exception: prices are down and availability is up. One of the fastest growing sectors of the industry, due to its wide appeal, is cruising. The selection of new ships and their offerings is astounding, and for the first time in years all the major luxury cruise lines are also deploying new vessels. Normally, one would need to book years in advance,



but the increased capacity means there is still a chance to find an available departure date for this year. Additionally, some hotels and tour operators are offering unprecedented rates that are impossible to ignore. So if you've been dreaming about sailing the Indian Ocean, riding a *tuk-tuk* in Thailand or climbing the steps of China's Great Wall, now's the time to do it!

We've got the goods on what's new in cruising for 2009–2010, and bring you up to date on the 'new' Yangtze after the controversial flood, tell you the eight essential things to do in Singapore, and discover Sanya, China's little-known 'Hawaii'. We also take a close-up look at Bangkok and Shanghai, learn about sake, explore the transformational (and material!) effects of visiting beautiful, spiritual India, and much, much more. Also, don't miss our special eight-page *Bon Vivant* section, filled with lifestyle travel ideas that focus on the food and wines of Europe.

Lose yourself in the pages of this 'Exotics' issue, and find your inspiration to turn those travel dreams into reality... while opportunities last. □

FEDERICA MARABOLI, EDITOR
editor@ensembletravel.ca



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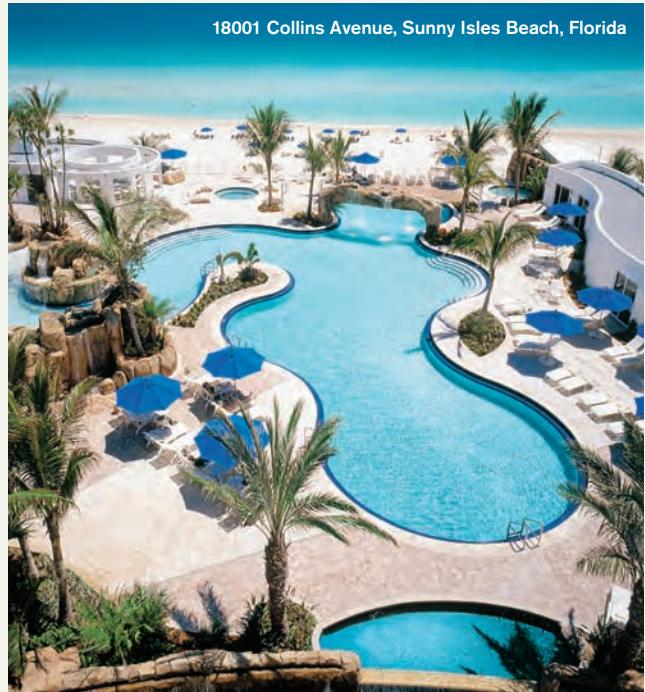
Hot hotels: our experts' top picks

A LITTLE NORTH, A LITTLE NICER

Minutes from Miami's tony Bal Harbor shopping district on Collins Avenue, the signature ironwork of the Trump Globe brands the entranceway of the **Trump International Beach Resort** in Sunny Isles. Having long ago evolved from its motel strip origins, where a young Tina Turner played gigs, this exclusive enclave now showcases modern luxury hotels on beautiful stretches of pristine beaches.

A 'little city within a resort area,' the Trump International offers an array of daily activities for those less inclined to stray down to SoBe. Enjoy a relaxing morning at Aquanox Spa, or take a complimentary shuttle bus to nearby shops. For the ultimate resort experience, rent your own air-conditioned poolside or beach cabana, complete with TVs and beds. Or simply lounge at Gili's Pool Bar & Grill while sipping a cocktail – try the Leblon caipirinha – and gaze out over the turquoise Atlantic.

There's no need to leave the building at night, either. Dining options include the Mobil award-winning Neomi's or, for a unique experience, **Paradigm: The Test Kitchen**. Open to non-guests, visitors reserve seats at the private chef's table to discover the world of molecular gastronomy. Special evening events like the 'Great Whiskey Debate' feature a hosted cocktail hour, debates with master distillers and a chef cook-off for the best backyard BBQ recipe. End the night with live entertainment at the Lime Lounge or return to your suite to enjoy the high thread-count sheets on your super-comfy pillow-top bed. □



Fifth Avenue at Central Park South, New York, New York

THE PERFECT SETTING

Beautiful, stylish, elegant and famous, **The Plaza Hotel, New York** is the grande dame of the city's hotel properties. Frequented over the years by wealthy socialites, royalty, politicians and stars, this historic landmark is synonymous with luxury, excitement and impeccable service. Since becoming a Fairmont-managed hotel, The Plaza has undergone a \$400-million dollar transformation, marrying the best of modern conveniences with traditional opulence and grandeur. Suites have the largest square footage of any luxury hotel in New York City. Each room has been renovated in Louis XV style décor, and include a flat screen TV and a removable touch-screen panel that allows you to adjust the lighting and heating in your room, while bathrooms are fitted with 24-karat gold-plated faucets and accessories. Take in the views of Central Park, cocktail in hand, from the Oak Bar or overlook Fifth Avenue while sipping bubbly at the Champagne Bar. Enjoy a romantic dinner in the famed **Oak Room** and imagine the stories that the walls of the Rose Club (formerly the Persian Room) might tell of the entertainment icons it has hosted. Shop the boutiques, pamper yourself at the Caudalie Vinothérapie® Spa or burn calories at the Radu Fitness Center. Even better, enjoy a complimentary third night until September 7, 2009. □

Diversions

Fishing for bargains

Hook, line and sinker: Top five fishing spots

New Brunswick's **Miramichi River** is considered the mother of all salmon streams. It has garnered a higher reputation for wild Atlantic salmon, in fact, than any other place in the world.

Wild brown trout draws those with reels and rods to **Lake Taupo Lodge** in **New Zealand**. This secluded spot is ideal for both nature lovers and fans of fantastic food and wine. The scenery is stunning.

In northern **British Columbia**, **King Pacific Lodge** dazzles wealthy fishers from around the globe. Located on **Princess Royal Island**,

this floating, luxury eco-lodge is accessible by air only. There's definitely no 'roughing it' here. After fishing for halibut, cod and salmon, spa treatments and martinis await.

Those who seek trophy-sized fish, like marlin, sailfish and barracuda, should head to the open seas around the **Seychelles**. The clear, warm waters are the stuff of legendary fishing expeditions from October to April.



©ISTOCKPHOTO/DARREN PEARSON

If **Grand Bahama Island** had a motto, it would be 'go big or go home.' Some of the biggest game fish populate these waters – bonefish, snapper, grouper and yellowtail to name a few. When you crave balmy temperatures and blue skies, this is the place to throw a line.

How to spot counterfeit 'designer' goods

The smart traveller will avoid buying counterfeit goods. Countries like Italy are imposing stiff fines on tourists who try to leave the country with these fake goods as souvenirs. A recent court decision saw a popular website fined by French courts for selling counterfeit items.

Bottom line: it's not worth the risk.



1. Price is a giveaway. If a Louis Vuitton purse is being sold for \$100, that should raise a red flag. Do some research to see what the real thing goes for.

2. Examine the goods. Inferior quality can be spotted in sloppy, uneven stitching, puckered seams and low-quality leather and/or lining.

3. The packaging may look different from the real thing or it may be absent altogether.

4. Check the labels carefully for spelling and grammatical mistakes.

5. Of course, consider the source. Real luxury goods are sold by traditional retailers, and seldom in sidewalk stalls or public markets.

Switch hits

These days, every dollar counts. That makes your choice of destination even more important. Travellers want value for their money, so consider swapping a big-name, expensive destination for a lesser-known, better-value gem. Some swaps to consider:

In Italy, **trade Florence for Bologna**. Bologna is Italy's fourth-largest city and has been described as a medieval Manhattan because of its abundance of towers. It's an authentic slice of Italy that's off the beaten path, but so worth the trip.

Try Salamanca instead of Madrid. This university town is always bustling with life. To see it firsthand, linger over a strong cup of coffee at a café by the Plaza Mayor, one of Spain's grandest central squares. Romanesque churches and graceful palaces are a sightseer's delight.

Get away from the busy urban din of Amsterdam in favour of Maastricht, the southernmost and oldest city in Holland. Its charms are abundant with its annual three-day carnival and thriving arts scene.

Niagara-on-the-Lake can get busy in the summer. **Head a little further south to the Finger Lakes region of New York State.** There aren't as many wineries, but they produce quality vintages at affordable prices.

Enjoy the splendours of Asia in Vietnam, a destination less developed and less expensive than Thailand. Its people have not grown tired of tourists and offer warm welcomes. Luxury accommodations can still be had for a fraction of the price of those in North America.

Diversions

Hot summer reads

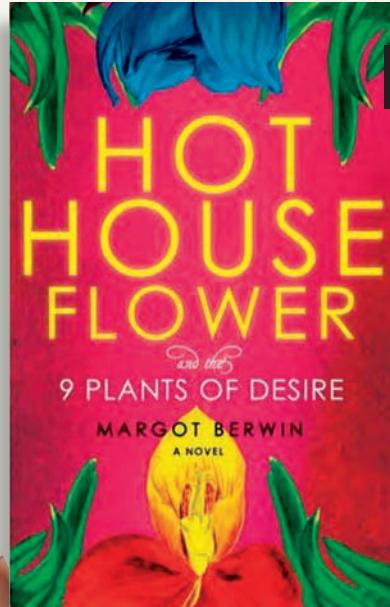


There's Something About St. Tropez

by Elizabeth Adler
(St. Martin's Press, \$32.99)

If you loved: Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians* and Elmore Leonard's *Get Shorty*

The Buzz: Five very different vacationers find themselves stuck in a rental scam and murder investigation at the Hotel of Dreams, which is anything but dreamy. At least they're in St. Tropez, the playground of the rich and famous, and Malibu. P.I. Mac Reilly, his girlfriend and her chihuahua are there to unravel the hijinx. A hot whodunit.

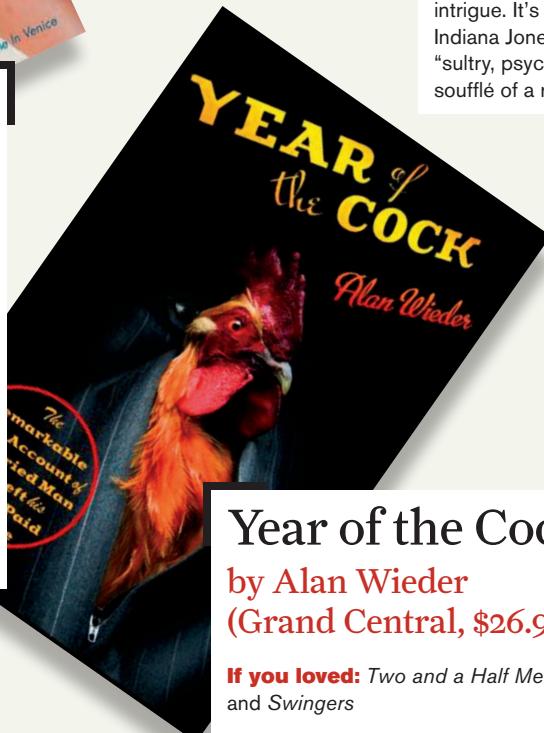


Hothouse Flower and the 9 Plants of Desire

by Margot Berwin
(Pantheon, \$28)

If you loved: Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession* and Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* – and who didn't?

The Buzz: Newly divorced Lila Nova embarks on a round-the-Yucatán adventure of archeology, plant mythology and romantic intrigue. It's Bridget Jones meets Indiana Jones, and *Elle* calls it a "sultry, psychedelic summer soufflé of a read."



Year of the Cock

by Alan Wieder
(Grand Central, \$26.99)

If you loved: *Two and a Half Men*, *Wife Swap* and *Swingers*

The Buzz: A memoir of 2005, the year of the rooster, inspires reality-TV producer Wieder (who's worked on *Temptation Island* and *The Apprentice*) to make like the shows he produces to discover if he 'settled' too soon. So he leaves his wife. But instead of a life of carefree bachelorhood, there's a dark, unexpected twist even seasoned reality-TV viewers won't see coming.

Packing List

New and notable



Case Files

Extra fees for excess baggage cut into your travel budget. Travel smart with a lightweight suitcase made from durable polycarbonate from **Rimowa**. They are built tough and made in Canada. From \$425. www.taschen.ca



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Smooth Moves

Save space in your suitcase with multi-use products like **Nivea Summer Touch Gradual Sunless Tan Moisturizer**. It gives your legs the look of being sun-kissed in the Caribbean while slowing hair growth with a special ingredient. \$7.99. www.beiersdorf.ca



Time Travel

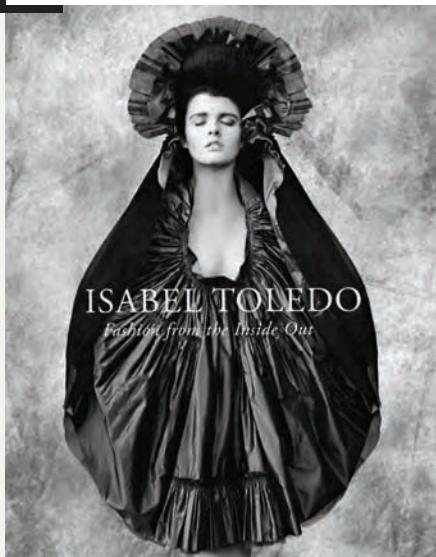
When seconds count, this **Omega Seamaster** diver's watch is a perfect choice. This gorgeous Vancouver 2010 limited edition (only 2,010 available worldwide) is truly a showpiece. \$4,500. www.omegawatches.com

Trends: Style Notes



Yes She Can

It may be petite but what the **Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology** may lack in size, it makes up for in scope. Its **Isabel Toledo: Fashion from the Inside Out** exhibition, a mid-career retrospective of the influential Cuban-American designer, was planned well before Michelle Obama stepped out in Toledo's now-famous Inauguration Day lemongrass day dress and coat. It showcases the designer's meticulous craftsmanship, signature sculpted fit and draped architecture, and the many couture details often hidden inside each garment. There's even a cameo from The Outfit itself, before it heads to the Smithsonian archives (from June 17 through September 26 at the Museum at FIT in New York, fitnyc.edu).



ISABEL TOLEDO
Fashion from the Inside Out

Masters of Their Domain

A jaunt to the **Museum of Fine Arts** in Boston could well satisfy a craving for gondolas and the Piazza San Marco with its comprehensive **Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice** Old Masters exhibition (through August 16, mfa.org). If bling's your thing, then Paris has it: **Art Deco and Avant-Garde Jewellery** at the **Louvre's Musée des Arts Décoratifs** features pieces by such modern masters as **Gérard Sandoz** and **Jean Després** (through July 12, lesartsdecoratifs.fr). Over in London the art on display is definitely less high-brow. Beginning July 2, **Jeff Koons: Popeye Series** is the first of the **Serpentine Gallery's** annual artist series, featuring inflatable pool sculptures, canvases and replicas of aluminum children's toys.



Super Women

Trying not to be outdone in the fashion department, hanging amid extensive modern photography and Francis Bacon retrospectives is the **Met's summer Costume Institute exhibit** recalling the era of Linda, Christy and Naomi with **The Model as Muse: Embodying Fashion**. It seems like a lifetime ago, and now that celebrities have supplanted supermodels on magazine covers around the world, a true 'super' revival seems unlikely (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through August 9, metmuseum.org).



TWIGGY IN DRESS, SPRING/SUMMER 1967,
BY YVES SAINT LAURENT (FRENCH, 1936–2008)
VOGUE, MARCH 15, 1967
PHOTOGRAPH BY BERT STERN (AMERICAN,
BORN 1929)
PHOTOGRAPH BY BERT STERN/COURTESY
STALEY-WISE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Trends: Style Notes

Roll With It

For the first time since the 1920s, **Kiehl's** has reintroduced portable versions of its 10 most popular essence oils, in amber glass rollerball vials that meet carry-on security restrictions. The series includes the first essence oil from the original apothecary in New York's East Village, **Musk 1921** (also known as 'love oil'), of course, as well as favourites such as amber, coriander, vanilla and grapefruit. \$35 each at Kiehl's Since 1851 and Holt Renfrew stores (kiehls.com).



Face Value

Vichy's new **Liftactiv Retinol HA anti-wrinkle skin care** for eyes and face targets the in-between skin years of 30- to 40-year-olds. It takes on all three types of wrinkles: permanent, reversible and embryonic (bonus: it also has SPF 18) and to figure out the formula, parent company L'Oréal studied the biological evolution of wrinkles on the same group of women over a 20-year period. The result is a cocktail of resurfacing retinol and adenosine, active ingredients promising visible results within two months, plus hyaluronic acid for an instant filling and plumping effect. \$42-\$49 at drugstores across Canada (vichy.ca).

Hat Trick

There was a time when a man wasn't properly dressed without a hat: a porkpie, trilby or fedora. That time will come again if San Francisco-based **Goorin Brothers** has anything to say in the matter. Founded by Cassel Goorin in 1895, the men's hat maker has since been re-energized by his enterprising hipster great-grandson Ben. For summer the look is urban safari, a **cool modern take on classic toppers** like the fedora but with a shorter brim (think jazz musician or Justin Timberlake), in natural or coloured straw, and plaid or pinstripe fabric. \$42-\$60 each at Harry Rosen (goorin.com).



Trends: Style Notes



Hip to be Square

There's no rest for those who throw wicked parties, as **Dean and Dan Caten**, the designing Canadian twins behind **DSquared²**, well know. Since launching bestselling his-and-hers perfumes last year, they've designed costumes for Britney's Circus tour and now their denim lifestyle brand offers the ultimate accessory: shades. DSquared²'s spring/summer men's show in Milan was hip-hop themed and set in a local corner barber shop. The **debut collection of sunglasses** plays with that inspiration, using the gold jewels and thick square and rectangular silhouette of Run-D.M.C.-era Seventies to channel the birth of hip-hop. \$435 exclusively at Holt Renfrew (dsquared2.com).



The Bronze Age

Chanel's new **Côte d'Azur collection** of bronzers and loose powders is inspired by Mademoiselle's first colour cosmetics collection. In the 1920s the designer herself was a sun worshipper, but today we know better than to cook to a crisp and Coco's iconic interlocking C compacts are definitely the chicest way to fake that bake. \$50-\$68 at Chanel counters (chanel.com).

Trends: Style Notes

The Rule of Three

They say that good things come in threes. They certainly do in perfume! To wit: **Sarah Jessica Parker's** recent trio **Lovely Collection**, **Karl Lagerfeld's** cool **Kapsule** trifecta and the new **Eau de Sisley** trilogy. And now French master perfumer **Jean-Claude Ellena**, the in-house nose at Hermès, has created siblings for the historic classic **Eau d'orange verte**. (Apt, since the eau de cologne celebrates the 30th anniversary of its creation in 1979.) While they're in keeping with the cologne's 18th-century origins (traditionally, a citrus splash), Ellena's compositions are simple yet inventive. **Eau de pamplemousse rose** is a sparkling citrus that combines zesty grapefruit with roses and a twist of vetiver, while **Eau de gentiane blanche** mixes rooty gentians with delicate white musk notes. Each comes in an elegant shade of green glass bottle inspired by traditional carriage lanterns and packaged in the posh signature orange box. \$95–\$145 for 100ml at Hermès and Holt Renfrew.



Keep Calm and Carry On

Montreal-based lifestyle brand **m0851** makes urban gear in buttery leathers and has boutiques across Canada and in Paris, New York, Taipei and Antwerp (the latter boasts studio guestrooms adjacent to the boutique for about €150/night, in the heart of Antwerp's art and design district). While m0851 has been known for its leathers since 1987, it has introduced a **polyurethane-coated brushed cotton** from Italy called *talmigo*. In black, dark grey, khaki or vanilla, the technical fabric is water-repellent but tumble-dried for a soft, crinkled look (which, not incidentally, packs like a dream). It comes in four-season outerwear like trench coats and safari jackets as well as military-inspired weekenders and carry-ons. Bags from \$160, jackets from \$340 at m0851 boutiques and retailers (m0851.com).

Cruise News

Sailing in style



Celebrity Solstice Quasar nightclub

RUBY PRINCESS

The newest ship in the **Princess** fleet, the **Ruby Princess** has just under 900 staterooms with private balconies, perfect for enjoying the scenic ports of the Caribbean that it visits. The main attractions onboard include an elegant piazza-style atrium featuring entertaining street performers, and the popular **Movies Under the Stars** at the pool on the **Lido** deck. For those who prefer not to be in the company of kids, **The Sanctuary** is a spacious, adults-only sundeck where you can lounge, swim or sit in the whirlpool in an oasis of calm. The ship offers a selection of bars and restaurants, beautiful and spacious staterooms and a variety of entertainment options. Play a game of mini-golf at the nine-hole putting course on the **Star** deck, or relax poolside listening to the rhythms of the calypso band; this ship appeals to all ages and interests.

THE 'WOW' FACTOR IS INCREASED WITH THE NEW **CELEBRITY SOLSTICE**

The first in a series of five sure to be spectacular *Solstice*-class ships, the **Celebrity Solstice** is a premium vessel with a class, contemporary design that won't go out of style. The ship carries 2,850 passengers, making it the largest Celebrity ship afloat, offering the most spacious accommodations. Spa lovers will rejoice at the new **Aqua-ClassSM** staterooms; incorporating select spa elements, they are located on the same deck as the **AquaSpa[®]** relaxation room and include special access to spa amenities. The luxurious **Grand Epernay Dining Room** is Hollywood-worthy, with a soaring two-storey glass wine tower to complement the decadent cuisine. The most popular hot spot on the ship may be the **Crush** martini bar, where you can watch expert bartenders whip up your preferred mix. Catch the live glass-blowing show or enjoy a picnic or game of bocce ball on real grass at the **Lawn Club**. The *Celebrity Solstice* currently sails from Rome on 10- and 11-night roundtrip Eastern Mediterranean voyages.



Ruby Princess

Who Needs Travel Insurance?

Recognize the limitations of your coverage



Many people believe they have enough travel insurance

through employment plans or credit cards, but don't recognize the limitations of their coverage. It is important to be aware of the type of coverage you have, if it extends to your family, and if the coverage is valid for the duration of the trip.

The fact is government health insurance plans provide only limited coverage for medical treatment and hospital costs outside Canada. Employee benefits plans may not provide out-of-country medical coverage, may not cover a spouse or dependents, and often have limits on the number of travel days covered and amounts payable.

Before you travel, be sure you and your family are appropriately protected in case of an unexpected emergency.

If you are still unsure about the value of travel insurance, consider these questions:

- How much money would you lose if you had to cancel or interrupt your trip?
- How much would you have to pay for a one-way, last minute ticket home?
- If you became ill or injured, would your emergency medical expenses be covered? Would you have to pay these costs up front?
- Would your hotel and meal expenses be paid if you had to stay at your destination longer than expected?
- Who would you call if you were faced with a medical emergency in a foreign country?

Next time you're making travel arrangements, ask for RBC Insurance®.



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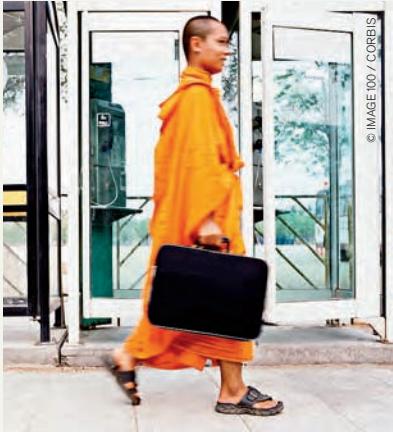
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City Guide: Bangkok



Welcome to Thailand, where East and West, ancient and modern, exotic and erotic, calm and chaotic clash and collide in the most delightful ways. Nowhere in the country is this yin and yang more evident than in its capital, Bangkok, named best city on the planet in *Travel + Leisure's* 2008 **World's Best Awards** readers' survey.

COMBINE CULTURE AND HEDONISM

Bangkok has more than 400 temples but if there's one must-see it's the **Grand Palace**, a square mile of gilded excess. The ornate **Wat Phra Kaew** houses the famous **Emerald Buddha** (actually it's made of jade). Take a *tuk-tuk* (scooter taxi) to the neighbouring **Wat Pho**, famous for its enormous **Reclining Buddha** and ancient school of Thai medicine and massage, so you can combine culture and hedonism in one visit. A one-hour massage costs about \$10.

FOUR SEASONS STYLE

The **Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok** makes a grand impression the moment you enter its magnificent lobby. Every afternoon a string sextet entertains from the balcony. The **Spice Market** restaurant serves some of the city's best Thai food. A private fleet of Mercedes limos, equipped with cellphones, is available for sightseeing, shopping or a night on the town.

Anita Draycott celebrates Asian fusion



SKY HIGH SOCIETY

Set on the 63rd floor of the **State Tower**, the open-air **Sirocco** restaurant is the place for a stylish evening out. Jutting out among the rooftops, the luminescent **Sky Bar** changes colours as you sip your apple martini while a cool jazz band serenades you.

TEA TIME

Enjoy afternoon tea in the famous **Authors' Lounge** at the

Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok, where luminaries such as Somerset Maugham and John Le Carré have supped. The chicken turnovers are exquisite, as are the scones with clotted cream. There's a tempting list of teas and infusions, but try **The Oriental** brew, a refreshing blend created for the hotel by the prestigious Parisian teahouse of **Mariage Frères**.

BANGKOK BARGAINS

You name it and they sell it at the **Chatuchak Weekend Market**, from aromatherapy oils to silk scarves. It's open Saturdays and Sundays from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Don't take a taxi; use the Skytrain.

TAILOR-MADE

It seems as if almost every other store in Bangkok is a tailor shop. You can have something custom-made in about 24 hours for ridiculously low prices. I spotted a pair of Burberry slacks in a designer store for about \$300. However, in a mall

across the road I found a tailor who had a bolt of fabric that looked just like the Burberry plaid. He made me a pair of slacks for \$21.

GET YOUR KICKS

The normally gentle Thai people are passionate about their national sport, Thai boxing. Join the locals as they cheer for and gamble on the athletes as they pummel each other using most of their body parts. Bouts take place at **Lumpini** and **Ratchadamnoen** stadiums.

GET AROUND

Most first-time visitors to Bangkok are overwhelmed by the maze of streets and horrendous traffic jams. Plan with your hotel concierge the most efficient way of getting to the places you want to visit. Also, have the concierge write on a card in Thai the names and addresses in case of communication problems. Boats on the **Chao Phraya River** connect with the city's efficient **BTS Skytrain**. The **MRT** is also a fast way to travel. Happily, both systems are inexpensive and have English instructions for buying tickets. When taking a taxi, ensure the driver turns on the meter when you get in. For short hops, try the *tuk-tuks* but be sure to negotiate the price in advance. Visit from late October to late March, when the weather is coolest and least humid. □



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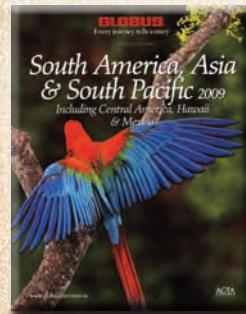
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City Snap Guide: Shanghai

Eye candy

Shanghai is huge, bustling, dynamic. Best known for its stunning architectural eye candy in **Pudong's Financial District**, the city still surprises with glimpses of tradition and history. Where better to host an exposition about urban living than this metropolis of 18 million-plus? **Expo 2010: Better City, Better Life** runs from May 1 to October 31 next year and organizers expect 70 million attendees.

Get lost

Kirsty Lawson, a Canadian designer living in Shanghai, shares her favourite place: **Taikang Road**. "It's a small, hidden area of old *shukomen*-style houses in the city centre, filled with artists' workshops, trendy little stores and European-style cafés. **Café Dan** has the best iced lattes and **Origins** serves healthy, delicious food. The trick is to find the entrance and solve the maze that is Taikang Road!" Don't be afraid to get lost, she urges. "You'll see Shanghai grannies exercising amid crumbling old buildings, contrasting with monster skyscrapers plastered with gold and glitz."

The Bund and beyond

The Bund, once the city's financial centre, faces its successor – **Pudong** – across the **Huangpu River**. Today the Bund's stately old bank buildings house some of Shanghai's best restaurants and upscale clubs. The buildings are sedate, European, classical. Pudong's architecture is dramatic, exciting, innovative. Ride the elevator 100 storeys up the newly completed **World Financial Center** to the Earth's highest observation platform. A fun way to get there is through the **Bund-Pudong Tunnel**, a cheesy, five-minute 'thrill ride' on a little silver train with psychedelic light effects, voice-overs and music.

Barter for bargains

Street vendors sell 'designer' everything. "Put on your bargaining face," warns Kirsty. "If you pay \$100 for something in Canada, you should expect to pay about 100 RMB (informally known as the yuan) at a market or on the street." Sad looks might influence you to allow a bit more for inflation, she admits! For more traditional shopping (don't barter in regular stores), head to **Nanjing East Pedestrian Road**. It's especially fun at night, and these stores don't close until late – really late!

Old Shanghai

It's China's most cosmopolitan city, but old attractions survive, like the **Temple of the Jade Buddha**, the **Yuyuan Gardens** (a magnificent Ming dynasty classical garden) and – on Shanghai's perimeter – the 400-year-old 'water village' of **Zhu Jia Jiao** with pretty stone bridges and narrow streets. Nearby is **Heritage Village for Arts and Culture** in Qingpu County. In town, **Shanghai Museum** boasts a prized collection of bronzes.

Eats and acrobats

Acrobatic shows are renowned, and well worth watching. After the show, Shanghai cuisine will be sure to please global palates, but for a traditional food treat check out **Ling Long Ge Restaurant**, 2nd Floor, 951 Hongxu Road (www.ning-long-ge.com, T: 86-21-32071177). Look for **Da Zha Xie**, a crab found in the Yangtze River and best eaten during the late fall or early winter months. Crispy chicken is another local favourite.

A CIVIC MARVEL

The city is a civic marvel. From its futuristic international airport, the world's fastest train – a maglev, propelled by electro-magnetic levitation – whisk you to downtown Pudong in eight minutes, a 30-kilometre journey that would take close to an hour by car. Fitting, isn't it, that Shanghai won the bid for World Expo in 2010? "There are so many interesting places in Shanghai," says Kirsty. "It's a great city and I love showing it off to visitors."

Peter Dominic serves up some Shanghai surprises

Shanghai, China



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New York on a Shoestring Budget

A New York minute is full of incredible experiences and the best way to enjoy them is by walking and exploring the city. The most remarkable feature is the beautiful architecture. Everywhere one looks in **Manhattan** there are stately buildings, majestic statues and state-of-the-art structures. However, to really discover New York, visitors need to delve into the heart of its unique neighbourhoods. Each street is full of interesting people and places; you can spend days enjoying the sights and sounds of this exciting city by walking around. But, if time is tight and you want to take in a number of places, it's a good idea to use public transit. The system takes a little getting used to, but the extensive network of subways and buses covers every corner of the city. US\$25 buys you an unlimited-use MetroCard for a week and is well worth the investment.

A great starting point is **TriBeCa**, which stretches from Canal Street south to Vesey Street. It is a charming residential area of 19th-century historic townhouses, old warehouses converted into multi-million-dollar lofts, cobblestone streets, small parks and playgrounds as well as some of New York's hottest restaurants, including **Nobu** and the **Tribeca Grill**, co-owned by Robert De Niro, and a great place to spot celebrities while enjoying delectable food. You'll also find unique stores, art galleries and lots of neighbourhood cafés and restaurants.

GREENWICH VILLAGE

As you continue the journey north on **Sixth Avenue** you are immersed in what once was the heart of Bohemia for American poets, writers, singers and wannabes. The small area on the west side is **Greenwich Village**. What was once a mecca for artists and musicians has become home to Hollywood stars. Sarah Jessica Parker, Liv Tyler and Julianne Moore recently moved into the area and top designers such as Marc Jacobs have occupied some of the small storefront locations, changing the culture of this famous area. Among all the high-priced designer wear there are a few second-hand shops with incredible finds. **Sixty-six Perry Street** is one of the main tourist

A \$25 MetroCard, good walking shoes and a sense of adventure are all you need for a true taste of the Big Apple
Franca Iuele



©ISTOCKPHOTO/TERRAXPLORE

attractions in the Village; this original brownstone was Carrie Bradshaw's home in *Sex and the City*, where today busloads of fans make their pilgrimage to walk on these famous steps. Although much of the essence of the Village has changed, it is still home to some of the best jazz clubs in New York. **Blue Note** and **The Village Vanguard**, along with a collection of new clubs, are still the best bets to catch some live jazz any night of the week.

LITTLE ITALY

The heart of Little Italy is the un-Italian sounding **Mulberry Street**. The Italian immigrants who made this area famous at the turn of the century have long since gone but the area still retains its charm. Landmarks worth visiting include **Old St. Patrick's Church**, which was the first cathedral to be built in New York, and the **Police Building**. Visit in September and partake in the **Feast of San Gennaro**. During this 10-day 'Festa', Mulberry Street is renamed **Via San Gennaro** and decked out with lights and banners, just like cities in Italy. A procession of the statue of San Gennaro and other Catholic relics parades through the streets and, once again, Italian-Americans flock to this area to enjoy traditional foods of all types, open air concerts and to dance a few *tarantellas*.

LOWER EAST SIDE

Once home to many different waves of immigrants, the Lower East Side runs along **Houston** and **Canal** streets. The **Tenement Museum**, located at **97 Orchard Street**, brings to life the struggles and sacrifices faced by new immigrants who landed at Ellis Island and made their way to the Lower East Side to start their new lives in the land of opportunity. The poverty-stricken area gave rise to organized crime, starting with the Irish gangs, then the Jewish mob and eventually the Italian Mafia. If you're a fan of *The Sopranos* and mob trivia, there are a number of tours of the neighbourhood that take you to 'hot' crime spots. Today, like every other part of Manhattan, the Lower East Side has undergone a lot of changes and is now home to many trendy bars, chic restaurants and funky boutiques. Crowds of mostly young people make their way here at night, so getting a seat at local restaurants or bars is sometimes tricky.

First-time visitors to New York tend to flock to main attractions like **Times Square**, the **Empire State Building**, **Broadway**, **Wall Street** and **Ground Zero**. While these are wonderful and worthwhile destinations, to get the real essence of New York, make sure you explore the neighbourhoods of Manhattan and discover how the natives live and flourish in this bustling place they call home. □

CRUISE TRENDS: WHAT'S HOT

DEBRA CONKEY

Adventure travellers zip-line from tree to tree in exotic locales like Costa Rica, the Caribbean and Mexico. But now you can zip-line across an open-air atrium 16 storeys above the ocean – nine decks above the ‘Boardwalk’ – on Royal Caribbean’s newest 5,400-passenger megaships *Oasis of the Seas* and *Allure of the Seas*, set to sail in December 2009 and summer 2010, respectively.

Perhaps you’re drawn to more intimate cultural and culinary adventures – a hot trend in travel – like small ship river cruises led by travel journalist and television host **Burt Wolf** on **Avalon Waterways**. His 2009 series of European river cruises – which help support public broadcasting – include regional wine and culinary tastings, pairing food and wine, and European architectural history of the ports visited. In 2010 Avalon Waterways will be adding two new ships in Europe and introducing a three-night **‘Taste of the Danube’** cruise for first-time river cruisers that starts at a remarkable \$949. Wolf will host his **‘Romantic Rhine’** cruises on one of those new ships as well.

Or how about something tiny, but epic? One of **Norwegian Cruise Line’s** new *Norwegian Epic* offerings will include 100-square-foot ultra-modern studio staterooms for the penny pinchers among us. But the lowest-category cabin has some special touches: rooms feature changeable mood lights and large round windows overlooking the corridor – plus private access to The Living Room lounge, which features a bar, two large TV screens and comfy seating.

Speaking of penny-pinching, due to the sinking economy prices are dropping to new lows, whether on a luxury liner, river cruise, megaliner, yacht, small ship, sailing vessel or adventure steamer. Some are throwing in incentives like two-for-one air and free upgrades. The key is to book as early as you can for the best cabin selection and often the best price – that is, if you want to sail on a specific itinerary and date during high season (summer, holidays, spring break).

And yes, there may be deals 30 to 90 days before the sailing date, but your dream cruise may be sold out during high season, or you may get a cabin like the one I was stuck with on one of my first cruises years ago – underneath the galley, where a metal table rolled back and forth with each sway of the ship. It sounded like a bowling alley above my head – all night long – and they couldn’t move us because the ship was sold out. Or you may get a nice space, but at a higher cost when the lower categories sell out.

Travel agent cruise specialists recommend booking nine to 12 months in advance – and longer for specialty and inaugural cruises. But if you’d prefer to wait until the last minute (30 to 60 days in advance), and can be flexible about the ship, types of cabins and itinerary, they can help you sort through the discount madness. □



Royal Caribbean
Oasis of the Seas
Launch:
December 2009

WHAT'S UNIQUE

Largest ship in the world, accommodates 5,400 guests on 16 decks. (*Allure of the Seas*, to launch in summer 2010, will equal its size.) Features seven 'neighbourhoods' at sea – including tree-filled Central Park and the Boardwalk promenade with a hand-carved, full-size carousel – all designed so guests can seek a variety of experiences. Two flowriders for bodysurfing and flowsurfing. Multi-level, urban-style loft suites with balcony and concierge service. Two-bedroom, two-bath suites (sleep up to eight) with balcony and views of the AquaTheater amphitheatre, and similar cabins with views of other 'neighbourhoods.' Rising Tide bar that slowly rises and falls within three decks.

ITINERARIES

December 2009 through April 2010: Seven-night Eastern Caribbean – Fort Lauderdale, Nassau (Bahamas), St. Thomas, St. Maarten. Departing **December 1, 2009**, a special four-night voyage to celebrate the launch of Royal Caribbean's new Labadee private beach paradise in Haiti. Beginning **May 2010**, alternating seven-night Western Caribbean (Fort Lauderdale, Haiti, Jamaica, Cozumel) and Eastern Caribbean.

Celebrity Cruises
Celebrity Equinox
Launch:
July 31, 2009

The same innovative features as sister *Celebrity Solstice*: half-acre Lawn Club (croquet, bocce and golf). Live glass-blowing shows developed with the Corning Museum of Glass. Ten dining venues, including French, Asian and Italian. New shows in partnership with Poet Theatricals. Spa-inspired AquaClass staterooms.

Starts with an eight-night soft-launch on **July 31**, round trip from Southampton, England through the Norwegian fjords, calling on Stavanger, Flåm, Geiranger and Oslo. Sailing **August 8**, 10-night 'Best of Europe' inaugural voyage from Southampton to Paris/Normandy (via Le Havre) and Cherbourg, France; Vigo, Cartagena and Barcelona, Spain; Lisbon, Portugal; and Gibraltar, ending in Rome (via Civitavecchia), Italy. Series of 13-night 'Ancient Empires' voyages from **August 18 through October 23** round trip from Rome (Naples/Capri; Athens/Piraeus; Rhodes, Greece; Ephesus/Kusadasi, Turkey) and two new ports, Haifa and Ashdod, Israel. Includes overnight stay in Alexandria, Egypt.

Silversea
Silver Spirit
Launch:
December 2009

Largest ship in the fleet (540 guests) and the first to be built in eight years. Cabins all have ocean-view suites, most with verandahs. Butler service for all guests (introduced to all ships in 2009). What's new: a larger spa (7,300 square feet), Stars modern-day supper club and Seishin Japanese restaurant. Largest suites in the fleet, a resort-style pool, four whirlpools and a choice of six dining venues.

December 23: 'Holiday Spirit' Maiden Voyage (11 days Barcelona to Lisbon). **January 3:** Maiden crossing (16 days Lisbon to Fort Lauderdale). On **January 21, 2010**, will embark on a 91-day Grand Inaugural Voyage, sailing to South America from Fort Lauderdale southward to Rio for Carnaval, around Cape Horn and along the Mexican Riviera. Guests can personalize their voyage by selecting whether to disembark in Los Angeles, travel through the Panama Canal and return round trip to Fort Lauderdale, or continue up America's colonial coast to New York City.

Norwegian Cruise Line
Norwegian Epic
Launch:
May 2010

Largest Norwegian Cruise Line Freestyle ship, carries 4,200 guests. All outside staterooms have balconies and chic New Wave curved architecture. Five nightclubs include the industry's first Ice Bar, the adults-only POSH Beach Club, the private-access Halo Uber Bar at the top of the ship, Bliss Ultra Lounge with a four-lane bowling alley and adults-only Spice H2O at the aft pool deck. Three 'private access' stateroom complexes:

1. Ultra-modern urban studios – slightly smaller than standard inside rooms – have exclusive card access to The Living Room lounge;
2. Spa suites access 'a complete spa vacation at sea';
3. The top two decks contain the 'largest ship-within-a-ship at sea' complex of 60 villas and suites, where guests have exclusive access to the Courtyard Villa – a pool, two whirlpools, gym, saunas, sundeck, indoor/outdoor dining, bar/nightclub and concierge lounge.

Following a series of inaugural events in Europe and the U.S., the ship will sail year-round from Miami to the Caribbean beginning **summer 2010**, offering alternating seven-day Western and Eastern Caribbean voyages through **April 2011**. The Western Caribbean itinerary includes stops in Costa Maya, Mexico; Roatán, Bay Islands, Honduras; and Cozumel, Mexico. The Eastern Caribbean itinerary includes stops in Philipsburg, St. Maarten; St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands; and Nassau, Bahamas.



Minjiang River flows past a temple near Chengdu



Tributary stream of Yangtze River, Chang Jiang

After the Flood: Cruising the Yangtze River

You've heard of a stairway to Heaven? On a recent **Yangtze River** cruise in China I found a stairway to Hell. Thankfully, a chairlift had been provided to save us from climbing the 200 steps. This is **Fengdu**, a mountain 'ghost town' remodelled into China's Underworld.

On Day Two of our four-day cruise Fengdu was about to prove that there's still plenty to see, despite the controversial flooding of an area the length of California. This year, the massive **Three Gorges Dam** project raises water levels again to their final 91 metres above the original river (175 metres above sea level), creating a reservoir that submerges 632 square kilometres of land.

Flooding has created a different Yangtze cruise, yet it remains a great experience. I took the voyage last fall, before water levels had reached their maximum, and asked our river guide Dan how things had changed. He pointed out submerged villages on a map.

"The young people were happy to go to new homes – you can see their new towns in the hills. Everything is modern with electricity, supermarkets, pedestrian streets and even parks. But the old people – they didn't always want to move. They liked their old villages." I ask Dan if he misses the old Yangtze.

"It's sad to think people won't see some of the things that are now underwater but there's an upside: we can reach parts of the river that we couldn't before, and see different things."

He explained the route to me: "We cruise 190 kilometres to the dam itself, traverse a five-stage lock – you'll love that, it's fascinating – and then cruise 43 kilometres to Yichang where we'll disembark."

We boarded the boat at **Chongqing**, a 90-minute flight from Beijing. Definitely no high-tech here. Baggage handling contrasted dramatically with the technology and development we'd seen so far, and even the elderly porters carried an

Christine Potter finds there's still plenty to see along the 'new' Yangtze

astonishing load of luggage on long poles balanced across their shoulders.

I loved my 'stateroom.' The balcony (each of the 153 rooms has one) was my eye on the Yangtze as we floated downstream, showing close-up views of river traffic: *sampans* with old, belching motors (often home to entire families), hovercraft, container ships and fishermen casting lines from their boats. Our cruise took in only a tiny fragment of the world's third-longest river, approximately 6,300 kilometres long.

The boat felt like a miniature cruise ship with tiny shops, a fitness centre, two restaurants and a spa (with somewhat limited treatments). An observation lounge and a large deck were popular for panoramic sightseeing and for passing through the five-stage lock – an attraction in itself.

A favourite excursion was along **Shennong Stream** and through the Bamboo Gorge, floating in 'pea pod'



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© DAVID HEDE

boats pulled along the bank by men in swimming trunks. (Apparently, they used to shed the bathing suits to pull the boats over shoals and shallows.)

The Shennong is a tributary in the **Lesser Three Gorges** and – thanks to higher water levels – it's now possible to clearly see mysterious 'hanging coffins' high in the steep cliffs. They are believed to be 2,000 to 2,500 years old, but how they were placed so high is a puzzle. This area, we're told earnestly, is yeti country. Scientists from around the world supposedly come to study footprints, teeth, scat and other yetibilia found here.

The chance of sighting the mythical creature fascinated fellow passengers from Australia.

"This cruise was on my 'bucket list' and exceeded my expectations," one of the Aussies told me emphatically. "Those gorges are awesome. But I'd love to see Bigfoot!"

Other passengers came from France, Japan, Taiwan, the UK, and the USA, and while it's not easy to please such a diverse group, our diligent crew pulled it off, and provided good evening entertainment as well. Most of us were happy with the food, which catered mainly to our Western palates, with a few Asian selections included, and a glorious Chinese farewell banquet.

We could relax on board or join a seminar on Chinese language, calligraphy, painting or kite-making. Our kite instructor's magnificent creations were sold in the shop, and I purchased a splendid dragon. (It survived the Yangtze and the flight home, but proved too delicate for boisterous grandchildren.)

The cruise's natural beauty is awe-inspiring, as is the man-made Three Gorges Dam (the world's largest at 185 metres high) and its enormous five-stage lock that carried us from one water level to another. A visit to the Information Centre is a must to understand the world's largest hydroelectric project, which provides flood control as well as vast amounts of clean electricity.

We brought home many impressions from the cruise, but for colourful folklore, Fengdu was a standout experience. Going to this Hell can't be all bad, because you enter it through the **Happiness** and **Good Luck** gates to view ancient temples, pagodas (many built more than 1,800 years ago) and – to my untrained eyes – garish statues.

"We call it Hell because these temples house statues of demons and devils, some dating to the Tang dynasty," explained Connie, our local guide. We crossed the bridge in seven steps to ensure happy afterlives, stroked the fortune symbol for wealth and harmony, gaped at statues of **Naughty Ghost** (said to spank kiddies and write 'naughty' on their foreheads) and **Drunken Ghost**, and trembled in front of the King of Hell in the main temple.

Across the valley, a huge, white Buddha-like countenance dominates the terrain. "This will be the entrance to Heaven," says Connie: "a new attraction to complement Hell."

"But Heaven isn't ready yet," she apologized. "You'll have to come back next year." I'll put it on my bucket list. ▼

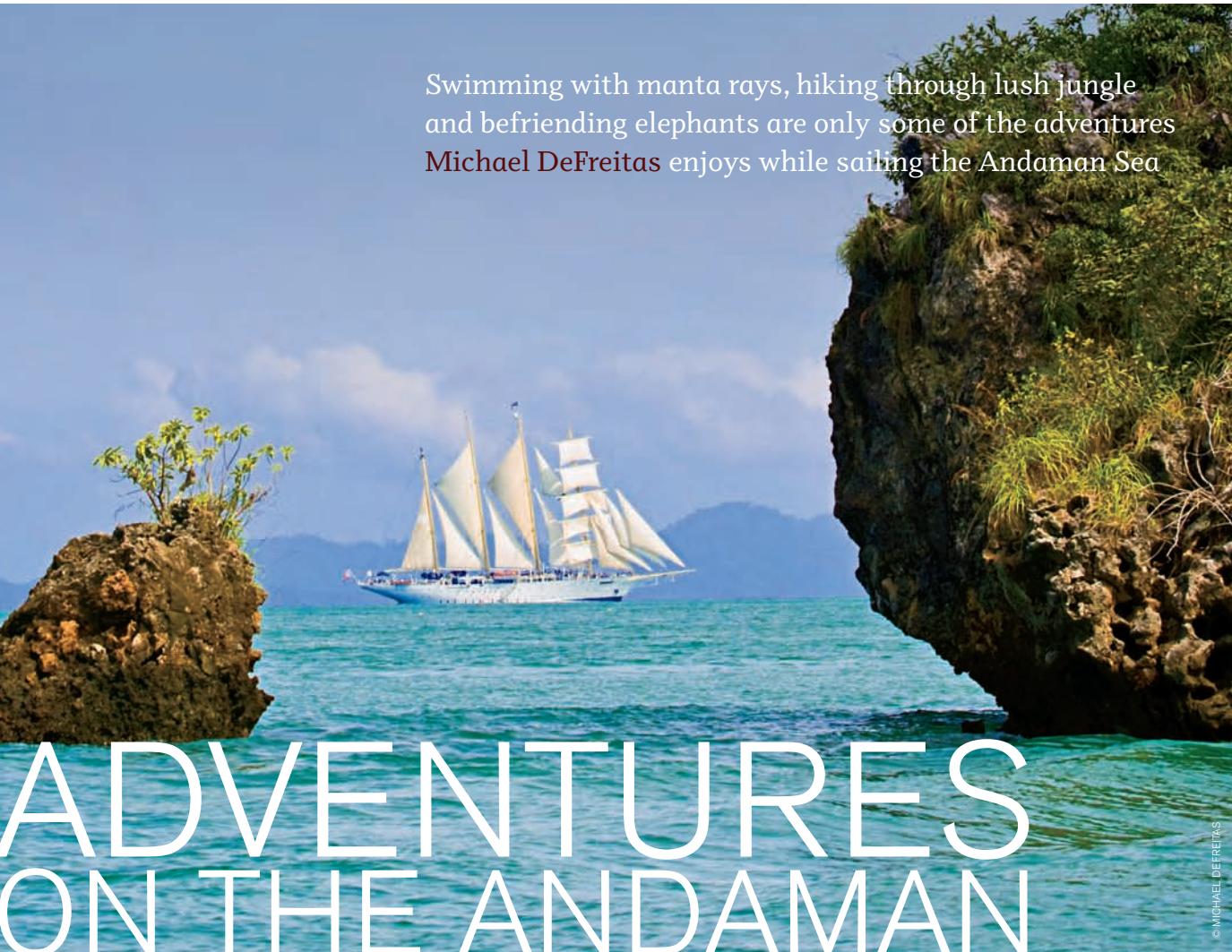
THINGS TO KNOW

ATMs aren't easily found, except in airports. Take traveller's cheques and cash. China's currency is the renminbi (RMB), informally called the yuan. Credit cards are accepted in hotels and large stores.

Visas are required.

May and October are the best cruise months, when the air is clear and temperatures mild.

The cruise is not suitable for those with mobility problems. Docks can be rickety, and steps feature prominently.



Swimming with manta rays, hiking through lush jungle and befriending elephants are only some of the adventures Michael DeFreitas enjoys while sailing the Andaman Sea

ADVENTURES ON THE ANDAMAN

©MICHAEL DEFREITAS

Now don't let those smaller ears fool you – Asian elephants are big. I stood next to my three-metre-tall 'ride' in the hills of **Phuket, Thailand** wondering how I would ever get up on its back and into the seat. As I checked out its wrinkled face, its tennis ball-sized eye met mine and, as if sensing my concern, it raised its massive trunk and patted me gently on the top of my head.

After introducing us to our rides, the guide took us up a hillside behind the greeting hut. A triangular-shaped ramp extended out from the side of the hill and my initial question was answered when my giant friend sauntered up to the ramp. I climbed on board and strapped myself in, and with a gentle nudge from the handler we lumbered off into the rainforest.

Wispy waterfalls and tall trees with immense buttressed bases flanked the trail, and the handler pointed out various animals and plants along the way. An hour later we were back at the ramp and everyone was jabbering about how

much fun it was. Then one of the guides called us over to the balcony of the main building, where we found the elephants lined up below with their trunks reaching up to us.

We were each handed bunches of about a dozen bananas to feed them. I reached over the rail with the treat and my big friend wrapped its trunk around the succulent offering, stuffing the entire bunch into its mouth. A few chews, a gulp and it was ready for more. After swallowing the second bunch, the great beast trumpeted its approval and ambled off.

Our pre-cruise rainforest adventure was a great welcome to Phuket, the pearl of the Andaman Sea. With its lush 30-metre-high tropical rainforests and magnificent palm-lined, white sand beaches, Phuket is Thailand's largest island and main gateway to the turquoise **Andaman Sea**.

JEWELS OF THE ANDAMAN SEA
After boarding our 170-passenger Star Clippers vessel in Phuket's **Patong Bay**,

we hugged Thailand's west coast north to the **Koh Surin Islands** near the border with Myanmar. Some of Thailand's most stunning beaches and reefs fringe these five island jewels. With visibility in the water approaching 40 metres, the islands are ideal for diving and snorkelling. I took advantage of the ship's onboard watersports centre to scuba dive at the world-famous **Richelieu Rock** near **Koh Surin Nua**, while the other guests snorkelled along the shallow reefs of **Koh Surin Thai** island. The plankton-rich waters around 'the Rock' are one of the best places in the world to encounter a manta ray, and I wasn't disappointed. I got within touching distance of one of the huge fish.

In an effort to preserve the islands' natural beauty, in 1981 the Thai government designated them, and the surrounding waters, the **Mu Ko Surin National Park**. Thick jungle blankets most of the uninhabited islands. A small community of 'sea gypsies', or *Moken*, has a temporary village on Koh Surin Nua,

where we joined the other passengers for a wonderful beach barbecue lunch after our dive.

A couple of days later, we sailed into a quiet bay on the south side of **Koh Similan** (Number 8) during a magnificent sunrise. Similan's Malay name means 'nine', thus each of the nine islands has a number as well as a name. Located south of the **Surins** about 84 kilometres northwest of the beach chairs of **Patong Beach**, the remote **Similan Islands** are like giant emeralds, trimmed in ivory, floating in the turquoise sea.

A stunning white sand beach punctuated with smooth giant boulders fringed the bay where we anchored. The island's lush jungle is home to rare crab-eating monkeys, large monitor lizards and a variety of indigenous birds. The well-marked walking trails that criss-cross the island lead to secluded white sand beaches, excellent snorkelling reefs and fabulous rainforest and ocean vistas atop the island's two peaks.

After breakfast I decided to hike up to the top of **Sailing Boat Rock** before the tropical sun got too hot. I clambered up the slippery, muddy trail – it had rained the night before – past lush stands of 10-metre high bamboo and trees smothered in philodendrons and wild orchids. The dramatic panorama of our ship in the bay with the backdrop of surrounding islands made it well worth the climb...and the muddy shoes.

But my most memorable spot was the **Koh Phi Phi Islands** off Phuket's southeast coast. The group's main island, H-shaped **Phi Phi Don**, is little more than a sandy 200-metre-wide isthmus spanning two high limestone ridges.

Tucked away amid the coconut trees between the two luxurious strands of white sand sits the quiet Muslim fishing village of **Ton Sai** (or 'banyan tree') with its mixture of Thai and Malay residents and its brightly decorated long-tail fishing boats bobbing in the calm bay. A fusion of aromas, sounds and colours dazzled me as I wandered the town's narrow sandy streets. Fresh fish and chicken satay, a Malay specialty, sizzled on charcoal barbecues in front of small open-air restaurants, while inside, spicy Thai noodle soup simmered in woks over open fires. Malay and Thai music filled the air outside shops selling brightly coloured sarongs, silk Islamic head coverings and custom shell jewellery. It was difficult to imagine that the entire town was swept away by the devastating 2004 tsunami.

Other popular stopping-off points on our seven-day Andaman Sea adventure included **Koh Ping Gan**, better known as **James Bond Island** from *The Man With the Golden Gun*, the rounded karst limestone formations of **Phang Nga Bay** and Malaysia's **Langkawi Island**.

My Andaman Sea adventure ended all too quickly, but the memories of sails filled with warm ocean breezes, tangerine-coloured sunsets, lush tropical islands, fabulous meals and friendly people will last me a lifetime.

CRUISE LINES SAILING THE ANDAMAN SEA

Only **Star Clippers** (www.starclippers.com) offers exclusive Andaman Sea itineraries. **Seabourn** (www.seabourn.com) offers Andaman Sea stops on some of their Southeast Asia itineraries, but are unable to visit the smaller island groups with their larger vessels. □

MUST SEE MUST DO: BANGKOK

All long-haul international flights enter and depart Thailand through Bangkok Airport, so why not spend a few days before or after your cruise exploring this ancient city's exotic palaces, temples and markets.



TOP TO BOTTOM PHI PHI LAY ISLAND; 'LADY'S SLIPPER' ORCHIDS; COOKING FISH AT THE MARKET; A YELLOW-BILLED HORNBILL





ISRAEL: LAND OF SURPRISES

MICHAEL DEFREITAS

DE-LI-CIOUS!

The single, three-note chant drifted toward me across Tel Aviv's crowded open-air Carmel Market. It was almost noon and I was getting hungry. The aromas of freshly baked bagels, pastries and dried fruit tested my willpower from every direction. But I was determined to find the hearty baritone source of that chant and pressed deeper into the market.

DE-LI-CIOUS!

With renewed vigour I hurried down a side alley in the direction of the chant. A few metres later, the tantalizing aroma of freshly grilled meats sent my rumbling stomach into overdrive.

"You look like you could use some lunch," quipped the burly Arab gentleman behind the grill. A little embarrassed, I surveyed his offerings. The problem was I only had one stomach, and what I wanted to try would require at least three.

"Lamb, chicken, beef or veggie," he prodded.

All I could offer was "Surprise me."

In a flash he picked up a pita and started stuffing it with bits of everything, pausing a few times to add different sauces. I hastily paid for the sandwich and a glass of freshly squeezed pomegranate juice and dashed to a nearby table.

The first bite went down so fast I hardly tasted it. But with each mouthful, the combination of meats and salad, punctuated with sweet, hot and tangy sauces, challenged my taste buds, turning my lunch break into a series of exciting bite-sized surprises.

As good as it was, my Carmel Market foray was only an appetizer for my first visit to Israel – one of two memorable bookends that bracketed a 10-day tour filled with surprises.

TO MOST TRAVELLERS, ISRAEL IS SYNONYMOUS WITH THE HOLY LAND AND RELIGIONS, BUT THE TINY STATE'S UNIQUE CULTURE AND HISTORY ARE FULL OF OTHER SURPRISES

SURPRISE, SURPRISE!

Besides its obvious religious attractions, tiny Israel is chock full of surprises. From its sprawling cities along the fertile Mediterranean coast to its *kibbutzim* in the high Judean Desert, Israel offers a wide range of exciting experiences.

Although the country celebrates only its 60th anniversary this year, it is a beguiling time capsule containing more than 4,000 years of history and culture. A country where ancient Roman ruins, Crusader cities, Turkish baths and mosques share the landscape with centuries-old Christian and Jewish religious sites. And a fascinating cultural melting pot of Middle Eastern, African and European influences found nowhere else in the region.

After spending a couple of days in modern **Tel Aviv**, with its sprawling five-star beach resorts, we drove north along the coast to the ancient Roman city of **Caesarea**, built by **Herod the Great** between 25–13 B.C. The remains of the original harbour now lie underwater, but a large portion of the old city has been unearthed and restored. As I sat in the seats that cradled the ancient hippodrome track I reflected on the chariot race sequence in one of my all-time favourite movies, *Ben Hur*. I was especially impressed, and a bit jealous, at how close the first-row spectators sat to all the action.

A few kilometres north of Caesarea, we stopped for lunch at the **Tishbi-Baron Wine Cellars**. Another delightful surprise, given that none of us knew Israel had a thriving wine industry. Baron Edmond James de Rothschild founded the country's modern wine industry in 1882. Today, Israel boasts five wine regions and dozens of non-kosher brands.

I sampled a glass of their fruity and elegant Tishbi Estate 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon, then finished off a delicious lunch of Jibni and Ma-Tom cheeses, homemade knish and freshly baked pita bread dipped in Israeli virgin olive oil, with a few glasses of their delicate fruit-flavoured Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. Needless to say, I was in excellent spirits on the bus ride to Haifa.

BAHÁ'I, BATHS AND BRAVERY

Nestled along a large bay near the Lebanese border, the quiet town of **Haifa** blankets the slopes of Mount Carmel. The city is Israel's main cruise port and the centre of the **Bahá'i** faith. Its top attraction is the magnificent **Bahá'i Gardens**, a series of geometric garden terraces that cascade down **Mount**

Carmel to the huge gold-domed **Shrine of the Báb** (the final resting place of Bahá'i faith founder Bahá'u'lláh). Even on our slightly overcast day, the panoramic view of Haifa, the gardens and the sun glistening off the golden dome from atop Mount Carmel's **Louis Promenade** was still breathtaking.

We spent the next morning nearby in the ancient walled city of **Akko** on the northern promontory of **Haifa Bay**. Over the centuries, the old Roman city changed hands many times. As a result, Akko is home to Arab markets and mosques, Jewish temples, Crusader churches, the Templars Tunnel and even a British fort. UNESCO designated the Old City a **World Heritage Site** in 2001 to help preserve its distinct heritage.

One of the city's rare treasures is the restored Turkish bathhouse, **Hammam al-Basha**, built by El-Jazar in 1795. Now a museum, the main steam room features beams of sunlight streaming down through small openings in the ceiling onto lifelike bronze figures depicting bathhouse activities. The scene was so realistic I started perspiring.

Later that afternoon as we headed east up into the Western Galilee mountains towards Tiberias it started to rain. We made a brief and wet stop in **Nazareth**, the childhood home of Jesus, to visit the **Basilica of the Annunciation** and the **Church of St. Joseph**. Enshrined in the centre of the Basilica is the cave where the Virgin Mary received the news from Gabriel that she would give birth to Jesus.

As we descended the eastern slopes of **Mount Tabor** to the **Sea of Galilee** – the lowest freshwater lake on Earth (209 metres below sea level), the clouds parted briefly and beams of sunlight, like giant spotlights, lit sections of the lake. Sadly, the inspirational light show ended before any of us could get off the bus and snap a picture.

The next day the skies were clear and bright as we motored south along the western shore of the lake to **Beit She'an National Park**. The park encompasses the ruins of the most important Roman city in northern Israel. The sight of such an intact Roman city in the Middle East was remarkable enough, but it was the acoustics in the 2,000-year-old, 7,000-seat amphitheatre that really surprised me.

I was admiring the sculptures near the top row of seats when I heard voices behind me. I turned expecting to see some of my travelling buddies, but I was alone. Then I spotted three German tourists on the stage about 100 metres below me.





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FRESH BREAD IN THE ARAB QUARTER OF JERUSALEM; VENDORS AND SHOPPERS AT THE CARMEL OPEN-AIR MARKET; COLOURFUL BEADS FOR SALE AROUND SUQ EL QATTANIN; TISHBI ESTATE 2005 CABERNET SAUVIGNON; A RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN JERUSALEM.

© MICHAEL DEFREITAS

I knew they were German because I could hear every word they were saying.

From Beit She'an we followed the Jordan River south to one of Israel's most revered sites. High atop an isolated mesa overlooking the western shore of the Dead Sea stand the majestic ruins of **Masada** (a Hebrew word meaning 'fortress'). Herod constructed Masada as a refuge and winter palace during his reign (37–4 B.C.) and it remained in Roman hands until the Sicarii Jews captured it during the Great Jewish Revolt in 66 A.D.

The Sicarii (named for the curved daggers they carried) held the city until Flavius Silva arrived with the mighty Roman 10th Legion in 74 A.D. As I surveyed the intimidating Roman encampment sites surrounding the base of the mesa, I was overcome with sadness and pride for Masada's 936 inhabitants. Despite overwhelming odds, they managed to hold out for three months, but when the Romans finally smashed through the main gate, all they found were bodies. The Sicarii had opted for mass suicide instead of certain slavery. Today, Masada remains a symbol of Jewish hope, heroism and defiance.

A CAPITAL IDEA

Of course, no visit to Israel would be complete without exploring the country's capital, **Jerusalem**. No other place on Earth holds such spiritual significance to so many religions as the capital's one-square-kilometre **Old City**. Not only is it the holiest site in Judaism and Christianity, but the magnificent **Dome of the Rock** mosque is Islam's third-holiest site (after Mecca and Medina).

For three days I wandered the narrow cobblestone alleyways of the Old City's Jewish, Arab and Christian quarters. I savoured falafels (too many!) and sipped strong Arab coffee at a tiny café in **Suq el-Qattanin**. I mingled with a group of American pilgrims retracing Christ's steps along the **Via Dolorosa** (the Stations of the Cross street) up to the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre** (believed to be where Jesus was crucified), where I lit candles for my dead sister and dad. I even braved the 178-step spiral staircase to the top of the bell tower in the **Lutheran Church of the Redeemer**.

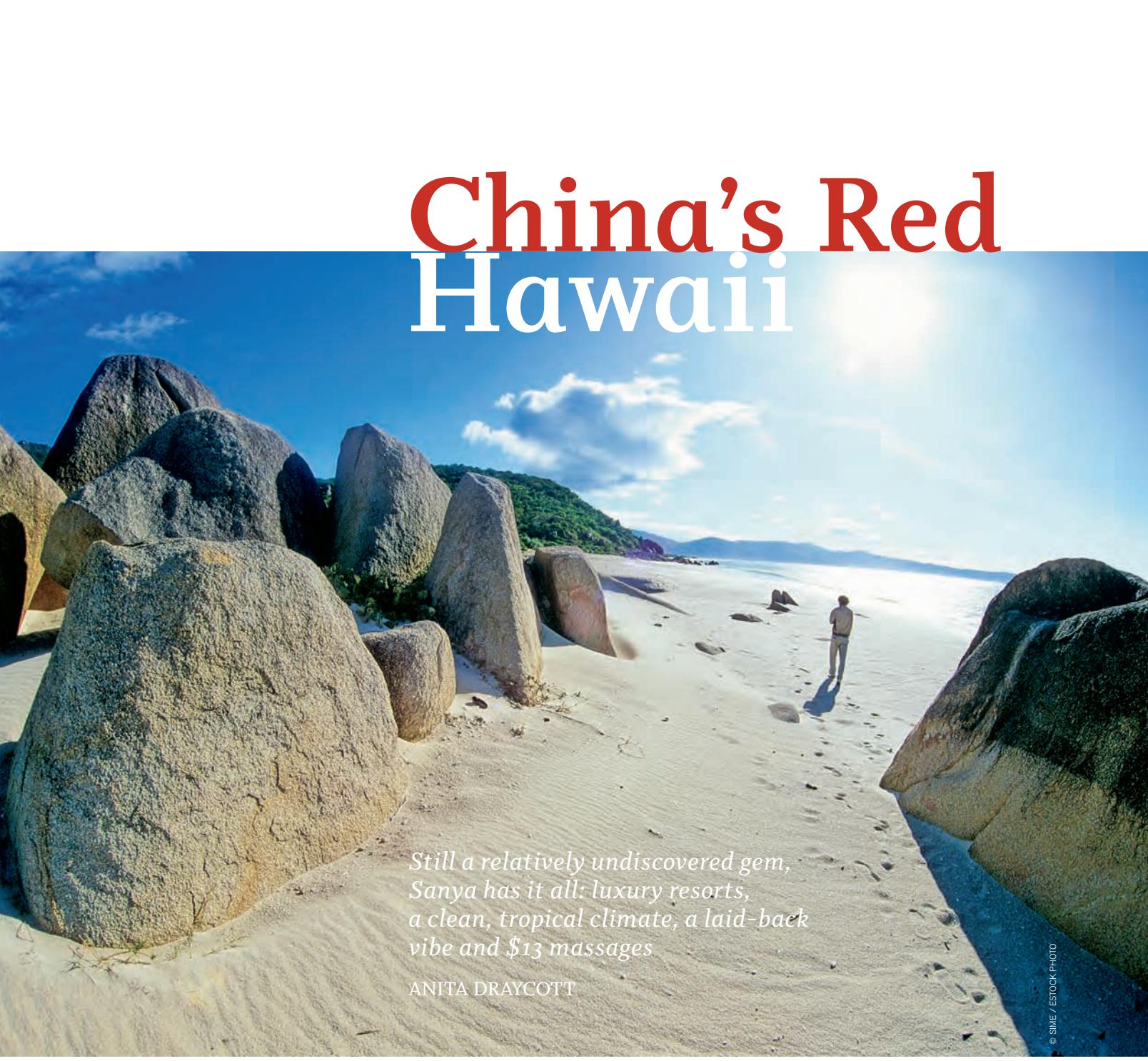
But my most memorable experience in the Old City occurred on my last afternoon. It was nearly sunset and I wasn't having much luck finding a high enough vantage point to photograph evening prayers at the Western Wall. I stopped two teenagers to ask if they could recommend a good spot for photos and found out they were Jewish exchange students from the Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto.

Five minutes later I was setting up my tripod on the roof of their school with just enough time to snap a few shots. The remarkable juxtaposition of Jewish worshippers praying along the warmly lit Western Wall below the cobalt blue Temple Mount mosque provided the perfect companion bookend to my visit.

Israel has had its fair share of problems in its short history, but it remains one of the safest and most welcoming countries in the Middle East. Although most travellers are drawn to the country for its religious significance, those willing to explore will find many unforgettable surprises. **v**

Air Canada offers daily non-stop flights between Toronto and Tel Aviv. Gateways International offers customized tours into Israel. Please contact our agency for further details.

China's Red Hawaii



Still a relatively undiscovered gem, Sanya has it all: luxury resorts, a clean, tropical climate, a laid-back vibe and \$13 massages

ANITA DRAYCOTT

My view from the deluxe suite at the Yalong Bay Mangrove Tree Resort in Sanya on Hainan Island overlooks swaying palms and a turquoise South China Sea. Around the open-air lobby and infinity pool, amenities include a Balinese-style spa, cigar and wine lounge, pearl boutique and three gourmet restaurants. Pinch me. Am I really in a communist country?

In his book *Getting Rich First: Life in a Changing China*, Shanghai-based journalist Duncan Hewitt states, "Chinese society has been dragged from Stalinism to the extreme fringes of capitalism in less than 20 years. To live in China in the early years

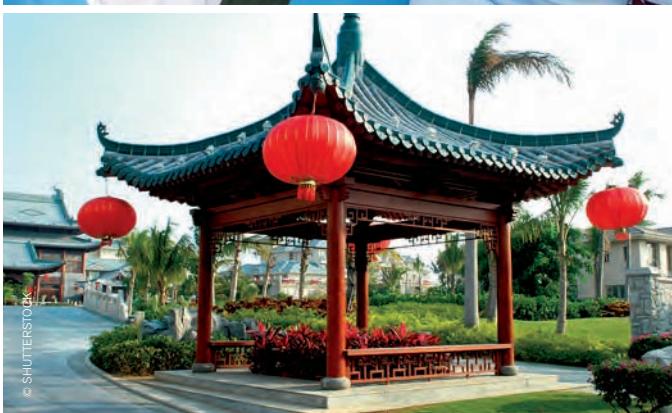
of the 21st century is to be surrounded by change on a scale and at a pace arguably unprecedented in human history. The whole value system has been shaken, but people are expected to believe in communism."

Indeed materialism, not Maoism, appears to be the favoured doctrine these days, especially here in Sanya, dubbed the Hawaii of China and boasting the country's cleanest air.

The pace of development is mind-boggling. On the way from the modern airport, where a Dolce & Gabbana fashion video is shown on high-definition televi-

sion, Lydia, our guide, informs us that the government intends to build 50 golf courses in the next 20 years. I recall that during Chairman Mao's regime, golf in the People's Republic was banned as he deemed it decadent and elitist.

On Yalong Bay's strip of beach I count about a dozen five-star hotels. The government has also signed a deal for a seven-star hotel with Sir Ka-shing Li, one of the world's wealthiest men, who owns much of the real estate in Hong Kong. Signs inform me that the Four Seasons and Mandarin Oriental are coming.



Outdoor dining; private massage area; female golf caddies; Chinese Pavilion.

WHEN YOU GO

Fly Air Canada from Toronto to Hong Kong and Cathay Pacific's Dragon Air from Hong Kong to Sanya.

CHINESE NATIONAL TOURIST OFFICE

Information about how to acquire a visa to visit China is available on their website. www.tourismchina-ca.com

The Russians are also coming – in hordes. So are the Koreans, who enjoy the bargain golf, and the well-heeled Chinese from Hong Kong as well as from some of China's designated Special Economic Zones, such as Shenzhen. One evening a white stretch limousine picks us up and takes us to He Sheng Tang, a combination spa/hospital where VIPs such as the president of Kazakhstan spent a month. Treatments for fatty liver, gout and a myriad of ailments are available, but I opt for a traditional massage performed by a young girl with fingers of steel who probably weighs about 49 pounds. She contorts me into pretzel positions and walks along my spine. It is probably the best massage I've ever had, for about \$13.

The funny thing is that most Canadians have never heard of Sanya. And, until last winter, that included me – even after 20-some years of globetrotting and travel writing. But a few of us were planning a golf trip to play Hong Kong's Kau Sai Chau North and South courses and sample some of Mission Hills' 10 designer tracks in Shenzhen. With Sanya just one hour away via Dragon Air we decided to include it in our Asian swing.

Not far from our hotel, we head out to the Sun Valley Golf Course, its grand clubhouse complete with an indoor waterfall, extensive wine cellar, sushi bar and spa. The meticulously manicured 18-hole course, set in the lush Hongxia Valley with views of mountains and the South China Sea, winds up with a grand (and I do mean grand) finale – the 828-yard 18th, the only par-six in Asia.

We also play Yalong Bay Golf Club, the first in Sanya designed by the prestigious Robert Trent Jones firm. Along with 98 deadly bunkers, there are other hazards. My caddie informs me that a few months ago he discovered an 18-foot cobra coiled around the toilet in the halfway house. Yikes!

After our game we stop in for an organic tea-tasting ceremony and then buy some baubles at the pearl emporium. Cocktails are at the Crowne Plaza Hotel on our beach strip, where contestants for the Miss World beauty pageant strut their stuff around the free-form pool.

Back at the Mangrove Tree, a reflexology foot massage on the beach costs \$12 for one hour. We opt for dinner at the resort's Thai restaurant. Thanks to the tropical climate and the South China Sea teeming with fish, exotic fruits, veggies and fabulous seafood are part of the healthy cuisine here in 'Red Hawaii.'

There is, unfortunately, another side of life here that's far from posh. In our travels around the island we pass dismal hovels, rickety rickshaws, mangy dogs and labourers toiling with water buffalo in rice paddies. While tourists are enjoying the good life, many of these poor locals will probably never own a television or have modern plumbing. I am reminded of just how lucky we are, and am grateful for the opportunity to experience Sanya as we have.

On our last day, Lydia takes us to the Li and Miao Cultural Villages, where we get a glimpse of life before infinity pools and sushi bars. Thirty-seven different ethnic groups live on the island. The Han people are the most populous, followed by the Li, Miao and Hui minorities. Drumming, dancing with bamboo poles, swallowing fire and walking on shards of glass are all part of the show, as are intricate weaving displays and a chance to participate in some local traditions. The Li marriage ceremony, for example, requires potential grooms to wear silly hats, sing and make fools of themselves – but all in good fun. It's a reminder of the dramatic changes that have transpired in this part of the world. And that raises the question, What's next? □

Singapore

Asia's Small Wonder

MICHELE
SPONAGLE

© WILLIAM CHO / GETTY



*Immerse yourself in Asian culture the easy way.
Singapore is Westernized, but still maintains
all the great things you love about Asia,
from delicious food to amazing shopping.*

Intimidated by Asia? Have no fear. If you're nervous about the thought of going to Asia, take a step with confidence toward **Singapore**. It blends the best of Eastern and Western worlds and adds its own unique twist. The result is a destination that isn't overwhelming for rookie travellers to Asia, but still offers many cultural riches. Think fabulous food, shopping, incredible spas, hotels and even beaches. It's all here on an island that is just over 700 square kilometres in size.

There's so much to love about Singapore. It's a microcosm of Asia, combining the cultures of China, Malaysia and India. For those interested in great cuisine, this mix means heavenly meals. On restaurant menus, you'll find plenty of **Peranakan** dishes, rooted in the Malay and Chinese communities that were once British colonies. Look for chili or black pepper crab, especially at seafood restaurants along the east coast. This is a must-try, but messy, experience. Whole cooked crabs are generously covered in sauce and served on newspapers. With hands, metal utensils and willpower, eat your way through the mound, smack your lips and clean up afterwards.

Order a bowl of *laksa* as well. It's probably the best-known Singaporean dish and is a delicious blend of noodles and coconut-based curry broth, topped with shrimp and other types of seafood. When a snack is all you need, try *popiah*, the Malay version of spring rolls, fresh or fried. The thin rice wrappers encase fresh ingredients like fried tofu, long beans, egg and boiled turnips. For dessert, try the local ice cream. It's a bit different from our own with unusual flavours like durian (a pungent, yet delicious, fruit) and red bean.

Wander over to Little India and immerse yourself in Indian culture. Beautiful temples share space with street stalls selling gorgeous sari fabric, silver bangles and hand-carved trinkets, and with authentic eateries. Watch for the fortune-telling parrot that, with the help of its master, will take a glimpse into your future for a few coins. In this area, fish head curry is the dish to try. It's quite delicious and it may be served on a banana leaf. If you're not sure what your

taste buds are craving, head to one of Singapore's hawker centres (like **Chomp** on Kensington Park Road). For the budget-conscious traveller, these offer fantastic value and quality. Dishes will cost from \$2 to \$5. Unlike some Asian countries, the hygiene and health standards here are very high. Each stall must post a government-issued health certificate with a grade from A to D. You can sample confidently through a range of local foods, from satay to rice dishes (typically eaten for breakfast). The ambience is really no better than a North American mall food court, but the food is truly wonderful. For a unique twist on dining, you can enjoy **sky dining** in a cable car that runs from Singapore to Sentosa Island at an elevation of about 18 storeys high.

When locals aren't eating, they're shopping. It's a national pastime, so revered that it has its own annual festival in June and July. Merchants offer deep discounts to attract travellers, so don't be surprised if a new suitcase is one of the items you need to buy. Store hours are extended until 11 p.m. or midnight. Before you heat up your credit card too much, grab a copy of the local paper and do some comparison shopping to get a feel for prices. Likely you'll find your way to Orchard Road, the major shopping street in Singapore. Take a break at **Miracle Traditional Blind Massage Centre** (150 Orchard Road) for a revitalizing foot massage. Blind practitioners work magic with acupressure for less than \$20 for a 45-minute session. You'll be ready to hit the stores running again!

When you're back in sightseeing mode, visit the giant half lion/half fish statue in **Merlion Park**. The merlion became the symbol of Singapore in 1964. A great way to see it is with a 'bumboat' ride along the river, which has served as a highway for goods coming in from Europe and China since the 14th century. Make sure you take in a performance at the **Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay**. Its funky design features a spike-covered exterior reminiscent of the durian fruit. Like everything in Singapore, the execution of the building is superb and it will be an indelible memory of your vacation in this small, but fascinating, destination. □

ESSENTIAL THINGS TO DO IN SINGAPORE

- 1 Have a Singapore Sling cocktail at the place where it was first created: the **Raffles Hotel**.
- 2 Hit the beach on **Sentosa Island** and bask in the sun along with other tourists.
- 3 Dance until the wee hours of the morning at **Zouk**, one of the world's most famous nightclubs.
- 4 Take home some tips by booking a class at **Sunrice**, a professional cooking academy that will teach you about the various uses of local spices and how to make your own curry paste.
- 5 Ensure good luck throughout the year by visiting the **Fountain of Wealth**, the world's largest, located in **Suntec City**. Walk around the fountain clockwise three times while keeping one hand in contact with the water at all times.
- 6 Visit the **Singapore Zoo** at night. A train takes you through the zoo and illuminates critters that are more active in the evening. It's great fun, especially for the kids, who love to see those glowing eyes in the dark.
- 7 Boost your health with dinner at **Metropole Herbal Restaurant** in **Clarke Quay**. A doctor specializing in Eastern medicine examines your eyes and tongue before prescribing certain herb-infused dishes. As a starter, crispy ginseng roots are a yummy and healthy alternative to peanuts or bread.
- 8 Chill out next to the river on **Robertson Quay**, where locals linger over cold bottles of Tiger beer (the local brew) at this strip of side-by-side venues offering live music and good food.

Victoria Rivers

Stepping into the Covingtons' Manhattan apartment, one is instantly transported to an era when royalty proudly displayed their treasures acquired from distant lands. The sounds of sitar, flute and chimes play softly in the background, and sandalwood incense wafts through the air – telltale signs of their recent visit to India.

RECIPE FOR A JOURNEY

For quintessential globetrotters Suzanne Hall and Jim Covington, home is filled with a collection of travel experiences... decorative reminders of favourite trips to Russia, China, Tahiti and the Czech Republic's Prague, to name but a few. However, it is their trip to India that has made the most indelible mark.

"Being in India is life changing," Suzanne explains. "It's as though a

BEGINNINGS

The Covingtons' introduction to Indian hospitality was **The Imperial**, a luxury hotel in **New Delhi**. A promenade of 24 king palms leads to the entrance of this 231-room historic hotel. Designed by an associate of Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1934, it was instantly deemed Delhi's most luxurious accommodation; many claim it remains so today. The four wings blend Victorian, colonial and informal art deco styling, and the wide hallways display priceless works of art – a collection so extensive that The Imperial is regarded as a 'museum hotel.' Done on an equally grand scale, the guest rooms – among them a 3,000-square-foot suite – are easily the most generous in India. But nowhere was the romantic essence of India better captured than at **Oberoi Hotels & Resorts** – several of its

Treasures

candle has been lit that can never be extinguished."

"Travelling to India has been a lifelong dream," she says, "coloured by reading Indian literature over the past decade – such as *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry.

You could say we were on a mission, so we needed our travel counsellor to design something truly unique," says Suzanne. "Then, too, the distances in India are immense and there is so much to see that we relied on her completely to weave the 'tapestry' together and make it work."

Hall has always been drawn to the spiritual qualities of Indian culture, so **Varanasi** – and other sacred sites – were a must. And shopping? Well, of course!

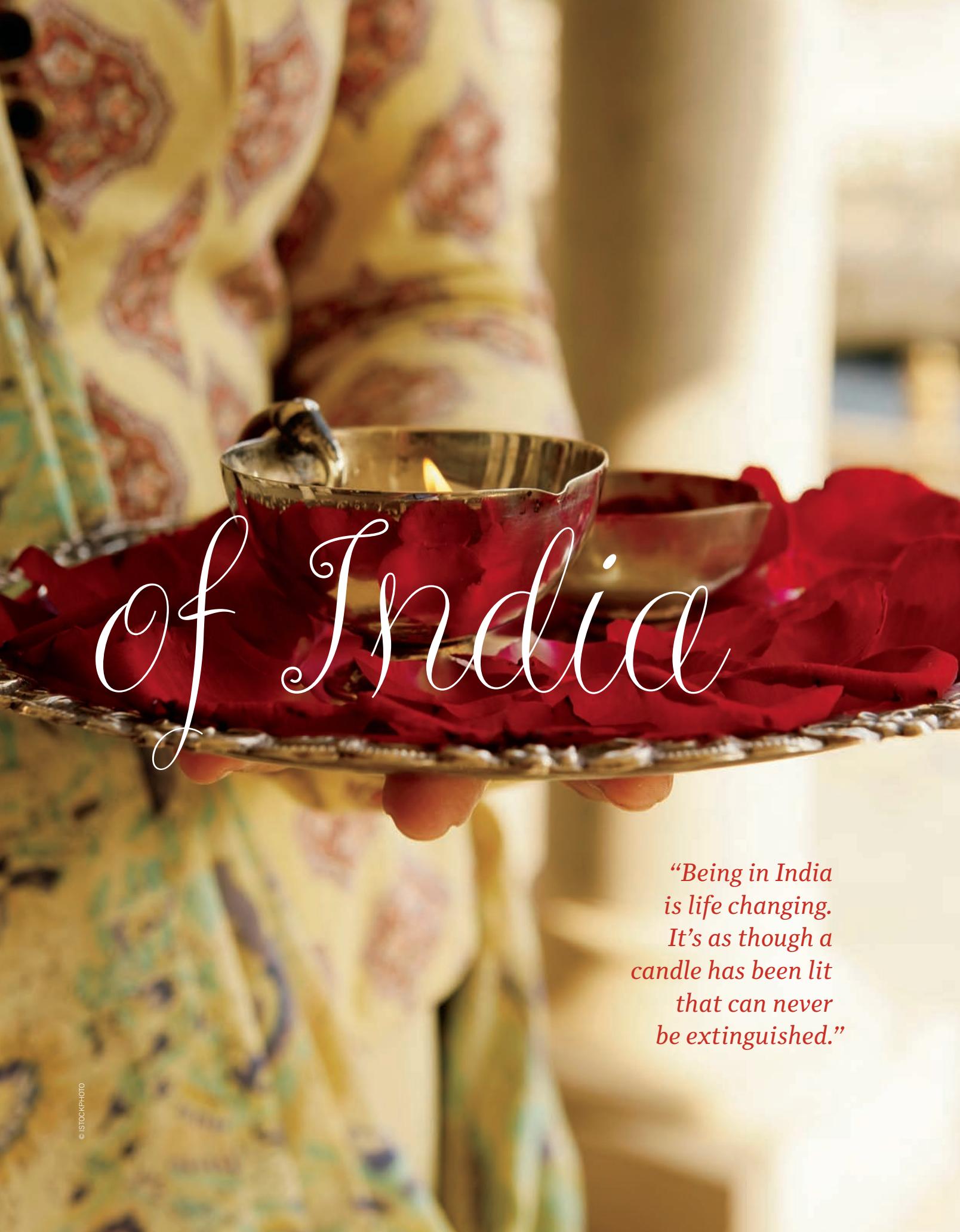
"We love Persian rugs and were in the market for a new one, so our travel counsellor found the perfect spot to locate this treasure. We also asked to pair authentic cultural outings with stays at India's finest hotels."

properties top 'World's Best' lists.

"As I walked into **The Oberoi Amarvilas** in Agra, a woman ceremoniously pressed a *bindi* (dot of red powder or sindoor) on my forehead. That instant, I felt transported into a fairytale," Suzanne reminisces. "The huge windows perfectly framed the **Taj Mahal**. It was my first magical encounter with this seventh wonder of the world."

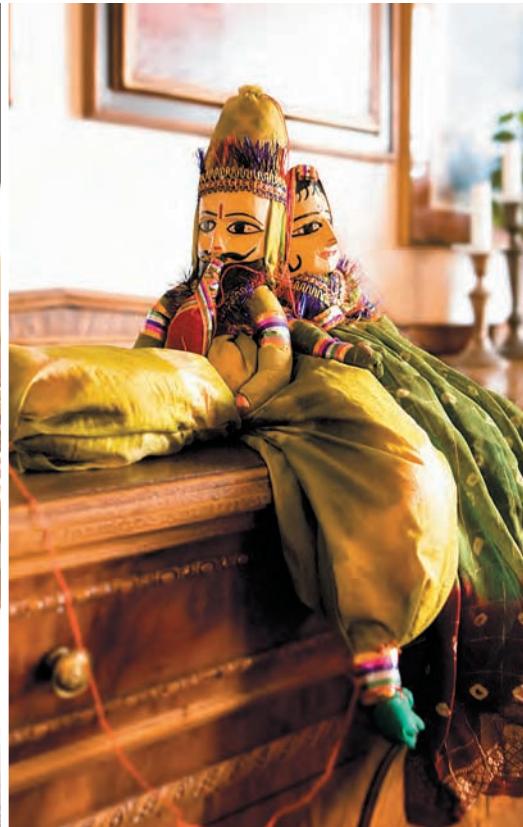
Amarvilas is, in fact, the only hotel with direct views of the Taj Mahal – only 650 yards away. Elaborate terraced gardens, punctuated by romantic reflection pools, surround this Mughal-style resort. And, like the Taj itself, the interior's white marble is filigreed and inlaid with colourful slivers of precious and semi-precious stones.

The Covingtons also stayed at several properties rich in history. The **Ajit Bhawan Palace Hotel** in **Jodhpur** was built for Maharaja Ajit Singh and served as home to the city's royal family. Set



of India

*“Being in India
is life changing.
It’s as though a
candle has been lit
that can never
be extinguished.”*



amidst 18 acres of gardens (said to be the finest Mughal gardens in existence), the Taj Hotels, Resorts and Palaces property of **Jai Mahal Palace** in Jaipur was the former residence of the Prime Minister. But the most unique hotel in India might very well be the **Taj Lake Palace**, located on a private island in the centre of Udaipur's **Lake Pichola**. With the **Aravalli Mountains** on one side and the **City Palace** on the other, a stay in this former palace – built in 1746 for the 62nd successor to the royal dynasty of Mewar – epitomizes the feeling of privileged isolation.

"The service level in all of these hotels is so different than anywhere else in the world," Suzanne shakes her head in awe, "The staff-to-guest ratio is astounding... everywhere you turn there is someone else eager to attend to your comfort." However, authenticity was a priority, so the Covingtons requested overnight accommodations on a train between Delhi and Jodhpur. Not all sleeping quarters in India are created equal though, and a night on the train proved a bit rugged.

FOR RICHER, FOR POORER

Suzanne was pleasantly surprised to discover that fears about being face to face with the depth of India's poverty were unwarranted. Instead, there was unexpected beauty, even within the most remote villages. "No matter what the economic level, Indian women carried themselves with such dignity and wore beautifully vibrant saris – even when riding on the back of motor scooters or working the fields. They looked like butterflies," notes Suzanne. "Everywhere we went, there was life happening out in plain view – a very public forum for intimate daily rituals such as bathing, shaving and brushing teeth. Despite the obvious lack of material things, there was no sense of anger and resentment," she says. "We were touched by the warmth

Finding just the right carpet, thanks to local guides, became far more than a shopping excursion; it was an entrée into the spirit of India's people. Tea was offered in delicate cups over warm and lingering conversation as the merchant described each unique pattern.

and kindness of everyone we met." This peaceful co-existence is almost certainly a by-product of the Hindu faith, subscribed to by about 80 percent of India's one-billion-plus population. "Hinduism is a choice you make about who you are as a human being," says Jim Covington. "It requires that you respect the way you treat others and nature, and offers a distinct point of view about which things should be most important to accomplish during our short time on earth."

SACRED OFFERINGS

One of the world's oldest and holiest cities, Varanasi is the spiritual home of the Hindu faith. The **Ganges River** serves as a vestibule to *moksha*, which can be equated with heaven or nirvana. Believers conduct cremations along the river's banks and return ashes of loved ones to "Mother Ganga" in hopes of eternal bliss. *Aarti* prayer ceremonies and bathing rituals take place at sunrise and sunset in these sacred waters from the many *ghats* (steps leading to the water's edge).

"Varanasi expresses the heart and essence of India. People make pilgrimages to dip their feet in the Ganges one last time before they die," Suzanne says.

One of her favourite travel memories was standing along the banks of the river, simply witnessing all of the displays of ritual and faith: a cremation ceremony; a woman in a sari sending a leaf raft topped with a candle, flowers and a devotion into the currents; a man standing waist-deep in the waters holding his hands in prayer.

Suzanne says, "It was a culmination of everything I knew and loved about India and its people – an incredibly emotional travel experience, in a category of its own."

GIFT WITH PURCHASE

Alas, a journey to a foreign land would be incomplete for Suzanne without spending time perusing the bazaars and shops. This independent journey provided the freedom to spend as much time as she liked doing it. And what of the Persian rug? She knew that finding just the right purchase was no small endeavour, since many Indian rugs are made of lesser quality camel hair instead of fine wool and silk. To guarantee the quality, her travel counsellor had tracked down the most highly reputed rug dealer in India before the Covingtons' flight

even touched down. While fine rug making in India had previously focused on Aubusson and Chinese Ming designs, once a 20-year embargo on Iranian goods was lifted, Persian designs replaced them. Thanks also to politics, the best dealer for Suzanne would no longer be in **Srinagar in Kashmir** (formerly a mecca for this specialty). With the resurgence of Pakistan and India's tug-of-war over Kashmir, many of its rug merchants relocated to Delhi, where they began to sell these intricately woven, richly coloured pieces – which brings us to **Cottage Industries Exposition Ltd.**, where the Covingtons went at last to purchase their rug.

Despite the merchant's reputation and the guide's assurances, at first Suzanne felt some trepidation over spending thousands of dollars on a purchase without an absolute guarantee of quality. But the merchants took time getting to know Jim and Suzanne, and their patience was vast, displaying rug after rug, and responding quickly as she narrowed down the choice by eliminating particular style and colour groups. Tea was offered in delicate cups over warm and lingering conversation. This was more than a shopping excursion; it was an entrée to the spirit of India's people. The merchant explained how each family has a unique pattern. Decoding it, the weaver knows exactly how many loops to weave of each colour. The three rugs that they ultimately purchased would not only be heirlooms, but would also serve as reminders of their love for India and its people.

Throughout the journey, a newfound trust was merited over and over again as Suzanne dealt with jewellery merchants, textile dealers and art sellers. A touch of jaded skepticism (she is, after all, a native New Yorker!) gave way to the simple pleasures of experience – being inundated by splashes of colourful fabrics and the potent scent of spices wafting through the market air.

"I couldn't believe how much the styles varied from region to region. And I learned a simple lesson: If you like something, buy it then and there, because you often won't find it at your next destination."

For example, elaborate miniatures painted on ivory with the finest of squirrel-hair brushes are unique to Rajasthan (Suzanne bought two); and only the artisans in Jodhpur make her

favourite bangle bracelets. Since she couldn't find them on subsequent stops, she e-mailed Surinder, her personal driver in India, to send more. He sent about \$350 worth – enough to feed his entire family for the month – without even asking for pre-payment. But over the course of the journey Surinder had truly become a friend, so she sent twice as much, a sum that has made it possible for him to send his daughter to private school.

While in Jaipur, a city known for its precious gems, Suzanne chose a beautiful peridot ring for her daughter Alexandra. They were leaving the country early the next morning and were already late for dinner, so they were obliged to leave before the stone was placed in its setting. She paid in advance, requesting that the ring be delivered to their hotel that night. India's laissez-faire laws left her with little recourse if the merchant's promises proved false. But this was the end of Suzanne's journey in India, and she had no doubt the ring would arrive.

"Imagine, even better, the ring showed up over dinner as we revelled in a sublime *subz biryani* and a fiery *lal maas* accompanied by perfectly layered *lachha paratha*."

This visit to India wasn't just another stamp in a well-worn passport or even a source of new treasures for the Covingtons' home – it would leave them forever transformed.

The Covingtons have amassed a collection of travel treasures to cherish at home, so they can always remember the many wonderful places they have discovered.

India offered a cornucopia of choices and varying levels of quality and price. While they were skeptical at first about prospective purchases, their guides' familiarity with local merchants built up confidence and trust that ultimately paid off. The only challenge was narrowing it down to the precious finds that would embody this remarkable journey. From exquisitely framed paintings and tapestries to jewellery, puppets and other reminders, the Covingtons have made magnificent additions to their globally themed treasure trove. ▀

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NEW FOR 2009



Artist's Rendering



Artist's Rendering



Riu Emerald Bay Mazatlán, Mexico

Opening on May 29, 2009, Riu Emerald Bay enjoys a prime location on Emerald Bay including a gorgeous expanse of beach, and is just 30 minutes from the great shopping, dining and nightlife of Mazatlán's 'Zona Dorada'. Golf, fishing, bird watching, history and culture experiences will turn your holiday into amazing adventures.

Riu Guanacaste Costa Rica

Ablaze with intoxicating colour and high style, Riu Guanacaste arrives October 30, 2009. Set on Matapalo Beach, this much anticipated resort boasts its own casino, an exciting disco, a spa and fitness facility, and with family vacation in mind, plenty of watersports and a fantastic children's area.

Riu Palace Paradise Island Bahamas

The resort re-opens as a Riu Palace on November 26, 2009 (closes August 20, 2009 for construction). Among the upgrades are: a sports bar, enhanced pool area and a new Krystal Fusion Gourmet Restaurant. All accommodation will be in Junior Suites, featuring flat screen TV and electronic in-room safe.



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All offers are per person based on double occupancy, in U.S. dollars, reflect promotional savings, are for new bookings only made by June 30, 2009, subject to availability, may not be combinable with other offers, are capacity controlled and may be withdrawn at any time without prior notice. Cruise and Fuel Tax are \$359 per person, not included. 2-night stay required. Booked full. Base Fares and do not include Prepaid Charges, Optional Facilities and Services Fees, and personal charges, as defined in the Terms and Conditions of the Guest Ticket Contract which may be viewed at www.RSSC.com. Full Brochure Fares may not have resulted in actual sales in all suite categories and may not have been in effect during the last 90 days. Promotional fares may remain in effect after the expiration date. Free airfare is available only from the following gateways: ATL, BOS, CLT, ORD, DFW, DEN, IAH, LAX, MIA, MSP, EWR, JFK, LGA, MCO, PHL, PHX, SAN, SFO, SEA, TPA, YYZ, YVR and IAD. Air add-ons apply for other gateways and for additional guests in the suite. Air routing, scheduling and air carrier are at the discretion of RSSC. Free unlimited shore excursions are capacity controlled and subject to availability. Requested excursions may not be available at time of booking. Supplement will apply on Regent Choice Excursions and excluded Private Arrangements and all Adventures Ashore programs. Free Unlimited Shore Excursions not combinable with Kids Sail Free promotion. Kids Sail Free offer is valid for children age 17 years old or younger sailing in the third or fourth berth only. Air and cruise Ship Fuel Surcharge may apply; the cruise Ship Fuel Surcharge is additional revenue to Regent Seven Seas Cruises. Additional terms and conditions may apply and penalties apply 36 hours prior to shore excursions start date. RSSC reserves the right to correct errors or omissions and to change any and all fares, fees and surcharges at any times. For terms and conditions visit www.RSSC.com. Ship's Registry: Bahamas © 2009 Regent Seven Seas Cruises

Worldly Delights: Miami Bites



GAIA RISTORANTE

New to the South Beach dining scene, executive chef Gaetano Ascione brings serious culinary credibility to the area with the opening of Gaia earlier this year. A refreshing return to authentic, yet craft-inspired Italian cuisine, Gaia scores big with its romantic beachside setting within the Hilton Bentley, personalized service and phenomenal dishes.

Lobster bisque served in an Illy cup begins a regional journey through Italy that has many stops along the way. Ascione is often found walking the floor sharing his passion while seeking permission from diners to create off-menu dishes for their culinary pleasure. Inside scoop: after being delighted by his truly inspired mains and sumptuous starters, put away the menu and ask this talented and well-storied chef for a dessert of tomato jam. Never mind if it sounds strange; the mix of San Marzano tomatoes with vanilla beans, sugar and lemon compares to no other dessert dish and makes for the ultimate closer.

Gaia Ristorante

Hilton Bentley Hotel
101 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach
(305) 672-6624

Heading to Miami? Check out these three hot new places to dine
Federica Maraboli



MEAT MARKET

General manager Sonny Gorushanovich greets you at the door with a warm welcome as you slide into this chic environment that sets the tone for something special. Blonde woods, white leather and a warm amber palette create a sophisticated ambience that says 'welcome to South Beach,' while futuristic overhead lighting leads like a runway to the large wine display on the back wall. Diners flock to this regularly packed house for the Super Tuscans and small farm-raised premium Kobe beef. Polished, knowledgeable servers disclose that only three farms are used to source beef for Meat Market: Harris Ranch in California, Strube Ranch in Texas and Snake River Ranch in Idaho. This is beef at its finest, with intelligent wine pairings, great staff and all the right finishing touches. Ask for a cucumber mojito to get things started, and remember that Meat Market is not necessarily all about great beef – be sure to sample items like the sensational *tiraditos*, stone crab with mustard sauce, or tomato and buffalo mozzarella salad. Just make sure you try to leave some room for the Boston cream pie served in a martini glass.

Located in the heart of the thriving Lincoln Road district in South Beach.

Meat Market

915 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach
(305) 532-0088
www.meatmarketmiami.com



PARADIGM: THE TEST KITCHEN

Paradigm offers a unique twist to the chef's table concept with its Friday night, reservation-only test kitchen, which is based on the concept of 'molecular gastronomy.' Located within Neomi's at the luxury Trump International Beach Resort in Sunny Isles, executive chef Kurtis Jantz and his team "set the framework for what is possible in this new era of unlimited culinary boundaries" – and they deliver. The elongated chef's table for 10 entices diners with its multi-course tasting menu, taking you on an innovative journey from carrot poached scallops with caramelized white chocolate caviar to foie gras tamale, or whatever creative direction the team chooses to take you that evening. Dishes are served with an introduction, description and corresponding inspiration by its creator, who steps up to the podium at the foot of the long table. Chefs regularly come in from other restaurants in the city to experiment with the cutting-edge techniques and whip up as many as 10 tasting courses, making an evening at Paradigm an entertaining and imaginative feast.

Paradigm: The Test Kitchen

Trump International Beach Resort
18001 Collins Avenue, Sunny Isles Beach
(305) 692-5600

Bon Vivant



Introduction

Explore the culinary delights in journeys to foreign lands

A *bon vivant* is defined as a person devoted to refined, sensuous enjoyment; a person with cultivated, refined and sociable tastes, especially with respect to food and drink; and also a good fellow, a jovial companion, a free-spirited person.

Ensemble Travel® Group is pleased to launch the Bon Vivant series, a collection of travel packages that take you beyond the main attractions, allowing for a more authentic experience of what lies at a destination's heart: its food and wine.

For many travellers, the memories of museums, art galleries and cathedrals eventually fade, but what does remain are those impressions of a culture's intrinsic nature: glimpses of everyday life, the markets, exotic aromas



© EVAN SKLAR / GETTY



from unique ingredients, walking among the vineyards, spending the afternoon cooking at a local kitchen and then enjoying the fruits of your labour. Or perhaps it is the opportunity to learn from a world-renowned chef the secret of how to make the perfect sauce, or learning how to select the ideal wine to complement a gourmet feast.

These Ensemble Bon Vivant pages are intended to inspire you to go beyond the everyday and to explore and celebrate the culinary delights of your journeys to foreign lands.

Start your journey right now by finding out what kind of a *bon vivant* you are. Visit our web site at www.bonvivantravel.ca and take our quiz that will help determine the type of travel package that would best suit your style. You'll also have a chance to win a trip to Spain courtesy of Transat Holidays.

Contest

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Experience that takes you places



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66 The Sevilians
actually make a meal
of tapas, moving from
bar to bar and trying
one dish at a time **99**



Charms of Andalusia

Seven glorious days to explore the beauty and rich traditions of Andalusia's grand cities – the tour takes guests to Moorish towns, medieval cities and magnificent sites. This is also the land of gastronomy, where climate and geography create the perfect conditions to produce some of the best wine, olive oil and fruit. While on this journey make sure you enjoy the specialties of this region.

Tapas in Seville

The city is credited with inventing tapas and has more than a thousand bars where the choice of food is virtually unlimited, from seafood to ham and sausage, from vegetables to cheese. The Sevilians actually make a meal of tapas, moving from bar to bar and trying one dish at a time.



Sherry in Jerez

The sherry houses are located, surprisingly, in the centre of town in Jerez, and tours of the cellars take place on weekdays, followed by sampling the various types of wines produced.

Price: \$1,899 + \$290 taxes – nine days (includes air, transfers, seven nights' accommodation, 14 meals, transportation in coach, services of tour guide, most attractions)

Details of Special Offer: Coach Tours – SAVE UP TO \$300 PER COUPLE – For travel between May 1 and November 1, 2009

Offer expires
July 31, 2009



Mediterranean

Roman Revelations

Ship Name: *Insignia*

Departure Date: August 9, 2009

Price: US\$1,000 price reduction off two-for-one cruise fares with free airfare, plus Ensemble exclusive \$100 per stateroom shipboard credit. From \$3,799 per guest (category G), including free airfare from Toronto or Vancouver, plus Ensemble exclusive \$100 per stateroom shipboard credit.

Special Offer: Jacques Pépin Culinary Cruise – world-renowned master chef and Oceania Cruises' Executive Culinary Director, Jacques Pépin, hosts this culinary sojourn, visiting eight countries in 14 days. Guests will be treated to specially designed signature menus, engaging lectures, culinary demonstrations and much more.

OCEANIA CRUISES®
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Asparagus in Mustard Sauce

by Jacques Pépin

1 1/4 pounds asparagus (about 15 stalks)
3/4 cup water
1 tablespoon Dijon-style mustard
2 tablespoons canola oil
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1/2 teaspoon salt

Using a vegetable peeler, peel the bottom third of the asparagus stalks to remove the fibrous skin. Cut the asparagus diagonally into 2- to 3-inch pieces. (You should have about 3 cups.) Place the asparagus in a stainless steel saucepan and add water. Cover, bring to a boil and boil for 3 minutes, until the asparagus is just tender and most of the liquid has evaporated. Drain off any remaining water and place the asparagus in a bowl. Add the mustard, oil, pepper and salt, and mix well. Serve at room temperature.



Spain

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Italy

Flavours of Italy

Italy is synonymous with food and wine, and what better way to enjoy some of the best this country has to offer than a fully escorted Trafalgar tour. Here are just a few highlights to enjoy:

Wine Tasting in Greve

This Tuscan village, situated in the rolling hills, is located in the heart of the Chianti region. This wonderful day is spent savouring Chianti and enjoying the local specialties such as salami, olive oils and cheeses.

Cooking Classes in Florence

The day starts with a walk to the local market to pick up fresh produce and meats. Then off to a local restaurant where you and your fellow travellers will prepare a decadent meal

and enjoy other local wines such as Orvieto and Pinot Grigio.

Food Shopping in San Gimignano

While in San Gimignano, make sure to buy a small package of pure saffron, which is produced naturally without any chemicals used in its cultivation, drying or preservation. The saffron stamens are packaged whole in order to guarantee their quality as well as to protect their pungent and slightly bitter aroma.

Price: Flavours of Italy
2009 – 11 days, departure April 2009 – October 2009

Priced from \$2,699 per person, land only, based on double occupancy

TRAFALGAR
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66 Start your day with a walk to the local market to pick up fresh produce and meats 99

Food & Wine Festival

The world's greatest chefs and wine experts join Crystal Cruises for our popular Wine & Food Festival sailings. Celebrated chefs prepare signature dishes for our dinner menus, demonstrate cooking techniques and share the secrets of their culinary artistry.

Distinguished wine experts provide insight into and education on the endlessly fascinating world of wine, offering unique opportunities to experience side-by-side tastings of select vintages from Crystal Cruises' extensive wine list, including our exclusive 'C' vintages.

Price: Amazon Thanksgiving Adventure – 13 days, Miami to Manaus, Brazil US\$3,615 cruise only price – Deluxe stateroom (\$305 port, security and handling charges)

 CRYSTAL CRUISES



Manaus

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Crystal Cruises bonus \$2,000 per couple shipboard credit to be used as you wish: on-board spa, shore excursions, gift shop purchases. Not applicable to casino.



Danube

The Blue Danube Discovery

Wine lovers – This special departure of the popular Danube cruise is for you! This particular cruise is accompanied by a distinguished wine expert who will enhance your knowledge of the wines of the region. Lectures will provide insight into local wine production and the art of wine tasting.

Tokai – Hungary's most famous wine, prized by the Tsars of Russia, is sweet and typically enjoyed as a dessert wine.

Price: The Blue Danube Discovery – Budapest to Prague, July 9, 2009 – 14 days \$3,464 cruise only



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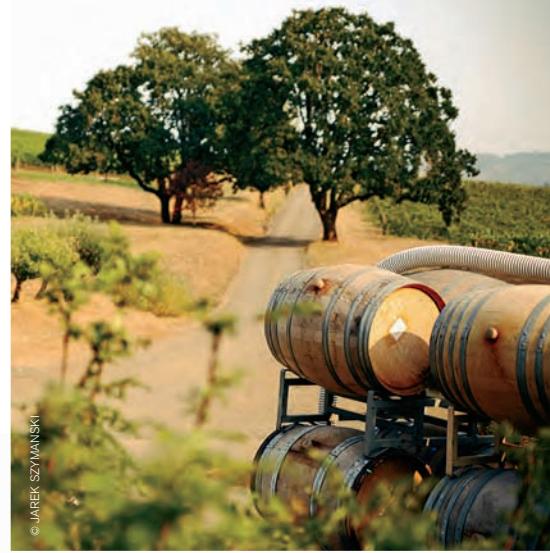
California

California Wine Country

Discover the best foods and wines in California on this vacation! Begin in San Francisco with a succulent Dungeness crab dinner. Excursions to Sonoma, Rutherford, Calistoga and St. Helena feature a wine-blending seminar where you can craft your own vintage. You'll also visit Rutherford Hill Winery, Round Pond Estate and enjoy a farewell dinner at Wine Spectator Greystone Restaurant.

Olive Press, Sonoma, California – One of the best places to learn about and taste olive oils. Here are some tasting tips from the experts at the Olive Press: Place a small amount of olive oil on your lower lip, and with the tip of your tongue taste the oil for its degree of sweetness. Sip the oil and taste for spiciness, using the sides of your tongue or, if you prefer, just dip a piece of bread in the olive oil and taste it.

66 Excursions include
a wine-blending
seminar where you
can craft your
own vintage 99



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Price: Globus San Francisco, California Wine Country – eight days. September 18, September 25 and October 2 departures, \$2,559 per person land only



Panama Canal

Culinary Arts

Join chef Maria Hines, one of *Food & Wine* magazine's 2005 'Top Ten Best New Chefs in America' for a series of culinary demonstrations aboard Holland America Lines.

The Culinary Arts Center program, presented by *Food & Wine* magazine, is a groundbreaking program that integrates guests' love of fine food and wine with a unique and entertaining experience. Immerse yourself in the unique traditions and tastes of the ports of call you will visit. Sample fine wines from around the world or learn to make a new gourmet dish in a hands-on cooking class taught by our own master chefs or culinary guests.



Prices: Panama Canal Sunfarer, October 24, 2009 – 10 days, Zuiderdam

Inside Category K Cdn\$1,159 per person

Outside Category GG Cdn\$1,259 per person

Verandah Category VD Cdn\$1,579 per person

Taxes additional Cdn\$259 per person

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Learn to make a new gourmet dish in a hands-on cooking class taught by our own master chefs



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Worldly Delights: New Zealand



New Zealand's 100% pure wine experience



New Zealand is a travel destination that is becoming more and more popular among wine lovers – both connoisseurs and novices. Situated throughout New Zealand's scenic and diverse landscape are vineyards that produce some of the world's most critically acclaimed wines, including **Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc** and **Mt. Difficulty Pinot Noir**.

Oliver Masters, a renowned Kiwi consultant winemaker at the **Ata Rangi Vineyard** and owner of Tripwire Wine Consulting, gives credit to the combination of New Zealand's temperate climate and a wide range of soil types for the quality of the wines. "We are a cool climate producer, meaning we retain intense fruit and varietal characters," he explains. With rain being the main challenge at the beginning of the harvest, winemakers are pushed to remain on schedule with processing. The success of the 2008 vintage stemmed from good crop levels and favourable weather during most of the harvest season, producing some of the highest standards in winemaking quality.

Exports of New Zealand wine have more than quadrupled in the past 10 years, and several winemakers in the country have earned excellent reputations and won prestigious awards for their wines.

According to Masters, the increasing popularity of New Zealand wines can be credited to the consistent delivery of youthful intensity and quality. "I think we are now seeing increasing levels of elegance and sophistication as the industry matures," says Masters. "We are also starting to pay more genuine respect to the land and what it is delivering to us."

New Zealand vineyards are reshaping the wine industry by producing popular varietals, wines made chiefly from one variety of grape, such as Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir, that have gained international recognition for quality. In particular, Sauvignon Blanc has set a definitive benchmark for this type of wine. Produced in **Marlborough**, New Zealand's largest winemaking region, the complex, exuberant bouquet of this increasingly popular wine has made it a favourite among experts and newbies alike. Pinot Noir is not far behind in receiving the acclaim it deserves, with **Wild Earth Pinot Noir 2006** winning the top international red wine award at last year's 'Oscars of the Wine Industry' – the **International Wine Challenge**. Central Otago is becoming more and more well known for its Pinot Noir. This varietal has really come into fruition and New Zealand is now recognized as one of the few countries that has adapted to growing this fickle, yet sophisticated type of grape.

If you enjoy the flavours of New Zealand wines, you won't be disappointed with the 2009 vintage. Grape growers and winemakers have been fortunate to have a warm, mild harvest season. While Masters says that they are still dependent on getting some good weather over the next few weeks, he doesn't hesitate in predicting that some great wines will emerge from this vintage. Just how many will be determined once that last grape has been picked.

Most wineries are within easy reach of a town or city, and guided wine tours are readily available for visitors wanting to take part in one of New Zealand's most popular activities. Take a walk or borrow a bike from your hotel to visit some of the local vineyards and taste the delicious flavours of some of the most internationally acclaimed wines.

If you're unable to visit New Zealand this year, the country will be co-hosting the **2010 Vancouver Playhouse International Wine Festival**, Canada's premier wine show, taking place April 19 to 25, 2010. □

Worldly Delights: Tasmania



Gourmets find a bounty of gems on this heart-shaped island at the end of the Earth
Stephanie Ortenzi

Aussies affectionately call it the Apple, but Tasmania deserves to be called the Heart. It looks like one, and it gives life to some of the world's best food.

Across the Bass Strait, 250 kilometres southeast of Australia, Tasmania has a fraction more land mass than Nova Scotia but only half the population. Natural beauty it has in spades.

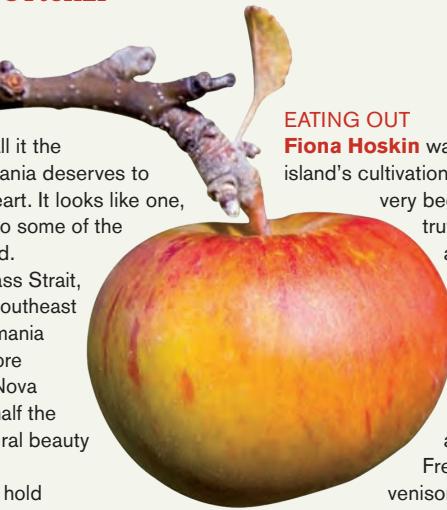
The sky might hold a passing flight of eagles. Eucalyptus grows in a spectrum of grey, yellow, white, blue and red varieties. Deep-sea waters are home to exotica such as clear-glass sponges, snow-white rays and pink sea stars. Roads have many hairpin turns and wind along the base of craggy mountainsides that lead to turquoise bays.

On the west coast, fresh water streaming down the mountains surrounding Macquarie Harbour is rich in tannins and nutrients, which provide an ideal habitat for **ocean trout**, one of the island's food treasures. So is **farmed salmon**, which thrive in pristine waters. Ferocious commitment to sustainability is part of Tasmania's cultural DNA. Law prohibits genetically modifying food. No wonder the world's first Green Party was founded here.

Organics are ubiquitous. North Americans brag about heirloom tomatoes, but Tasmanians grow heirloom apples and quinces. Commercial agriculture is pesticide-free. The **cheese** is world-class. **Wagyu** beef is raised for locals as well as for export to Japan. So is the local **wasabi**.

Saffron is a prospering micro-industry. Thanks to rainforest leatherwood trees, Tasmania produces a nonpareil **honey**: amber-yellow, creamy, musky and softly sweet.

However, Tasmania's top gastro-gem is the **black truffle**. It took nearly a decade of soil cultivation around oak and hazel trees before the first local truffle was ripened in 1999. European *truffières* use trained hogs to ferret them out, but since pigs love truffles, they often steal a bite for themselves. Tassies use dogs. They're indifferent to the taste of truffles, thankfully.



EATING OUT

Fiona Hoskin was involved in the island's cultivation of truffles from the very beginning, which is why truffles figure prominently at her restaurant, **Fee & Me**, in the capital city of Hobart. Her style brings to mind Alice Waters, with a devotion to honouring raw ingredients simply and with a decidedly French bent. She favours venison, hare, crayfish and abalone. Two of her characteristic dishes are ocean trout tartare with tomato and basil, and a layered watermelon and tomato salad with truffles.

Half an hour south of Hobart, **Peppermint Bay chef David Martin** lists his local suppliers on the front page of his menu – from buffalo and olive oil to honey, nuts and ice cream. He names dishes for the main ingredient's origin: Bruny Island oysters, Huon Valley mushrooms, Spring Bay scallops, D'Entrecasteaux Channel baby abalone, Cressy rack of lamb.

Like Hoskin, Martin loves French cooking and serves traditional greats like duck confit and cassoulet, following them with the technical flourish of an *à la minute* coffee soufflé.

Most of the Peppermint Bay experience is haute, including the luxury catamaran, which will take you to the resto itself or for a cruise. It has an underwater camera that relays jaw-dropping images of sealife, which passengers watch via the onboard plasma TV.

Goodbye, humble glass-bottom boat.

Taking a completely different tack is **Flathead**, a casual 20-seat boîte strong on fish and seafood: during the day, it's a fish and seafood shop.

EATING IN

For hard-core epicures adventurous enough to arrange accommodations with a good kitchen, Tasmanian specialties are all you need for inspiration, and any good local wine merchant will pair your courses with great Tassie wines. □

Worldly Delights: Recipe

© COLIN DUTTON / CORBIS



© ANDREW MEADE



Menu

*Grilled ocean trout & salmon filet with wasabi
Linguini with black truffle & parmigiano (or not)*

Wagyu rib-eye steak with saffron potatoes & micro-greens

Berries in season with cream & leatherwood honey

Tassie cheese board

To get started, crack open a craft beer recommended by a local, fire up the grill and start the potatoes.

Lightly heat three tablespoons of olive oil with six to 10 strands of **saffron** and set aside while you peel potatoes and dice them into roughly one-inch cubes. Season with salt and pepper, toss with the oil (don't leave any of the strands behind in the pan), wrap in a foil purse and set aside to marinate.

Get the **salmon** as a fat filet and keep the **trout** whole. Brush them lightly with oil, and season with salt and pepper – remember to season inside the trout, too – and grill. Plate them with nothing more than a gingerly dot of **wasabi**, a gorgeous counterpoint to the sea scent of the trout and the salmon's richness.

Just before sitting down to this course, throw the potato packet onto the back of a lidded grill or into a hot oven for about 45 minutes. Test doneness with a knife. Don't worry if they're ready before you are. They'll keep.

To do right by the **black truffles**, take your cue from the Italians, who believe pasta is the ideal vehicle for truffles. They favour linguini. Toss with some butter, sea salt, cracked black pepper and generous truffle shavings. Some epicures demand freshly grated parmigiano here; others are vehemently opposed. To find out where you stand, try it both ways.

A **Wagyu** steak is dead easy to make. Nature and the farmer have done all the work for you. Do nothing other than season and grill. Pull it off the grill rare to medium rare, and let it rest uncovered away from the heat for five to 10 minutes. Plate it with the saffron potatoes and a salad of micro-greens dressed with olive oil and red wine vinegar.

The dessert berries in season need only a splash of cream and a drizzle of **leatherwood honey**.

For the **cheese** course, ask the local cheesemonger for an aged, hard cheese, a soft, rich and creamy one, and a blue. Three contrasting styles best reveal the characteristics of each. Serve them at room temperature, with toasted slices of baguettes, apples, grapes and walnuts.

You've just been to heaven and back. Good on ya'.



© THOMAS BARWICK / GETTY

Worldly Delights: Sake



Nick Keukemeester sheds some light on this well-known yet under-appreciated Japanese drink

If you are like me, then your first experience with sake coincided with your first experience with raw fish, pickled ginger and wasabi. This sensory overload may have led you to miss the subtleties and joys of this wonderful drink. Let's see if we can help.

The first time I had sake it was served hot, in porcelain jars (*tokkuri*). I was nearly knocked out by the aroma of alcohol and it dried my mouth and didn't taste of much at all. I have since discovered that the best sakes are served chilled or at room temperature to retain the intricate aromas. Low-grade sake is warmed to intentionally lessen its less attractive characteristics! Lesson learned. Have the good stuff and have it cold.

High-quality sake has fruity fragrances of apples, peaches or pears. There is often

a grassy note. Some are nutty or sherry-like. Others have a milky quality. There are as many styles and flavours as there are occasions to drink it.

Sake is of great cultural importance in Japan. The Japanese have been making it for at least 2,000 years. In the Middle Ages, brewing sake was an important part of monastic life. What else would you do all day? At the end of the 19th century, sake made up almost half of total government taxation revenue and by the beginning of the 20th century home brewing was finally outlawed to protect this revenue stream. Sake is the drink of the dinner table and celebrates family and community. It is traditional to pour sake for others rather than for yourself and to have them pour for you. The drink also plays an important role in Shinto religious



ceremonies. It is believed that the goddess Matsuo inhabits every bottle, so drink it with the appropriate reverence.

We refer to sake as 'rice wine' but it isn't really. Like beer, it is brewed. Sake's unique 'multiple parallel fermentation' requires both bacteria to convert the rice starch to sugar (*koji*) and yeast to ferment that sugar into alcohol. At the risk of putting you off sake for life, they used to make it by chewing the rice and spitting into a pot, the necessary bacteria coming from human saliva. Luckily, they haven't done that for 1,000 years or so. These days the finest-quality rice can be polished down to as little as half its original weight (*daiginjo*). It is then brewed to alcohol levels as high as 20% before being diluted with a little water to bring out the aromas and flavours.

TIP: Trust the English-speaking world to muck things up. The word 'sake' is Japanese for alcohol, so if you want the local stuff you need to ask for *nihonshu*. (Don't say you never learn anything from me!)

TIP: Keep sake in a cool, dark place, as exposure to heat or light will lead to spoilage.

SOME STYLES OF SAKE

Futsu – cheaper sake where large quantities of spirits are often used to further stretch the brewed rice.

Junmai – pure sake with nothing but rice, water, yeast and *koji* (no added spirits).

Honjozo – unlike *junmai*, a small amount of spirits is added to bring out additional

flavours. This is a high-quality approach, not for increasing quantity.

Daiginjo – sake made from highly polished rice (less than 50% of its original weight).

Nigori – another style of sake that is milky due to being unfiltered and low in alcohol. It must be kept refrigerated.

Gekkeikan has been making sake since 1640. The Gekkeikan range is available across Canada by going to www.selectwines.ca.

Hakutsuru is another brand available across Canada, although brewed entirely in Japan.

For more information check out the **Japanese Sake Brewers Association** at www.japansake.or.jp. □

A Rookie's Guide to Yoga Vacations

Richard Ebbs



© DMITRY ERSLER

SOUTHERN THAILAND You're moving gently through a yoga sequence, in a wooden-floored, thatched-roofed, open-sided pagoda by the beach. The warm air feels good on your skin. The only distractions are the sound of the surf, the occasional whoop of a *koel* (Thai cuckoo) in the trees and the smile of the person working out beside you. You gently bring yourself back into focus and realize that you haven't actually felt this good in years...

SOMEWHERE IN EUROPE Cross-legged in the meditation room of a magnificent 300-year-old building that is shrouded in the mist of a deep, forested valley. The silence is perfect. Your legs are a little uncomfortable but that's OK. Gently leaving that concern aside, you return again to the space between each thought. How can the space between thoughts be so luminous, you wonder, and you smile as you realize that in the act of contemplating you've stepped away from the centre. One more time, you gently bring yourself back. An hour later, looking out over the trees in the valley below, you're amazed at the power of such an apparently simple technique.

Sound tempting? Interest in yoga is blossoming as part of the trend toward healthier lifestyle choices. More people than ever are practising yoga at home, taking classes or packing their bags for yoga holidays and retreats that may be in exotic locations, but which can also often be found in rural areas just a couple of hours from home.

What's it all about? And is a yoga holiday good for you? The first thing to bear in mind is that there's a wide variety of available 'retreats' (relatively intensive, for the more committed) and 'holidays' (for those who want to do their own thing as well as practise yoga for a few hours each day). There are many kinds of yoga too, so doing a little research and asking a few questions will be useful when looking for a location that's appropriate for you.

The various systems of yoga have their roots in India, extending way back to the time of Alexander the Great and before. (Alexander himself is reputed to have communicated with Indian 'forest *rishis*', or yoga practitioners). Many Westerners are most familiar with the side of yoga that deals with body posture (broadly, *hatha* yoga) though in the East (in India today, for instance) yoga practice tends to incorporate a broader range of techniques with more emphasis on breath control, development of the 'subtle body' and intense meditation discipline, where all practice leads toward *moksha*, or liberation from worldly suffering and the cycle of birth and death.

So, some teachers may emphasize the spiritual side while others may focus more on the body. Some may be more intense with their postures, or *asanas*, of yoga than others. Before booking your trip, do an Internet search for 'styles of *hatha* yoga' (or just 'styles of yoga') in order to help you ask the right questions, and provide some idea of what you're



getting yourself into. You may also want to know about your prospective teacher's qualifications, experience and style of teaching, as well as how many hours of yoga are practised in a normal day. Most yoga holiday and retreat centres are happy to have complete beginners join them, but it's a good idea to check this in advance if you're a novice. Yoga holiday and retreat centres tend to be run by people who have a real interest in yoga; many of them have been doing it for years. The best yoga centres combine good organization and experienced teaching with an organic approach that comes from the heart. Remember, too, that the yoga holiday experience is unlike staying at a typical hotel – food tends to be vegetarian, for one thing. If you're not normally a vegetarian, don't worry – vegetarian food can be as tasty as it is healthy!

If you're looking for a yoga holiday rather than a retreat, you may as well focus first on the parts of the world that you really want to visit. Thailand? The Caribbean? The Pyrenees? Chances are there's a good yoga centre somewhere you'll want to visit. For instance, there are a number of popular holiday and retreat centres in southern Thailand (Koh Samui and elsewhere).

For the more committed yogin or yogi, the destination may be less important – much more time will be spent at the retreat centre doing actual yoga. Perhaps Rishikesh in northern India, or maybe Big Sur in California? These are just two of a number of locations that have virtually become synonymous with the exploration of consciousness. Guests at Big Sur's Esalen Institute have included Aldous Huxley, Joseph Campbell, Alan Watts and a host of other famous names.

Doctors are increasingly recommending yoga to help with a range of conditions. Great for stress reduction (and thus helping reduce stress-induced burdens on the heart), yoga can also help make your body more flexible, improve the tone of your muscles and prevent back pain by helping to improve posture. Just from learning to breathe more deeply you may experience greater calmness and vitality, and (if you choose to meditate regularly) yoga meditation can do wonders in terms of lessening anxiety, helping you concentrate and more.

So, next time you find that thinking about Koh Samui is harder than finding the space between thoughts, maybe it's time for a little karma yoga (the yoga of action)... **v**

Health and Wellness

Michele Sponagle

Fit to be Tried: Top Fitness Vacations

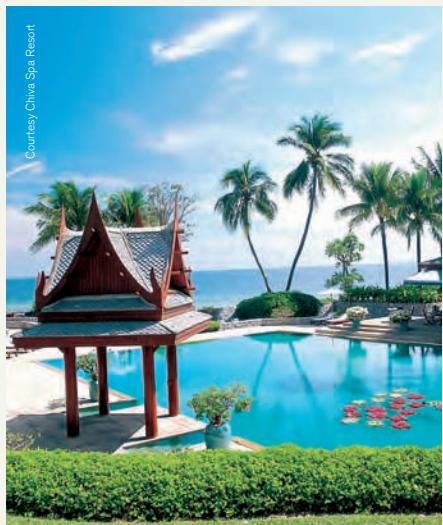
It's easy to allow everyday life to throw you off your good habits. Health-conscious travellers can now jump-start fitness regimes with action-packed fitness holidays.

Where to go? These five stylish destinations are sure to get you moving:

- 1 For body and soul,** *Red Mountain Resort & Spa* in St. George, Utah wins high marks for its comprehensive approach to health. It combines healthy gourmet cuisine with outdoor fitness activities (like hikes through the gorgeous Red Mountains), health education classes focusing on subjects like coping with stress, and a spa that uses indigenous ingredients from the desert in its treatments.
- 2 Exercise with a Western flair.** Specialty programs devoted to weight loss and sleep regulation are standouts at *The Hills Health Ranch* in the interior of British Columbia. If you have dreams of living the life of a cowgirl, you'll love its Western flair with horseback riding and wrangling. Expert staff on hand, from personal trainers to life coaches, put the fun into fitness.
- 3 Cycle through Italy.** Many companies offer cycling holidays through Tuscany, the Alps and the Amalfi Coast. Some have short trips of just two days, while others are more intensive with an 11-day ride. The great thing about cycling in Italy is that you're sure to eat well and enjoy spectacular scenery while you exercise.
- 4 Take a fitness cruise.** Most people think of all-you-can-eat buffets when it comes to cruising. Today's themed cruises have passengers exercising their bodies, not just their mouths. *Windstar*, *Royal Caribbean International* and *Celebrity Cruises* offer fitness-themed itineraries. You'll find delicious low-fat cuisine, sunset yoga classes, weight-training facilities and shore excursions focusing on hiking or biking.
- 5 Book a boot camp holiday.** A boot camp holiday jump-starts your fitness routine in a big way with back-to-back classes and challenging activities like rock climbing, boxing and rope courses that provide ample physical challenges. Ones to consider include *Cabo San Lucas Bikini Boot Camp*, Costa Rica's *Long Beach Adventure Boot Camp* and exotic ones offered by *Wildfitness* in Kenya and Greece.



HUGH STEWART



Cleanse and Amend: Top Detox Vacations

If you've over-indulged and your body is paying the price for it, think about a detox vacation. It's designed to get rid of all that bad stuff and recharge your body. Here are some top spots around the globe.

Chiva-Som Health Resort, Thailand. Model and actor Elizabeth Hurley swears by this resort for keeping her body ship-shape. A 12-hour fast, followed by a barrage of medical tests, begins the experience. Then it's all about exercise, massage and a strict diet with no salt, sugar, caffeine or alcohol.

Ayurvedic Natural Health Centre, Goa, India. This retreats taps into an ancient Indian practice that teaches the importance of balance between mind, body and soul. Yoga, meditation and colon cleansing are the cornerstones of this program. A stunning natural setting provides a beautiful backdrop.

Le Retreat, Saires, France. This sprawling, 14th-century French country manor is an elegant place to start a detox program. It's not as hardcore as some other programs, but for those who like luxury and need to unwind, it's a great fit. Home-cooked vegetarian meals, a salt-water pool, and bicycles to take into the countryside are nice touches.

The Guys' Getaway

Does any sight cement a friendship like that of a buddy's head poking up from below deck first thing in the morning? How about sharing silence at sunrise or a conversation interrupted only by a sea turtle bobbing on the surface of the ocean?

Five friends decided to celebrate milestone birthdays by taking a guys' trip. Our ages – 40 through 60 – are varied but we are forever bound by that first week of December 2008.

We chartered a 50-foot catamaran from **Angela Connery Yacht Charters**, complete with an onboard captain, and sailed around the British Virgin Islands. Seven islands in seven days.

I'd like to dispel the notion that chartering your own boat means roughing it. You needn't be an athlete or a skilled sailor to relish the open seas; this is a very achievable adventure. I would, however, offer this advice: work with someone who's had the experience. Time of year and type of boat are crucial factors. I felt confident coordinating this trip as a travel professional who had already taken my family on a similar excursion combined with a villa stay.

There are different yachts available, depending on the size and makeup of your group. There are old-fashioned monohull ships, elegant or rustic, some more appropriate for couples, and choices to suit different budgets. We opted for a catamaran. Two hulls travel flatter and offer more surface area, affording each of us our own bedroom and shower.

Although we quickly fell into a rhythm, no two days were exactly the same. Once everybody awoke, we'd decide on breakfast and activities for the day, always consulting the captain. Based on where we planned to anchor that evening, we enjoyed sightseeing, fishing or snorkelling. Our itinerary remained loose. Stay in one spot or keep moving – this type of trip enables you the freedom to literally chart your own course. Although part of a group, we weren't joined at the hip.

Five friends celebrate, snorkel, fish and explore as they sail the British Virgin Islands for seven days. Philip Houde, Ensemble Travel® agent, Winnipeg, MB



Before commencing our trip we had sent an initial list of provisions and then restocked from port to port. Shopping locally at what looked like a little country store uncovered a delightful surprise: an impressive selection of Californian, South African and Chilean wines – along with the ever-available rum – at bargain prices to boot!

We mostly prepared lunches on board and dined out on various islands at night. Your captain can use the two-way radio to make a reservation – just make sure you take him along, as is the tradition. Having an onboard chef as part of your crew is another option.

We enjoyed getting cleaned up and going ashore for dinner and some bar hopping – a popular activity. Don't miss **The Last Resort** bar in **Trellis Bay off Beef Island**: they have a band that includes two Canadian guys who tell jokes and are very interactive. **Willie T's** is another great restaurant, this one on a 'pirate ship' on Norman Island. The setting for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* is loosely based on this locale. There's a guy here from Newfoundland cutting amazing raw tuna at the bar – and the burgers are great, too. As it gets dark, sharks come around and, if you throw scraps in the water, you can get a glimpse of these predators' disarmingly red eyes by shining flashlights on them. That was an unexpected thrill! As the night wears on, the party atmosphere gets pretty animated but it was always nice to return to the boat, play cards and get rocked to sleep in a sheltered cove.

Whether you're after a romantic getaway, a once-in-a-lifetime family opportunity or simply the ultimate in relaxation, look no further. This type of trip constitutes the most unique and laid-back holiday experience imaginable.

There are no flights to the smaller islands so they can only be reached by boat. You'll find the tourists are an eclectic group, including sailing families who are self-schooling their kids, couples or single sailors and dot.com millionaires. It's a uniquely classless society; other than seeing what type of vessel visitors arrive on one can't guess their financial status.

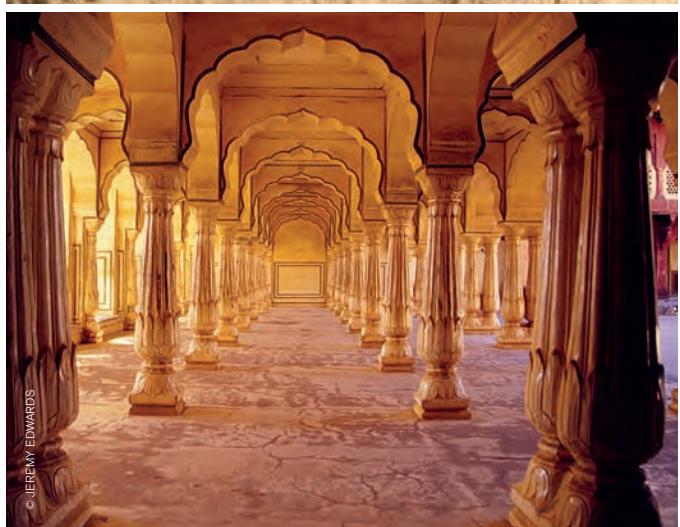
The **British Virgin Islands** are less commercial than their U.S. counterparts. Most are volcanic and some have only a dozen inhabitants. We walked a deserted beach, greeting the same handful of people in both directions. Sir Richard Branson owns a resort on **Necker Island** as well as the island itself; you will not see a major chain.

Tortola is the main island and there is only one traffic light on it! It's home to government offices and about 15,000 of the 20,000 residents of the British Virgin Islands.

Anegada Island is the only one that is out in the open ocean. It is farthest out, 22 miles into the Caribbean. Due to its coral reef composition, the island has a very low-lying profile. In fact, you can't see it until you get very close. If you go there, try the **Anegada lobster** – a specialty that is highly recommended!

As for me, I can't wait for my next birthday. □

The Palace on Wheels



Rajasthan – or ‘the land of kings and princes’ – is located in northern India, the land of legends and pageantry. It is a colourful explosion of heritage, magnificent palaces, majestic fortresses, lush green forests and incredible wildlife. It is also the home of the **Palace on Wheels**, one of the world’s most enchanting train journeys. Travelling from **New Delhi** to **Agra**, the fantasy-like voyage takes seven days and is a true indulgence of the senses. The Palace on Wheels was launched in 1982 by the State of Rajasthan and the Indian Railway Corporation in order to invigorate tourism in the area and bring back some of the glory of bygone days.

The 14 coaches of the train were once the personal travelling vehicles of the maharajas of the princely states of **Rajputana** and **Gujarat**, the **Nizam of Hyderabad** and the **Viceroy of India**. Each coach is a unique and opulent oasis lavishly decorated and equipped with top-notch modern facilities. The train also includes two restaurants, **The Maharaja** and **The Maharani**, which serve a variety of Continental, Chinese, Indian and Rajasthani dishes. A *khidmatgar*, or personal attendant, is always available to take care of every need.

The breathtaking scenery en route equally matches the splendour of the train itself. Every day there are more treasures to discover. **Jaipur**, the capital city of **Rajasthan** and also known as the **Pink City**, is the only city in the world that is divided into nine rectangular sectors symbolizing the nine divisions of the universe in accordance with the *shilpa shastra*: ancient texts that are based on the principles of Hindu sculpture and architecture.

The fortress city of **Jaisalmer**, located in the **Thar Desert**, is a setting straight out of *Arabian Nights*; its architecture reveals a brilliant blend of Rajasthani and Muslim influences. Visitors to this picturesque city can enjoy many of the golden sandstone buildings, enjoy the hustle and bustle of the local market or take in nearby attractions.

For those who prefer a little more excitement, a desert safari is an unforgettable event, as is a visit to **Ranthambore National Park** to see one of the finest tiger reserves in the world.

Udaipur, considered by many the **Venice of the East**, is a serene, picturesque city surrounded by the tranquil waters of **Lake Pichola**. This romantic city is full of beautiful palaces, temples and lush gardens.

A journey to Rajasthan to see these incredible cities and sights, while travelling in the luxury of the Palace on Wheels, is truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Trust your Ensemble Travel® expert who, along with our Exclusive On Location® Partners, can plan and develop unique itineraries that meet your individual needs. □

Cycling with the Kiwis

James Voorend



© AN STAFFORD

Contact your Ensemble Travel® agent to inquire about and book a cycling tour of New Zealand.

As a kid growing up in **New Zealand**, cycling was always something you did to get somewhere, usually because my parents were too busy to drive us. To visit schoolmates, or get to rugby practice, or even when a little older to get to work, my two-wheeled chariot was the preferred (and only) option.

It helped that the weather is mild almost the whole year, with just a few early morning winter frosts to contend with. Even in the summer months of November through March, temperatures rarely rise above 25 degrees, so you could argue the country has a perfect climate for cycling.

We also never had any 400-series highways to contend with, or any very busy roads for that matter. Our dairy farm was actually on a state highway, but with a population of only four million in a country the size of Italy (with a population of 60 million), the term 'highway' becomes relative. Potholes are virtually nonexistent, an added blessing for cycling tourists.

Our farm was on the **North Island**, about midway between **Auckland** (the largest city at one million) and **Rotorua**, which is a small spa city full of geysers, hot pools, boiling mud and **Maori** culture. Just an hour east of us was the beautiful **Pacific Ocean**, with its

gorgeous beaches on the **Coromandel Peninsula**. This was where we headed on a summer's day to sink our toes in the sand and our bodies in the surf. Nowadays the area is still a mecca for holiday makers, both locals and visitors. The oceanside roads are perfect for today's bicycle tourist, with a new beach every few kilometres, most of them likely to be devoid of other people. South of Rotorua lies beautiful scenery of forests, lakes, volcanos (Mt. Doom) and sheep farms. To experience so much variety in such a small country is surely one of New Zealand's greatest features!

Cycle touring on the South Island is arguably even more popular with visitors, as the roads are almost deserted. The scenery through the **Southern Alps** is spectacular, with mountain lakes, clear air and extraordinary vistas.

There is a wide choice of bicycle tours available throughout New Zealand, both independent and escorted. Trips range from two days to a spectacular 37-day combined tour that covers much of both islands. There is a tour for everyone, and combining them is a wonderful way to see the country and its scenic diversity. Brand new Trek bikes are included, as is a support van, luggage transportation and most meals. □

Three for the Road: Charlevoix, Saint John and Kelowna

From the East Coast to the West, **Barbara Ann Lamb** offers three Canadian gems to put on your travel list this year



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“The more I travel around Canada, the more I realize I haven’t even scratched the surface of its infinite variety. What a diverse country we live in! Certain places always draw me back, like these three – completely different – destination gems.”

CHARLEVOIX, QUEBEC

Celebrating Quebec City's 400th birthday last summer, I stretched my stay with a week in **Charlevoix**. It's less than an hour's drive east of Quebec City (on Route 138 beside the St. Lawrence River) but little known among out-of-province visitors.

Leave 138 at Route 362 to wind through Baie-Saint-Paul and along rollercoaster roads to the area's 'capital,' **La Malbaie**. Between these pretty little towns you'll find Charlevoix's **Flavour Trail** and **Arts Trail** meandering through charming communities snuggled along the river banks.

Fine organic foods are produced here in Quebec's premier gourmet destination. Look for emu and duck farmers, and cheese makers, among others. The natural beauty makes it easy to understand why Charlevoix is a favourite with artists. Art flourishes here, in tiny studios punctuating the roadsides, in major galleries, and in performances at the grand **Domaine Forget**, a major arts education centre and theatre complex.

Don't miss the delightful **Île-aux-Coudres** in the middle of the river. It's a short – and free – ferry trip from **Saint-Joseph-de-la-Rive** (itself a delightful stop) and a favourite vacation spot. Views of **Baie-Saint-Paul** are stunning.

Activities abound, from whale, wildlife and bird watching to hiking, canoeing and more. Lovers of the outdoors should head to **Parc national des Hautes-Gorges-de-la-Rivière-Malbaie**, a treasure in the Parcs Québec network and part of the Charlevoix world biosphere reserve. It's a great place at any time of year for hiking, canoeing, snowshoeing, skiing and more.

Golfers love the championship course at **Le Manoir Richelieu**, a Fairmont property high in the hills overlooking the river, and the Manoir is an elegant place to stay, with a classy casino.

Charlevoix lies in the heart of the Canadian Shield, one of the Earth's oldest rock formations, and it owes some of its lovely mountain scenery to the impact of a 15-billion-tonne meteorite 350 million years ago.



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SAINT JOHN, NEW BRUNSWICK

Saint John, Canada's oldest incorporated city, is historical, cultural and fun.

Shipbuilders, sea captains, and United Empire Loyalists feature prominently in its history and the oldest building is the **Loyalist House** (a National Historic Site) dating to 1817. It tells quite a story. So will you, if you take a jet boat ride along **Reversing Falls**. The Falls owe their name to the Bay of Fundy tides, the highest in the world, which meet the **Saint John River** twice a day and force it to flow backwards.

Perhaps you prefer your adventure more extreme? Try the **Bubble**, where riders bounce through rapids, spin in whirlpools, and flip through whitecaps while strapped into clear plastic spheres. Saner folks just watch the whole thing from a lookout.

You must munch dulse, an Atlantic staple made from dried seaweed and consumed like potato chips. I bought some in the **City Market** and found it surprisingly tasty. The 1876 market – a must-see when you're in town – is colourful and lively. (It closes on Sundays.)

When the countryside calls, head for **Rockwood Park**, where you can try your skill at geocaching, walk the trails or take a paddleboat around **Lily Lake**. It's a great outdoor venue in the city.

Saint John nightlife has the proverbial 'something for everyone' with plenty of dining options, live theatre, clubs and pubs. You're sure to find some Maritime music, so grab a pair of spoons and clack along with the group – they won't mind.

When cruise ships visit Saint John, passengers are greeted by the same lamp that lit the way for 19th-century sea captains, who likely bought their bakkie at **Barbour's General Store**, dating to the same era and now a museum/information centre.

As I said, Saint John is fun. To prove it, the city hosts the **Canadian Comedy Festival** from October 1 to 4 this year. It'll be a gas.



KELOWNA, OKANAGAN VALLEY, BC

British Columbia's **Okanagan Valley** – a four-season destination – is famous for wine, sunshine and great produce. Between June and October, roadside stands are piled high with local fruits and vegetables (cherries and peaches are famous), pies and preserves.

The valley hemms the shores of 135-kilometre-long **Lake Okanagan**, wherein, legend has it, resides Ogopogo the monster. Central along the lake is Kelowna, the base of choice for exploring the area.

Kelowna is enjoyed by golfers, sun-lovers, oenophiles and winter sports fans. Swirl and sniff the grape at four annual wine festivals – this year's fall festival runs from October 1 to 11 – and visit your choice of almost 100 wineries in the Okanagan Valley. (Kelowna alone has 14, and the tourist office has a GPS-based winery tour.)

Those who love the great outdoors head this way to hike, cycle, golf and enjoy water sports and lovely beaches.

A favourite hiking and cycling route is the **Kettle Valley Rail Trail**. The old railroad was developed in the late 1800s to serve the silver mines, and while the total trail stretches about 455 kilometres, the Kelowna section offers a challenging 12-kilometre trail around Myra Canyon. Twelve of the original 16 wooden trestles were destroyed in a devastating fire in 2003 but have since been lovingly and authentically recreated.

Golf matters. The area boasts some 40 courses, including **Predator Ridge** and **Gallagher's Canyon**, rated among Canada's finest, and the equally popular **Bear** and **Quail** courses.

In winter, great snow sports are less than an hour's drive away, with three centres to choose from: **Apex**, **Silver Star** and **Big White**.

The city may be small but there's plenty to please a whole range of tastes with its six-block **Cultural District**, sophisticated nightlife and great family attractions, and a range of accommodations to match. □

MY FAVOURITE PLACE

GABRIELLE MILLER
Michele Sponagle

You can be sure that Gabrielle Miller is ready to take on the world after recently wrapping on two hit television series, *Corner Gas* and *Robson Arms*. The actor adores exploring new places, whether it's hiking in the Valhalla Wilderness or vacationing in tropical destinations. As long as she is close to nature, she is content. It's not surprising, since she was born and raised in Vancouver, next to mountains and ocean air. She has travelled coast-to-coast in Canada and has discovered the delights of the East Coast, too. "I am in love with Cape Breton," she says, "and dream that one day I'll have a little house in Nova Scotia."

Outside Canada, she has snorkelled in the crystal clear waters of Grand Cayman and hiked the rainforests of Central America. Still, the destination that is perhaps closest to her heart is Africa. In December 2007, during a break from filming *Corner Gas*, Miller visited Mali to visit her sponsored child on behalf of World Vision.

She fell in love with the country and its people. "I now understand why this continent seeps into people's souls," she says from her home in Vancouver. "It was one of the most amazing and humbling experiences of my life."

When she arrived in Niamana village in central Mali, hundreds of children welcomed her with hours of non-stop chanting and dancing. The entire village turned out to greet this Canadian, a woman they did not know was a television star. They were anxious to thank someone from Canada, a country that has contributed so greatly to improving their quality of life. As the music got louder and everyone moved to the rhythms and songs played on traditional instruments, Miller was swept away by the magic of the moment and couldn't resist an invitation to join in on the fun.

"I was witness to so much generosity and love and hope and incredible humanity in this country that has so little," recalls Miller. "For most of the people, it's a struggle just to get access to clean water." Her visit to Africa was further enriched when she met her sponsored child Sanye, who charmed Miller to the core with her shy smile. With Miller's assistance, this sweet-faced girl has been able to attend school. "What a delight to meet her and know that I was helping her in a tiny way," Miller says. "When I left, we gave each other a big hug and I told her I'll write her."

As Miller visits families in the village, she gives pigs and goats as gifts. Though Miller is a long-time vegetarian, she knows that the pigs and goats will enrich the lives of the locals and enable them to pay for school fees and other essential items with the money they can earn by breeding and selling the animals.

One of the most moving moments of her trip came when she witnessed the opening of a well – not exactly the usual thing a tourist sees – but it was an emotional experience. Clean water means that children are able to go to school. Before the villagers had the well, they had to walk miles just to get safe water for their families. "I felt so humbled and extremely honoured to be participating in and witnessing this joyous moment. It was absolutely unforgettable. These villagers' lives have changed forever – and so has mine."

Miller and her husband A.J. have already made a trip back to the continent, visiting South Africa and Swaziland. No matter what the future holds for her career-wise, you can bet that travel and more vacation time in Africa are going to be part of her schedule. □



Gabrielle Miller
Actor



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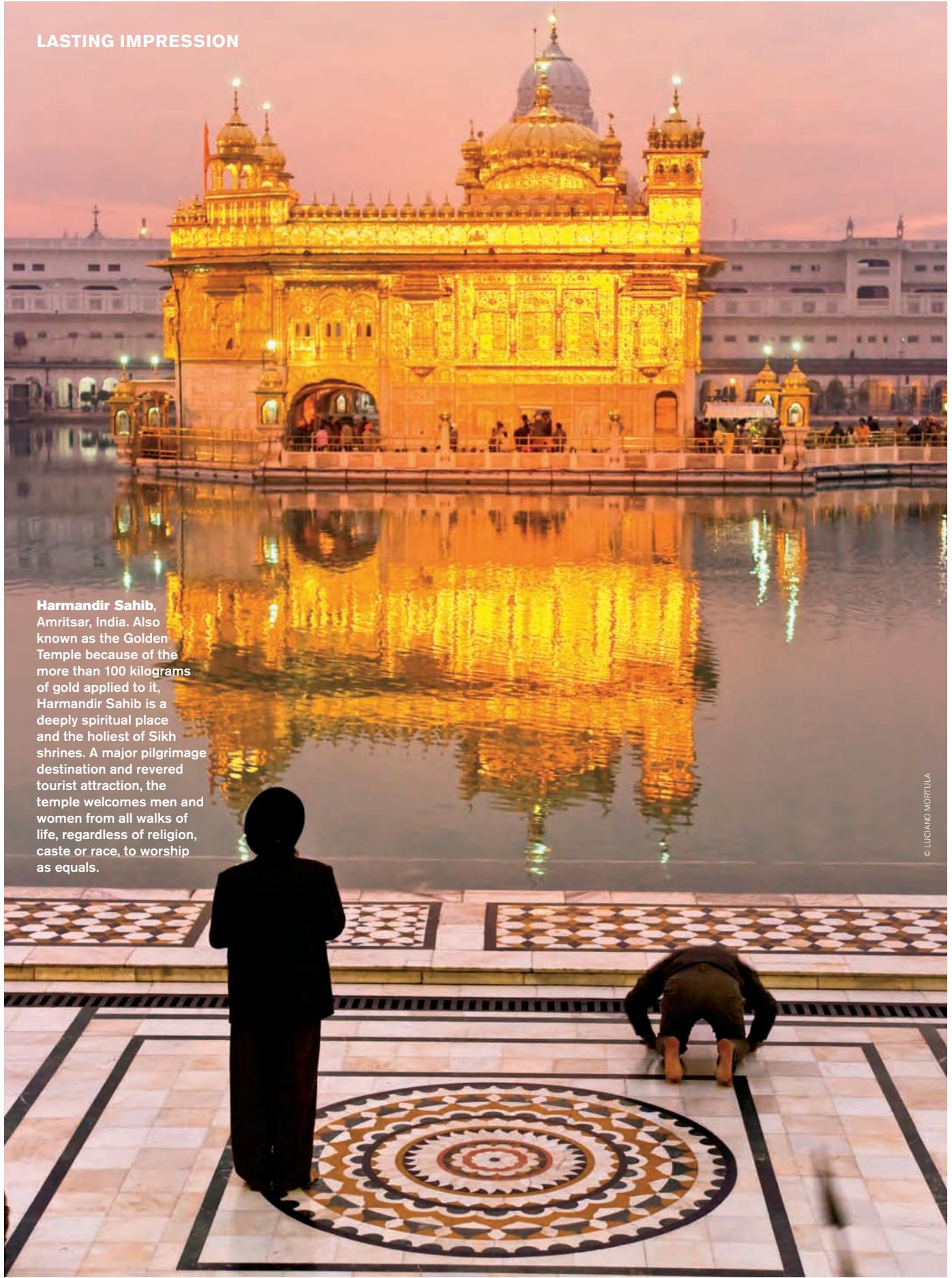
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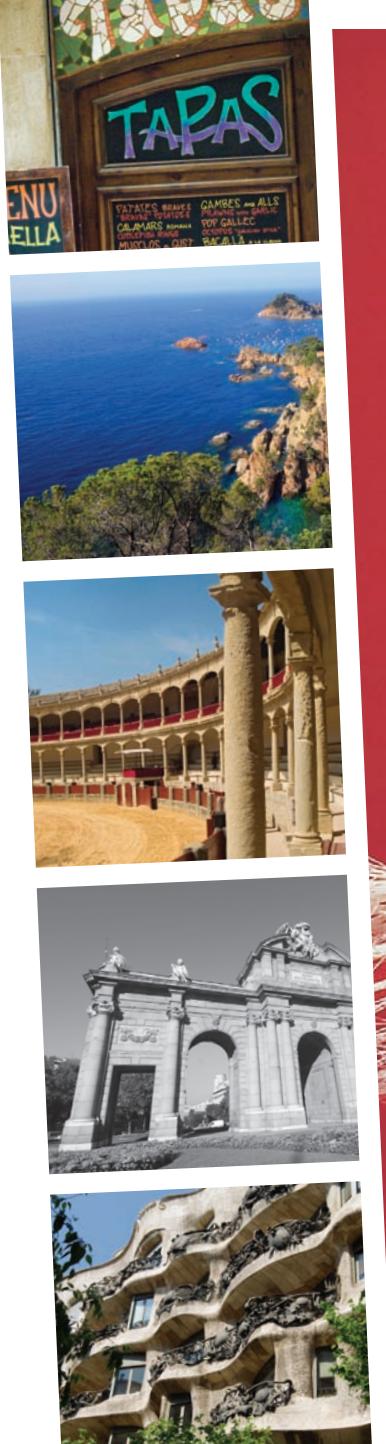


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