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WINTER 2010

FESTIVAL FEVER!

Ode to Venice

Barranquilla's Carnaval

A New Amsterdam

**Cultural Close-up:
New Orleans**

River Cruising
The Rhine and
the Mekong

10

**BEST PLACES
TO SKI**

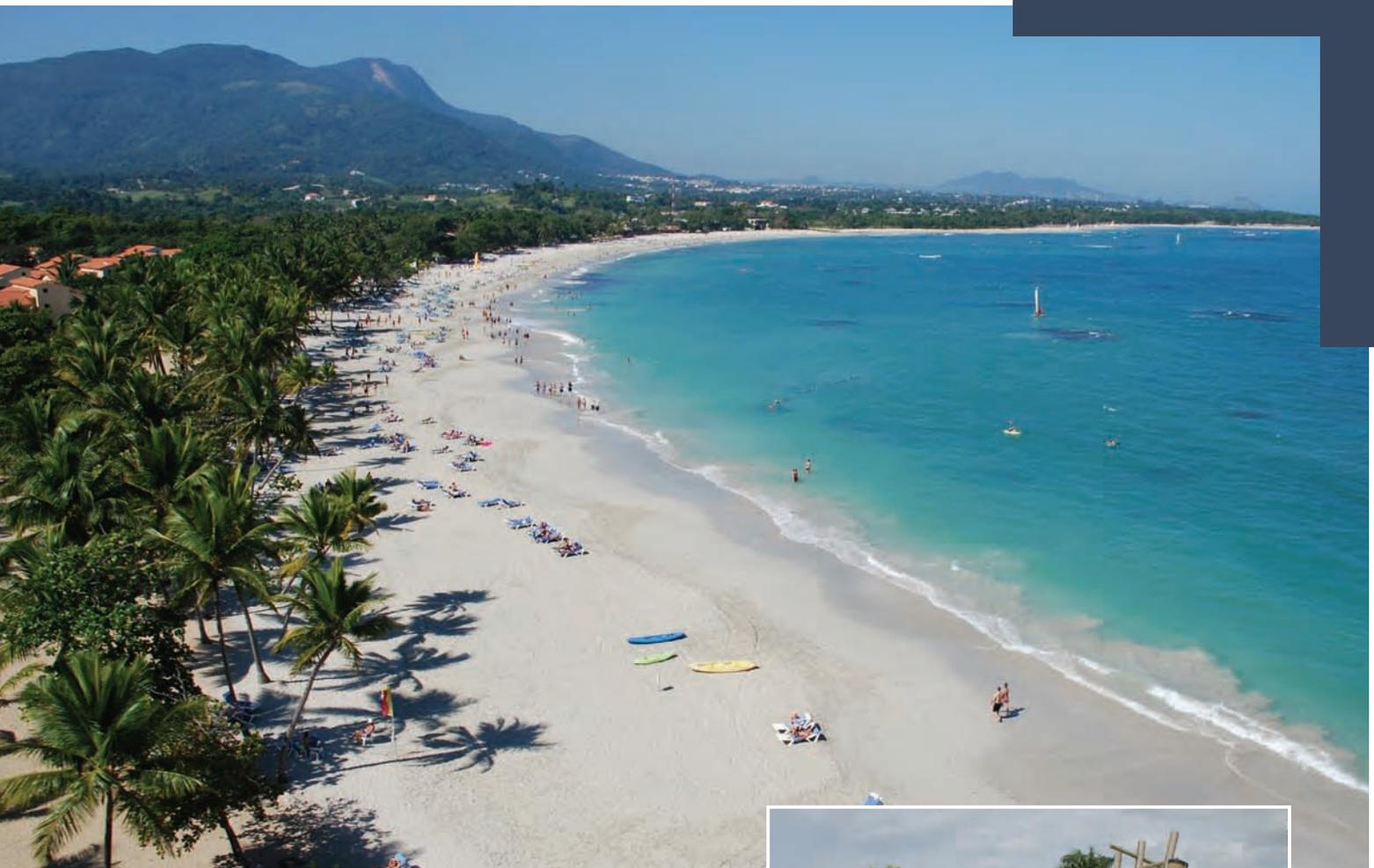
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Adventures in Barbados
Victorian Cocktails
San Francisco Treats



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lessons included.





The Allegro Puerto Plata features a varied selection of room categories, along with the lovely Playa Dorada beach and beautiful pools. Guests can choose from three fine à la carte restaurants, a wide array of water sports and many activities. With a spa onsite and a golf course nearby, the resort is the perfect spot for a fun-filled getaway for families, friends and couples.

A FAMILY RESORT

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For complete details refer to the Nolitours 2010/2011 Sun brochure or visit your Ensemble Travel® Group agency.

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Ships' Registry: The Netherlands

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ISRAEL

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Combo 4	Oasis Turquesa	OR	Breezes Bella Costa	→	Be Live Panorama

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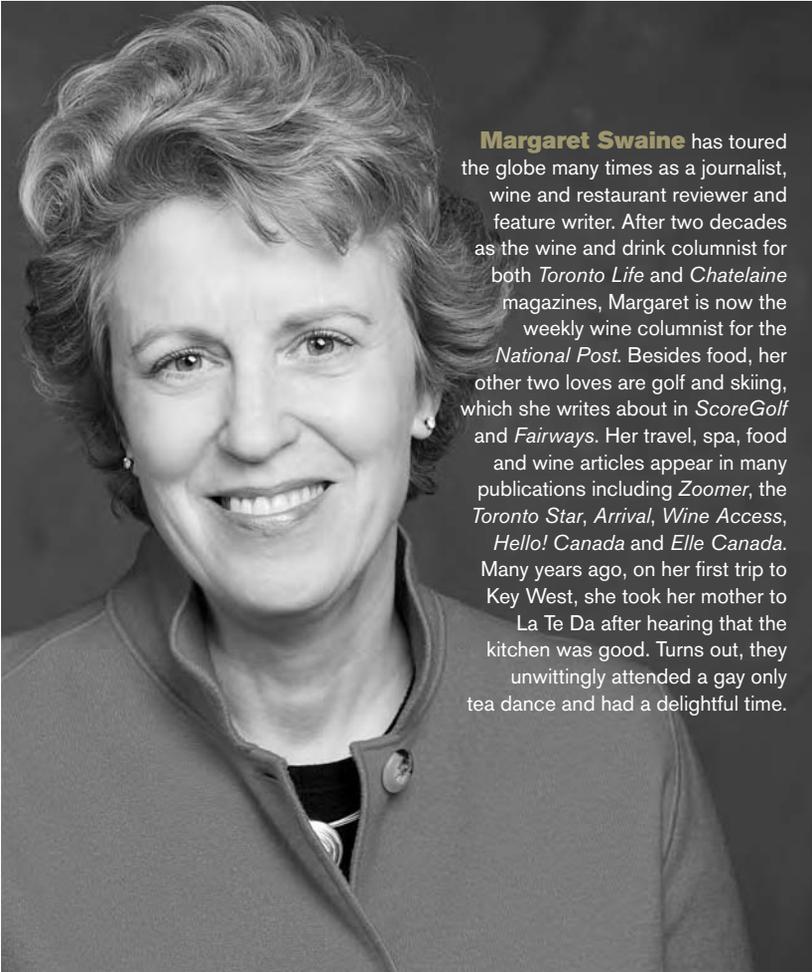
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Margaret Swaine has toured the globe many times as a journalist, wine and restaurant reviewer and feature writer. After two decades as the wine and drink columnist for both *Toronto Life* and *Chatelaine* magazines, Margaret is now the weekly wine columnist for the *National Post*. Besides food, her other two loves are golf and skiing, which she writes about in *ScoreGolf* and *Fairways*. Her travel, spa, food and wine articles appear in many publications including *Zoomer*, the *Toronto Star*, *Arrival*, *Wine Access*, *Hello! Canada* and *Elle Canada*. Many years ago, on her first trip to Key West, she took her mother to La Te Da after hearing that the kitchen was good. Turns out, they unwittingly attended a gay only tea dance and had a delightful time.



Jacqueline Swartz grew up in San Francisco, lived in Greece and Paris and now resides in Toronto. She has ridden elephants in India, interviewed philosophers in Paris and sent political dispatches from Athens. Her work appears in major Canadian publications, and she has also written for *Cosmopolitan* in the U.S. and *Condé Nast Traveller* in the U.K. Travel writing encompasses her interests and passions, from food and art to health and archaeology. "I do not look for *the* next new place – so many people travel these days – or the most extreme adventure. I try to find the extra dimensions of a place, in its present and its past."

Toronto-based travel writer

Tim Johnson kicked off 2010 at a crazy New Year's party in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, and he hasn't looked back, spending significant portions of the year in different corners of the world – across Asia and Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway, to Central America, the Caribbean, the U.K., Norway, Iceland, Canada and the United States. His work has appeared in a wide variety of publications, among them *Reader's Digest*, the *National Post*, *Fashion*, *Canadian Family*, *enRoute*, *Best Health*, *Maclean's*, *MoneySense*, *Driven* and *Toronto Life*. He finds adventure in Barbados on page 51, and while it might not be quite as exotic as Mongolia, he notes that the beautiful island has *much* more to offer in terms of surfing, paddle boarding, cricket and, of course, rum punch.



Travel trends



I have just returned from our international conference in Orlando, Florida – a large annual event, where hundreds of our Ensemble member agencies come together to exchange information and network with many of the top cruise lines, tour operators, hotels, resorts and destination partners.

It was an educational four days, where agents learned about upcoming trends and forged valuable connections with new or specialty travel providers, all so they can offer you the very best options for your vacation needs. I'll admit there was a little bit of fun thrown in, too: our whole group enjoyed a private visit to Universal Orlando's Wizarding World of Harry Potter – a *very* cool experience for all ages and a must-do for families.

One of the topics we covered is hot travel trends. And speaking of families, travelling together with friends and loved ones is bigger than ever. Economic reality has made people reassess what's important and while they'll still spend a lot on priorities, they are much more value-conscious – and conscious of their values. No longer satisfied with hedonistic holidays, travellers today want *meaningful* experiences. 'Green' is still huge (check out our green packing list

on page 17) and eco-travel is hot, as are vacations with a volunteer element where visitors can give back to the destination. Another hot trend is river cruising; the pleasures of small ship sailing on some of the world's most famous rivers offers an experience like no other. And forget the IKEA look – some cruise lines are stepping up their game with gorgeous interior décor and themed staterooms designed by luxury boutique hotels.

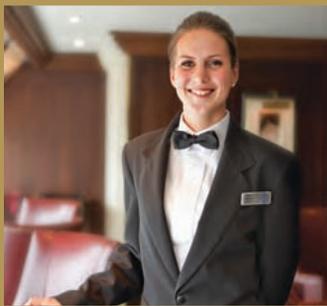
In this issue of *Vacations*, you'll get a taste of river cruising as we take you down the Rhine (page 42) and the mighty Mekong (page 44), and check out our list of the top 10 places to ski (page 38) – all great family destinations! We turn our eye on Venice (page 34), Barranquilla (page 62) and New Orleans (page 71), each home to arguably the best carnival in the world, and find a little adventure in Barbados (page 51). And don't miss our fabulous Worldly Delights section starting on page 55: find out what's opening where, the latest trends in food and drink and our recipes from around the world – a perfect reference planner just in time for the holidays! ▣

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Taste

AN AFFORDABLE LUXURY



The essence of taste reaches far beyond the culinary creations of our Master Chef, Jacques Pépin. It's in the hand-selected furnishings of our gourmet restaurants. It's in our richly appointed staterooms and lounges. It's how our staff warmly welcomes you to the comfort of our country club-casual ambiance. From the serenity of our Canyon Ranch SpaClub® to the allure of more than 300 global destinations, our style reflects your tastes.

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Diversions

Innovations and celebrations

Opening soon...

W London-Leicester Square. In February, the latest **W hotel** will open in the heart of London's entertainment district. Bet on an über-cool vibe with a hip décor and a moody red and black bar.



Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Modern art lovers can't wait for the opening of the new facility in 2011, when its stellar works ranging from Matisse to Warhol will be on display.

Museum of Liverpool, Liverpool, U.K. The Beatles' former hometown puts culture and history at the forefront with a brand new museum opening in 2011. Of course, it will feature plenty of memorabilia from the Fab Four.

Big bites: Three hot food trends

Pop-up restaurants

Some good things aren't meant to last. Select chefs are playing it safe and opening eateries for a limited time only. In Vancouver's **False Creek**, the **Plastic Dining Room**, built as a fundraiser that floats on a platform of 1,700 plastic pop bottles, lasted just 60 days. The city's latest, **100 Days**, at the **Opus Hotel**, will open for – wait for it – 100 days. London and Sydney have also been swept up in the pop-up boom. Catch it while you can.

Roll with the lunches

A little less ephemeral is the worldwide trend toward high-quality fast food served from food trucks. You can dine (well) and dash in hot spots like Anguilla, at **Hungry's Good Food** (stationed in the Valley and run by Irad Gumbs, a former chef at luxe resort **Cap Juluca**), which serves some of the best local conch soup and lobster quesadillas. In **LA**, fans of Mexican-Korean fusion monitor the arrival of the Kogi truck via Facebook and Twitter. But Portland, Oregon is still the hands-down winner for sheer variety with more than 200 food carts, serving cuisine ranging from Hawaiian to German. Vancouver is getting in on the mobile trend, too, launching a year-long pilot project that features southern BBQ food and Asian noodles being served from trucks downtown.



Mezcal, tequila's smoother cousin

Although tequila and mezcal are both produced from the agave plant, they taste – and are made – very differently. Mezcal is winning raves and flocks of followers because of its cognac-like smoothness and complexity. Taste the roasted notes it gets when the hearts, or *piñas*, of the agave plants are smoked in underground pits for three days. The flavours shine in cocktails served at hot new mezcal bars like **Casa Mezcal** in **New York** or **LA's Las Perlas Mezcal** and **Tequila Bar**. If you're picking up a bottle, look for respected brands like **El Rey Zapoteco** and **Herencia del Mezcalero**.

©FRANCISCO ARCAUTE

Hello 2011! Best places to ring in the New Year

Raise a glass in style at these celebrations around the world.

For extroverts only: Join more than a million people gathered by Berlin's **Brandenburg Gate**. At midnight, Germans make a toast with Sekt (a local sparkling wine) or Champagne, while fireworks illuminate the sky. If just one day of partying isn't enough, head to Scotland for **Hogmanay**, a four-day fun fest that culminates in the burning of a replica Viking ship.

In Lima, Peru, celebrants gather in the main square and, in Spanish tradition, eat 12 grapes with each chime at midnight for good luck. Wearing yellow for the occasion is believed to ensure prosperity. Meanwhile, in Ecuador, a walk around the block carrying a suitcase means the upcoming year will bring a memorable journey. Cheers to that....



Green Packing List

New and notable

Clean as You Go

If the hand-drying sting of alcohol combined with artificial scents has turned you off hand sanitizers, you'll love **Quash**, the 100% natural alternative. Quash uses naturally antiseptic and antifungal lavender and lime oils, antibacterial manuka honey, skin-friendly vitamin C and moisture-boosting aloe vera, to name a few. This lab-proven spray keeps illness-causing germs off our hands without the use of chemicals, making it as good for you as it is for the environment. Even better, it's available in handy 15 ml travel bottles (\$4.85 each) http://well.ca/products/quash-moisturizing-hand-sanitizer_23900.html.



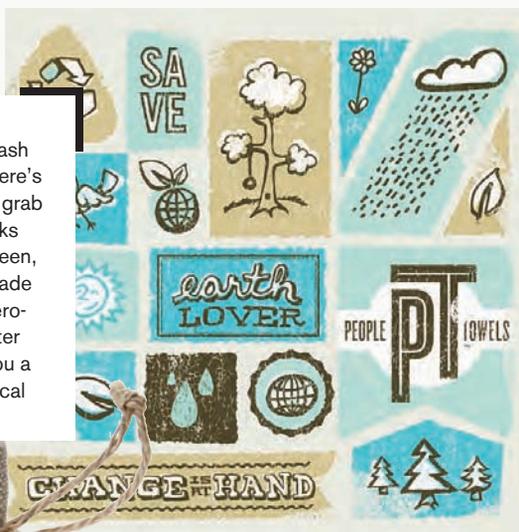
In the Bag

The **RuMe ALL** is the go-to bag for busy travellers. This super-lightweight, heavy-duty beauty is designed with pockets and features that make getting there without losing anything a first-class experience. With three exterior pockets to store bottles, keys, cellphones, iPods and other gadgets, RuMe ALL can carry up to 50 pounds and is TSA-approved for carry-on. Non-slip shoulder pads mean you won't be wrestling with your bag while you commute, and if it rains on your parade, you'll be happy to know that at least the bags are water-resistant. \$26.95, www.rumebags.com/shop/RuMe-ALL.



All Dried Up

Every traveller knows this scenario – you wash your hands while on the road only to find there's nothing to dry them with, or you grudgingly grab a tree-killing paper towel. The eco-smart folks at **People Towels** have come up with a green, clean solution made of 100% organic fair trade cotton. Absorbent and quick drying, this zero-waste hand-drying solution is smart no matter where your travels take you. US\$21 gets you a set of three towels in your choice of whimsical prints, www.peopletowels.com.



H₂O on the Go

Food-grade, stainless steel **klean kanteen** bottles are the savvy solution for hydrating on the go in lieu of plastic water or juice bottles. Available in a range of sizes (from 12 oz to 40 oz), insulated varieties and even sippy-style child-friendly versions, you can now drink your bevy in style! Available in a rainbow of colours or in a more minimalist brushed steel option. These durable bottles were the first on the market and are BPA- and aluminum-free, which means you get the best because you deserve it. From \$14.95 to \$32.95, www.kleankanteen.com/retailers/kanteen-locator.php for a list of Canadian retailers.



Roll, Baby, Roll

Frequent flyers can self-massage using these portable, lightweight organic rubber compound **t spheres**, infused with the therapeutic essential oil of their choice. Need to shake off jet lag and energize after a long flight? **Pep-Up Mint** is the answer for mouse-weary arms and tired limbs. Each t sphere comes with an essential oil re-infuser and instructions on how to massage your way to bliss. Besides, it's how rock stars like Dave Gahan of Depeche Mode roll, and now you can, too. From US\$20 per set, plus shipping, www.tspheres.com.



Trends: Style Notes



The Fur Flies Again

The ethical debate rages on over the use of leather, shearing and fur, but whether real, recycled or faux, there's no question designers made use of the material in their fall collections in a big way. In New York, multi-generational furrier **J. Mendel** went for broke with sable while here at home, **Jeremy Laing** opted to accent his **Pacific Northwest** collection using only wild Canadian fur in neckpieces and stoles. Even if you're not headed for Moscow this winter, you can still rock the fur trend with **Jillian Wood's Headmistress** line of whimsical feather and fabric fascinators, headbands and hair adornments that include upcycled vintage fur (think Granny's outdated mink), as muffs, headbands and cuffs (Deer Island cuff \$65 each, loveheadmistress.com).



Junk in the Trunk

Louis Vuitton opens a new Maison at the historic **Fairmont Hotel Vancouver** in early December 2010. One of only 11 in the world, it will occupy 10,000 square feet on two levels to become the largest LV store in the country. The Maison will carry all product categories, including an array of leather goods from the iconic and innovative collections of luggage and city bags, shoes, watches, jewellery, sunglasses, textiles, ties, accessories and, for the first time in Vancouver, ready-to-wear (louisvuitton.com, 1-866-VUITTON). Can't afford the hefty price tags? Aspire to the coffee-table tome instead. *100 Legendary Trunks* (Abrams, \$150) is a compendium of the unique pieces the house has handcrafted over the years, including commissions for such personalities as Paris fashion designer Paul Poiret, Sharon Stone, Karl Lagerfeld, Ernest Hemingway and Damien Hirst.



Fashion as Art

Before that outfit hits the runway it's an idea in a designer's mind, and until photography reigned supreme, consumers didn't get their first glimpse of fashion through the lens of style.com but through the interpretation of fashion illustrators. These professional mode sketchers gave an artistic interpretation in magazines and advertising. **'Drawing Fashion,'** the new exhibition at **London's Design Museum**, shows artistic and commercial examples of fashion illustration sketches from Chanel, Dior and Comme des Garçons, starting with Georges Lepape a century ago and René Gruau in the '40s to the latest from Viktor & Rolf, Christian Lacroix and the late Alexander McQueen. It runs through March 6, 2011 at the Design Museum, designmuseum.org.

Trends: Style Notes



Twinkle Like a Star

Twinkle is always on tap for the festive season and **La Belle Rose**, the latest red carpet collection from celebrity favourite **Lia Sophia**, adds sparkle to the holidays. It's glam with an edge: distressed rose gold, brass or pewter-look metals are combined with baguette-cut crystals and smooth bullet shapes for an industrial Art Deco feeling. This and her other collections are not only striking, but affordable too – the perfect companion for on the town or on your travels (from \$72, at www.liasophia.ca).



Heel, Girl

The dragons of CBC's *Dragons' Den* squabbled over her business plan and entrepreneur **Hailey Coleman** got the backing she needed to market **Damn Heels**, her inexpensive footwear solution. The idea? Emergency ballet slippers for those occasions when a woman simply can't walk another step in those beautiful but painful stilettos (think commuting, sightseeing or the last dance at a wedding). The black vinyl flats fold up small and tuck into a pouch, perfect for popping into a purse for later. (\$20 per pair in S, M and L at retailers across Canada and online at damnheels.com).



True Prep

Heritage preppy style is back, from the L.L.Bean duck boots of New England to the pink-and-green Palm Beach country club style. **Michael Bastian**, the former men's fashion director for **Bergdorf Goodman**, who launched his eponymous cult-following menswear line in 2006, branches out this fall with **GANT by Michael Bastian**, an ongoing capsule collection for the historic American lifestyle brand (at retailers across Canada including Harry Rosen). This season, GANT by Michael Bastian puts slim, well-cut shirts that take their cue from the all-American game of lacrosse front and centre. Shirts are layered with intarsia knit sweaters and paired with slender jeans, and tweed jackets feature such details as quilt-padded elbows (from \$170, www.gant.com).



Danish Modern

The craze for mid-century modern continues unabated, and the latest must-have object of revival isn't a low-slung *Mad Men*-era couch or groovy pendant lamp but a salt and pepper mill. **Crate & Barrel's** exclusive trio of wooden salt and pepper mills are award-winning designs by **Jens Quistgaard** and lifted straight from the Dansk archives. In a nod to the 21st century, the sculptural **Henrik, Jesper** and **Lisbet** now come in eco-friendly acacia wood instead of teak and are sure to stimulate dinner party conversation (\$44.95 each at Crate & Barrel).

Travel File

Ensemble® Hotel and Resort Collection



LLAO LLAO HOTEL & RESORT • GOLF • SPA
Patagonia, Argentina

There are some places that are well-kept secrets, existing quietly under the radar. **Llao Llao Hotel & Resort** is just such a place. Over the years, celebrities, diplomats and aristocrats have all enjoyed the hotel's tranquility, majestic landscapes and consistently impeccable service. Located within **Argentine Patagonia's Nahuel Huapi National Park**, Llao Llao is an eco-traveller's paradise with nearly 360° views of crystalline lakes, parkland and the surrounding Andean mountains. You can bring your iPad but the outdoors is your playground here: take a leisurely mountain bike ride or try a more intense four-hour trek. Archery, canoeing, kayaking, windsurfing and rappelling as well as canopy tours, 4x4 excursions and traditional lake and land tours are available. After all that exercise, relax at the hotel's heated in/out infinity pool or unwind at the spa – a serene oasis that blends advanced technology with all-natural ingredients. Cap your day with delicious cuisine from your choice of six restaurants offering everything from Patagonian lamb to international dishes. Don't miss the **Llao Llao Tea**, served overlooking the hotel gardens and **Nahuel Huapi Lake**. Sound breathtaking? It is.

GAMBOA RAINFOREST RESORT

Colón, Panama

On the banks of the **Chagres River** at the **Panama Canal**, nestled within the vast **Soberania National Park Rainforest**, you'll find the exotic **Gamboa Rainforest Resort**. Adventure lovers take note: activities include soaring above the rainforest canopy on an aerial tram, canal fishing or kayaking, the world's best bird-watching and Safari Night, an evening of adventure and mystery in search of flora and fauna along the Chagres River. If that sounds a bit intimidating, simply relax poolside or enjoy the incredible views from the hammock on your private balcony. Families will love the junior suites, with a king-size bed on the main floor and a spiral staircase leading to a loft with two twin beds and a second bathroom – ideal when travelling with children. If rejuvenation is your aim, take it to the next level at the **Spa Gamboa**, where unique treatments combine natural herbs, minerals and the ancient secrets of local tribes. Best: the Rainforest River Experience, a massage on board a river boat – truly a once-in-a-lifetime indulgence.



Cruise News

Epic opulence and Cunard's Queen



© RICK DIAZ

An Epic Party

This past summer, country music legend Reba McEntire christened one of the newest ships to set sail: **Norwegian Cruise Line's *Epic***. Industry insiders have compared the 1,200 passenger ship to Las Vegas: *Epic* boasts 20 restaurants, including the elegant **Le Bistro**; **Cagney's Steakhouse**, serving classic American beef dishes; **The Manhattan Room** designed to replicate a private New York supper club, as well as several Asian and

European restaurants. To complement the large selection of free-style dining, *Epic* also features the first (and only) ice bar at sea. **The Svedka Bar** is inspired by the Scandinavian ice hotel concept and of course serves a full menu of – you guessed it – vodka-inspired delicacies.

If you want to experience something unique, make reservations at the **New Cirque Dreams and Dinner**. This one-of-a-kind dinner theatre is located in the **Spiegel Tent**, which was built on

two decks of the ship. The show features 16 performers and a group of 15 to 20 servers who are also part of the show.

Non-stop entertainment includes everything from beach parties to the Blue Man Group, a Second City comedy show, Fat Cats Jazz Club, Legends in Concert and Howl at the Moon. And for those seeking a more relaxed atmosphere, *Epic* is home to nine unique watering holes, including a sake bar, a whiskey bar, a martini bar and even a cigar lounge.



Coming Soon...

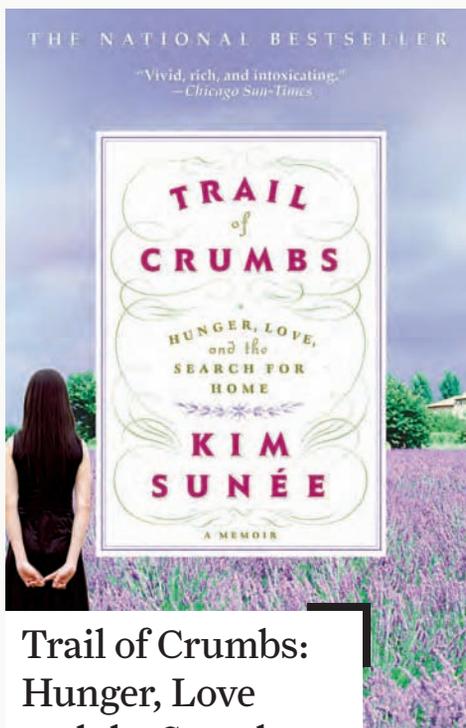
Luxury cruising has just been elevated with the launch of **Cunard's** newest queen: the **Queen Elizabeth**. The ship was officially named by Her Majesty the Queen at an appropriately posh ceremony, with more than 1,500 VIP guests including celebrities and dignitaries, before setting sail on October 12. *Queen Elizabeth* showcases all the refined opulence her sister ships are known for, as well as the modern amenities one would expect from Cunard. Ask us about available voyages for 2011.

UPCOMING MAIDEN VOYAGES

- Royal Caribbean *Allure of the Seas*** – December 2010
- Seabourn *Quest*** – June 2011

Required Reading

Enchanting escapes



Trail of Crumbs: Hunger, Love and the Search for Home

by Kim Sunée
(Grand Central Publishing, \$28.99)

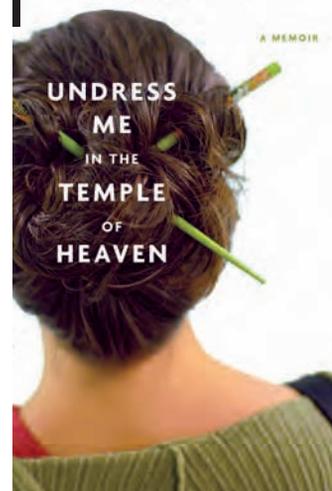
The typical questions most of us ask ourselves – who am I, where am I going, where do I belong – weigh just a bit more heavily on Kim Sunée’s mind. Abandoned at a South Korean market at the age of three, adopted by American parents and relocating to Europe in her twenties, Sunée’s quest to answer life’s big questions is haunting. Beautiful prose conjures images of a lavender-scented Provençal countryside, snowy Swedish streets and special moments spent learning to cook Creole fare with her grandfather ‘Poppy’ in New Orleans. Heartbreaking, honest and inspiring, Sunée will leave you yearning for another chapter, if for no other reason than to keep her company from afar.

Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven

by Susan Jane Gilman
(Grand Central Publishing, \$16.99)

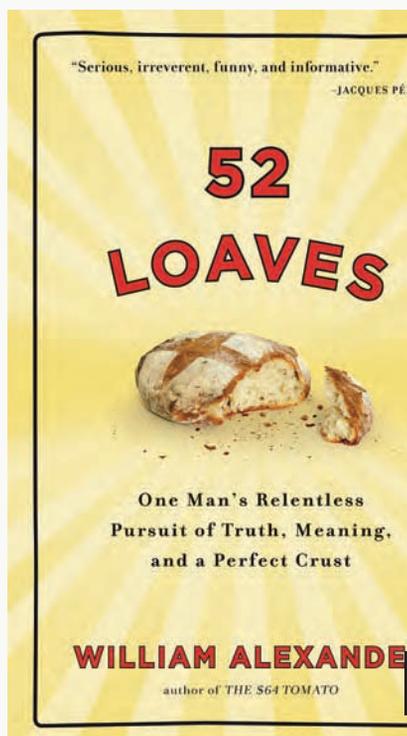
It’s 1986 and Gilman has graduated from college. Instead of hunting for the ultimate job, she and a friend decide to veer off the beaten path. The road less travelled takes them to Hong Kong and then on to the People’s Republic of China, newly opened to outsiders. There the young women come face to face with culture shock, eccentric expats, new lifelong friends and a way of life they’d never experienced. Dusty Shanghai streets give way to wind-carved mountain vistas and awe-inspiring remote settings. As the year progresses, Gilman’s friend starts to feel ‘watched’ by Chinese government ‘eyes.’ Fun and frolic meet international spy thriller in this book, and since it’s a memoir, you can bet your dim sum it happened!

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
HYPOCRITE IN A PUFFY WHITE DRESS
SUSAN JANE GILMAN



52 Loaves: One Man’s Relentless Pursuit of Truth, Meaning, and a Perfect Crust

by William Alexander
(Workman Publishing, \$29.95)



Bread, the six-thousand-year-old staple, gives William Alexander a veritable run for his money. In an effort to bake not just any old loaf but rather try to replicate the perfect loaf of artisan bread he once tasted, Alexander decides to bake bread every week for a year. What starts out as a fun, self-imposed task ends up becoming a metaphor for patience, obsession and what the author calls “the meditative qualities of ritual.” From Moroccan back alleys to a monk’s abbey in Normandy, France, Alexander spans the globe in search of the perfect bread. He even has to get 12-year-old sourdough starter past airport security to accomplish his mission.

City Snap Guide: Key West

Margaret Swaine

Key West, America's southernmost city, is quirky, fun and eminently gay-friendly. Once you arrive, you'll feel removed from the rest of the Sunshine State in this paradise of particular charm. Stroll palm-lined streets to discover gingerbread mansions, tin-roofed conch houses, open-air bars and sidewalk cafés. Walk in the footsteps of Ernest Hemingway, Harry Truman and Tennessee Williams. Visit the renovated Historic District, known locally as the Key West Bight, and arrange a day on the water to fish, snorkel or scuba dive.



Hemingway's Glory Days

On July 21, coinciding with Ernest Hemingway's birthday, you'll see Hemingway doubles everywhere. The Pulitzer Prize-winning author left an enduring legacy in the city, commemorated during the annual six-day **Hemingway Days** celebration. Catch a reading during the festival and get a book signed by an acclaimed author, or watch stocky white-bearded men vie to win the look-alike contest. Year round, you can visit the **Whitehead Street** house, built in 1851, where Hemingway lived in the '30s. Above the pool house is a separate writing studio where the novelist penned *To Have and Have Not* and polished the initial draft of *A Farewell to Arms*.

Key Lime Pie and Cool Cocktails

Pop into **Sloppy Joe's**, a beloved drinking spot since 1937 that pours a steady stream of cocktails from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m., located at the corner of **Greene** and **Duval** streets. Visit **Better Than Sex** and try its **Kinky Key Lime** pie, a fluffy lime chiffon creation with macadamia nuts. This romantic dessert spot dips its wine glasses in chocolate to better match the decadent warm brownies, peanut butter pies and **'Sugar Daddy Cheesecakes.'** Be sure to have a nosh at **B.O.'s Fish Wagon**. It started out as a catering truck, serving what many locals believe to be the world's best fish sandwich, but the burgeoning ranks of fans prompted the purveyor to build a restaurant – modelled after the original truck. Just step up to the counter and order.

The Pride of the Keys

For the gayest of times go to Key West during **Fantasy Fest**, an annual 10-day celebration in late October. It features colourful parades, fetish and toga parties, pet masquerades, body-painting, sexy costume contests and lots of other hedonistic activities. The annual **PrideFest** happens in June, with a pride parade, dance parties and contests. Any time of the year, gay or straight, you can enjoy drag shows at hot spots like the **Bourbon Bar** and **Cabaret** or **La Te Da**, which also has a lively piano bar.

Sunset Celebration

Head to **Mallory Square** just before sunset to witness the famous celebration of the setting sun. About two hours before the sun dips below the **Gulf of Mexico**, masses of locals and tourists flock to the water's edge to catch the nightly arts festival. Join in and watch jugglers, magicians, escape artists and other street performers, get your fortune told by psychics or buy everything from jewellery to sculptures, paintings and objects d'art from local artists.

GET AWAY

Take a day trip to **Dry Tortugas National Park**, a cluster of seven tiny islands approximately 70 miles west of Key West in the Gulf of Mexico. Formerly accessible only by boat, North America's most remote national park can now be visited by seaplane. Sign up with **Key West Seaplane Adventures** for an excursion and see the Civil War-era **Fort Jefferson**, the largest masonry structure in the western hemisphere, or take a guided park tour, bask on one of the pristine beaches and snorkel in clear blue waters. If you prefer a beach that's accessible by land, **Bahia Honda State Park** boasts three breezy, palm-studded beaches that many consider the best in the Keys.



© VISTA/ISTOCK PHOTO

© LAUREN ZEID/ISTOCK PHOTO

Twin Delights

On Location with Christine Walwyn, St. Kitts/Nevis



St. Kitts and Nevis form a twin island tourist destination that has retained its authentically Caribbean feel. Though each island offers a different regional flavour, together their natural beauty, cultural heritage and rich history provide an opportunity to enjoy a unique vacation that brings visitors back time and again.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO PLAN A VACATION TO ST. KITTS?

As on-island specialists, we have an intimate knowledge of this destination and are able to guide each visitor or vacation planner through the details and execution of a perfect holiday experience. This contributes significantly to an unforgettable vacation and a satisfied client. We give careful attention to recommending the ideal accommodation to match each visitor's taste and budget. On our islands, this selection includes holidaying at quaint centuries-old plantation inns or luxury beachfront hotels with modern amenities. We present the best there is to offer in cuisine and activities, or simply the ideal place to 'lime' (the local term for hanging out) the way our islanders do.

WHAT ARE THE TRENDS AND NEW THINGS TO EXPERIENCE ON ST. KITTS?

A new attraction is **Clay Villa**, a former sugar plantation that is part botanical zoo, theme park, museum and gift shop. The **Spencer Cameron Gallery** is now the new home of artists and artisans providing beautiful souvenirs in glass-work, paintings and classic pottery pieces. For the thrill-seeker, **St. Kitts** offers an opportunity to gain an aerial view of the island's rainforest and the vistas beyond while ziplining at **Wingfield Estate**, or experience the underwater world via **Sea Trek** at **Frigate Bay**.

Of course, we continue to introduce our discerning visitors to the multi-cultural heritage of our people and their past in the many small museums located predominantly in our capital towns of **Basseterre** and **Charlestown**. For example, the **National Museum**, housed in the old **Treasury Building** in Basseterre, served as the gateway to the island when travel by sea was the only option. Getting around on the islands is easily done in air-conditioned minibuses, or catamaran cruises or inter-island ferries. Ride the **Sugar Train**, the Caribbean's only scenic railway,

while enjoying the rich tapestry of our landscape, which includes the abandoned windmills and chimneys that are relics of our 'sugar' past. No visit to this destination is complete without a trip to **Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with its panoramic view of our land and neighbouring islands.

The **Southeast Peninsula** of St. Kitts is a virgin paradise only now being discovered and developed. Luxury villas and new hotels are under construction. In addition, there is a range of restaurants all over the island, which runs from the budget-conscious to fine dining and includes local beach bars at our famous strip on Frigate Bay, as well as French and Italian restaurants and sushi bars.

WHAT IS THE MOST EXCITING VACATION PACKAGE YOU HAVE EVER PUT TOGETHER?

Our vacation packages include a strong cultural element, where we mix relaxation with high-quality revelry reminiscent of our annual carnival. This is reflected in the food, décor and entertainment. One memorable occasion featured a corporate client who flew in 100 agents on an incentive trip; I arranged their farewell dinner amid the ruins of Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park. There was a Caribbean carnival atmosphere and all the guests were outfitted with a carnival costume headpiece, which they all took home.

The first destination wedding I was involved with took place on a Saturday when all government offices were closed. We nonetheless managed to get all the paperwork together and signed by the appropriate people. The couple was wed on the beach as they had requested, within two hours of their arrival via cruise ship. They were even more ecstatic when the announcement was broadcast on the radio congratulating them on their marriage! ▣

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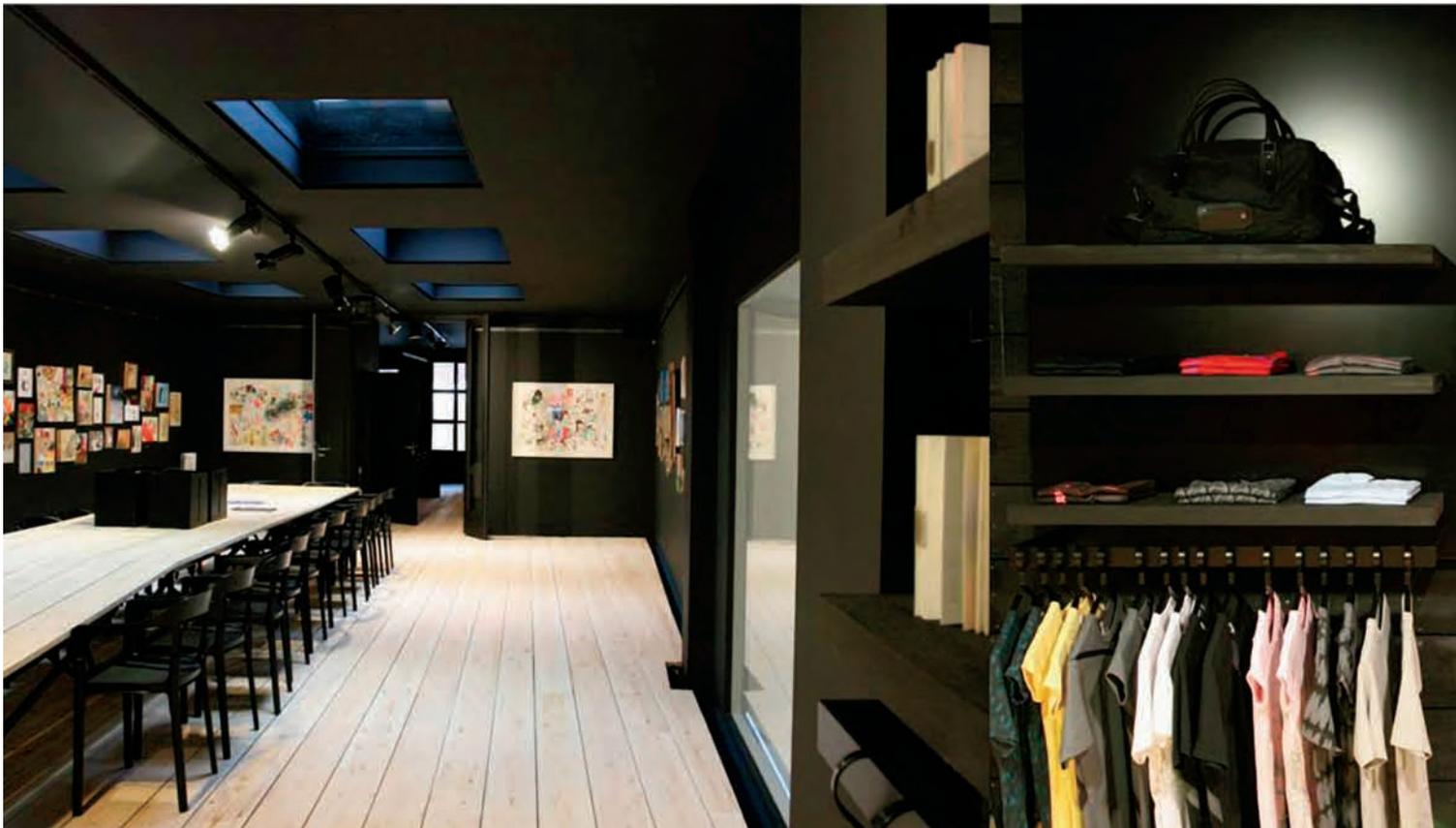
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 **ENSEMBLE TRAVEL Group**
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Amsterdam's Extreme Makeover

MORE PRETTY THAN GRITTY,
THE CITY TAKES CENTRE STAGE
AS A CULTURAL POWERHOUSE.



Michele Sponagle



Sid Lee Amsterdam

IF EVER THERE WERE A CITY at the crossroads, it's **Amsterdam**. In the middle of a transition that put it in a new light on the world stage, it is successfully fighting its reputation for being permissive, risqué and party central. New museums, hotels, restaurants and attractions are giving the port town a fresh look, while its less savoury areas (like the docklands, and the infamous **Red Light District**) have been cleaned up and revitalized. This cultural hub has also been attracting new business – especially in the creative field – as advertising agencies, including successful Canadian company Sid Lee, have been setting up shop in record numbers. If you haven't been to Amsterdam lately, it's time to make your way to this world class arts and cultural destination where the grimy, gritty neighbourhoods are fading fast.

That's not to say that the things visitors love about the city are gone. They're not. It's a case of there being so much more. Take the museum scene, for example. Joining the ranks of the 51 existing museums, the **Hermitage Amsterdam** is a worthy addition. It opened in the summer of 2009 with a blockbuster exhibit, **At the Russian Court**, featuring more than 1,800 objects on loan from the State Hermitage Museum in

St. Petersburg. As much as visitors came to get a glimpse of Russian court life in the 19th century, they also came to look at the transformation of a building that had served as a home for the elderly for three centuries. The Hermitage Amsterdam won raves on all fronts. Its current exhibit, **The Immortal Alexander the Great** (until March 18, 2011), features more than 350 masterpieces and showcases Alexander's journey to the East and the influence of Hellenism, spanning a period of almost 2,500 years. To avoid the inevitable lineups, go before noon or on Wednesdays after 4:30 p.m.

The **Stedelijk Museum** will have a new life once its collection of modern and contemporary art and design is in its new and much improved home. The old part of the museum, dating back to 1895, has been undergoing massive renovations and will ultimately be incorporated into a modern structure that resembles a futuristic bathtub. In the meantime, the temporary **Stedelijk** is home to two exhibitions until January 2011, when it will close until its 'grand opening' at the end of 2011. It's a fitting addition to the museum district, along with the **Van Gogh Museum** and **Rijksmuseum**. Throughout its history, dating back to 1808, the Rijksmuseum has undergone

routine renovations, but the current makeover now underway is a big one and won't be completed until 2012 at the earliest. In the meantime, the museum has assembled a truncated 'greatest hits' collection of such renowned pieces as **Vermeer's *The Kitchen Maid*** and **Rembrandt's *The Night Watch***.

The **Royal Palace** has also undergone an extensive four-year renovation. It reopened to visitors last summer, though work continues on spiffing up its furniture – some still dating from the time when Louis Napoleon, appointed as the King of Holland by his brother Napoleon, lived there from 1808 to 1813. These days, **Queen Beatrix** and her family drop by for state visits and other official functions. Most other times it's filled with tourists dazzled by one of the world's most extensive collections of Empire furnishings (more than 2,000 pieces).

An exploration of the 'new' Amsterdam should include a trip to **Oostelijk Havengebied**, the eastern harbour area between the **Central Station** and **Zeeburg Island**. Ten years ago, this area was a wasteland. The former docklands had outlived their usefulness. City planners turned this area, which includes four peninsulas, into residential housing – not your usual ugly apartment blocks,



© MARTIN KERESZAMER

Albert Cuypstraat market



Restaurant in the trendy de Pijp area



Cafe de Pijp

© TIMO ARNALL

but superblocks with striking architecture. To explore these 'new islands,' just hop on a ferry from Central Station to **Java Island**. For those who venture off the beaten path, the reward is a trendy, hip neighbourhood with chic boutique hotels like the Lloyd, nightclubs like **Panama**, a boulevard with design shops (on **KNSM Island**) and former warehouses converted into expansive stores (like the **Dutch Design Center** for furniture).

Another former ugly duckling is an area called **de Pijp**. It was a working-class quarter built for labourers in the 19th century. Fast-forward to 2010 and it's *the* neighbourhood where everyone hangs out. It is a cultural melting pot, which is great news for the culinary scene.

Moroccan, Syrian, Turkish, Indian and Spanish are among the cuisines to be enjoyed. One of its main streets, **Albert Cuypstraat**, is home to a rambling market with more than 300 vendors. It can be very crowded on Saturdays so try getting there during a weekday. You'll have more time to linger over handmade chocolates, fresh flower stalls, cheese vendors and sellers of tacky souvenirs like wooden shoe slippers and windmill magnets.

If you have the nerve, sample the local delicacy – pickled herring and onions. Watch the technique of the locals. The fish is grabbed by the tail, lifted high above the head and dropped into the mouth. It's not for everyone, but it is a true Dutch treat.

Of course, the Red Light District continues to command plenty of attention. It's still one of Amsterdam's top attractions but it doesn't deserve to be, and visitors to the area today will definitely see the changes in progress. The more lurid aspects are disappearing and in their place boutiques, bistros and even a Buddhist temple have sprung up. Certainly the district is part of Amsterdam's past, but its role in the future will be much smaller, with prostitution being pushed out of the area because of more restrictive licensing policies. In 2007, the government announced its transition plans for the 1012 (the area's postal code) in an effort to curb organized crime. **▼**

REMBRANDT AND HIS PUPILS · After his
Rembrandt returned to his native Leiden, where
In 1631 Rembrandt settled in Amsterdam. He
figure in the city. Rembrandt painted portraits
grew and became a busy workplace with num
Ferdinand Bol and Nicolaes Maes – became m

Eastman of Amsterdam,
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HAMBURG

with the Works

JACQUELINE SWARTZ



Erotic Art Museum, St. Pauli district

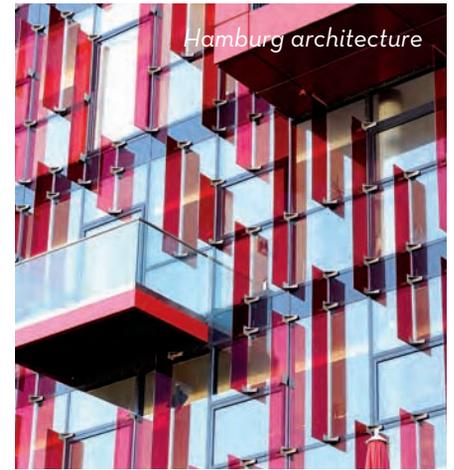
HOW MANY TRAVELLERS WOULD GUESS that **Hamburg** is the second-largest city in **Germany**, and one of the most affluent, with the third-largest port in Europe after **Rotterdam** and **Antwerp**? Unlike glitzy **Berlin**, the colossus to the south, Hamburg's image is far from high-definition, at least to most North American visitors. Bordered by the **North Sea** and the **Baltic**, Hamburg is closer to **Scandinavia** than to Berlin (which is a comfortable 90-minute train ride away), and two years ago, a high-speed train began to bring in eager shoppers from **Copenhagen**.

Water seems to be Hamburg's element, with rivers, canals, lakes and bridges everywhere. The nickname '**Venice of the North**' is well deserved – the city has more bridges than the Italian icon.

Berlin may be Germany's capital, but Hamburg is competing by drawing on its long history of shipping and trade, along with its international outlook, to find a new energy.

The headquarters of some of the country's largest media organizations are located here – AOL Germany and the magazine *Der Spiegel*, for example. And Hamburgers (that's what they're called!) like to talk about ad agencies that move to Berlin only to come back. These trendy companies are right in sync with the city's new vanguard development, **HafenCity**, the transformation of a former dockyard area and one of the largest construction sites in the European Union. A place to work, live and play, the project has engaged 'starchitects' including Rem Koolhaas and Renzo Piano.

Hamburg architecture



Berlin may be Germany's capital, but Hamburg is competing by drawing on its long history of shipping and trade, along with its international outlook, to find a new energy.



RED LIGHT DISTRICT

If Hamburg is known for anything, it's the **Reeperbahn** red light district, which continues to offer all things erotic, from sex shops to strip clubs. Hamburg's brothels are located on the **Herbertstrasse**, where sex has been for sale since the 19th century. Prostitutes are still on display in windows, but are protected from prying eyes by a blocked-off section bounded by tall red doors; women are not encouraged to enter.

However, Reeperbahn is only one part of the district called **St. Pauli**, which is also home to fashionable clubs, bars and restaurants. After dark, and late into the night, crowds including families stroll the area; the trendy coexisting with the sleazy. The theatres in the area –



©NUTZUNGSBEDINGUNGEN DES HMG-MEDIASERVERS



HafenCity Bistro

Hamburg ranks third in the number of international musicals after **New York** and **London** – draw their own crowds, and St. Pauli's more wholesome delights are becoming so popular that some locals fear the neighbourhood will lose its edge.

The **Beatlemania Museum**, which opened in 2009, is a reminder of how that edge helped shape the Fab Four. It was in Reeperbahn dives, from 1960 to 1962, where the Beatles honed their skills, often playing night after night, all night long. "I might have been born in Liverpool," said John Lennon, "but I grew up in Hamburg." The four floors of Beatlemania include photos, a mock-up of the Yellow Submarine, guitars and other memorabilia, offering a bittersweet pleasure for fans.

Outside is **Beatles-Platz**, a square with stainless steel cut-outs of the group. Few can resist getting a corny photo taken of one's head emerging through one of the cut-outs of the lads.

Nearby, still in St. Pauli is the **Bavaria Quarter**, the former site of a brewery where some of the most chic nightspots are found. Hamburg scenesters drink and dine at **Hotel East**, a super-trendy hotel converted from a foundry. The brick walls are intact, but Chicago architect Jordan Mozerhas added surreal Gaudi-like curved white sculpted walls and hanging lamps that look like giant teardrops. The restaurant is known for its fine Asian fusion food. www.east-hamburg.de

MARITIME LEGACY

Hamburg might be reinventing itself, but its maritime tradition remains imbedded in the soul of the city. More than 13,000 cruise and container ships dock here each year. A Russian billionaire's yacht is currently being refurbished. And the tall, narrow red-brick warehouses that tower above the dreamy canals still house coffee, tea, spices and the largest concentration of Persian rugs in Europe.

©NIKADA/STOCKPHOTO

In this area, known as the **Speicherstadt**, some of the warehouses have been transformed into museums.

The **Miniatur Wunderland** (*miniaturwunderland.com*), the largest model train museum in the world, is a huge (nearly 12,000 square feet) multi-display fantasy world for all ages. At the push of a button, you can see any one of 800 trains chug through the snowy **Alps** or myriad other places. Also on view are scale models of the Champs-Élysées, the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore and Hamburg itself. Miniature boats float on real water and there will soon be a miniature airport, complete with model planes taking off.

There's also a spice museum, where you can smell and touch a variety of spices, though you'll need to brush up on your German as there is no English translation for the descriptions.

You can get to the train museum, the spice museum and several other sites via the **Maritime Circle Line**, which is a hop on and off boat service that costs €8 (about CAD\$11). Most people board the colourful red barges at the **Landungsbrücken** in St. Pauli. A running narration is provided on the boats, but again only in German.

Another unexpected but must-see museum is **BallinStadt**, or **Port of Dreams**, named after the shipping magnate Albert Ballin. The 13th son of a Danish Jew who moved to Hamburg before Albert was born, Ballin helped make Hamburg Europe's major port of embarkation during the waves of emigration between 1850 and 1910. The ships of Ballin's **Hamburg-America Line** brought five million people to the New World from 1901 until 1918. He is also credited with the introduction of the first cruise ship.

BallinStadt displays the interiors of some of the ships and tells the story of the lives of various classes of people when they arrived in the New World. There is also a genealogical centre on the main floor. Opened in 2007, the museum displays the sleeping and dining facilities Ballin built in 1901 for the thousands of people who couldn't afford to stay in hotels while awaiting departure.

Take a break at **Nach Amerika**, the museum's casual restaurant, and try the apple strudel – it's top notch.

SHOPPING

The city's centre, near the grandiose Rathaus, or town hall, an ornate Neo-Renaissance building, is flanked with cafés offering a view of the bridge and the water. There are numerous covered shopping arcades and major shopping

streets. Jungfernstieg is the place to go for luxury goods, but Mönckebergstrasse and Spitalerstrasse are the magnets for mid-range shopping.

For fashionable, moderately priced German clothes (that fit those who are not model-skinny), head for **Peek & Cloppenburg**. Shoe lovers will find their paradise in Görtz, which has four floors of footwear and is the largest shoe store in Europe. They carry the Think! brand, an Austrian line known for its comfortable yet stylish shoes crafted from all-natural materials.

DINING

Eleven of Hamburg's restaurants boast Michelin stars and there are many reasonably priced eateries serving a range of cuisines. For traditional German food like bratwurst or schnitzel, locals head for **Freudenhaus** bar and restaurant in the St. Pauli area. The restaurant's name means 'house of pleasure' or brothel but the food is wholesome and the portions are large. *www.stpauli-freudenhaus.de*

Chilli Club is a trendy Asian fusion restaurant in the Hafencity area, which attracts a smartly dressed crowd that spills out onto the deck overlooking the

harbour. It's known for its crispy duck, Asian Tho Pau Salad (lime, bamboo, bean sprouts, shiso cress) and inventive cocktails.

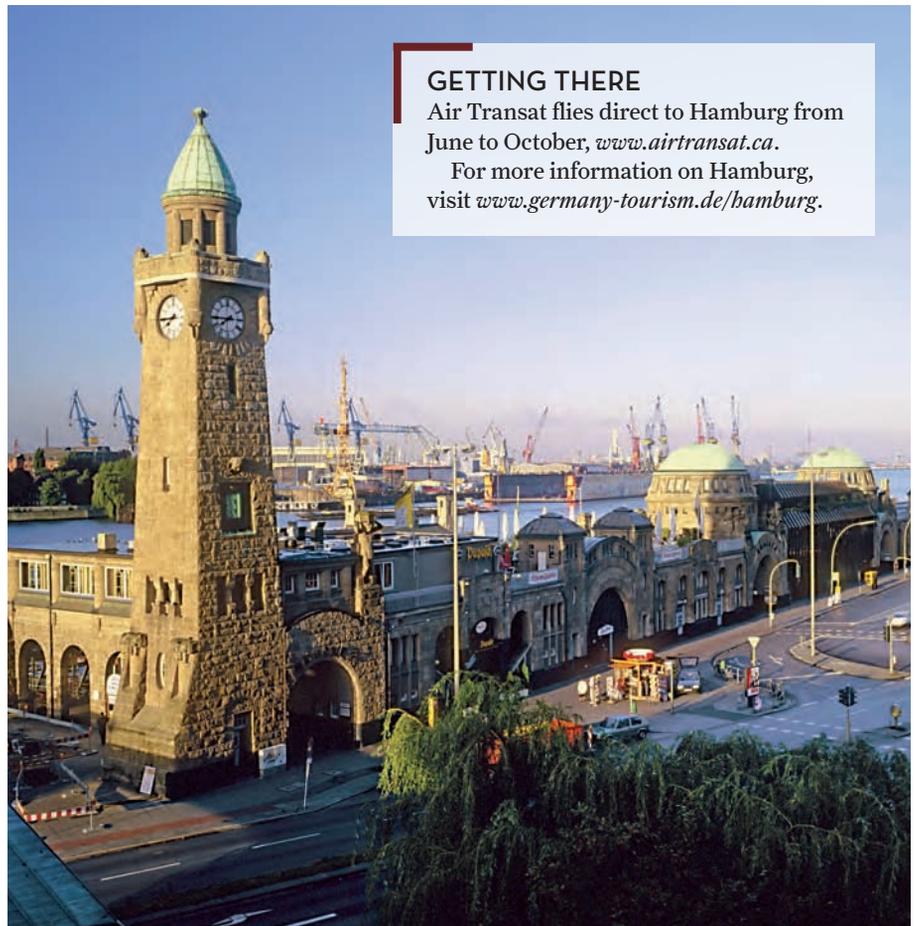
On the pedestrian-only street, **Spitalerstrasse**, you'll find **Daniel Wischer**, Hamburg's favourite fish and chips restaurant whose outdoor french fry bar often has long queues at lunchtime. It's well worth the wait: fresh fish is cooked on the spot to light, crispy perfection. Try it with Fassbrause, a popular non-alcoholic malt drink that tastes like apple beer.

Yet, I must confess that my most memorable meal was... a hamburger. Lusciously grilled, topped with cooked cabbage, slathered in mustard and accompanied by pan-fried potatoes. It was delicious even though it was not the authentic dish, which consists of sliced – not fried – meat and does not include a bun. The dockside diner where I sat is called **Oberhafen Kantine** and it's one of the oldest in the city. The place is a local tradition and now it's an objet d'art – there's a wooden copy of the brick building in Berlin, part of a travelling art exhibit. Berlin copying Hamburg? The competition continues. ▣

GETTING THERE

Air Transat flies direct to Hamburg from June to October, *www.airtransat.ca*.

For more information on Hamburg, visit *www.germany-tourism.de/hamburg*.



Ode to



The view from Hotel Cipriani

© GENES Lodi



Venice

ANITA DRAYCOTT

THE FIRST MOMENT I LAID EYES on **La Serenissima** I was smitten. Who could not be seduced by this fantastic mirage rising like Venus from the lagoon? ‘Nothing succeeds like excess’ could be her motto – from the golden mosaics of the **Doge’s Palace** to the marvellous Tintoretto-painted ceilings of the **Scuola Grande di San Rocco**.

Venice is like a treasure chest brimming with precious exotica from all over the world. This image isn’t far from reality, actually. The city was built by merchant princes whose navies ruled the eastern Mediterranean and dominated trade routes between Europe and the Far East. So if **La Serenissima** resembles a woven tapestry of silk, velvet and lace imbued with saffron, cinnamon, amber and silver filigree, it’s because those riches and more first entered the Western world through her labyrinth of waterways. Probably nowhere else on earth does East meet West with so much panache.

Venice has been seducing visitors for centuries. Entering the city via the **Grand Canal** is always an amazing experience, whether it’s for the first time or the tenth. It would be impossible to improve upon this architectural fantasy of Romanesque and Renaissance palaces, domed churches and arched bridges, all bathed in that rich, radiant light that seems peculiar to Venice alone. At dusk the city is enshrouded in soft mist and a mauve glow cast by iconic lamplights. The grand salons of the palazzos are illuminated by flickering Murano-glass chandeliers and their lacy façades appear to be melting into the watery mirror below.

Is Venice a tourist mecca? Of course. We flock to the **Piazza San Marco**, which Napoleon described as the drawing room of Europe. We order exorbitantly priced coffee, with zabaglione liqueur and whipped cream, served on a silver tray to the accompaniment of a string quartet at **Caffè Florian**. We head to **Harry’s Bar**, one of Ernest Hemingway’s favourite watering holes, for a Bellini cocktail. We soak up contemporary artwork at the **Venice Biennale** (held once every two years).

We buy glass baubles on the island of **Murano** and handmade lace on **Burano**, the fisherman’s island, its houses painted in assorted crayon colours with ever-present laundry hanging from the windows. We make a pilgrimage to the island of **Torcello**, where Venice began back in the sixth century when the locals of the northwest Adriatic fled from the

attacking Lombards to the lagoons. We visit **Torcello’s** remarkable cathedral and marvel at the Byzantine mosaics and then linger over lunch in the glorious garden of the **Locanda Cipriani**, another Hemingway haunt.

We bargain for leather goods, **Carnevale** masks and other trinkets in the stalls around the impressive **Rialto Bridge**. We shell out €80 for a 40-minute ride in a sleek black gondola gracefully manoeuvred through the narrow canals by a dashing gondolier. And we leave absolutely entranced by the city that Gore Vidal called “perhaps the most beautiful cliché on earth.”

But there’s also a mysterious and quirky side to Venice that adds to her allure. During the two weeks of **Carnevale** in February, revellers don masks and fanciful costumes, play pranks on one another and attend lavish balls. You might glimpse the **Three Musketeers** riding in a vaporetto or your waiter might appear dressed as a nun. Indeed, all of Venice becomes a stage.

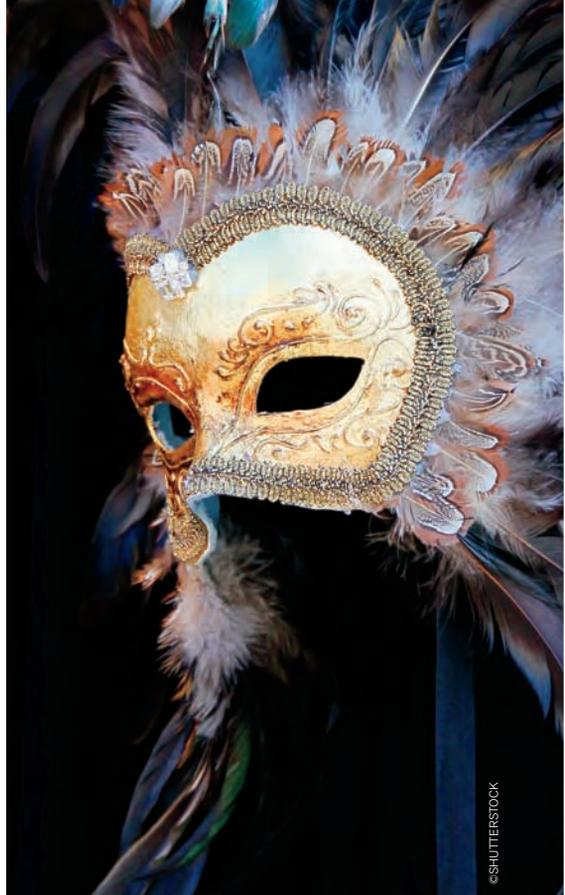
Where else would one of the world’s most famous lovers have caroused and been imprisoned in the **Doge’s Palace** for possessing books on magic? **Casanova** and his cellmate, a renegade priest, escaped by gouging a passageway in the ceiling using a steel bar that they concealed in a Bible under a heaping plate of **gnocchi**.

Where else would a naked **Lord Byron** have swum home in the **Grand Canal** after a night on the town while his servant, carrying his clothes, followed behind in a gondola?

And about where else could **Charles Dickens** have written, “The gorgeous and wonderful reality of Venice is beyond the fancy of the wildest dreamer. Opium couldn’t build such a place, and enchantment couldn’t shadow it forth in a vision... It has never been rated high enough. It is a thing you would shed tears to see.”

Here in Venice, hotels supply rubber boots for those times when high tide causes the **Piazza San Marco** to flood so that locals and tourists alike literally walk the planks – and slosh their way about town. And keep in mind as you stroll amid Venice’s some 400 bridges and 117 islands that you’re actually walking over a petrified forest. The thousands of wooden poles pounded into the mud to create foundations have become petrified over time and are stronger than steel.

In Venice, truth can be stranger than fiction. **📍**



St. Mark’s Square



Glass Museum, Murano



Venice has
been seducing visitors
for centuries.

WHEN YOU GO

Join gondoliers in rustic *bacaros* (wine bars) where a glass of vino costs less than a euro and a plate of *cicchetti* (savory snacks) such as marinated artichokes, a cod mixture spread on polenta squares and mini salami sandwiches costs about €3. Try Cantina Do Mori, San Polo 429, near the Rialto Market.

Caffè del Doge, also near the Rialto Market, serves the best lattes. Take some beans home.

Enjoy live opera in a palazzo on the Grand Canal and move from room to room for each act.
www.musicapalazzo.com

Dine on inexpensive pastas and pizzas under the wisteria or inside at the cozy Osteria Al Nono Risorto, Santa Croce 2337.

Take a guided 'Secret Itineraries' tour through the narrow passages of the Doge's Palace and see the tiny cell where Casanova was imprisoned.

Shop for a silk Fortuny lamp.
www.venetiastudium.com

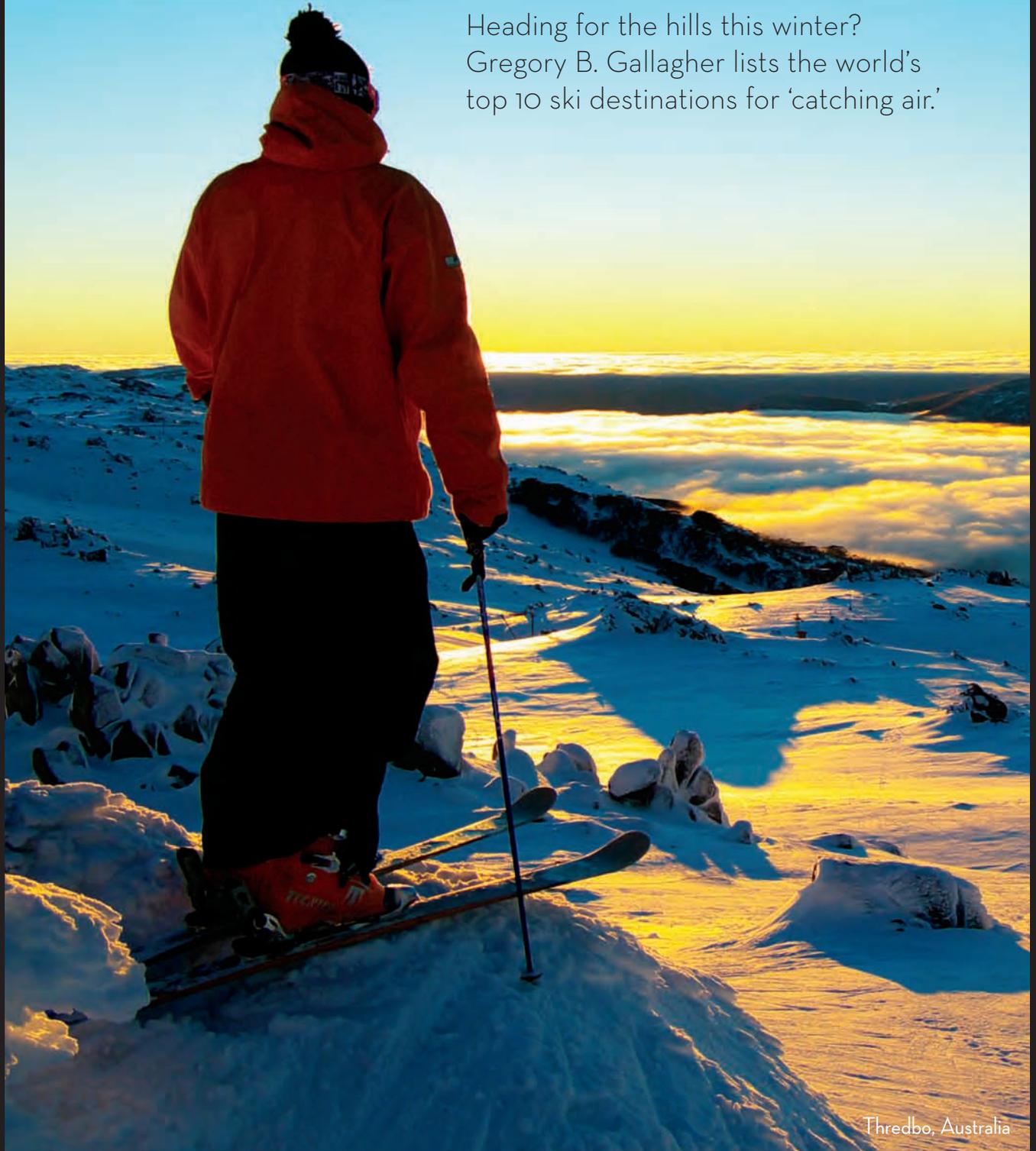
Buy exquisite lace at Emilia on Burano and dine at the romantic Riva Rosa restaurant, both owned by the same family.

Splurge on a room and dinner on the terrace at Hotel Danieli, a former doge's palace just off St. Mark's Square.
www.venice-hotel-danieli.com

At the Hotel Cipriani's Gabbiano Bar, sip a Spritz, a Venetian cocktail made from Prosecco, Aperol bitter orange liqueur and a dash of soda.
www.hotelcipriani.com

Powder Hounds

Heading for the hills this winter?
Gregory B. Gallagher lists the world's
top 10 ski destinations for 'catching air.'



Thredbo, Australia

VAIL, COLORADO

Home to the largest single ski mountain in North America, Vail also has other excellent hills like **Beaver Creek**, **Steamboat** and **Breckenridge**. The sheer volume of snow here is legendary and with the greatest number of high-speed lifts anywhere on the continent, it's easy to see why Vail owns the title of 'King of the Mountains.' Just ask backwoods bowlers, or even the cruisers and carvers; they'll report getting stoked across 5,000 acres, with **Gore Valley** runs of more than seven miles, and the ungroomed **Back Bowl** providing the freedom to huck cliffs and slow-dog noodle. Combined with village ambiance to suit skiers and non-skiers alike, few will go home from Vail disappointed.



Vail, Colorado

KITZBÜHEL, AUSTRIA

For that distinctly European feel of cobblestone streets, cozy eateries and bustling nightlife, head to **Kitzbühel**, home of the **Hahnenkammrennen**, the annual World Cup alpine ski races. Only 80 kilometres from historic **Salzburg**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kitzbühel guarantees snow. The **Hahnenkamm Mountain** downhill course, held on the infamous **Streif** slope, is regarded by top skiers as the most difficult run in Europe to master and the toughest course on the World Cup circuit, and has been attracting the world's best since 1931. Expert downhill skiers will thrive on riding a different run each outing, with more than 158 kilometres of trails. Cross-country and ski mountaineers have more than 500 kilometres of their own to discover, while **Lake Schwarzsee** offers an outdoor arena for curling and ice-skating fans.



Kitzbühel, Austria

WHISTLER BLACKCOMB, BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Olympic Selection Committee got it right when they selected **Vancouver** for the 2010 Winter Olympics, in large part because of the twin peaks at **Whistler Blackcomb**. Reliable snowfall, along with the two highest vertical rises in North America spreads over 7,000 acres of chutes, bowls, steeps and the signature **Couloir Extreme** double black diamond run. Whistler Blackcomb is served by the dreamy new **Peak 2 Peak Gondola**, a high-speed system that connects skiers to more than 200 trails and additional acreage in **Garibaldi Provincial Park**. Luxurious off-hill attractions mix with sensational skiing to create a winning ambiance felt throughout the bustling village. The season runs from late November until early June, and those in the know travel from Vancouver aboard the **Rocky Mountaineer** train via the breathtaking three-hour **Whistler Sea to Sky Climb**.



Whistler Blackcomb, British Columbia

STOWE, VERMONT

The largest ski resort town in the northeastern U.S. leads the field in winter village mystique. The excitement of tree skiing and the sheer physicality of the steeps, plus the heavy winter backcountry snowfall in excess of 300 inches, were the original draw in the '60s. Today, the blueblood crowd still packs both mountains each year for the combination of idyllic terrain and the romance of **New England**. More than 116 trails and 13 lifts cover 39 ski miles, encompassing **Mount Mansfield** for experts, **Spruce Peak** for beginners and intermediates, plus countless wild miles for cross-country skiers. The challenges of the **Front Four** extreme downhill runs - **Goat**, **Liftline**, **National** and **Starr** - continue to create storytelling sessions par excellence for skiers and audiences alike during après-ski unwinding.



Chalet at the Stowe Mountain Resort



LOS TRES VALLES, CHILE

East of **Santiago**, at the Andean foot of **El Plomo** (17,800 feet), skiers flock to **Los Tres Valles**, with access to the largest ski area in **South America**. **Valle Nevado** leads with 23,000 acres, featuring steep peaks like **Tres Puntos**, **El Colorado's** cone-shaped crown beckons beginners with more than 70 starter hills, 16 lifts and 25 trails, while **La Parva** owns the most dramatic 24 miles of powdered fun with the biggest vertical drop at 3,150 feet. The French-built **Valle Nevado** resort exudes European über-luxe, and delivers an array of services to satisfy even the most demanding clientele: **Andes Express** chair lifts, heli-skiing and heli-snowboarding, **South America's** only super half-pipe, hang gliding, ski school, ski shop, three hotels and six restaurants.

THREDBO, AUSTRALIA

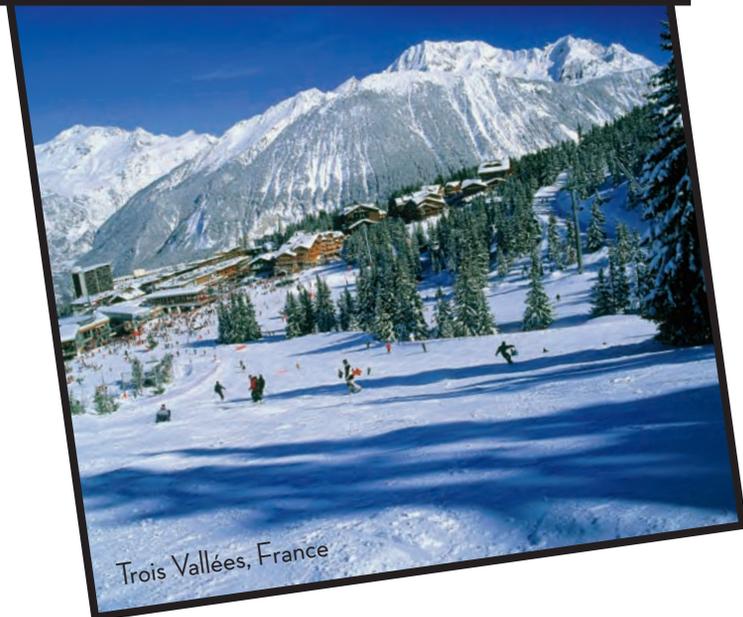
Halfway between **Sydney** and **Melbourne** in the **Snowy Mountains** of **Australia's** **New South Wales**, **Thredbo** is a thriller ski resort celebrating more than 50 years as the country's best. The largest snowmaking machines in the southern hemisphere guarantee snow levels, and its location inside **Kosciuszko National Park**, a **UNESCO Biosphere Reserve**, assures a range of amenities to suit many budgets. Boarders and skiers of every stripe will love the impressive **Monster Bagjump** training tool, while advanced skiers can choose from **Michael's Mistake**, **Funnel Web** and **Cannonball** runs. The **Crackenback Supertrail** is a must-do, and first-timers are awed by the idyllic view from the **Express Chairlift**, rising 560 vertical metres to the veritable top of **Australia**.

LAKE PLACID, NEW YORK

The **Winter Olympics** have been awarded twice to just three locations: **St. Moritz**, **Innsbruck** and **Lake Placid**. Local skiers brag about **The Slides** on **Whiteface Mountain**, an expert-only 35-acre zone of steep wilderness with double black diamond chutes that are open only when the ski patrol approves. Located in the six-million-acre **Adirondack Park**, **Lake Placid** is an official U.S. Olympic Training Site, featuring the highest vertical drop east of the **Rockies**. Expert skiers ride long runs filled with plenty of steepers, 87 trails fed by nine chairlifts, one gondola and a conveyor lift, while novices enjoy great beginner runs, snow sports school, an **Olympics Museum** and the **Annual Winter Carnival** in February.



Whiteface Lodge, Lake Placid, New York



TROIS VALLÉES, FRANCE

Trois Vallées in the **French Alps** is arguably the best ski destination on the planet and comprises the three valleys of **Courchevel**, **Val Thorens** and **Méribel**. Collectively, they encompass the largest linked-up ski area in the world. More than 600 kilometres of trails with 200 lifts (including three funitels) create a dream environment without equal. Purchase a three-valley pass, pick your style of vacation and you will find it here: from boisterous nightlife to tranquil retreat, with luxe trappings to serve the kings and queens of the ski world. Stay at the **Courchevel 1850** – reputed to be the world's best ski resort – catering to the jet-setting crowd, ski the **Combe du Vallon** run at **Méribel** and don't miss the amazing six-kilometre toboggan run at **Val Thorens**, the highest ski resort in **Europe**.

©KARL SANDERSON

COURTESY OF THE WHITEFACE LODGE

©SIME/ASTOCK PHOTO

Après-Ski Plus

Reserve a room at **Vail Mountain Lodge and Spa** and visit its new **Vitality Center**, focused on comprehensive, medically-based wellness programs.

On your way to **Kitzbühel**, spend a night at the luxurious **Hotel Sacher** in **Salzburg** and treat yourself to its storied **Sacher-Torte**.

The happy hour it-spot in **Chile's Los Tres Valles** is the lounge at the **Valle Nevado Hotel**. Come midnight, everyone shifts to **Tres Puntas Hotel** to dance until dawn.

At the **Fairmont Whistler Resort**, sit by the firepits on the **Mallard Terrace** or snag the comfy fireside couches inside the lounge while sipping a **Polar Bear**, the signature hot chocolate drink.

Méribel in **France's Trois Vallées** now boasts its own version of **Dick's Tea Bar**, made famous at **Val d'Isère**, while **Jack's Bar** cranks live music most afternoons, with live comedy until the wee hours.

Stay for a couple of nights at **Australia's Westin Sydney** on your way to the **Snowy Mountains**; it's within walking distance of the **Sydney Opera House**, **Botanical Gardens** and **Harbour Bridge**.

Lake Placid's waterside **High Peaks Resort** boasts an **Aveda Signature Spa** and offers a three-day **Winter Adventure Package** for \$348 per person that includes breakfast and dinner and selected activities each day.

Switzerland's Davos Resort is notorious for its hip nightlife, including the **Hotel Europe** piano bar and **Cabanna Club**.

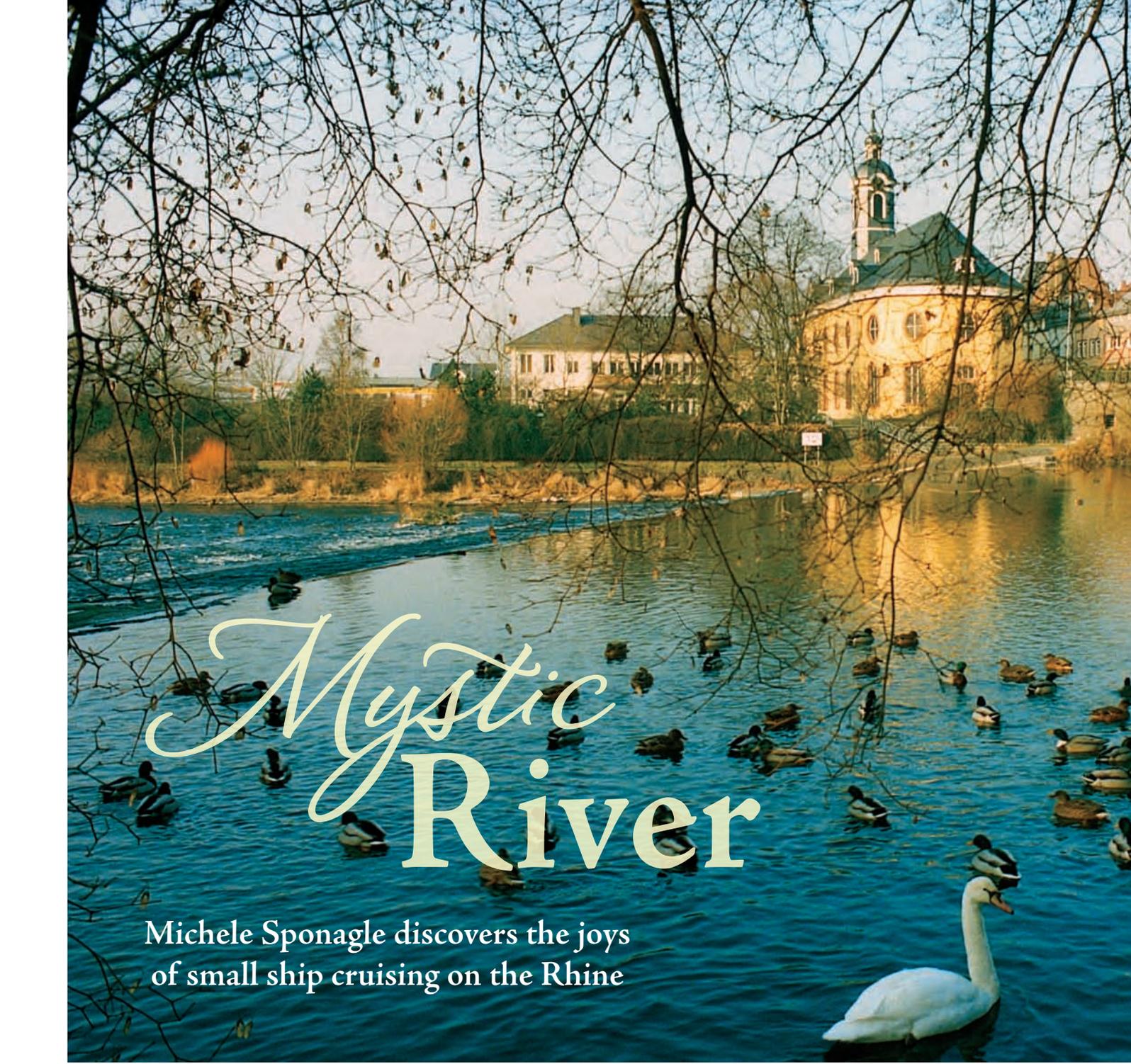
LE MASSIF DE CHARLEVOIX, QUÉBEC

Operated by **Daniel Gauthier**, one of the founders of **Cirque du Soleil**, **Le Massif** has a signature view over the mighty **St. Lawrence River**. With a vertical drop of 2,526 feet, **Le Massif** has the highest Canadian annual snowfall east of the **Canadian Rockies** of 21 feet and attracts legions of downhill skiers, snowboarders and cross-country fans, not to mention the **National Alpine Skiing Downhill Training Centre**. Of course, no conversation is complete in **Québec** without talk of cuisine, and **Le Massif's Mer & Monts** restaurant provides fine dining atop the mountain, featuring robust local flavours. Conviviality, both on and off the slopes, attracts families, groups and singles.

DAVOS, SWITZERLAND

Not as glitzy as **St. Moritz** or **Gstaad**, **Davos** delivers an extraordinary level of skiing and *couloir* fun considered the best in Europe. At an elevation of 5,000 feet, it is the highest town on the continent, and widely recognized as a snow mecca for downhill and cross-country skiers and snowboarders too. Half-pipes at **Jakobshorn**, and **Monster Pipes** at **Nidecker** and **Bolgen** combine with rails and kickers at the **Jatz Junior Snowpark** to supply the hip-hop crowd with the requisite challenges. Offering 54 lifts, nine chairs, 27 drags, 12 cable cars and 106 runs, **Davos** keeps all levels of skiers moving with a bus system that operates every five minutes, linking all five major mountain regions. ▣





Mystic River

Michele Sponagle discovers the joys of small ship cruising on the Rhine

I WAS RELUCTANT TO TAKE ANOTHER CRUISE. My first was on a behemoth ship, complete with 1,400 passengers and combative line-ups at the buffet. While the attractions and amenities are certainly impressive for many cruisers, it just wasn't for me. So when an opportunity arose to experience a more intimate river cruise with **Avalon Waterways**, I was willing to give it a try. I was promised that it would be very different from a big ship experience – and it was.

The **Avalon Creativity** was on its maiden voyage from **Amsterdam** to **Basel, Switzerland** as part of its **Romantic**

Rhine itinerary. With just 70 staterooms, **Creativity** is a fraction of the size of a large cruise ship, something I was thankful for. I never got lost once and I was able to get to know my fellow passengers and the crew members I saw daily. By the end of the trip, it felt as though I'd spent time with my extended family.

Creativity's relaxed atmosphere can be credited in part to the absence of extras that are better suited to bigger ships, like skating rinks, rock climbing walls, casinos or spas. You never have that pressure of feeling that you should be

doing something just because it's there. This ship did have a roomy bar, nightly entertainment, evening lectures about upcoming stops, a Jacuzzi, a games room and a small gym, and that was plenty. The focus was on the ports of call first and foremost, whether you spent all day there or just a few hours. While in transit, everyone was either tucked in for a good night's sleep, or during the day lounging on the sunny upper deck and snapping photos of the numerous castles, vineyards, locks and cityscapes scattered along the **Rhine**. The views are stellar from the dining room or your stateroom as well



(most have floor-to-ceiling windows) so you'll never miss a thing.

As someone who often travels independently, the freedom that comes with river cruising is important to me. You can leave the ship when you feel like it and explore on your own, or head out with your fellow passengers and tour the highlights with a pre-arranged guide. Most of the time, the city centres are just a short walk away so you can plan your stay to suit yourself, doing as much or as little as you choose. As long as you're back on the ship before it pulls away from the dock, it's all good.

In **Cologne**, I stuck with the guide for a little while to get some background and history on the city, then followed the scent of chocolate and ended up at the chocolate museum that, to me, equals any tropical paradise I've ever visited. I crunched numerous biscuits dipped in chocolate from a cocoa-pod fountain, handed out by a generous woman in white. Along with the history of chocolate and displays of chocolate moulds, advertising and paraphernalia (from chocolate pots to pretty boxes), there was an on-site chocolate boutique and café featuring, naturally, chocolate desserts.

The next stop, **Koblenz**, was a pleasant surprise – a city where the **Moselle** and **Rhine** rivers meet. To be honest, I had never heard of this town. Our guide, a passionate raconteur, led us to the **Schängelchen**, a fountain in the shape of a boy who sporadically spits a stream of water out of his mouth onto the stone courtyard near city hall. It symbolizes the city's disdain for foreign authority, perhaps because Koblenz seems to have belonged to almost everyone throughout its history, from the Romans to the French. It's great fun to see unsuspecting tourists approach it, ready to snap a photo, and then receive a soggy surprise. This town has a sense of humour.

Just check out the clock tower of the **Mittelrhein Museum**. It features the face of Johann Lutter von Kobern, a guy who had fun robbing the rich and poor alike until he was caught in 1536 and beheaded. Legend has it that he stuck out his tongue and rolled his eyes at the spectators on hand for his execution. He proclaimed the town would have good luck if they erected a memorial to him, so it did. Now every half-hour on the hour, he sticks out his tongue from high atop his perch on the tower. "Take that!" he seems to be saying.

There were other surprises in store, like **Rüdesheim**. It's home to the odd, yet charming, **Siegfried's Mechanical Musical Instrument Museum**, containing

everything from a delicate music box with a chirping bird to a mammoth piano-orchestration, which mimics the sounds of a full orchestra through a keyboard. **Rüdesheim** appeared like a picturesque, but sleepy, village at first until later in the evening, when the pubs filled with thirsty patrons who sang and danced – thanks in part to the signature **Rüdesheimer** coffee, made with **Asbach Uralt** (a local brandy), whipped cream, sugar, coffee and chocolate sprinkles. Even non-coffee drinkers will be seduced by its deliciousness, and coaxed into singing along with the crowd.

Heidelberg and a stop in **Strasbourg** wrapped up the cruise in fine style, with great food and wine along the way. Over nine days, we had travelled through four countries – the **Netherlands**, **France**, **Germany** and finally **Switzerland** – but strangely, it didn't feel rushed. The leisurely pace of cruising between each stop prevented that. I elected to spend a couple of extra days in **Basel** before flying home from **Zurich**. Strolling along the river, I went to see the **Van Gogh** exhibit at the **Kunstmuseum**, and dined al fresco at **Restaurant Torstübli**. If the **Rhine** river cruise was an ice cream sundae, those last few days in **Basel** were the cherry on top.

Back on the ship, I confess that I looked forward to mealtimes as much as the ports of call. The breakfast and lunch buffets were hearty and varied, designed to satiate but also allowing you to maximize your time in port. Dinners were a highlight. They were a bit more formal, with table service and wine included, but still relaxed. You could sit where, and with whom, you pleased, while enjoying four courses of fine food that echoed the culture of the places visited. *Spätzle* (pasta-type noodles) was a nod to Germany, while magnificent beef bourguignon put me in a French state of mind.

I admit that now I'm hooked. I loved not having to pack and repack every day while I experienced a part of Europe in what felt like a sleek, floating boutique hotel. The rooms were compact but smartly designed, with beds high enough off the floor that you could tuck your suitcase underneath, well-lit bathrooms and a mini-fridge. I've been poring over brochures, already thinking about another river cruise. I see that **Avalon** has a **Burgundy & Provence** jazz cruise, an assortment of wine cruises and trips down such legendary rivers as the **Danube**, **Yangtze**, **Nile** and **Seine**. The only thing I wonder about is which itinerary might have a port of call near a chocolate museum! ▣

Coming in 2011

Avalon Panorama, the first 'suite ship' offering staterooms that are 30 percent larger than the industry average, as well as the category's first open-air balcony, a 10- by seven-foot wide floor-to-ceiling wall-to-wall panoramic window. Fleet-wide, **Avalon** is also adding more perks for passengers: the **Comfort Collection** by **Avalon** offers a choice of pillows, orthopaedic mattresses, Egyptian cotton linens, **L'Occitane** toiletries and more.

Eight Days on the
Mighty Mekong



DEBRA CONKEY



During our flight over Cambodia, people suddenly start pointing excitedly at the windows. Below us lies a huge swath of river, slicing and twisting across the land as far as the eye can see.

I'll soon embark on an eight-day luxury river cruise through Cambodia and Vietnam, and am already awestruck by the immensity of the waterway. My earliest impressions of the **Mekong River** were from television news accounts and movies about the Vietnam War, where you could get little perspective of its size. The Mekong flows nearly 3,000 miles through six countries, beginning its journey in the **Himalayas** and flowing through **China, Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Thailand, Cambodia** and **Vietnam**. We'll travel from **Siem Reap** – home of **Angkor**, the ancient capital of Cambodia – to **Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)** in Vietnam.

Ancient Angkor

We don't have an extra week to join the pre-cruise overland tour, which includes two nights in Vietnam's capital city of **Hanoi**, an overnight cruise of **Ha Long Bay** in a traditional wooden junk and three nights in Siem Reap's **Angkor Archaeological Park**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. But we're able to squeeze in a day-and-a-half tour of the ancient temples with a private guide and driver. The highlights include the most famous landmark, the 12th-century **Angkor Wat**, with its five peaked towers and lily pond, the **Smiling Buddhas of Angkor Thom** (Great City) and another favourite temple, **Ta Prohm**, which featured alongside Angelina Jolie in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and is being strangled by overgrown trees.

Day One

We step into small boats on **Tonle Sap Lake** (Great Lake) – a tributary of the Mekong – passing the floating village of **Chong Kneas** and ramshackle floating houses that Paroth, our guide, claims keep the monsoons out. "The Tonle Sap is one of the greatest waterways in southeast Asia and 1.5 million people live on the lake," he says. "They know how to adapt since they must move their houses 10 times a year. During the monsoon season, the lake swells fivefold. What's unique is that it reverses its flow from south to northwest in the dry season. There are 81 villages on the lake and 85 percent of the people are fishermen. The rest work in related jobs, like boatbuilding." I notice that a school, church, hospital, market – even a basketball court – are all on the water, too.

Then we board the new *MS La Marguerite* – the largest luxury ship on the Mekong – and settle into our comfortable cabin, where a sliding glass door and large window provide an ongoing picture of bustling river life.

Day Two

A blazing orange sunrise reveals a stream of cargo ships, wooden motorboats and fishing villages on stilts, dozens of pagodas on the riverbanks and locals checking their fishing nets. We watch in wonder and, at 6:20 a.m., a young woman knocks softly on our door. "This is your wake-up call," she says. Breakfast brings new tastes: I enjoy sampling local flavours, so I have hot rice porridge, along with fruit and a crusty baguette with butter, though there are fresh omelettes, cereal and all the usual morning fare.



Once again, we board small boats and cruise among the floating houses in **Kampong Chhnang**, watching everyday life unfold: a family picks water hyacinths, a man sells fruit from his boat, a boy cuts thick bamboo for a platform, a woman washes vegetables and people lean into their long upright paddles, rowing from house to house. We disembark and watch a young man struggle to unload a six-foot-high block of ice. Then we continue into the marketplace.

☞ Day Three ☞

Disembarking the ship can be a challenge as the river drops, but there's always a smiling assistant willing to help. In fact, some of the staff members have been busy cutting steps into the hillside at our next stop, where I hop on the back of a motorcycle with a local rather than climb the steep steps to pre-Angkorian temple **Wat Hanchey**, which dates from the 8th century. I befriend a monk, who allows me to photograph him in front of a golden statue of Buddha. Curiously, at the lookout over the Mekong River, a very large monkey lingers nearby. In the afternoon, we visit a village with an older weaver who has shaved her head (often done to detach oneself from vanity). The highlight of the day is witnessing a Cambodian wedding ceremony and greeting the bride and groom.

☞ Day Four ☞

Cambodia's capital, **Phnom Penh**, sits right along the river, and we visit the Royal Palace, Silver Pagoda and National Museum. Although these are spectacular, our most moving visits are to the Killing Fields memorial, which contains 8,986 skulls of some of the two million people murdered by the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979, as well as the **S21 Detention Centre**, where people were photographed, catalogued, tortured and killed. The journey starts in horror, but remarkably, ends in reconciliation. "There were actually 343 killing fields, but people in the region have moved forward," says our Cambodian guide Visoth. "They want to try the leaders, but give amnesty to the soldiers who had to be cruel in exchange for their family's survival." Forgiveness. An extraordinary lesson in the 21st century, especially for a people so long at war. How fitting that as we walk the grounds, butterflies – symbols of death and rebirth – flutter among those lost, but not forgotten.

☞ Day Five ☞

Travel along the Mekong hasn't always been easy; authorities in each country often made border crossings difficult. Recently that has changed, but today it doesn't seem so. The process of crossing into Vietnam along the river takes longer than expected, so instead of visiting a village, we simply have to relax – a divine excuse to read all day, write in our journals, watch the river from the sun deck and nap.

Lunch and dinner on the ship include daily regional specials – Cambodian, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, French – all of which are excellent. We enjoy such dishes as **Lab Kai** (spicy ground chicken salad), **Tom Yam Kong** (sour prawn soup), steamed fish with Thai spices and wok-fried vegetables with oyster sauce. But today is Thanksgiving, so turkey is also on the menu, along with the usual array of non-Asian selections. I have become so accustomed to exotic desserts – dragon fruit, sweet white mangosteen berries, or a delightful local concoction of starchy round green beans, coconut milk and coconut jelly – that tonight a cake pales in comparison.

☞ Day Six ☞

It's a sunny November day along the Mekong River in Vietnam, and the weather is perfect. This is the dry season so the river is low and there's no humidity. We board small boats and soon jump onto the floating platform of a tiny fish farm. "There are 50,000 floating fish farms like this in Vietnam," explains our guide Thou. "The owners spend \$20,000 to \$30,000 to construct the building and within six to eight months, the farm can yield between 20,000 and 50,000 fish. At \$1 per kilogram, the owners can earn \$50,000."

In the afternoon, we tour the remote town of **Tan Chau** on a *xe loi*, a bicycle-powered rickshaw, and later walk into the countryside, passing teens pulling carts full of hay. On the way to a rattan mat-making factory, we pass through another tiny village. A boy is sleeping on a bed underneath his house on stilts. Locals tend their gardens. A young man scrubs his clothes, while his wife cooks nearby using sticks to feed the fire. A man guides his water buffalo down the path in front of me. A child peeks out of a thatched-roof house, one elderly woman sits side-saddle on a hammock and another leans out of her window, hands together, smiling, as I talk to her and try to connect with her world.

☞ Days Seven and Eight ☞

Today's highlight is a walk through the bustling marketplace in **Sa Dec**, where live eels wriggle and fish circle in metal trays of water. Women in traditional garb giggle as we chat with them and take their pictures, grandmas play with grandchildren, vendors slice fish and a woman in a conical hat pushes a cart with firewood stacked high above her head.

On our final day, we disembark in Ho Chi Minh City, where motorcycles rule. We eat chicken pho (soup) and drink pineapple shakes at Pho 2000. We visit **Ben Thanh Market**, hidden temples among Chinese shop houses in District 5, **Notre Dame Cathedral**, the stunning French colonial post office, the **Reunification Palace** where almost everything has been left untouched since 1975, and the sobering **War Remnants Museum**. Later we dine on spicy shrimp, lemongrass chicken, appetizers and drinks at **Lemongrass**, a restaurant in our hotel in the centre of **Old Saigon**. The entire meal costs us only \$10 each – that's 193,000 bong to the Vietnamese.

The irony of this huge discrepancy is not lost on me; I appreciate even more the services offered by our private guides in both Cambodia and Vietnam. Though we had precious little time before and after the cruise, our guides delighted us at every turn. Thuy, for example, carefully timed each visit so we'd get to all the sites. Later, when she heard that our friend Sandy had wanted to buy that book of colourful postage stamps, Thuy brought several to our table during dinner. To their countries, these hard-working people represent the future. To me, they are the reason why I travel.

Only a handful of luxury river cruise lines offer this eight-day cruise down the Mekong, which included several lectures and cultural entertainment. Contact your Ensemble Travel® agent for more information. ▣



Floating houses on the Tonle Sap



Ben Thanh Market, Ho Chi Minh City



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Elephants have greeting ceremonies for friends returning from voyages. Secretly, I hoped that when I come back, they'll remember me as much as I'll remember them.

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South Africa

The Table Bay Hotel, Cape Town



The impressive bulk of Cape Town's iconic **Table Mountain** looms over the city, a silent sentinel to the vibrant local culture, beautiful beaches, rich history, world-class shopping, entertainment facilities and friendly citizens. Cape Town is also known for its restaurants, which serve deliciously fresh seafood, award-winning wines and the Cape's own distinctive Malay-inspired cuisine.

Set on the historic Victoria and Alfred waterfront, **The Table Bay Hotel** has been created not only as a tribute to this world-famous bay, but also sets its

own standards in international service, cuisine and luxury. Straddling the antique breakwater, The Table Bay Hotel has a style that is both innovative and yet entirely in keeping with its surroundings; its contemporary architectural design and execution are the result of trans-continental co-operation.

Each room overlooks either the harbour and Table Mountain, or across the bay to **Robben Island Museum**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that was once the infamous home of South Africa's former President

Nelson Mandela for the greater part of his 27 years of political incarceration. President Nelson Mandela officially opened The Table Bay Hotel to much fanfare in May 1997. Here, you'll enjoy five-star luxurious comfort: rooms and suites feature a modern décor and large walk-in closets, marble finishes, armoires and writing desks, and each comes equipped with a butler station and honour bar. In-room dining is offered around the clock, but if you're heading outdoors there's plenty to see and do: roam the historic streets of the city centre and the many outdoor markets, or enjoy Cape Town's entertainment scene. Beaches are yet another of Cape Town's attractions, drawing sun-seekers and sporting enthusiasts alike. You'll find clean white sand and sparkling water, as well as such activities as sailing, fishing, whale watching, wind-surfing and kite-boarding. Cape Town offers plenty for adrenalin junkies too, with city-based mountain climbing, rapelling and paragliding.



Victoria Basin, Harbour



The Table Bay

At the Waterfront

ADVENTURES IN PARADISE



©SIME/aSTOCK PHOTO

*On an island renowned for its sun and beaches,
Tim Johnson finds a surprising amount of outdoorsy fun –
always capped off by some rum punch – in Barbados.*

AFTER A MORNING OF RIDING AROUND in the open bed of a tricked-out Land Rover, winding through charming Crayola-bright villages splashed in vivid pinks, blues and neon greens, climbing up to spectacular coastal views and then crashing down narrow paths through dense rainforest, past eucalyptus and banyan trees and big round termite mounds, we make an unscheduled stop. It's Sunday in **Barbados**, and cricket games are taking place all across the island. Here in a grassy meadow in **St. George's Parish**, a small gathering of locals has come

together to watch Malvern take on United. The spectators banter good-naturedly with the players, all decked out in their proper white uniforms, and I tarry a bit longer than most of our group, snapping pictures of the scene. When I return to the Land Rover, my compatriots – a happy band of smiling Brits – are much quieter than usual. Finally Eddie, a gregarious Manchester man, breaks the silence. “Your drink’s been spilled,” he says in a rather grave tone, referring to the half glass of rum punch that I’d left on the floor in my hasty exit from the truck.



© SHIRAZ/ISTOCK PHOTO



© TORLEIF SVENSSON/CORBIS



Pool at the Colony Club

© RED SQUARE INC.



© SPRADA/ISTOCKPHOTO

Fortunately, Ian – our equally jovial guide – remedies the situation immediately, pouring me a fresh cup from a plastic jug he keeps inside a cooler in front. We all toast a great day, and roll on. That’s kind of how it works in Barbados – the island has plenty of adventure for those who seek it, but usually it’s just intense enough to spill your drink every once in a while.

Known more for its soft white sandy beaches than its soft adventure, Barbados – the birthplace of rum and a long-time British protectorate that gained independence only in 1966 (they maintain many British traditions, including cricket, polo and daily high tea) – has long been one of the Caribbean’s legendary sunshine destinations. With many excellent restaurants and resorts, glorious year-round temperatures and water that is stunningly blue and bathtub warm, many come to this teardrop-shaped island at the southern end of the **Lesser Antilles** seeking little else than a week or two of relaxation. But for those looking for more than just a good tan, Barbados has plenty to offer – so much, in fact, that during my five days here, I can’t actually squeeze it all in (zip-lining, deep-sea fishing, horseback riding, mountain biking and hiking are among the things I’d planned, but didn’t get a chance to do).

My base for the week is the **Colony Club**, an elegant resort set on the crystal clear waters of the island’s west coast (informally known as the ‘**Platinum Coast**’). One could easily spend a few days without ever having to leave the property – in addition to the four lagoon-style pools and seven acres of lush, manicured grounds, the resort offers plenty of water sports, including water skiing and tubing, windsurfing, kayaking and sailing. I try my hand (rather unsuccessfully, as it turns out) at a little paddle-boarding, a relatively new sport that involves balancing atop a broad board while paddling out to sea.

But Barbados is a place that invites exploration. On my first full day on the island, I start with a catamaran cruise that includes three stops for swimming and snorkelling. The Barbadian (or in local lingo, ‘Bajan’) coastline teems with life, and the convivial spirit on the boat encourages social interaction – I end up

spending much of the day hanging out with a friendly Canadian expat couple, Matt and Kathi, who left Toronto 11 years ago with plans to return in two – plans that were abandoned due to the high quality of life they found in Barbados. “We ended up really enjoying the lifestyle – no shovelling snow, 350 days a year of sunshine, a five-minute drive to work. No rat race. Golf and tennis all year round,” Kathi tells me. At the first stop, we tread water with hawksbill and leatherback turtles – one actually bumps my right elbow as it swims past me. At the second stop, we swim above a shipwreck that plays host to thousands of tropical fish, and at the third we leave the snorkels behind, jumping off the side of the cat and swimming across to a nearly deserted beach.

On land, in addition to the **Island Safari** tour, I do a little exploring on foot and pay a visit to **Hunte’s Gardens**, an exotic collection of greenery dramatically set in a deep gully, which was created when an ancient limestone cave collapsed. I’d been told that the gardens’ millionaire proprietor, Anthony Hunte, is a bit of an eccentric, and he doesn’t disappoint.

I pack it in and head to shore. After all, I have another glass of rum punch waiting for me.

He greets me at the gate in his trademark grubby denim shirt and asks me to meet him at the bottom of the gully. I wind my way down, picking a path through the lush vegetation. Hunte disappears to flip a switch somewhere, and soaring notes from some of his favourite operas resound across the gully. We chat at the bottom, then later in his house back at the top, a converted stable with perpetually open doors and windows that allow birds, bats and whatever else free passage through his home. He brings me a rum punch (the stuff is ubiquitous in Barbados) and the tray also hosts a blinking green lizard.

After a few minutes of pleasant conversation, I’m off again, this time to venture under the earth at **Harrison’s Cave**, a cavern three miles long and 150 feet deep. My visions of scampering over dark, slippery rocks on my hands and knees are quickly dispelled – a modern, air-conditioned complex has been built over its mouth and, after playing with some of the high-tech interactive displays and watching a film about the formation of the cave, I board a comfortable tram for a narrated tour of the impressive forests of stalactites and stalagmites, underground streams and waterfalls, and massive subterranean chambers.

On my final full day on the island, I have a score to settle. The Caribbean isn’t generally known for its surfing, but Barbados is the exception – well to the east of the rest of the Lesser Antilles, the waves that crash onto the island’s rugged east coast are some of the best in the world, having rolled in, unimpeded, all the way from Africa. It’s been two years since my first surfing lesson, which was in Hawaii and, despite the fact that I had a world-class instructor and the lesson took place on the beach where surfing was (more or less) invented, it went terribly. At the end of the day, I still hadn’t ridden a wave.

But as I arrive at windswept **Surfer’s Point** here in Barbados, I resolve that this will not be the case today. I meet my instructor, a patient Bajan with wavy blond hair and a lean surfer’s build named Jonathan – or ‘Jon-O’ as he’s invariably called on the beach. As I follow him into the water after our dry-land training, Jon-O turns back to me and says, “Enough of that Hawaiian stuff. Today we surf Bajan style.”

And indeed I do. After two failed attempts, I rise to my feet atop a wave – a small one, admittedly, and just for a second or two. But it’s exhilarating and a perfect ending to my adventures here in Barbados. Satisfied, and to the loud applause of Jon-O, I pack it in and head to shore. After all, I have another glass of rum punch waiting for me. 

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Worldly Delights: Opening Soon

Mary Luz Mejia

Battle Chocolate

Touted as the "most exciting chocolate event on the planet," the upcoming **World Chocolate Masters** competition in Paris is where 18 professional pastry chefs will strut their stuff. From October 19 to 21, 2011, the best from around the globe will gather at the Salon du Chocolat for a chocolate-fuelled frenzy. This year's theme: **Cocoa, Quetzalcoatl's Gift**, promises to be a delicious challenge. www.worldchocolatemasters.com/en/edition_2011



© EMMANUEL SPECIALE



Northern Lights

Denmark's **Noma** restaurant (Strandgade 93, 1401 Copenhagen) is the 2010 winner of the **World's Best Restaurant** and the **Best Restaurant in Europe** according to the arbiter of good taste, *Restaurant Magazine*. Helmed by chef René Redzepi, Noma offers gourmet Nordic cuisine using pristine local ingredients. It doesn't hurt that Redzepi has also earned two Michelin stars and ousted Spain's El Bulli from its number one spot. Reservations are already booked into 2011, so if you can snag dinner there, you'll have bragging rights, too!

© DITTE ISAGER

Homecoming

South Florida's father of 'New World Cuisine' is back! Norman Van Aken's recently opened **Norman's 180** (180 Aragon Ave, (305) 529 5180) in Coral Gables is wowing loyal fans and garnering new ones. From farmer to table to chef, Van Aken says he's taking "a 180 degree look back at his roots to discover the origins of 'sustenance.'" Sustenance and sustainability never tasted so good!



© KIM WOOD



London Calling

New York City's Adam Perry Lang brought some south to the north at his **Daisy May's BBQ** back in 2003. Now he's taking his love of Southern American BBQ across the pond when he and Jamie Oliver open **Barbecoa** in downtown London. With Lang and Oliver behind the venture, and views of St. Paul's Cathedral from the new eatery, Barbecoa should prove to be gloriously good.

© DAVID LOFTUS

Roll With It

Most people have savoured an oceanful of sushi, but how many have enjoyed that other Japanese tradition: temaki? Meaning 'hand roll' in Japanese, this build-it-yourself delicacy is now available at Toronto's **Drake Hotel**. A sharing plate of fresh fish includes slices of raw butterfish, hamachi and cooked lobster, three dipping sauces, perfectly seasoned sushi rice and quality nori sheets to satiate any hungry diner. A new flavour combination awaits in every roll, where you get to be the captain of your own culinary odyssey.



Worldly Delights: San Francisco

The Spanish first settled in the area known as **Golden Gate** in the late 1700s when they built a fort and a mission named after Saint Francis of Assisi. By 1848, the Gold Rush turned formerly sleepy **San Francisco** into a boom town. After an earthquake, the 'Summer of Love' and a few other reinventions, San Francisco is now best known for its majestic Victorian 'painted ladies' (colourful period homes), breathtaking ocean vistas and some of the best food in the nation. Experimental, playful, fresh and always seasonal, here are some of the most delicious reasons to visit the fog-laced city where Tony Bennett left his heart.



NORTHERN CALIFORNIA TERROIR
Ferry Plaza Farmers Market: During the Gold Rush, the Ferry Plaza Building was the transportation hub for dreamers and gamblers alike. The stunning 1898 building is currently home to one of California's most famous markets and, arguably, some of the country's best artisanal food producers. Area chefs source raw ingredients here to imbue their dishes with a sense of place, or 'terroir.'

Food Network celebrity chef **Chris Cosentino's** sought-after **Boccalone Salumeria's** offerings are available within the building's hallowed halls. A 'meat cone' gives curious eaters a chance to sample the shop's famous artisanal salumi, or 'Tasty Salted Pig Parts' as they call them. Not to be missed: orange and wild fennel salami to satisfy any craving for tasty pig parts.

You'll also find the James Beard award-winning chef **Traci Des Jardins' Mijita** taqueria for a hit of Mexican *sabor*, around the corner from the quality-obsessed, organic **Blue Bottle Coffee** micro-roasters.

Mary Luz Mejia

The outdoor farmer's market is open to the public three days a week: Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. The additional bonus on Saturday mornings is à la minute breakfast options prepared by top-notch local chefs. Saturdays are the busiest, most farmer-populated market days; the wise arrive early. You'll find everything from **Frog Pond Hollow Farm's** legendary organic fruit, freshly made tortillas, Hog Island oysters, clams and mussels, award-winning Cowgirl Creamery cheeses and Acme Bread Company's crumb-perfect loaves, to name a few. Bring your appetite.

AMERICANA

Wayfare Tavern: If you've ever watched **Tyler Florence's** *Tyler's Ultimate TV* series and salivated at the thought of savouring one of his enticing creations, you just got your wish. The Wayfare Tavern is Florence's new flagship eatery, which he's striving to turn into 'the great American restaurant.' Using seasonal local ingredients blessed by the surrounding valleys' fertile soil, warm days and cool nights, Tyler's California-inspired Americana is lip-smacking through and through.



His menu is a modern update of local cuisine from the turn of the 20th century, complete with Victorian-era cocktails (try the citrusy and balanced **Darkness at Noon**) set amid an ambiance of gentleman's hunting lodge meets upscale tavern. A San Francisco cult favourite, the **Hangtown Fry** (organic eggs, crispy oysters, smoked bacon and watercress) is on the menu next to the best buttermilk brined fried chicken you've ever had, as well as



Hog Island oysters flash-broiled on the half-shell with a chorizo carrot butter. These will impress even the most jaded gourmand.

But it's the peach pie that's a true revelation. Florence tells me he uses butter and pork lard in the pastry to achieve that flaky, almost shattering quality. Inside, generous slices of **Frog Pond Hollow's** peaches are topped by a gorgeous goat's milk ice cream and sugared rosemary. Rosemary? "It's a California thing," he says, smiling. And it's absolutely spectacular.

CAL-ITAL

Zero Zero: Certified *pizzaiolo*, noted executive chef and restaurant owner **Bruce Hill** is bringing quality

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARY LUZ MEJIA



Tyler Florence at work

Neapolitan-style pizzas to the people. At Zero Zero (named after the finely milled flour used by *pizzaiolos*) in San Francisco's **SoMa District**, Hill and his team are crafting some of the best pies in the city.

A rotating roster of 10 'Calipolitan' pizzas using luscious regional produce with Neapolitan techniques means you get a beautifully blistered pizza from a wood-burning oven in mere seconds (90, to be exact). Not content simply to use local produce, Hill also hand-stretches his own mozzarella daily using nearby **Formaggi de Ferrante's** curds and cooks his sausages *sous-vide* so that they remain juicy and keep their flavourful fat.

Small sharing plates, antipasti, house-made pastas and **Straus Family**

Creamery organic soft-serve ice cream are all on the menu, reflecting Hill's love of *la cucina Italiana* with a sunny side of San Francisco style.

LEFT-FIELD FLAVOURS

Humphry Slocombe Ice Cream:

100 flavours rotate every day for the kid at heart at this San Francisco hot spot in the **Mission District**. Rain, fog or shine, the denizens of this city are flavour obsessed, so it's no surprise to encounter half-hour lineups at any time of the day outside the shop's royal blue and white storefront.

Ice cream flecked with Boccalone's prosciutto, or with bourbon and cornflakes (called '**Secret Breakfast**') are two of the wild and wonderful flavours on offer.

Former pastry chef **Jake Godby** uses Straus organic products as his base and then goes on a Willy Wonka journey of flavours.

The shop was written up in *The New York Times*, which means that it has now become the go-to ice creamery for food cognoscenti across the nation. This likely explains why next to us a couple from Manhattan is savouring three-scoop bowls that include McEvoy Olive Oil ice cream, Blue Bottle Vietnamese Coffee and Eight Ball Stout. The verdict: "Wonderful!" says the lady, adding, "We get just about everything in New York City but we don't have ice cream quite like this!" Her husband nods in agreement. Turns out they have great taste in ice cream.

Worldly Delights: Liquid Revolution

Mary Luz Mejia witnesses a renaissance in the art of cocktails



There's a liquid revolution brewing. Actually, it has been for more than 15 years, but it's finally gaining real momentum. Around the world, bartending is back and so are elegant cocktails that hearken back to the days when liquor was taken as seriously as the sophisticated drinks you created with them. Welcome to the era of pre-Prohibition cocktails, where foams are out and homemade tonic water is *de rigueur*.

From Belfast to New York City, the art of the cocktail continues its renaissance. And we're not talking about the wave of molecular wizardry that transforms cocktails into form-defying feats of organic chemistry. No, we're referring to time-honoured traditions that begin with carefully chosen handmade ingredients, know-how and an artisan's dedication to this almost-forgotten craft.

Think that sounds evangelical? Then try *Mondo Cocktail* author and cocktail expert **Christine Sismondo's** explanation for the rise of pre-Prohibition traditions. "The whole reason to call it pre-Prohibition is we're talking about a 'lost way' with food and drink... where people used to hand down recipes from one person to the next and careful apprenticeships took place behind bars. This was all lost during Prohibition, which officially started in the U.S. in 1920," she says, adding, "and in Canada, we had a wartime prohibition that was part of the *War Measures Act*. In Ontario, we weren't allowed to sell liquor in bars until 1947!"

In some parts of North America, the art of cocktail making disappeared for almost 30 years. Post-prohibition, Sismondo says, "No one but a grandfather remembered how to make a cocktail. There was this lost drink-way, if you will." In lieu of carefully crafted libations, barkeeps improvised.

Toby Maloney, partner at Chicago's much-lauded **The Violet Hour** and Nashville's **The Patterson House**, elaborates. "The late '70s to the '90s were a travesty for drinking. The '80s were all about sticky sweet drinks with lots of sugars, big flavours and cranberry juice meant to overpower. It was a big vodka era. Eventually, people realized these drinks didn't really taste very good."

Around 1995, the art of good cocktail making started to resurface

in New York City. By 2000, bars like NYC's swanky **Milk & Honey** started to set the pace for this full-fledged, old-school cocktail revival. But why did it take so long? Former bartender and *The Thirsty Traveler* TV show host **Kevin Brauch** responds by saying, "As we began to explore organic foods, and Slow Food, we began putting better stuff into our bodies. It only made sense that we then started thinking about the kinds of liquids we were putting into our bodies, too."

And that's what makes the resurgence of fine cocktail making a refreshing change, or as Brauch puts it, "leading us to the future by going back." Bars like The Violet Hour (1520 North Damen Avenue, Chicago), **Death and Company** in New York City (433 East 6th Street), **The Varnish** in Los Angeles (118 East Sixth Street) and in Northern Ireland, Belfast's **The Merchant Hotel** (16 Skipper Street – voted the 'World's Best Hotel Bar' at the internationally acclaimed **Tales of the Cocktail Festival** in New Orleans) are all going back in order to go forward. Freshly squeezed juices, homemade syrups and grenadine, mixed with craft-brewed spirits, are all on the menu. And let's not forget that barkeep's secret ingredient, ice: blocked, lumped, cubed, cracked or snowed. The kind of ice you choose

determines how fast it melts, which in turn affects the flavour of a specific beverage. Yes, it's that precise.

Sismondo credits the 1862 book *The Bar-Tender's Guide or How to Mix Drinks* by Jerry Thomas as the go-to manual for much of the rebirth of drinking culture today. It doesn't hurt that in 2007, David Wondrich translated Thomas' recipes and concepts in his book *Imbibe! From Absinthe Cocktail to Whiskey Smash, a Salute in Stories and Drinks to "Professor" Jerry Thomas, Pioneer of the American Bar* for the modern bartender.

Cocktail bars today are likely to be plush and have a few basic house rules. Clients may be expected to turn off cellphones, remove hats once inside, dress appropriately and in some even make reservations or become members. And there's a no-standing policy – everyone must be seated to enjoy the experience, part of what Brauch calls "top-shelving cocktails to give them the ultimate respect and treatment." Maloney adds that at his bars, what they're trying to do is "create an atmosphere that doesn't have modern inconveniences. We cut out the modern white noise that's constantly around us."

Well-made **Sazeracs**, **Sidecars**, **The Last Word** (made with Maraschino liqueur, lime, gin and Chartreuse) and dry **Manhattans** are all being mixed again

with precision. "A properly made martini is wonderful because the spirit itself is an intriguing thing every time," says Maloney of the enduring quality of these cocktails. Sismondo is more pragmatic in her explanation, "The proof is in the pudding; it's not philosophical for me. These are much better drinks. If you go to a bar like Milk & Honey, you'll see precise measurements, based on years of figuring out the perfect balance of these liquors. It's a craft and very precise, like baking."

The days of improvised cocktails, where three ounces of booze and a sweet juice attempt to cover up any lack of technique will, according to Brauch, hopefully soon be relegated to the past. "After all, even in pubs around the world, any barman should be able to at least make a really good martini!" Until then, we have specialty cocktail bars that are transporting patrons to simpler, more elegant times, one pre-Prohibition libation at a time. ▣

Toby Maloney's **Juliet & Romeo** is almost synonymous with The Violet Hour in Chicago. It's an augmented gimlet, or as Maloney says, "as classic a cocktail as it gets!"

JULIET & ROMEO
 2 oz Beefeater gin
 .75 oz fresh lime juice
 .75 oz simple syrup
 3 drops rosewater
 3 drops Angostura bitters
 3 slices cucumber
 3 sprigs mint
 tiny pinch of salt
 Glass: coupe
 Garnish: mint leaf and one drop of rosewater
 Ice: none

Method:
 Muddle cucumber, mint and pinch of salt. Add remaining ingredients. Let sit for 30 seconds (time allowing). Shake. Strain. Garnish with one floating mint leaf and one drop of rosewater on top of the leaf.



©TROY SIDLE



Worldly Delights: Digestifs

Nick Keukenmeester

A **digestif** is any drink you are likely to have at the end of a meal. This includes **port** or **grappa**, as well as the rarer herbal **liqueurs** and **bitters**. These liqueurs are not merely after-dinner drinks; many were once purported to be elixirs of long life and even aphrodisiacs, and very popular as a result. This should come as no surprise to anyone who has been lectured about the medicinal qualities of red wine, although there is little medical evidence for either assertion.

So what are these mysterious liqueurs? Basically, someone who was bored with his grappa or eau de vie decided to add roots, flowers, herbs, spices and whatever else he liked from the garden.

Years ago I sat behind the counter of my shop in South Kensington with some bottles of **Chartreuse** gathering dust on the shelves behind me. There was one

rather quirky German man who would come in from time to time and pick up a bottle and together we would praise its qualities. Sadly, he was the only one. This was a pity because Chartreuse has been featured in everything from *The Great Gatsby* to Tarantino's *Death Proof* and they really did name the colour after it. It was also Hunter S. Thompson's favourite liqueur – if you're looking for a professional drinker's approval.

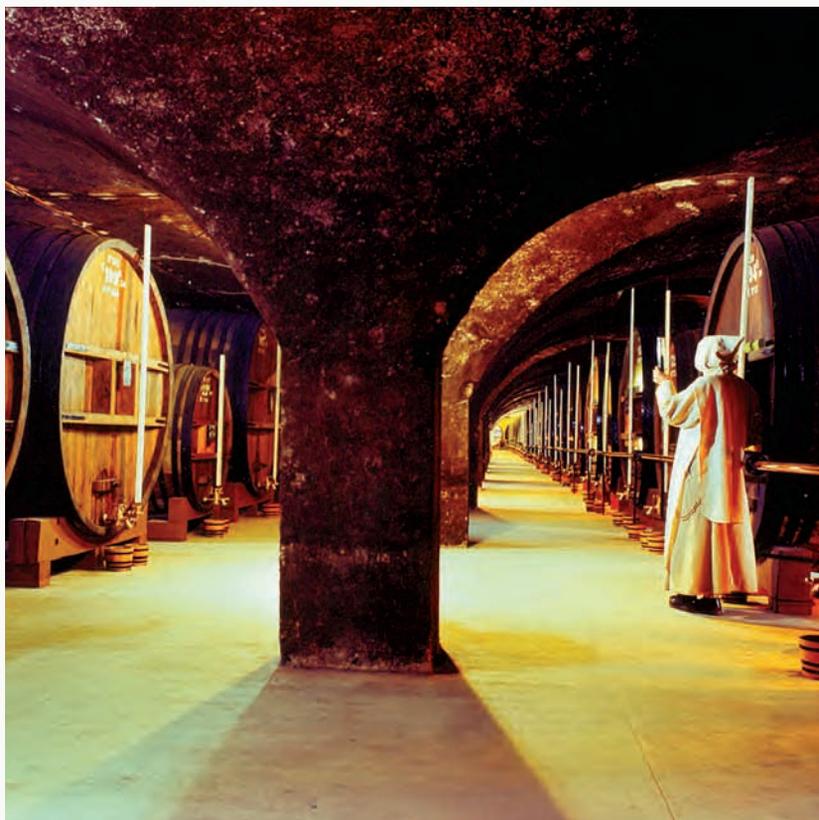
Chartreuse is a wine-based spirit infused with a secret recipe of more than 130 herbs and flowers that give it its distinctive green tint. It was first made by Carthusian monks in **Voiron**, France in the 1600s. They were exiled to Spain in 1903 (governments do that sort of thing sometimes), but they were eventually invited back and Chartreuse is still made in Voiron to this day. Here is the really

cool bit: only two Carthusian monks have the recipe. I assume they are not allowed to travel together.

This digestif is spicy and sweet, with a vegetal note that just might explain its colour, and it also has a strong alcoholic kick at 55 percent. It's now back in vogue and bars all over Europe and North America are using it thanks to mixologists' 'thirst' for new flavours. Cocktail makers are perpetually looking for new and interesting ingredients, and these ready-made bouquets-in-a-bottle can be the perfect choice.

As long as people have been making spirits, they have been adding distinctive flavours to make them more interesting and enjoyable. Some of the most ancient and respected digestifs are herbal liqueurs and bitters.





French monks aren't the only ones who like to wander around their gardens to find flavour enhancers for their drinks.

Amaro means 'bitter' and the plural *amari* are the Italian versions of herbal liqueurs and bitters. It is the bitterness itself (along with the alcohol no doubt) that settles the stomach and aids digestion. So it's particularly helpful if you have over-indulged, and they are pleasing to the palate as well.

Along with a heady array of grappas, the **Nonino** family in **Friuli** are famed for their *amaro*. **Amaro Nonino Quintessentia** combines their patented Nonino grappa with a mix of mountain herbs, which they age in *barriques* (small French oak barrels) and sherry casks for colour and flavour.

Due to the quality of their product, the Noninos have caused a quiet revolution in the *amari* world and demand for their liqueurs is growing at an amazing rate.

The fact that their family get-togethers look like a super-model convention can't hurt business, either.

Although an *amaro* is traditionally served neat after a meal, here is a fun cocktail invented by Italian bartender Davide Girardi, who works with the Noninos to create cocktails using their liqueurs:

The Quintofiore

Muddle a lime quarter with two spoonfuls of sugar. Fill a glass with crushed ice and 50 ml of amaro and top it up with soda water. Mix it in the glass in which it's to be served and decorate with two mint leaves.

(Amaro Nonino Quintessentia retails for \$41 in Quebec and \$46 in Ontario.)

No matter where you are, there is a local herbal liqueur to try. Just like beers and wines, they can help give you a sense of place. So why not try something different? ▣

OTHER HERBAL LIQUEURS AND BITTERS ON THE SHELF:

Fernet Branca, **Campari** and all **Amari** (Italy), **Gammel Dansk** (Denmark), **Unicum** (Hungary), **Angostura** (Trinidad), **Jägermeister** (Germany), **Pimm's No. 1** (England) are all classed as liqueur bitters.

KEEP IT COOL:

Serving temperature for these drinks can be vital. They are usually best cold and poured over ice.

GOOD FOR WHAT AILS YOU:

Until recently **Fernet** was still classed as a medicine in the U.S. This allowed Fernet to be imported during Prohibition and also to enjoy a lower import tax thereafter. Angostura bitters also originally had claims to healing properties. Both are happy to be classed as digestifs these days. Please consult your doctor.



New Orleans Bijou

- 1 oz gin
- 1 oz Green Chartreuse
- 1 oz sweet vermouth
- 1 dash orange bitters
- Garnish: Cherry and a lemon twist

(A 375 ml bottle of Chartreuse goes for approximately \$36 in Canada.)

Worldly Delights: Carnival

Barranquilla welcomes the world as revellers celebrate culture and cuisine over four glorious days
 Mary Luz Mejia with notes from Stephanie Ortenzi



©JUAN SOCHOR

New Orleans, of course, owns **Mardi Gras**. **Rio de Janeiro** hosts its own sexy version of this pre-Lenten festival, the largest in the world. In third place, and the second-largest on the South American continent, is **Barranquilla** on **Colombia's** Caribbean coast. 'The City of Open Arms' warmly welcomes revellers from around the globe for four energetic days and nights. In 2011, the party starts on the 5th of March and ends on the 8th, with pre-Carnaval parties getting underway in mid-February. Rest assured, however: this is no regular Caribbean fiesta. In 2003, Carnival in Barranquilla was deemed a UNESCO world cultural heritage event thanks to the long-standing traditions of dance, music, art and food that permeate the very soul of this vibrant party.

Steeped in tradition, this Carnival is also a reflection of the cultures that settled the area – from native Indian, Spanish and African, to later migrations from the Middle East, Asia and Europe. The combination of dance, music, food and art continues to weave a dazzling tapestry that infectiously envelops the crowds before Ash Wednesday puts an end to the merriment for another year.

The festivities kick off with the stunning **Battle of the Flowers** parade. Here, you'll find the Carnival queen tossing flowers to her adoring fans. Afro-Colombian dances, replete with congas and *cumbias* – musical styles with roots deeply planted in Africa and embraced throughout Colombia – are the highlight of all four days. At any given time, you might

find the Carnival queen and her court shimmying their way along the streets in colourful costumes with fellow partiers to one of the best band's beats. My uncle, a long-time resident of Barranquilla, used to say "Even if you aren't much of a dancer, you'll find your feet moving. If this doesn't get you up and dancing, you're not alive!"

All of this excitement will rouse a lion's hunger. Luckily for partiers, Barranquilla's Carnival cuisine helps recharge tired bodies and feet. One of Carnival's best-known dishes is *sancocho de guandú*, a hearty, pigeon pea-based bean soup. Cooked with pork, beef, sweet plantain, yucca and potato, this *sancocho* is appreciated for its fortifying effects on 24-hour party people. The best and quickest place to find delicious snacks

on the go is right in the middle of the action: on the streets of Barranquilla. Start with *patacones*, or *tostones* as they're known elsewhere in South America. One-inch thick green plantain slices are fried, removed from the oil, flattened and returned to continue crisping. When they get to a deep golden hue and are appropriately crunchy, they're sprinkled with salt and devoured. They're like a fibre-boosted thicker potato chip, only infinitely better. Next, order a small *butifarra* – beef or pork sausages that are eaten with *bollos de yucca* or *bollos limpios*. *Bollo* is the coastal Colombian version of a tamale: cassava or cornmeal *masa* (dough) wrapped in corn husks and steamed. Another crowd-pleaser is the *carimañola*, a lightly golden torpedo-shaped *yucca* fritter stuffed with cheese or meat. If you feel adventurous, try it with *aji* – a spicy, vinegar-based condiment. And don't miss the *arepas*: cornmeal tortilla-like breads. In Barranquilla, it's criminal not to have an *arepa de huevo*, in which a whole egg is cracked into the arepa, sealed and deep fried. Crispy, packed with protein and better than any 'eggwich' you've ever had, it's the quintessential 'street eat' for people on the conga line.

Amid all this excitement, you're bound to get thirsty. You'd think rum is king in this coastal town but, while it's a popular choice, the clear winner is beer. The national brand, **Club Colombia**, is considered one of the best to quench a dance-induced thirst. Next in order of liquid importance when it comes to party lubricants is *aguardiente*, which translates loosely as 'firewater.' As the name implies, this drink packs a punch. This distillate of sugar cane, with a distinct anise flavour, is consumed around the country as a badge of cultural honour. *Aguardiente* is to Colombia what Champagne is to France: national character in liquid form, and both capable of making you happy or knocking you off your feet.

If you're looking to hydrate, *aguapanela* is refreshing and non-alcoholic. Made from condensed sugar cane juice, served with lemon or lime and sometimes flavoured with cinnamon or with milk instead of water, it's like a portable oasis in the tropical heat. Ironically, it's also often the chaser of choice with a shot of *aguardiente*. After all, this is one of the best parties in all of South America, so if you party like a Barranquillero for four days, that's okay. Post-Ash Wednesday, you'll have plenty of time to atone for your dance-induced indulgences. ▣

Party Here, Party There

NEW ORLEANS does Mardi Gras with *jambalaya*, *shrimp étouffée* and *beignets*, standards so beloved that they're not just for Mardi Gras anymore. And then there's the **King Cake**. Enriched with sour cream and decorated with purple, green and yellow icing, the cake hides a tiny baby doll, representing the Christ child. It is said that if you find him in your slice, you'll be lucky all year long.

RIO DE JANEIRO dishes up *feijoada* for Carnaval, a black bean stew with pork, served with rice and orange wedges. On the street, there's meat on a stick, meat off a grill and plenty of sausage. Other Rio Carnaval stars: *acarajé*, a fritter made from black-eyed pea flour; *pão de queijo*, a cassava flour cheese puff; and the famously potent *caipirinha*, a drink made with lime, sugar and *cachaça*, a type of liquor made from sugar cane.

VENICE invests a lot of Carnevale energy into multi-epoch costumery complete with sparkling silver and gilding. Festival food is from the 'special occasions' repertoire, except for these two Carnevale essentials: *frittelle*, small balls of fried dough with raisins and pine nuts; and *chiachiere*, a lemon-scented yeast dough, cut into ribbons, deep-fried and dusted with sugar.

LIMOUX, in France's Languedoc, calls its Carnival *Fécós*, and **Blanquette de Limoux** is the festival's official drink. This sparkling white wine is said to predate Champagne. Do we believe that? Since women weren't allowed to participate in *Fécós* until 1972, maybe not.



©ROB WIGGINS

Worldly Delights: Recipe

Arepas de Huevo Egg-filled corn fritters

MAKES SIX 4-INCH AREPAS

Patricia McCausland-Gallo writes: “*Arepas de huevo* are sold in my hometown, the city of **Barranquilla**, where Carnival is a four-day-long party before Ash Wednesday. They are sold from carts on the streets, fresh out of the fryer, and they help people get through the long days and nights of dancing and enjoying a fiesta that has been named a world cultural heritage event by UNESCO.”

Ingredients:

½ cup precooked white cornmeal (found at most Latin American grocers)
½ teaspoon salt
½ cup hot tap water
6 small fresh eggs
3 to 4 cups vegetable oil for frying

Directions:

Place cornmeal and salt in a bowl and mix with a fork. Add the water and mix with your hands for about a minute, until you have a soft yet firm homogeneous mixture; this is the *arepa* dough. Cover and set aside for 15 minutes.

Remove the dough from the bowl, place on the countertop, knead for 1 minute and roll into a log. Cut into six equal pieces.

Place one dough ball in an open plastic bag and press to flatten to ¼ inch thickness.

Pour the oil into a deep pot over medium heat. When the oil reaches 325° F drop the *arepas* in one at a time. Fry for 1 to 2 minutes on each side. They will puff up on one or both sides. After they have been fried, carefully remove them from the oil with a slotted spoon so they don't crack or rip open. Drain over paper towels on a rack with the inflated side up.

Break each egg into a small cup.

Make a ¾-inch cut on one side of one *arepa* using scissors or a knife, going all the way in to reach the pocket of air formed on one side of the *arepa*. Pour one egg through this hole and into the pocket. Close the opening with a piece of uncooked dough and immediately place in the hot oil again, with the opening on top, and with a spoon hold it in the oil for 2 seconds. Let go of the *arepa* and fry for 1 to 2 minutes depending on how well done you want the yolk. Continue to do the same with the remaining *arepas*.

Drain briefly on paper towels. Serve immediately, very hot.

RECIPE AND PHOTO COURTESY OF PATRICIA McCAUSLAND-GALLO,
AUTHOR OF *SECRETS OF COLOMBIAN COOKING*, HIPPOCRENE BOOKS, INC., ©2004

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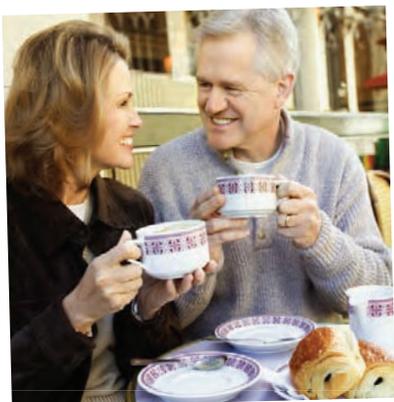


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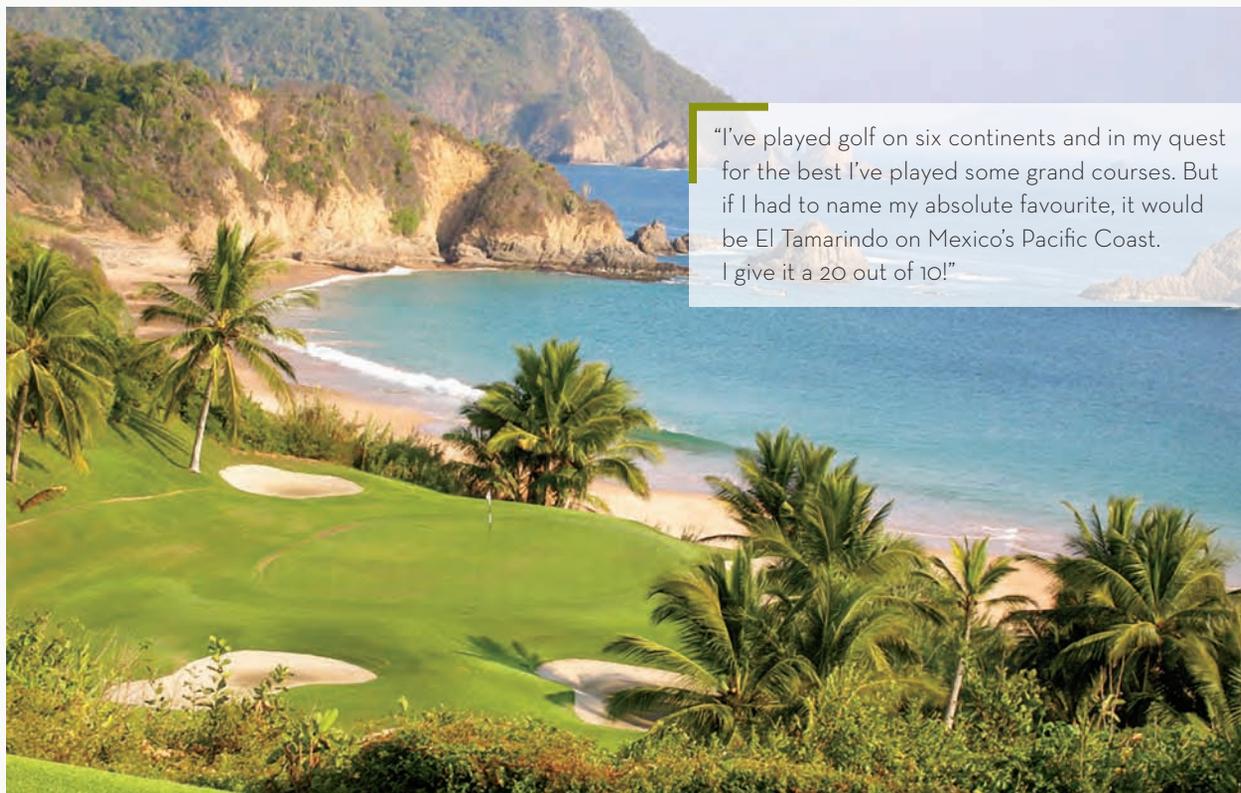
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El Tamarindo Golf Resort

Anita Draycott leads the way off the beaten path to luxury in the wild and 18 virtually private seaside fairways



"I've played golf on six continents and in my quest for the best I've played some grand courses. But if I had to name my absolute favourite, it would be El Tamarindo on Mexico's Pacific Coast. I give it a 20 out of 10!"

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANITA DRAYCOTT

Nestled in a luxurious 2,040-acre resort hideaway, about an hour's drive north of **Manzanillo**, the course may as well have been private. The only people we encountered were maintenance staff tending the already flawless fairways, our caddy, Jorge, and the waiter at the snack bar.

However, wildlife abounds. During our rounds we spotted wild boar strutting across the eighteenth green and coatimundis (diurnal members of the raccoon family) begging for bites of our burgers. We heard tales of a crocodile which lives on the seventeenth fairway. Butterflies and wild parrots with exotic plumage flitted from tree to tree. Most spectacular was the bird's-eye view of whales breaking the turquoise surf in the jagged cove below the ninth hole.

"Numbers six, seven, eight and nine may be the best string of four holes in the world. Before dismissing this as an overstatement, try them," recommends the esteemed *Golf Odyssey* newsletter.

Indeed, six is a stout 472-yard par four from an elevated tee. On the challenging double dogleg seventh you can try to cut off some of the first dogleg. The short eighth is pure magic, owing to its elevated tee, a long carry over a morass of wild bushes to the fairway far below and a bunker-lined green framed by the sparkling **Pacific Ocean**. Number nine, a breathtaking par three, plays from a precipitous perch down to a postage stamp-sized green jutting out over a rousing stretch of untamed, rocky coastline with crashing surf. I've instructed my husband that this is where I want my ashes sprinkled when my time comes.

At the halfway house we were given iced towels scented with lemongrass before devouring burgers and fish tacos and a couple of Coronas.

Unlike the 'conveyor belt' mentality of many North American courses, this is stress-free glamour golf. The management encourages you to have a swim between holes. (The pristine beaches are so deserted that even skinny dipping is

possible.) The staff will also happily cater a picnic on the beach (with washroom and change facilities). Did you par that unforgettable ninth hole? Perhaps you'd like to play it again.

After our round and a memorable massage at the **Spa Hut** on the beach, we followed a candlelit path to the beachside **La Higuera** restaurant. Sitting under a huge wild fig tree, we ordered a couple of margaritas, flavoured by the tart tamarind fruit for which the resort is named and contemplated a few more days of playing Tarzan and Jane in this exotic jungle.

WHEN YOU GO

El Tamarindo Beach & Golf Resort is located approximately 48 kilometres north of Manzanillo International Airport and 209 kilometres south of **Puerto Vallarta**. Once you turn off the highway at the sign, follow the cobblestone road through the jungle for about 20 minutes. Don't give up; there really is paradise at the end of the road. ▣

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Cultural Close-up: New Orleans

Tim Johnson delves into the beating heart of New Orleans and Cajun country, a place where Creole, Cajun and French cultures intersect... with fascinating results



©KRISTA ROSSOW

Louisiana's travails in the past few years are well known – just recovering from Katrina's punch five years ago, the Pelican State was socked with another devastating blow in the form of this year's Gulf oil spill, which blanketed its wetlands with waves of black crude.

But great places don't stay down for long. **New Orleans** and the colourful towns and villages that dot the swamps of Cajun country eagerly welcome visitors to come south this winter to experience some of the best food, festivals and overall joie de vivre on the entire continent. As they say down here: *Laissez les bons temps rouler*.

All That Jazz

New Orleans is a city that simply radiates music. It seems to flow from everywhere – from the bouncing calliopes ringing forth from the steamboats out on the **Mississippi River**, to the lively buskers in **Jackson Square**, to the exciting brass bands that play on **Bourbon Street**. Start your **French Quarter** night at the famed **Preservation Hall** on **St. Peter Street**. While the jazz here is some of the best you'll find anywhere, the Hall doesn't have a bar, so keep the music going and get the drinks flowing at the nearby

Maison Bourbon, long a local favourite for Dixieland and traditional jazz.

Beyond the Quarter

Some visitors to New Orleans never make it past the confines of the French Quarter, and that's a shame, as the city has much more to offer. For example, take the classic **St. Charles Avenue streetcar** out to the **Garden District**, a lovely neighbourhood filled with fountains, parks and leafy streets lined with stunning 19th-century Italianate and Greek revival homes. And make sure to spend some time on the district's main thoroughfare, **Magazine Street**. Whether you're seeking fine art, handcrafted antiques or just a great cup of coffee, this six-mile bohemian stretch is bound to have exactly what you're looking for.

Cajun Culture

The areas to the west of New Orleans – dominated by vast wetlands and sprinkled with fishing villages, sugarcane plantations and towering oak trees dripping with Spanish moss – are the homeland of the Cajun people, direct descendants of the Acadians expelled from Canada's maritime provinces during the Seven Years' War. Visit the **Cajun Music Hall of Fame and Museum** in **Eunice**, head to

Avery Island and its famous Tabasco factory and surrounding exotic gardens, or take a swamp tour – there are many on offer, including the excellent **Atchafalaya Experience**, based in the Cajun 'capital' of **Lafayette**.

Festival Heaven

If anyone knows how to party it's the people of Louisiana, and the state hosts more than 400 festivals each year. In Lafayette, the **Cinema on the Bayou Film Festival** (January 26 to 30) promotes Cajun and Creole culture through film, and the **Festival International de Louisiane** (April 27 to May 1), one of the largest francophone events in the United States, celebrates the cultures of south Louisiana through the musical, visual and culinary arts. In New Orleans, the **French Quarter Festival** (April 8 to 10) will feature more than 150 musical performances across 17 stages, and of course there's the granddaddy of them all – and arguably the biggest party in the world: **Mardi Gras** (Fat Tuesday will be on March 8). Celebrations take place across the state, but the most over-the-top festivities are always on Bourbon Street.

Eat and Sleep

With so many amazing options, dining out in a place like Louisiana can be a little intimidating. In New Orleans, start out with the absolute necessities – coffee and beignets at **Café du Monde**, Bananas Foster at **Brennan's**, Creole bread pudding soufflé at **Commander's Palace**, and crawfish, gumbo and jambalaya... well, pretty much anywhere. And don't miss the fried alligator, oysters and catfish at **Prejean's** in Lafayette.

At the end of the day, lay your head somewhere stylish. **Hotel Monteleone**, a national historic landmark, offers sumptuous luxury accommodations on **Royal Street**, one of the most beautiful streets in the French Quarter. And **The Iberville Suites** offers large two-room accommodations, top amenities and the on-site **Davenport Lounge**, which features resident jazz trumpeter **Jeremy Davenport**. ▣

GRAVITAS QUOTIENT

Multiple award-winning chef Susur Lee is a culinary trail-blazer known for fusing Chinese ingredients and techniques with French flair and precision. A finalist on season two of *Top Chef Masters*, multiple restaurant owner (in Toronto, Washington, D.C., New York City and Singapore), cookbook author and innovator, chef Lee shows no signs of slowing down. Here's a glimpse into the Zen approach preferred by chef Lee via our Gravitas questions.

Give an example of your taste for adventure.

Going somewhere I've never been before and being unfamiliar with the culture. Take, for example, my recent trip to Tunisia. Never having been exposed to North African culture and its cuisine, my first question was "What is Tunisian food?" I had to go there to really begin to understand the surrounding area, the ocean, the geography, the people, their culture and religion. That's my motivation for adventure.

Complete the sentence, "Follow me and I will show you..."

...the world, with the adventure of new tastes and old tastes combined.

How can first impressions be misleading?

Asians believe in the art of *feng shui* and how it affects your environment and the energy around you. I think in some ways this is no different than meeting someone. Not liking someone at first impression is only judging a book by its cover. You have to read it to understand it. Digging deeper helps you become a richer person.

Why is the superficial so appealing to us?

Because it requires no commitment. People don't want to commit to something real and spend the time to make it worthwhile. For some people, the superficial is maintaining a certain lifestyle. A lot of people just want to 'let it be.' It's easier.

What is your standard for a gentleman?

To respect women.

When does the past not rest easily?

Perhaps when one's past has been difficult. But the past is a learning stage in life, no matter how hard, sad or happy. You have to treasure that. You must look at the past to evaluate and appreciate the present. Grace is in being present; that is the key to a happy life.

What is intelligence?

There are so many different kinds but to me, intelligence is experiencing life, being open minded, appreciating other cultures, living healthily and richly. Accepting and understanding others - that's also very intelligent. ▣



PHOTO COURTESY OF FOOD NETWORK CANADA

GRAVITAS THE GAME

Invented by Canadian **Alan Gratias** after hosting a particularly interesting dinner party, Gravitas is a game of discovery - of who we are and how we live. There are no dice or cards, just questions with no right or wrong answers. Although the game calls for reflection, you can make it as lighthearted as you wish. The player with the highest Gravitas Quotient (GQ) wins! Why not test your own GQ? Find out more about the game at www.gravitasthegame.com.



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