AFAR

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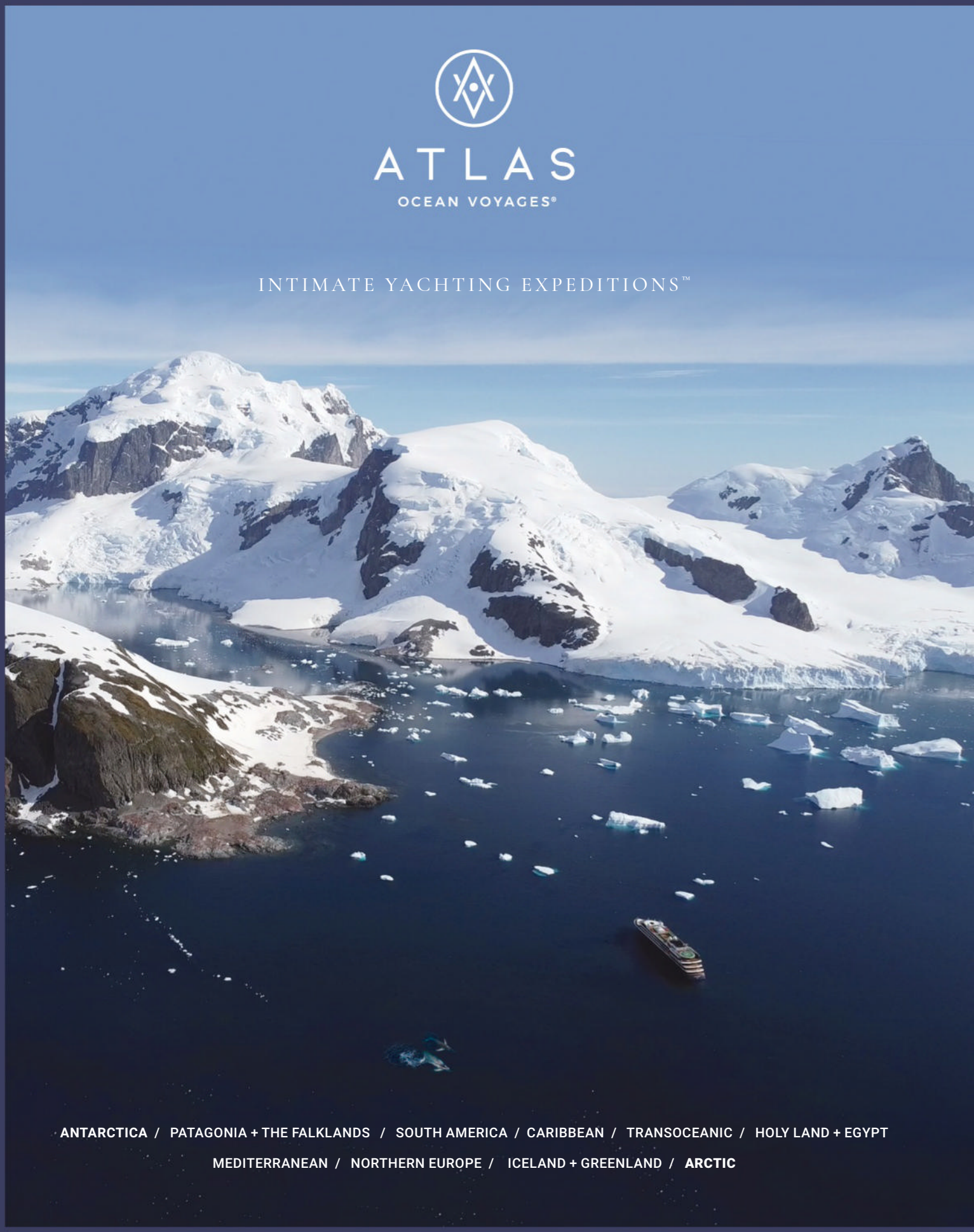
Travel Companies That Put People—and Planet—First
p.25

The EPIC TRIPS issue

TRAVEL THAT CHANGES YOU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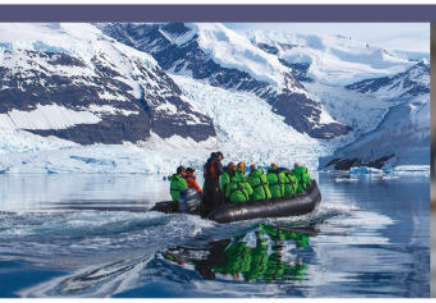

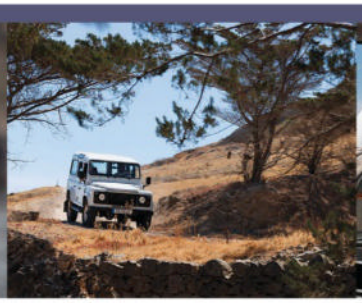
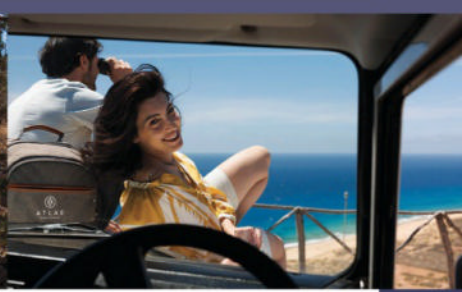

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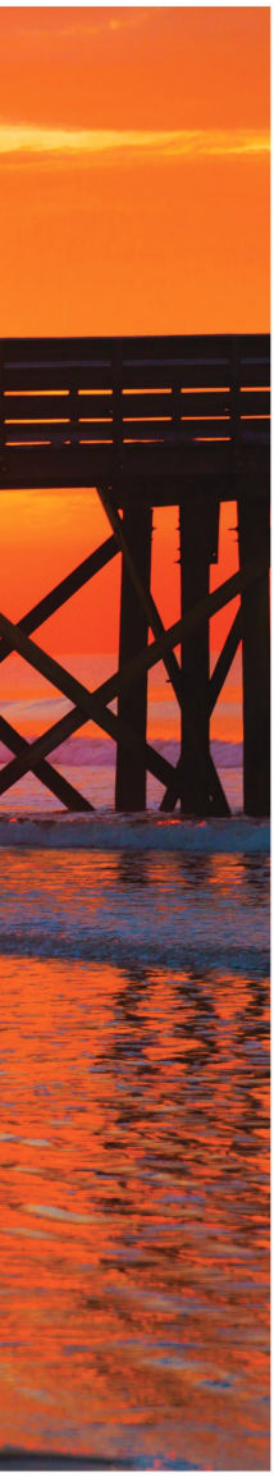

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NATHALIE MOHADJER

THE COSMOPOLITAN™
of LAS VEGAS

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Suspended there between earth and sky, I perceive it all differently than I did when I was standing at the top or even when my feet were planted on the ground earlier in the day.

ILLUSTRATIONS, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: LAUREN TAMAKI; VIRGINIA GABRIELLI
PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY OF FOUR SEASONS RESORT MAUI AT WAILEA; COURTESY OF JONO PANDOLFI DESIGNS; MICHELLE HEIMERMAN

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER

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AMERICA ATLANTA BOGOTA BOSTON BUENOS AIRES CANCUN CARACAS CHICAGO DALLAS HAVANA HOUSTON LOS ANGELES MEXICO CITY MIAMI MONTREAL NEWARK NEW YORK PANAMA SAN FRANCISCO SAO PAULO SEATTLE TORONTO VANCOUVER WASHINGTON **FAR EAST** AKTAU ALMATY BALI BANGKOK BISHKEK BUKHARA CEBU COLOMBO DHAKA DUSHANBE FERGENA GUANGZHOU HANOI HO CHI MINH HONG KONG ISLAMABAD JAKARTA KABUL KARACHI KATHMANDU KUALA LUMPUR LAHORE MALE MANILA MAZAR-I SHARIF MUMBAI NEW DELHI NUR-SULTAN PHUKET SAMARKAND SEOUL SINGAPORE TAIPEI TASHKENT TOKYO TURKISTAN ULAANBAATAR URGENCH **EUROPE** AMSTERDAM ATHENS BAKU BARCELONA BARI BASEL BATUM BELGRADE BERGAMO BERLIN BILBAO BILLUND BIRMINGHAM BOLOGNA BORDEAUX BREMEN BRUSSELS BUCHAREST BUDAPEST CATANIA CLUJ COLOGNE CONSTANTA COPENHAGEN DUBLIN DUBROVNIK DUSSELDORF EDINBURGH FRANKFURT GANJA GENEVA GOTHENBURG HAMBURG HANOVER HELSINKI HERSON / MYKOLAIV KAZAN KHARKIV KISHINEV KYIV LEIPZIG LISBON LJUBLJANA LONDON LUXEMBOURG LVIV LYON MADRID MALAGA MALTA MANCHESTER MARSEILLE MILAN MINSK MOSCOW MUNICH NAKHICHEVAN NAPLES NICE NUREMBERG ODESA OSLO PARIS PODGORICA PORTO PRAGUE PRISTINA RIGA ROME ROSTOV ROVANIEMI SALZBURG SARAJEVO SKOPJE SOCHI SOFIA ST. PETERSBURG STOCKHOLM STRASBOURG STUTTGART TALLINN TBILISI THESSALONIKI TIVAT TOULOUSE VALENCIA VARNA VENICE VIENNA VILNIUS WARSAW YEKATERINBURG ZAGREB ZAPORIJYA ZURICH **MIDDLE EAST** ABU DHABI AMMAN AQABA BAGHDAD BAHRAIN BASRA BEIRUT DAMMAM DOHA DUBAI ERBIL ERCAN ISFAHAN JEDDAH KUWAIT MEDINA MASHHAD MUSCAT NECEF RIYAD SHARJAH SHIRAZ SULAYMANIYAH TABRIZ TEHRAN TEL AVIV URMIA **TÜRKİYE** ADANA ADIYAMAN AGRI AMASYA/MERZIFON ANKARA ANTALYA BATMAN BINGOL BODRUM BURSA CANAKKALE DALAMAN DENIZLI DIYARBAKIR EDREMIT ELAZIG ERZINCAN ERZURUM GAZIANTEP HAKKARI HATAY IGDIR ISPARTA ISTANBUL IZMIR KAHRAMANMARAS KARS KASTAMONU KAYSERI KOCAELI KONYA KUTAHYA MALATYA MARDIN MUS NEVSEHIR ORDU-GIRESUN RIZE-ARTVIN SAMSUN SIIRT SINOP SIVAS SANLIURFA SIRNAK TOKAT TRABZON VAN ZONGULDAK

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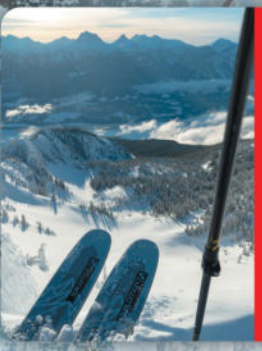
Ever felt like skiing while being towed by a horse? If not, you should still come watch the pros do it at one of Banff's many skijoring events.



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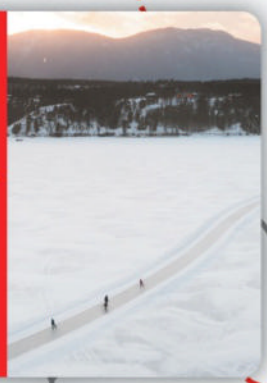

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FOUNDERS Greg Sullivan & Joe Diaz

What's the most epic trip you've taken in the United States?

"My dad and I traveled to his birthplace of Rugby, North Dakota, which claims to be the Geographical Center of North America. We stopped at our family farm and the farm my parents owned when I was born." —K.L.

"In 2000, I drove for 24 hours straight from the Bay Area to attend the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado. The town's mountainous setting, combined with the experience of enjoying movies with film fans from all over the world, was magical." —A.K.

"Led by guides, I hiked down and camped at the bottom of the Grand Canyon near Havasu Falls. I loved it so much and I can't wait to do it again someday." —O.M.

"I bike-packed around Washington's San Juan Islands, which is made easy by an extensive system of ferries that conveys passengers—and their bikes—from one island to the next." —J.B.

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Contributors

EMANUEL HAHN
Photographer

Born in the U.S., photographer Emanuel Hahn spent most of his childhood abroad and grew up in several countries around the world. One constant throughout his life: Koreatowns in American cities have always felt like home. In **From K-Town With Love** (p.80), an excerpt from his new book *Koreatown Dreaming* (Running Press, 2023), Hahn explores his connection to these neighborhoods. "Having a place where you can feel safe and be yourself without performing for other groups of people is very important," he says. See more of his photography on Instagram @hahnbo.

KATHLEEN RELLIHAN
Writer

For **Epic Trips by the Numbers** (p.51), Brooklyn-based writer Kathleen Rellihan hiked Switzerland's Great Aletsch Glacier, the largest, longest, and thickest ice stream in the Alps. The experience was bittersweet for Rellihan: Glaciers are awe-inspiring, but they're also threatened by climate change. "They give me that feeling that you can only otherwise get when you're listening to classical music or opera: goosebumps," she says. Rellihan's work has appeared in *National Geographic*, *Time*, and *Outside*. Follow her on Instagram @k_rellihan.

SARAH THANKAM MATHEWS
Writer

In **The Otherworldly, Overwhelming, Oftentimes Unbelievable Natural Wonders of Oman** (p.88), Sarah Thankam Mathews, author of the novel *All This Could Be Different* (Viking, 2022), recounts her trip to her childhood home of Oman. There, she dipped her toes back into Omani culture through adventurous, nature-focused excursions including mountain climbing and hiking. "This year is roughly the halfway mark of my life since leaving Oman," Mathews says. "I think the younger version of myself would be very impressed with [what I did]." Mathews' novel was shortlisted for the 2022 National Book Award and the 2022 Discover Prize. Keep up with her on Instagram @smathewss.

EVE STEBEN & SEAN FREEMAN
Illustrators

Illustrators Eve Steben and Sean Freeman are partners in both art and life—they opened a studio together in 2011. They're drawn to using seemingly mundane objects and text in unexpected ways, a theme they've brought to this issue's **Features Opener** (p.67). Inspired by the idea of epic travels and the deep sea, Steben and Freeman made a colorful 3D collage of marine animals, corals, and sea anemones. "[We wanted] to create some sort of playful underwater sculptural fantasy," Steben says. "It's a colorful, dimensional, and organic patchwork of tactile elements." Freeman and Steben have produced work for Microsoft, Nike, and Penguin Books, among other clients. Find the pair on Instagram @there.is.studio.

JULIA NIMKE
Photographer

In her work, Berlin-based photographer Julia Nimke likes to focus on the quiet, calming power of nature and the joy of being outdoors. For **Where the Quiet Things Are** (p.68), Nimke traveled to Slovenia and captured the countryside's idyllic ambiance, by photographing things like farm animals, misty bridges, and fresh peaches. While there, she also got a taste of local hospitality. "Slovenia is an interesting mix of eastern and western Europe," Nimke says. "A big part of Slovenian identity involves being open and generous with guests." Her photographs have appeared in *Condé Nast Traveller*, *Vice*, and *Cosmopolitan Germany*. See more of Nimke's work on Instagram @julianimkephotography.

LYNN BROWN
Writer

Harlem-based journalist Lynn Brown describes her experience on the U.S. Civil Rights Trail in **Epic Trips by the Numbers** (p.51). During her journey, she visited the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, which represents the 805 counties where documented lynchings of Black Americans took place. "I've never had a monument affect me that way—it was upsetting and moving," she says. "But there were so many places that gave me a strong sense of hope in the South, too." Brown also writes for *Fodor's*, *Ebony*, and *Thrillist*. Follow her travels on Instagram @lrdbrown79.

WHEN IT COMES TO

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As an ecotourism destination, we are hard at work in Belize to preserve the nature and wildlife that has put us atop many a bucket list. In fact, thanks to all our visitors, programs to protect our living reef, our ban on plastics, and our commitment to building sustainable accommodations, we are stronger than ever. So kick off your sandals and come experience the beauty of Belize. Learn more at TravelBelize.org.

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At the Intersection of Climate and Travel

HARRY MITCHELL

By the year 2034, all of London's buses will be zero emission.

AS I EXITED HEATHROW this past summer, I was greeted by a life-size elephant. More specifically, a giant billboard that advertised how one of the world's largest airports was switching to 100 percent renewable energy and sustainable fuels—or, in its words, "tackling the elephant in the airport."

When I looked for an Uber, the app offered the option to take an electric vehicle. As we drove into London, road signs stated that we were entering a designated Ultra Low Emission Zone. And at the Waitrose supermarket in Victoria, I spied a carbon-neutral IPA beer.

As little as five years ago, it felt to me that sustainability was still on the fringes. Some individuals and organizations considered their carbon footprint, but the average traveler to London wouldn't think too hard about making a "green" choice. Now, industries across the globe, including travel and tourism, have been forced to consider climate in their daily operations. An increasing number of tour operators, destinations, and airlines are doing more for the environment—and making sure consumers know about it.

That's why I'm so thrilled to present the 2023 AFAR Travel Vanguard (page 25). Every year, we honor the top organizations that put people and planet first. This time, our team reviewed 200 pages of applications and selected seven companies making a significant difference with regard to sustainability, diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility. We hope the 2023 Vanguard honorees can serve as inspiration for other organizations around the world.

Elsewhere in this issue, we venture out on epic, life-altering trips. Contributing writer Peggy Orenstein walks through the dramatic peaks and fairy-tale villages of Slovenia (page 68). Novelist Sarah Thankam Mathews returns to Oman for the first time as an adult and experiences the country on her own terms—including navigating its narrow mountain passes and snorkeling in its turquoise waters (page 88). We accompany other writers as they rappel down rocks in Utah, trek across Swiss glaciers, and travel through the southern United States along the Civil Rights Trail (page 51).

I would love to know what you think of this issue. Please reach out to me on Instagram @sarika008.

Travel well,

SARIKA BANSAL

Editorial Director

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Enjoy the Tranquility of Asheville's Spectacular Fall Foliage—If You Know Where to Look

Explore these lesser-known spots for stunning seasonal landscapes and more in this western North Carolina city.

by Jenn Rice

The majestic **Blue Ridge Mountains** that surround Asheville, just like its art deco buildings downtown and thriving food scene, are an essential part of the city's rich history. It's this heady mix that's continued to draw me back to the area for more than three decades as a native of North Carolina. While the destination is among the top in the Southeast, especially during my favorite time of year when leaves start to change, plenty of off-the-beaten-path outdoor gems mean you can enjoy fewer crowds and reduce your impact to help preserve this gorgeous natural landscape.

With another year of extraordinary autumn color predicted in Asheville, the **Graveyard Fields Loop Trail** off the **Blue Ridge Parkway** is a local favorite for trees in striking hues and waterfalls. My first time on **Trombatore Trail**—an under-the-radar woodland hike that leads to **Blue Ridge Pastures'** grassy summit in the **Hickory Nut Gorge**—it seemed as if I'd stepped into a painting. Residents also recommend **The North Carolina Arboretum** for its pristine trails, plus the upper gardens and secret paths behind the Education Center, in leaf-peeping season. And the **French Broad River** is ideal for early fall fly-fishing for smallmouth bass.

I also love to stroll along the **French Broad River Greenway** with the **French Broad Chocolate Factory & Cafe's** drinking chocolate warming my hands. Soak up the autumnal vibes alfresco—by a firepit with a glass of natural wine and the best tartare in town—at **Leo's House of Thirst**. Or feast on pizza with seasonal ingredients at **All Souls Pizza's** outdoor tables for a true sense of place.

Always Asheville

This fall also brings Explore Asheville and AFAR together for a series of stories told by the people who know the city best. Local writers and photographers will celebrate what makes the destination so special—why it's **Always Asheville**—in content designed for savvy travelers like you.

Starting this November, see the Asheville stories at afar.com/AlwaysAsheville.

by **LATRIA GRAHAM**
Illustrations by **YUKAI DU**

Pin Drop

Announcing a location on social media can be harmful to flora, fauna, and fellow travelers. Is there a responsible way to spotlight our whereabouts in nature?

I JOINED INSTAGRAM in 2012. I was slow to adopt the app's geotag feature, which can embed the physical coordinates of a photo as part of the post's data. In 2017, Instagram made it easier for users to share and search for location-based content; by 2018—when it seemed like everyone was announcing online where they were all the time—I was tagging nearly every place I visited. But in 2020, an incident on Max Patch mountain in North Carolina made me rethink the way I call attention to the natural world.

A relatively short drive from my home in South Carolina, Max Patch is a popular outdoor destination on the Appalachian Trail, because the 1.5-mile-long segment has minimal elevation gain, and the hike to the summit usually takes fewer than 30 minutes. Famous for 360-degree views of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina (when the weather cooperates), the landscape is a dramatic backdrop. In the thick of COVID-19 lockdowns, hundreds of people made their way there, lured by the relatively easy hike, stunning scenery, opportunity to camp, and desire for fresh air.

But before I could visit Max Patch mountain that summer, it was trampled, a victim of social media success. People brought up rolling coolers and tents and left them behind as trash. With no restrooms on this section of the trail, the area was replete with human waste. There were fire rings where there weren't supposed to be, raising the threat of flames when the region was on the cusp of drought. Formerly serene spots that would typically see day-trippers and a couple of thru-hikers daily now had hundreds of visitors or campers. As a result, to aid restoration efforts and allow the ecosystem to recover, Max Patch banned overnight camping.

Jackson Hole, Wyoming, had been grappling with a similar issue, so much so that the tourism board created the "Tag Responsibly, Keep Jackson Hole Wild" campaign, asking visitors to tag a general area, such as the state or national park, instead of trails or specific, hard-to-reach vantage points. Delta Lake, a remote destination in Grand Teton National Park, went from seeing one or two hikers daily to drawing an estimated 145 people a day. Many were unprepared for the strenuous nine-mile trek. Some required assistance from rangers. The increased foot traffic also caused land erosion, and today, signs around the area ask visitors to "tag thoughtfully," so that the landscape's beauty remains for the future.

Travelers use tagged location searches on social media for myriad reasons: to gain inspiration, satiate wanderlust, make a list of places to hike on the next family vacation. And there are upsides to geotagging. More people of color are confident venturing into spaces they might have previously been hesitant to explore, and towns near these destinations get an economic boost from the travelers who pass through. Users get a boost, too—content with a geotag has up to 79 percent more engagement than a post without one, according to software company Sprout Social. But reading of the destruction of Max Patch cemented my resolve to rarely use geotags. Today, I don't identify specific locales in national forests and federally managed wilderness areas—which typically don't have bathrooms or well-maintained trails—and I don't tag specific off-the-beaten-path spots. When I do choose to identify a place, I add a "generic tag," which usually has the name of a nearby town, or of a national or state park.

Sometimes, I choose not to share with my social media audience at all—not every wonder is meant to be broadcast to the wider world.

Before I add a location, I ask myself three questions inspired by Responsible Stewardship, an environmental nonprofit based in East Tennessee:

Can the area's current infrastructure support an additional influx of visitors?

Are adequate roads, parking, and restrooms available?

Is this a fragile ecosystem where accelerated human interaction/visitation could have a detrimental environmental impact?

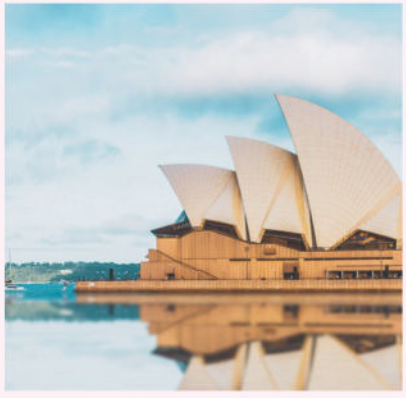
Sometimes, I choose not to share with my social media audience at all—not every wonder is meant to be broadcast to the wider world. Instead, I'll send a photo or short video to a friend with a note to let them know I'm thinking of them, an exchange that often leads to conversation about where I am, what it's like, and how I feel. Those small interactions, while not public, still strengthen our connection—to nature and, perhaps more importantly, to each other.

PACIFIC PANACHE

Let us be your guide to these four fantastic destinations in Indonesia and Australia, each home to a different Langham hotel. Discover the stunning architecture and design of Langham properties, along with renowned restaurants, exemplary service tailored to you, and easy access to awe-inspiring sights, thanks to central locations in vibrant neighborhoods.

Jakarta, Indonesia

Behold **The Langham, Jakarta**, with a crystal butterfly installation suspended from the ceiling to welcome you, as well as a 62nd-floor art deco lobby. Five diverse dining concepts, including Japanese at **Morimoto** and European classics at **Tom's by Tom Aikens**, embody the cultural fusion of the surrounding **Sudirman Central Business District**.

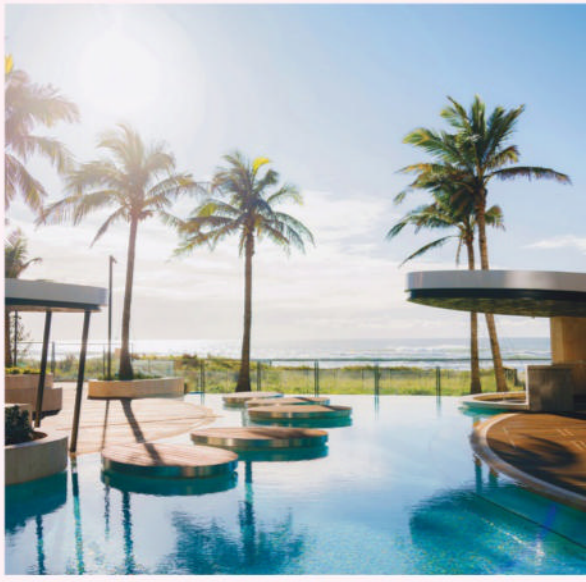


Sydney, Australia

Retreat to **The Langham, Sydney** in the city's historic heart, **The Rocks**, where the indoor pool's star-dappled ceiling re-creates the Southern Hemisphere's night sky. Make the most of the hotel's location opposite **Observatory Hill**—gaze at the **Sydney Opera House** and shop at the **Queen Victoria Building** and **Pitt Street Mall**.

Gold Coast, Australia

Rise to ocean or skyline vistas from the beachfront landmark towers of **The Langham, Gold Coast** in **Surfers Paradise**. And see the Pacific Ocean while lounging poolside, hitting the gym, sipping a flat white at **26 & Sunny**, or enjoying seafood at **Akoya**. Then, explore theme parks and the **Pacific Fair Shopping Centre** nearby.



Melbourne, Australia

Delight in **Yarra River** and **Flinders Street Station** views from **The Langham, Melbourne**. Book a Club Room for exclusive **Langham Club** access, and savor the celebrated **Langham afternoon tea** and **Melba's** buffet. Take advantage of the prime **Southbank Promenade** location and peruse **The National Gallery of Victoria's** art collection.

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AFAR ANSWERS

Primers for Travelers Who Care

by **TIM CHESTER** | Illustration by **VIRGINIA GABRIELLI**

How to Decode Travel's Climate Certifications

Carbon neutral. Carbon offsets. Carbon onsets. As a sign of the tourism industry's progress, these terms are now everywhere when you're booking travel. More and more tour companies, hotels, and airlines are striving for meaningful change when it comes to the climate crisis. But how can travelers navigate their way through the badges and buzzwords, without getting caught up in greenwashing? Here are some pointers.

Clear up those carbon terms

The phrase *carbon neutral* means there's no net addition of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. It involves "paying a third party to remove the greenhouse gas emissions you are responsible for so that your emissions balance is neutral," says Patty Martin, a climate scientist working with the **Travel Foundation**, a U.K.-based sustainable tourism organization. "Through this approach, you never actually have to reduce your emissions, relying on others to offset your impact. Net zero is achieved when you no longer emit greenhouse gas emissions through your activities or behaviors, and only offset emissions that are not humanly possible to reduce."

The **Travel Corporation**, for example, which owns and operates 40 brands including **Contiki** and **Uniworld Boutique River Cruises**, aims to be net zero by 2050. To achieve that, it's looking at ways to reduce both its own emissions and those of its suppliers—such as alternative propulsion systems on its river cruise ships or different transport options on itineraries. Hilton's **Hotel Marcel** in New Haven, Connecticut, meanwhile, anticipates being certified as the first net-zero hotel in the U.S. by 2025. One thousand solar panels are lending a hand.

Seek out vetted certifications

Sustainability certifications have proliferated, and some are more rigorous than others. How do you distinguish between them? The answer is brought to you by the letters GSTC. That's the **Global Sustainable Tourism Council**, an independent nonprofit whose members include governments, travel companies, tour operators, and NGOs. It doesn't approve individual companies; rather, it vets the certifiers.

If your chosen hotel displays an **Ecostars** logo, for example, then it's been certified by a body whose standards were recognized by the GSTC. The council accredits eight bodies across destinations, tour operators, and hotels, and it has a map of places that "have traveled a long way down the path of sustainability," such as Thredbo mountain resort in Australia, which has been certified by **EarthCheck**.

Another globally recognized program is the **World Travel & Tourism Council**'s Hotel Sustainability Basics. Hotels can adopt 12 criteria as a first step in their sustainability journeys.

Look into B Corp companies

The detailed **B Corp** certification process scrutinizes a company's entire social and environmental impact. Tour operator (and 2022 AFAR Travel Vanguard honoree) **Intrepid Travel** achieved B Corp status in 2018 after three years of preparation by more than 30 global offices.

The company focused on several aspects of the business during the process, addressing everything from modern slavery in its supply chain to emissions reductions and fair, livable wages.

Certification "provides us with a road map to consistently strive to improve our impact," Intrepid cofounder and director Geoff Manchester says. It also "showcases to others what is possible," says Duncan Grossart, founder of another B Corp tour operator, **Journeys With Purpose**.

Don't automatically skip places that aren't accredited

Many worthy businesses might not be shouting about their net-zero goals or applying for accreditation, perhaps due to lack of funds, interest, or even knowledge of the process. That's where we travelers come in.

You may discover a hotel or tour operator that isn't certified but that "you very much appreciate and find to act responsibly," says Roi Ariel, general manager of the GSTC. "Here's your chance to influence! Ask them if they use a sustainable tourism standard. Ask them if they seek certification." He says that hearing directly from a customer can be a powerful motivator. A

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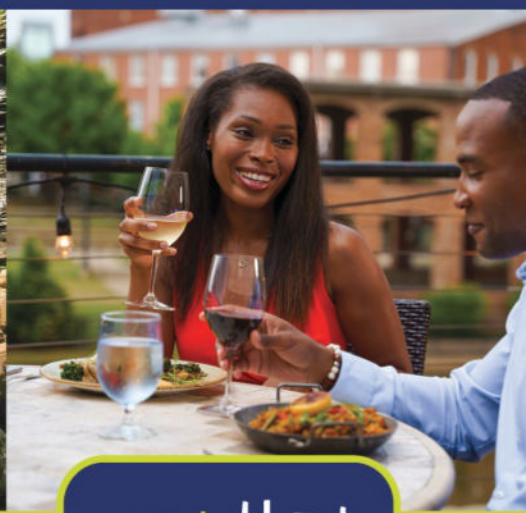

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THE 2023 TRAVEL VANGUARD

AFAR HONORS SEVEN TRAVEL ORGANIZATIONS THAT PUT PEOPLE—AND PLANET—FIRST.

Launched in 2016, the AFAR Travel Vanguard celebrates organizations that are making travel a force for good.

Out of nearly 130 nominees this year, we selected seven honorees, including a nonprofit working to bring back an ancient wilderness, a luxury cruise line pioneering new green technologies, and a hotel brand that prioritizes art and artists. Read on to learn more about these changemakers.

From left: A Ngäbe woman teaches a visitor to stitch a *chácara* bag; travelers take a canoe along Panama's Chagres River to visit the Emberá community.

PANAMA TOURISM

FOR EMPOWERING LOCAL COMMUNITIES THROUGH TOURISM

PANAMA IS HELPING travelers experience the country beyond its stunning beaches, popular surf spots, and eponymous canal. Included in the nation's Sustainable Tourism Master Plan 2020–2025 are projects to reduce carbon emissions, protect marine environments, and educate travelers about their impact. But it is Panama's work with its Indigenous communities that is perhaps the most groundbreaking.

In 2022, a consortium of government agencies and nonprofits launched SOSTUR (a portmanteau of *turismo sostenible*, Spanish for "sustainable tourism"), a network that connects travelers directly with pilot projects in 10 communities across the country. "Before SOSTUR, these communities didn't have access to the tourism market, so this allows them to develop their own tourism strategy that works for them," says Fernando Fondevila, the CEO of PROMTUR, an organization that promotes tourism in Panama.

Through SOSTUR, a traveler can, for example, book a tour to Bonllik, a dense jungle landscape located along the border with Costa Rica. There, the Naso people, in what is considered to be the last Indigenous monarchy of the Americas, have designed a tourism experience that introduces visitors to their culture on their own terms. Guests can participate in the harvesting of cacao and bananas while learning how their hosts have maintained their heritage despite centuries of colonial violence.

SOSTUR experiences begin with community buy-in. For a trip to be listed on the platform, local hosts first need to agree to terms and be involved in designing the activity. "From the transportation, to the moment that a visitor arrives, to the accommodations in which they are staying, to the guides bringing them on the journey, to the groups cooking and teaching visitors about their community," says Annie Young, president of SOSTUR, "everyone is involved in the process."

COURTESY OF VISIT PANAMA

andBEYOND

FOR TRANSLATING ITS CONSERVATION-MINDED MISSION TO NEW CORNERS OF THE WORLD

SINCE 1991, the tour and lodging company andBeyond has championed a model of tourism that places the traveler at the center of an interconnected system, one that links the land, local communities, and wildlife. The company has grown gradually—from one safari property in South Africa to 25 lodges across six African countries—and expanded its conservation reach every time. Today, its properties preserve more than a million acres of wilderness.

In recent years, andBeyond has started looking farther afield. After opening Vira Vira, a lodge in Chile's Lake District, in 2018, the company turned its attention to Asia. Its Punakha River Lodge, a small collection of suites and luxury tents, debuted in September 2023 on the banks of the Mo Chhu River. Bhutan—where the government has long been a global leader in conservation through a model of high-value, low-volume tourism—might seem like an odd choice for a company that usually operates in countries where wild spaces are under greater threat. But Nicole Robinson, andBeyond's chief marketing officer, explains that the goal here was for guests to experience Bhutan's commitment firsthand.

"What we really want is that [our guests'] travel also makes them rethink their place in the world and how they live when they get home," Robinson says. "There's so much to learn from seeing what the Bhutanese value and how that plays out across the country."

It wouldn't be an andBeyond project without some element of supporting the host community. Around 80 percent of the staff come from the nearby areas, and Robinson says that most are new to the hospitality industry. Introducing new employment opportunities—especially in an industry that offers room for growth—can have ripple effects beyond the lodge. In addition, the company limits the environmental footprint of Punakha and employs local architectural styles that blend seamlessly with the surroundings.

"We want to leave our world a better place, which obviously includes the land and wildlife," Robinson says. "But it also means our guests and our staff—we must be leaving them in a better place, too."

The area around the Punakha River Lodge includes rice terraces, chili fields, and views of the Himalayas.

MATT DUTILE

Cuples Tea House, owned by Eric and Lynnette Dodson (pictured), participates in Baltimore's Warm Welcome program.

VISIT BALTIMORE

FOR GIVING THE KEY TO THE CITY . . . TO EVERYONE

AFTER A PANDEMIC and a racial reckoning, as travel tiptoed back toward normalcy, the city of Baltimore saw an opportunity. Not everyone felt they could just pretend the last few years hadn't happened. "When it comes to travel in the United States, the reality is that there are destinations where many individuals still feel unwelcome or even unsafe while visiting," says Al Hutchinson, president and CEO of Visit Baltimore, the city's official tourism board.

So in 2021, Visit Baltimore unveiled the Warm Welcome program, which seeks to tell all visitors, regardless of who they are, that the city is a place for them. To date, more than 80 hotels, restaurants, museums, and other tourism establishments have signed up to participate in the program. It requires that they make a pledge to follow a set of inclusive principles, such as speaking up when witnessing an act of discrimination. But it isn't enough to make a promise. To be part of the program, businesses must also offer mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion training courses, designed by subject-matter experts from across Baltimore.

Once they're approved, businesses can advertise through storefront stickers that they are a program member, giving travelers of color, the LGBTQ community, and others renewed confidence to explore the city.

"More and more, research showed that travelers would seek destinations where they felt seen, heard, welcomed, and respected," says Tracey Johnson, Visit Baltimore's PR and communications manager. To that end, Visit Baltimore compiled a Black-owned business directory and released the BoP Pass, named as a double entendre for "bridging our people" and "bop," Baltimore slang for a long walk. The pass offers discounts at Black-owned shops and restaurants and Black history attractions. It's a resource of great value to both visitors and local residents of Baltimore, a majority Black city.

"While these are individual initiatives, I think they truly go hand in hand to contribute to the bigger picture of what it means to be intentional about areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion," Hutchinson says.

SCOTT SUCHMAN

21C MUSEUM HOTELS

FOR USING ART TO SPARK CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES

THE FIRST 21C MUSEUM HOTEL opened in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2006, when Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson were looking for a home for their extensive art collection and a way to give back to their hometown. What started out as a single hotel-museum hybrid crystallized into a mission that extends beyond the scope of most hospitality brands: to simultaneously revitalize historic buildings, celebrate unsung cities, empower artists, and inspire social change.

Today, 21c operates eight hotels, which are themselves works of art. Durham, North Carolina's outpost is in the Hill Building, an art deco standout from the 1930s. The company's latest addition in St. Louis, Missouri, is housed in a 95-year-old, 10-story, Renaissance Revival–style YMCA. All of the hotels devote a significant portion of their communal spaces to art exhibitions and community events.

Art shows are open to the public and touch on themes that resonate with locals and visitors alike. For instance, 21c curated a show of Indigenous artists in Cincinnati, and one in Chicago that explored pay inequity. The brand also partners with Artadia, a nonprofit that supports artists through unrestricted financial awards. By offering grants in cities where the company has hotels, 21c hopes to elevate and draw attention to artists outside the usual art-world locations.

"It gives great exposure and opportunities to these artists and gets the word out that there is a vibrant visual culture happening in all of these cities," says Alice Gray Stites, 21c Museum Hotels' chief curator and museum director. "It reinforces the idea that we are a multivenue museum, because the award will happen in each city and there will be more opportunities for cross-pollination between these artists."

The 21c Museum Hotel in Lexington, Kentucky, includes works by Chinese and South African artists.

COURTESY OF 21C MUSEUM HOTELS

SINGAPORE TOURISM BOARD

FOR MAKING AN ENTIRE CITY SEE GREEN

Gardens by the Bay is the first destination in Singapore to join EarthCheck, which facilitates sustainable practices.

IN 2023, Singapore became the first country certified as a sustainable destination by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), which has developed a set of strict environmental, economic, and cultural criteria. (It was also the first country to apply.) The Southeast Asian island nation has, in recent years, made a massive push to transform its urban landscape into a "city in nature," where lush parks and gardens cover the spaces between skyscrapers—or even along buildings' facades. You'll find hotel roofs blanketed in solar panels, restaurants making efforts to reduce their waste, and green corridors that connect parks.

"As a small city-state, our resources are limited," says Rachel Loh, a senior vice president of the Singapore Tourism Board. "Over time, we have found innovative ways to function as a society through efforts such as vertical farming, which is growing crops in stacked layers to maximize food production without needing a lot of farmland."

The GSTC certification is a testament to the success of Singapore's own Green Plan, launched in February 2021 with the bold goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. The Singapore Tourism Board has played a vital role in bringing that mission into the travel sector by introducing sustainability-focused training programs for tourism professionals; aligning hotels, airlines, and conference organizers behind concrete emissions targets; and spearheading the campaign for GSTC certification.

Along with the overarching efforts of the Singaporean government and the Singapore Tourism Board, individual hospitality businesses are also doing their part. The ParkRoyal Collection Pickering, for example, has taken on a "hotel-in-a-garden" concept, with dense greenery along its balconies and 262 solar panels. The Pan Pacific Orchard, opened in June 2023, is the city's first zero-waste hotel.

While travelers will benefit from cleaner air and more green space, Loh says it's important to keep in mind the benefits for Singaporeans. "Sustainable tourism also considers the well-being of local communities and their cultural heritage," she notes. "It promotes respectful engagement with local traditions, supports local economies, and creates opportunities for community development."

AMRITA CHANDRADAS

Travel Tales

by AFAR

Our award-winning podcast is back with an all-new season.

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TREES FOR LIFE

FOR BRINGING BACK THE WORLD'S WILD PLACES

THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO, the Scottish Highlands were blanketed by Caledonian forest, with endemic wolves, red squirrels, and beavers thriving under its canopy. Today, due to the effects of climate change, habitat destruction, and the introduction of non-native plant species, just 2 percent of that forest remains. Trees for Life is a rewilding charity established in 1993 with the mission to restore the ancient forests, part of a global rewilding movement that seeks to bring back local ecosystems that have all but vanished. The organization has planted almost 2 million native trees and reintroduced red squirrels, among other accomplishments.

In April 2023, the group opened the Dundreggan Rewilding Centre just south of Inverness on 10,000 acres of woodland that were once royal hunting grounds. Guests can wander a network of trails through hundreds of thousands of replanted pines and willows; take a guided walk to learn how the return of native flora can help bring back populations of golden eagle, beaver, and lynx; or attend a lecture about the insects in the region.

The organization's CEO, Steve Micklewright, says the Dundreggan Rewilding Centre allows for a more tangible link between tourism and the natural world. "We've built a building which is mainly about getting people outside," Micklewright says, adding that they also offer lodging options to those interested in multiday volunteer opportunites such as tree planting or wildlife surveying. "People travel for an experience and to expand their mind. You can have a holiday where you can give something back to nature."

Trees can take hundreds of years to grow, so rewilding requires patience. The center is an embodiment of what people can achieve in the short term, too. "We need to think of this work as a kind of partnership with nature rather than feeling that we are stewards or custodians of the natural world," Micklewright says. "If we disappeared tomorrow, everything would be fine. The reason we have to restore nature really is for us, for human existence."

The Dundreggan Rewilding Centre connects visitors to nature through a range of hands-on experiences.

TOP: COURTESY OF TREES FOR LIFE; BOTTOM: PAUL CAMPBELL

From left: The Ponant ship *Le Commandant Charcot* features a sunroom in the spa with floor-to-ceiling windows; Ponant offers 52 cruises in the Arctic Circle, including to the North Pole.

PONANT CRUISES

FOR PAIRING DEEP EXPLORATION WITH SUSTAINABILITY

IN 2022, *Le Commandant Charcot*, the latest ship from the French company Ponant, proved its adventure bona fides by becoming the first luxury passenger ship to bring guests to the geographic North Pole. That it did so while safeguarding the fragile environment made the sailing a game changer for expedition cruising.

With its 123 plush cabins, fine dining options, and spa, the *Charcot* has all the trappings of a high-end ship. Under the hood is even more impressive: It is the world's first luxury icebreaker of its class to run on a combination of electric battery power, liquefied natural gas, and low-sulfur gas oil. In all, that translates to 25 percent lower carbon emissions, and up to a 95 percent reduction in the fine-particle emissions that come from more conventional fuel sources.

The ship's development was part of Ponant's investment of more than $1 billion in green technologies, such as hybrid batteries and low-emission fuel. The company's CEO for the Americas, Navin Sawhney, says that part of Ponant's commitment to a green future for expedition cruises is its direct support of scientific research. The *Charcot* can journey to areas that are cost-prohibitive to many scientific teams that otherwise wouldn't have transport that meets the technical requirements for traveling in extreme conditions. By hitching a ride on tourism ships, scientists can reduce the monumental costs of visiting the polar regions. Passengers, meanwhile, get to learn about the latest in ecological, geological, and climate-based research firsthand from those scientists.

In 2022, the *Charcot* hosted 29 scientific expeditions, with researchers working out of its two onboard laboratories. "This ship exemplifies our commitment to discovering and learning more about the oceans, but we're also actively working to preserve the environment through that new knowledge," Sawhney says. A

LEFT: PONANT/GILLES TRILLARD; RIGHT: PONANT/OPHÉLIE BLEUNVEN


AMELIA ISLAND
FLORIDA
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The Natural Treasures of Amelia Island Await

From serene stretches of shoreline to preserves brimming with wildlife, there are endless ways to enjoy time outdoors in this blissful corner of Florida.

Walk or bike the many miles of nature trails weaving through **Fort Clinch State Park** and the **Egans Creek Greenway**, marveling at more than 300 species of subtropical birds, enormous live oak trees, and a bounty of other flora and fauna that call the island home. Or picture yourself on horseback at sunrise, admiring the pristine sand as you ride past crashing waves—and stop for some postcard-worthy pics along the way.

Prefer to savor the setting from the water? Head to the riverside, rent hydro bikes, and float among the marshes, keeping an eye out for turtles, gators, and the occasional manatee. Let **Amelia River Cruises** take you along the coast, where the local captains will regale you with tales of the island's history and teach you about the animals who live here and their surrounding ecosystem. And since you're visiting the birthplace of the country's modern shrimping industry, you can't miss a catch-and-release shrimping tour.

Top it all off at **Main Beach Park**. Take a dip in the surf and bask in the sun before you tuck into dinner on the sand at **Sandbar** and debate what's better, the fresh seafood or the unobstructed ocean views.

"Picture yourself on horseback at sunrise, admiring the pristine sand as you ride past crashing waves."

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Tourism Cares

Pictured: Afro Tour in Comuna 13 in Medellín, Colombia immerses visitors in three different neighborhoods, learning the history of the community directly from impressive artists who through art and tourism, have helped to transform Colombia's most feared district.

1 Hotel Hanalei Bay, Kaua'i

Mauna Lani, Hawai'i

STAY

Ripple Effect

All across Hawai'i, hotels are helping travelers dive deeper into the islands' ocean traditions and adventures. Learning to surf is just the beginning.

by Jennifer Flowers

Turtle Bay Resort, O'ahu

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: AVABLU; COURTESY OF TURTLE BAY RESORT; NICOLE FRANZEN

Turtle Bay Resort, O'ahu

MINUTES BEFORE I caught the first wave of my life, I bobbed on my board next to award-winning pro surfer Jamie O'Brien, my instructor at Turtle Bay Resort on O'ahu's North Shore. When he identified the swell he wanted me to catch, he gave me a push. I stood up, legs and arms wobbling, and in disbelief, rode the shoulder of a small wave for what felt like five minutes (but what must have been less than 10 seconds). Time stood still as I sensed the dense salt water beneath me, relishing the otherworldly feeling of gliding—flying, almost—toward shore.

Turtle Bay is the only luxury resort in O'ahu's less developed northern reaches, an area that's home to the world-famous Banzai Pipeline surf break. The property sits on five miles of coastline, and a major 2021 renovation brought the ocean and surf culture into the spotlight. Views of the water are everywhere: from all 450 rooms and bungalows, from the lobby's floor-to-ceiling windows, and from the redesigned pool area. Inside, a marine-inspired color palette and local artworks further the connection.

It makes sense that O'Brien chose Turtle Bay Resort to launch his first surf school in 2021. He was born and raised on the North Shore, and his father worked at the resort, which has been open since 1972. O'Brien even took his first surf lesson in the hotel's pool. When he became one of the youngest winners of the North Shore's annual Pipeline Masters competition, at age 21 in 2004, it jump-started a career that would take him all over the world. These days, though, he tries not to be away from home for too long.

"I feel like every time I land back in Hawai'i, we're energized," he said, referring to his partner and fellow surfer, Tina Cohen, who'd joined us on the waves. "We're so excited to be home."

Hawai'i is special to me too. My Japanese American family goes back four generations here, and I grew up visiting the tidal pools of O'ahu's North Shore. When the wildfire broke out in western Maui in August, I was heartbroken. My trip to the nearby island of O'ahu took place just a few months before, and seeing the devastation and the recovery effort only solidified my resolve to share why I've always found Hawai'i so inspiring.

There's a unique confluence of nature and culture here—and surfers, in particular, have a special bond with it. Polynesians brought surfing to the Hawaiian Islands as early as 400 C.E., when they arrived here in double-hulled canoes.

I'm not the only one feeling in awe of the ocean these days. In recent years, Hawai'i has taken major steps to protect its waters. The state has banned coral-harming sunscreens and capped tourist numbers at popular sites like Hanauma Bay. At Turtle Bay Resort, more than half of its 1,300 acres are set aside for conservation, which also protects crucial habitats for marine life, such as Laysan albatrosses, sea turtles, and endangered Hawaiian monk seals. In addition, the resort is helping travelers forge a personal relationship with the ocean through activities like outrigger canoe tours, nighttime snorkeling trips, and O'Brien's surf lessons.

As I spent time on the water with O'Brien and Cohen, I could see how much pleasure they seemed to get by simply floating on their boards while waiting for swells. We were fully present, free of our smartphones, feeling the rise and fall of the ocean, and just going with the flow until a rideable wave presented itself. Cohen pointed to humpback whales breaching in the open ocean. Minutes later, a turtle popped its head out of the water near us.

I still wouldn't dare utter the words "I'm a surfer," but I did learn some of the basic rules behind harnessing the

COURTESY OF JAMIE O'BRIEN SURF EXPERIENCE

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power of the world's largest ecosystem. For one, getting up on that board on my first attempt was less about skill mastery and more about a chance collaboration with nature—as my subsequent spill after spill taught me. I also used that time to try interpreting the waves, each a unique manifestation of gravitational forces, wind, and marine conditions. During those magical moments of calm, the ocean tells its story, and when we're fully surrounded by this vast blue world, it's that much easier to listen.

Find more information about Turtle Bay Resort and Jamie O'Brien Surf Experience at turtlebayresort.com and jobsurfexperience.com.

The Royal Hawaiian, O'ahu


Kona Village, Hawai'i


Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea

More Hotels in Hawai'i Where Travelers Can Connect with the Ocean

FOUR SEASONS RESORT MAUI AT WAILEA

Maui

The 383 rooms and 72 suites here channel the ocean, which is on display through large windows. Guests can learn more about the sea through such adventures as the Wayfinder's Journey, a catamaran trip for up to six passengers hosted by respected navigator Kala Baybayan Tanaka (pictured left), whose skills come down through her Polynesian forebears and her father, a master navigator. *fourseasons.com/maui*

1 HOTEL HANALEI BAY

Kaua'i

This garden-filled, 252-room hotel opened in February 2023 along the two-mile-long Hanalei Bay. The property's Seedlings program helps younger guests ages four to 12 understand nature and marine ecosystems through hands-on activities. The Marine Life Magic class takes them through tide pools to talk about fish and other wildlife and to introduce ecofriendly ideas like using reef-safe sunscreen. *1hotels.com/hanalei-bay*

FAIRMONT ORCHID

Island of Hawai'i

The Fairmont Orchid features 540 airy guest rooms on 32 landscaped acres, all with private lanais, but it has a cultural focus too. The Kalahiki Canoe Experience takes place on the open ocean at dawn, when the resort's Hui Holokai Beach Ambassadors, all of native Hawaiian descent, share cultural tales, blow the conch, and perform an *oli*, or chant, to welcome the sun as it peeks out from behind the active Mauna Kea volcano. *fairmontorchid.com*

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Jennifer Flowers traveled in April, before the Maui wildfires in August. In the interest of supporting Maui and Hawai'i, we chose to move forward with our article. At the time we went to print, Hawai'i Governor Josh Green was asking visitors to avoid the affected area of Lahaina until further notice, but was encouraging travel to all other parts of Maui and the state. For more information, see afar.com/hawaii.*

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF KONA VILLAGE, A ROSEWOOD RESORT; MICHELLE MISHINA-KUNZ/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX; COURTESY OF FOUR SEASONS RESORT MAUI AT WAILEA. OPPOSITE PAGE: NICOLE FRANZEN

Mauna Lani, Hawai'i

THE ROYAL HAWAIIAN, A LUXURY COLLECTION RESORT

O'ahu

Once a week on the shores of Honolulu's Waikiki Beach, a cultural guide at the Royal Hawaiian leads a Hi'uwai, a traditional Hawaiian sunrise ritual intended for cleansing and purification. As the guide begins a blessing, the group steps into the ocean, then returns to shore, faces east toward Diamond Head crater, and chants "*E ala e*," a call for the sun to rise and to mark a new beginning. *royal-hawaiian.com*

MAUNA LANI, AUBERGE RESORTS COLLECTION

Island of Hawai'i

The Mauna Lani resort has 333 rooms (most with ocean views of the Kohala Coast) and strong on-site cultural programming. Their Intro to Underwater Rock Running course centers on a practice that surfers use to build mental and physical stamina for bigger winter waves. Participants wade into the water carrying a rock that keeps them anchored on the ocean floor; as they get deeper, they hold their breath, then let go of the rock and resurface. The idea is to get a workout and be fully present in the surroundings through breath work. *aubergeresorts.com/maunalani*

KONA VILLAGE, A ROSEWOOD RESORT

Island of Hawai'i

The iconic Kona Village, which was destroyed by a tsunami in 2011, was completely reimagined by Rosewood Hotels in 2023 with 150 *hales* (rooms) along the beach and a lagoon. The resort partners with the Ke Kai Ola monk seal rehabilitation center to educate visitors on endangered species conservation and invites them to help with the seals' recovery. *rosewoodhotels.com/kona-village* A

ON *the* MAP

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Dreamy accommodations for every desire include historic hotels, cozy cabins, and stylish mountain homes. Plus, you can enjoy spa time at the **Qi Lounge** at **Estes Park Resort**, riverside relaxation at **Estes Park Condos**, and trail lunches from **Aspen Winds on Fall River**.

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WORKSHOP

Mise en Plate

The dinnerware used in some of the finest restaurants and hotels in the United States is shaped in a soap-factory-turned-studio in New Jersey.

by Lyndsey Matthews

COURTESY OF JONO PANDOLFI DESIGNS

I'M INSIDE A LIGHT-FILLED, 14,000-square-foot warehouse that overlooks the Manhattan skyline in Union City, New Jersey. The smell of freshly baked bread from the *panadería* across the street fades as I take in the earthy scent of wet clay being fashioned into dinnerware. Designed in collaboration with some of the world's top chefs, these dishes will eventually make their way to high-end restaurants and hotels across the country.

Sixteen Jono Pandolfi Designs artisans are hard at work forming more than 50 different ceramic shapes, including mugs and dinner plates. A few of them lean over pottery wheels, making pieces from the company's best-known collection: the Coupe. The line's shallow, 10.5-inch entrée plate has a gentle curve that's instantly recognizable by its classic white glaze—not too shiny but not too matte either—with a slim line of dark clay peeking over the edge.

"It serves the food well because it's not a sterile white china. It's got some life to the surface, but it just has that simple dark edge," says Jono Pandolfi, the company's founder. Originally created with chef Daniel Humm in 2012 for the restaurant at New York City's NoMad Hotel, this hefty plate weighs a pound and a half and is built to withstand the rigors of a commercial kitchen.

Pandolfi says he "fell in love" with pottery at Millbrook, a boarding school in upstate New York, and later studied studio art at Skidmore College. There, he worked primarily with clay, as well as jewelry, metals, and sculpture. "But ceramics were always in my mind," he says. His first collaboration happened in 2004 during what Pandolfi calls his "starving artist phase." Soon after he moved to New York City, Pandolfi connected with a friend who was working for restaurateur Danny Meyer; the link led to an opportunity to design bud vases and chopstick holders for Meyers's café at the Museum of Modern Art.

Pandolfi completed that commission, then struggled for a while to find another major client. But in 2011, retailers Crate & Barrel and Anthropologie came to him to create elaborate serving pieces and teapots.

He found his niche when his high-school buddy, restaurateur Will Guidara—the former business partner of Humm at the NoMad and New York City's Michelin-starred Eleven Madison Park—reached out with a NoMad order for 6,000 pieces. That deal helped spark introductions to other chefs and restaurateurs who were also drawn to Pandolfi's distinctive and practical designs.

Working with culinary professionals, Pandolfi says, is "much more of a collaborative peer-to-peer relationship." Chefs and restaurant owners can mix and match from 12 to 15 colors of glaze (ranging from tame shades of beige to vivid sunset yellows and cerulean blues), two colors of clay, and more than 50 minimalist, yet striking forms.

Today, Jono Pandolfi Designs has roughly 500 hospitality clients, including the Four Horsemen, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Brooklyn; nearly a dozen Rosewood and Four Seasons hotels; the Auberge Resorts Collection; and the uber-hip Elysian Bar at Hotel Peter and Paul in New Orleans. In fact, the ceramic dishes have become so popular in restaurants across the United States that they were featured on

COURTESY OF JONO PANDOLFI DESIGNS

an episode of *The Bear*, a Hulu show about a Chicago sandwich shop, in a scene where the two lead chefs argue over which dinnerware to buy for their restaurant.

Despite the company's growth, Jono Pandolfi Designs artisans still form most pieces at their Union City factory and follow the same method he's used for more than 10 years. As Pandolfi guides me from room to room, I observe how the factory staff produces these functional works of art. Making ceramics at Jono Pandolfi Designs can involve up to seven people and five machines. The process begins by running raw clay through a pug mill, which shapes it into a log. Then it is put through a slab roller, which flattens it into disks. Later, the clay is hand cut into the specific size of the plate, bowl, or cup it will become.

For speed and efficiency's sake, ceramics aren't "thrown" (which refers to shaping clay directly on a potter's wheel). Instead, artisans "jigger" plates, a process that involves pressing the material into a plaster mold on a wheel and cutting away excess. Once the clay air-dries overnight, each plate is fired inside a kiln for a day and a half. The ceramic then makes its way to the glazing station, where it is sprayed instead of dipped, to allow for a more uniform and consistent color. Finally, the plate is fired again for 15 hours to lock in the color and ensure the piece is durable enough to ship. Pandolfi's team repeats this process 800 times a day.

As I look at the finished cups, bowls, plates, and vases on racks in the packaging room, I spot one of Pandolfi's latest collaborations: a pink ombré cookie tray he made with chef Christina Tosi of Milk Bar. Though Pandolfi is best known for the white plates that kicked off his business at the NoMad, he loves to produce work with culinary professionals who want to experiment with color, such as the bright red plates he made for chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's vegan restaurant Seeds & Weeds in Lower Manhattan, or the lavender ones he designed with his friends Rowen McDermott and Rebecca Johnson for their West Village wine bar Moonflower.

Opener: Plates from Jono Pandolfi Designs decorated with a colorful, special edition glaze.

This page, clockwise from top: Jono Pandolfi pouring clay into molds; stacks of finished stoneware; Pandolfi and an artisan pulling bowls out of a kiln.

Opposite page: Most pieces at the studio are jiggered, rather than thrown on a wheel, for efficiency's sake.

The team at Jono Pandolfi Designs is known for creating sturdy dishware that can withstand the many hazards of a bustling commercial kitchen.

"It's an enchanting hue. Serene yet bold, with a hint of romance," Johnson says of the lavender glaze she picked to complement the psychedelic color palette, botanical murals, and Hawaiian Flower quartzite bar top at her wine bar. "We spent hours with Jono . . . to ensure aesthetics and function were in harmony. All aspects of the project emphasize a caring human touch."

As for the future, Jono Pandolfi Designs recently installed a larger gas kiln, which will allow the studio to increase production and take on even more clients. Yet this continued growth doesn't mean Pandolfi will stop producing pieces by hand—making everything from scratch is core to his values as an artist. "Anybody can pull together the money to outsource stuff. By making it all [in-house], that's how we differentiate ourselves," he says.

During the pandemic, Jono Pandolfi Designs' publicly available e-commerce shop quickly grew in popularity as many customers, unable to travel, began looking for and finding ways to spruce up their living spaces—including by investing in dishware. He says home chefs looking for stylish yet durable sets often seek out the company after falling in love with the dishes at a favorite restaurant. "We're kind of straddling luxurious and cool," he says.

But for Pandolfi, it's still all about the chefs. He has no aspirations of opening a retail brick-and-mortar outlet beyond the occasional pop-up. "Making dinnerware for restaurants is incredibly fulfilling, because chefs come to me with cool little challenges," he says. "It has to be durable, it has to fit in their dishwashers. We get some pretty specific requests when it comes to how the sauce pools in the middle of a plate. Some chefs prefer for it to pool in the middle, some chefs prefer a perfectly flat bottom. I love the constraints that restaurants put me to."

> Making these ceramics requires more than 15 individual steps, involving up to seven people and five machines.

And to Pandolfi, there's no greater compliment than when former line chefs who were introduced to his plates at their first jobs ask him to customize their dishware when they open their own restaurants: James Kent, for example, who used to work at the NoMad, came to him before opening Crown Shy and Saga in New York City. It's something that Pandolfi says happens quite often.

"The repeat customers are the most fulfilling," he says. "How did I get this lucky as an artist?" A

COURTESY OF JONO PANDOLFI DESIGNS

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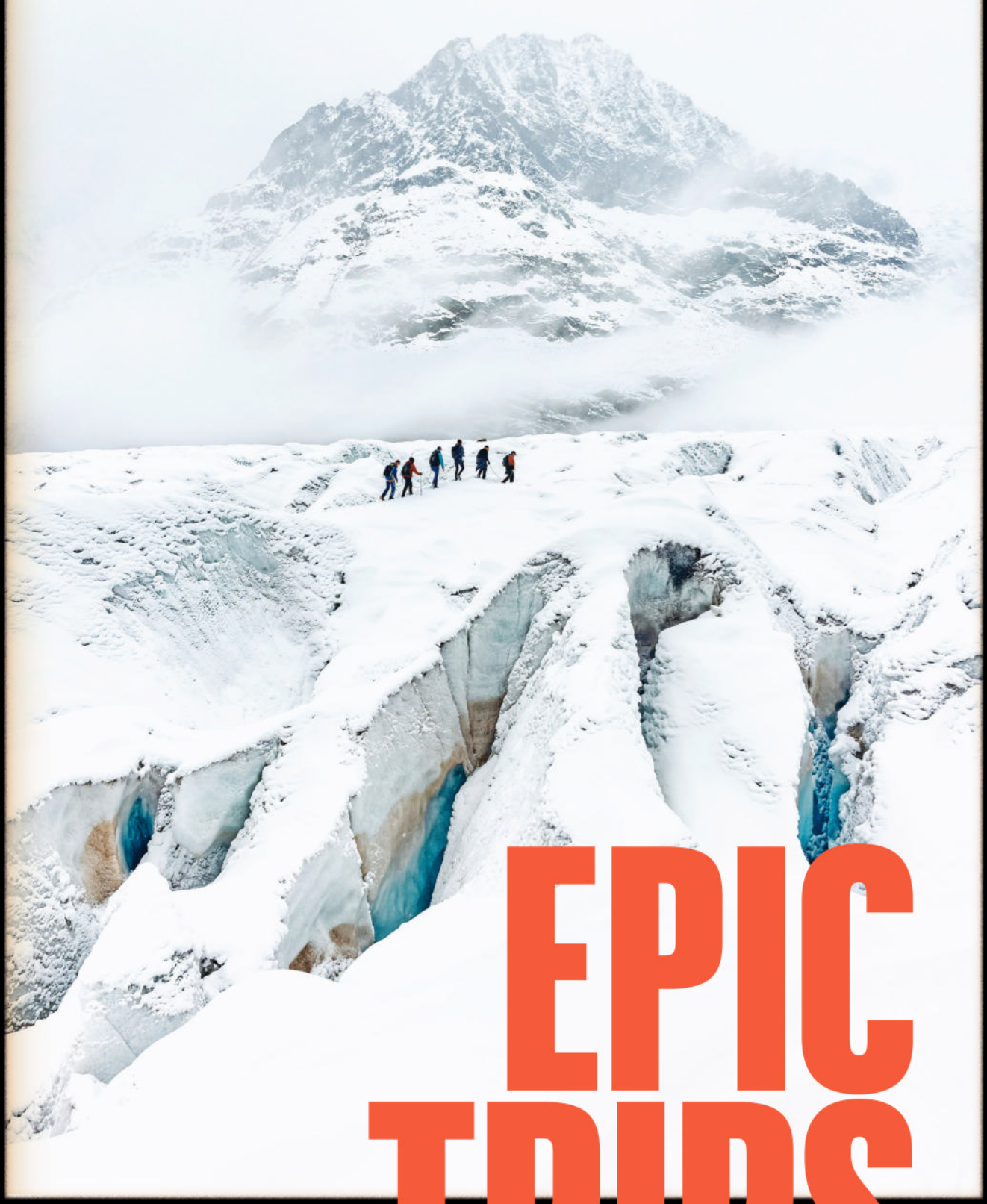


EPIC TRIPS BY THE NUMBERS

Trek harder, climb higher, and travel further back in time on 14 inspiring journeys that explore some of the world's most fascinating places.

U.S. SOUTH ▲ CIVIL RIGHTS TRAIL
UTAH ▲ DAMMERON VALLEY
TÜRKIYE ▲ GÖBEKLI TEPE
SWITZERLAND ▲ GREAT ALETSCH GLACIER (PICTURED)

ATTA/HASSEN SALUM

MORE THAN 130 HISTORY-CHANGING SITES

Wrestling with a dream deferred along the Civil Rights Trail

by LYNN BROWN

Halfway through my trip along the Civil Rights Trail, I was reevaluating my preconceptions. As a Black woman traveling through the Deep South, I'd been mostly concerned for my physical safety. However, it turned out it was my emotions that were in turmoil. While visiting the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in Jackson, where motion-triggered audio recordings re-created verbal abuses that African Americans endured during the Jim Crow era, I cried. It wouldn't be the last time.

On some level, my reaction didn't surprise me. The Civil Rights Trail is intense because the history it covers is intense: Founded in 2018, its 130-plus sites honor Civil Rights-era events and activists across 15 states and Washington, D.C. What I didn't expect was how profound my reactions would be—or that I'd be equally overwhelmed by the sense of community I found as I traveled through Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Alabama.

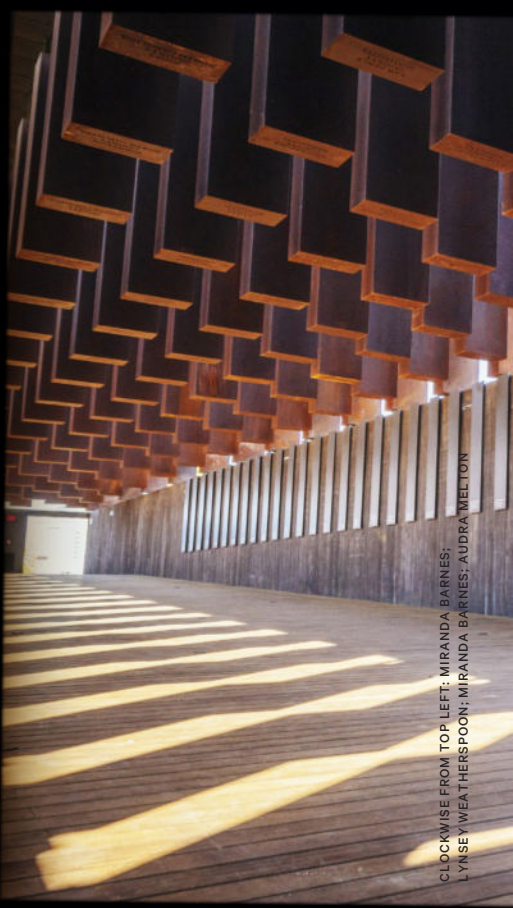
After my experience with fear at the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, I wrestled with a wave of despair in the room of the Lorraine Motel where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Here, as in other destinations along the trail, I got to stand where those who fought for equality once stood, only to watch the dream die. And here, it had died quite literally, on the balcony of what is now the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee.

The fury that filled me at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, was perhaps to be expected. Its exhibits, told in first-person narratives and historical displays, track the links between slavery, lynching, segregation, over-incarceration, and police violence—the clearest depiction I've seen of the ways in which so many of the gains made by civil rights activists morphed into policies that continue to cause injustice against Black people today.

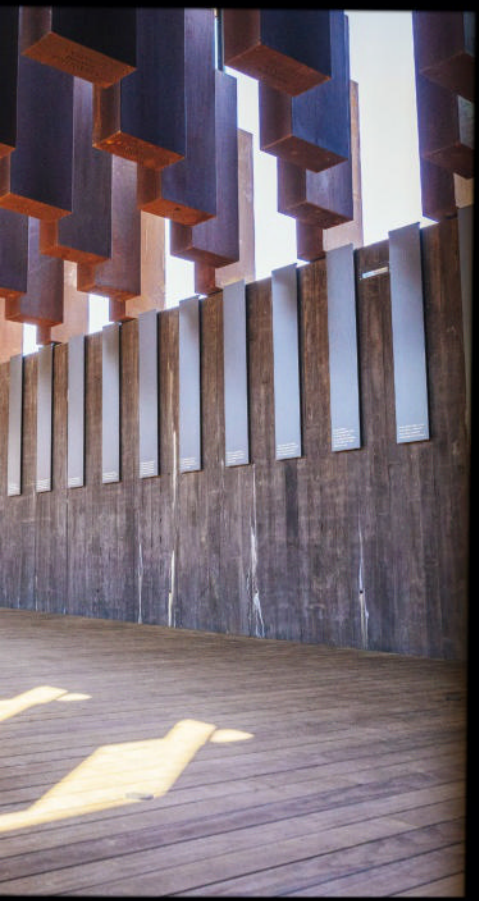
I took my anger to church, specifically the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, where Dr. King served as pastor during the Montgomery bus boycott—and where the focus is still on his vision for a Beloved Community in which people are cared for and respected equally. I realized that I'd felt that community along my trip already: when a visitor was moved to sing protest songs in the National Civil Rights Museum; when a museum worker recommended her neighbor's restaurant in Indianola, Mississippi; and here in the church, as our docent facilitated difficult conversations among our diverse tour group.

The experience ultimately left me with a different understanding of the South and of the country I live in, as well as a renewed passion for Black history and the importance of teaching it to all Americans. It also taught me that while change is never easy, it's the beloved community that keeps you moving forward.

MAKE IT HAPPEN *Civilrightstrail.com offers downloadable PDF itineraries by state, as well as an interactive map of the trail with history and travel information for visitors.*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MIRANDA BARNES; LYNSEY WEATHERSPOON; MIRANDA BARNES; AUDRA MELTON



The Civil Rights Trail includes the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ, where Dr. King gave his “Mountaintop” speech (top left); the Memphis hotel where he was assassinated (bottom right); and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which honors lynching victims (top right, bottom left).

UTAH ▲ DAMMERON VALLEY

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management administers 245 million acres of the country's land, and more than 99 percent of it is available for recreational use with no fees.

140 FEET IN THE AIR

Leaping into the unknown from Utah's rocky cliffs

by ERIK TRINIDAD

I'm usually OK with heights, but this situation is a little different: I find myself leaning over the edge of a 140-foot cliff with nothing but a rope and a harness to keep me from an imminent, gruesome demise. It's the equivalent of dangling off the roof of a 14-story building, and a sudden rush of anxiety fills me as I realize what I'm about to do.

I'm atop a craggy sandstone rock face in southwestern Utah, and I'm gathering the nerve to plunge down it in an epic rappel, the grand finale of an all-day canyoneering tour.

This region is best known for Zion National Park, which draws adventurers from around the world with its giant, photogenic red boulders and awe-inspiring canyons. However, the magnificent geology continues beyond the park's borders into Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property—public, multiuse space for all types of outdoor recreation, including rock climbing, UTV (utility terrain vehicle) riding, and mountain biking, without the stricter regulations, permits, and wait times required for the national park.

About an hour from Zion Canyon Visitor Center is a slice of BLM land in Dammeron Valley, a vertical playground for climbers who have lots of adrenaline and zero acrophobia. My guide, Todd Perkins of Southern Utah Guiding, has led me here to experience his secret stash of boulders and slot canyons, away from the crowds of the greater Zion area.

"Just hashtag it 'Zion,' so no one finds out about it," Todd jokes, trying to keep our location unspoiled.

I've enjoyed everything leading up to this final descent: maneuvering through narrow slots, scrambling from boulder to boulder, crawling through natural tunnels, and even rappelling down some 50-foot drops. But none of those challenges was as intimidating as the depths before me now.

"Lean back and take your time," Todd coaches me.

I remind myself that he has me safely on belay, and then I hop over the edge slowly, securing my footing with each baby step. Eventually, I brave bigger leaps—it helps that I never look directly down. The view toward the horizon is more awe-inspiring anyway, the azure-colored sky contrasting with the dusty-beige sand speckled with green desert shrubs. Suspended there between earth and sky, I perceive it all differently than I did when I was standing at the top or even when my feet were planted on the ground earlier in the day. Here, I feel the sensation of hovering in limbo, both physically and metaphysically.

Once I land back on the ground, I shake the residual stress out of my legs—and my soul. Then I look up as Todd, a veteran canyoneer, bounces his way down like a rubber ball. He even does some flips, showing me how fast and thrilling the rappel can be.

But I know from my slower descent that taking one's time comes with a reward here: the unequaled, otherworldly view of the high desert and its beauty. Just don't tell Todd that I told anyone about it. #Zion

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MAKE IT HAPPEN *Southern Utah Guiding leads half- and full-day group and private trips, as well as private, customized multiday trips. Paragon Adventures and Zion Adventures are additional canyoneering companies in the Greater Zion area.*

THIS PAGE: JANELLE DRANSFIELD. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ERIK TRINIDAD; JANELLE DRANSFIELD; ERIK TRINIDAD; ADAM ELLIOTT

11,000 YEARS IN THE PAST

Visiting one of the world's greatest archaeological sites in Türkiye

by JED HEUER

I'm standing on a hilltop amid millennia-old ruins, surrounded by a landscape of sun-dried grass. It looks as if I'm in the middle of nowhere—a strange way for me to think about a spot that might be the center of everything.

This is Göbekli Tepe, one of the most important archaeological discoveries in human history. Located in eastern Türkiye's region of ancient Mesopotamia near the city of Şanlıurfa (also known as Urfa), it was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2018, and it's home to the oldest known human-made megaliths, or massive stone pillars, in the world (dating to 9600 B.C.E.). It's also a central place in the timeline of the Neolithic Revolution, when, after an age of nomadic hunting and gathering, Homo sapiens decided it was time to settle down.

MICHELLE HEIMERMAN

Throughout Göbekli Tepe, low stone walls created rooms with built-in seating for people, and vertical stone pillars were arranged in a way to promote a gathering space.


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TÜRKIYE ▲ GÖBEKLI TEPE

Up ahead, beneath a sweeping protective canopy, I see a collection of buildings: oval gathering spaces with carved T-shaped pillars on pedestals of bedrock that still present a mystery to experts. As a large tour group mills around a raised walkway taking photos, I meet with the archaeologist in charge, Dr. Lee Clare (pictured at right), at the spot where the excavation first began in the 1990s by another German archaeologist, Klaus Schmidt. A youthful expert in prehistoric archaeology, Clare wears skinny jeans and a sun hat. A few stray cats walk with us as he explains the site, a settlement that shows the gradual transition of humans from hunter-gatherers to settlers and farmers.

One thing Clare is adamant about: This is not a temple. Schmidt originally touted Göbekli Tepe as "the world's first temple" in a bid to get attention. But, as Clare explains, no matter how much we're conditioned into thinking megaliths are religious sites, there's nary a deity, god, or goddess depicted here. Instead, he shows me relief carvings of snakes, insects, cranes, and even a fox being held under an arm. All of this was accomplished by hunter-gatherers without any metal carving implements. "This is not a primitive group of people," he reminds me. "These were modern humans with simple tools."

The depictions on these T-shaped pillars are essential to the story of humanity. Clare explains: "Here is the earliest example of a man-made environment, where they're carving their myths, their narratives, onto a large piece of stone in a building to promote identity, belonging, being part of a group at a time [when humans were] going through a very drastic transition from hunting-gathering to farming. This is a part of it. Cognitively, they're changing. Their minds need to adapt."

Yet what he is most excited about isn't the 50-ton carved stones rising more than 16 feet, but a small rectangular stone room on the other side of the walkway. These are "ninth-millennium [B.C.E.] domestic structures," he says, pointing to a preserved wall that marks the area where people once lived, the basalt grinding stones and basin on the floor. "This is really quite spectacular."

If he's excited, I'm excited. It may be the simplest-looking part of the whole complex, but also the most telling. The ordinary can be beautiful and astounding. Yes, our brains like the spectacular, but a site of this magnitude is about seeing what's beneath the surface. As we look across the landscape, Clare reminds me of how much more there is to uncover. Because every single spot on Earth is in the middle of somewhere, and questions and stories are all we ever really have.

MAKE IT HAPPEN *Göbekli Tepe is open daily. Visitors can rent a car or take a bus from Şanlıurfa. Alternatively, travel company Sea Song (seasong.com) can arrange private guided tours and custom trips.*

MICHELLE HEIMERMAN

Clockwise from left: Balıklıgöl, or the Pool of Abraham, is a sacred site in Şanlıurfa; the excavation of Göbekli Tepe began in the 1990s; Dr. Lee Clare coordinates the project now.

10 BILLION TONS OF ICE

Feeling awestruck on the Swiss Alps' largest glacier

by KATHLEEN RELLIHAN

A sea of ice surrounds me as I trek the Great Aletsch Glacier, located southeast of Bern in the heart of Switzerland—the largest, longest, thickest glacier in the Alps. In 2001, it was chosen as part of the first alpine UNESCO World Heritage site, and it's almost too much to take in: Spanning 31 square miles and half a mile deep in places, the glacier has a total volume of more than 10 billion tons of ice. It's so massive it can be seen from space.

As I hear my crampons crunch solidly beneath me, I feel exhilarated. But as I look out over endless marbled ice dunes streaked with gray rock and see the deep crevasses we'll have to navigate on this six-hour hike, I also feel a touch terrified.

"Just follow my trail exactly," mountain guide Kurt Burgener calls to me as I hesitate on a slippery, narrow ledge. My fellow trekkers and I have been following him through a labyrinth of fissures, roped together and herded like a gaggle of preschoolers on a field trip.

If anyone is going to get us safely over this impasse, it's Burgener. At 50, he has been a certified Swiss Alps mountain guide for half his life. He grew up next to the Aletsch and has been walking on this glacier since he was five years old.

I take a deep breath, place my feet in his exact boot prints, and shuffle across, keeping my gaze averted from the abyss on my right and left.

Once I feel in flow with Burgener's steps, I look up to see the sun breaking through the clouds and the rugged Bernese Alps emerging from the fog. My soul feels recharged, and I mutter one "Oh my God" after another as the glow passes over deep chasms in the ice, illuminating pops of turquoise blue.

But my lightness has a counterweight to it: Burgener points out a spot where the ice has receded, revealing jagged rock. He tells me that in the past 40 years, he has seen the ice shrink noticeably. "Year after year, or even within a few months or weeks, the approaches to the glaciers have to be adjusted or revisited," he says. Scientists have seen it, too: Swiss glaciers had their worst melt rate in 2022, losing 6 percent of their volume. Indeed, global warming is especially visible in the Swiss Alps, where temperatures have been accelerating in the past few decades at about twice the global average. Experts warn that Alpine glaciers—and half of all glaciers in the world—might completely disappear by 2100.

When I'd read similar headlines and stats about climate change before, it had felt abstract, but here, I'm viscerally struck by what could be lost—and the opportunity that an experience

SWITZERLAND ▲ GREAT ALETSCH GLACIER

ATTA/HASSEN SALUM

Switzerland's Jungfrau-Aletsch region was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001; the site's designated boundaries were expanded in 2007.

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like this offers. Later, when I talk to Emmanuel Salim, an assistant professor at the University of Toulouse who leads studies on how glacier tourism in the Alps is affected by climate change, he confirms what I've been mulling over. "Last-chance tourism is not only a matter of seeing these glaciers before they melt," he says, "but also about understanding what is happening in our world." By seeing climate change firsthand, he adds, we establish a personal connection to the crisis. As I blink in the face of the blinding white glacier, I know I have.

MAKE IT HAPPEN *Glacier trekking on the Great Aletsch Glacier must be done as a guided tour. You can book one through Aletsch Arena, which offers day trips and overnights between June and October.*

SWITZERLAND ▲ GREAT ALETSCH GLACIER

ATTA/HASSEN SALUM

Kurt Burgener (above) grew up near the Aletsch Glacier and has been a certified mountain guide for more than two decades. He says that ice melt is becoming more visible.

10

EPIC TRIPS THAT ARE EASY ON THE PLANET

Answer the call to adventure on one of these conscientious tours.

by KELSEY LINDSEY

1.87 MILLION ACRES OF PROTECTED LAND IN ARGENTINA

Journeys With Purpose's "The Return of the Jaguar" trip is led by Sofía Heinonen, executive director of Fundación Rewilding Argentina. Participants learn about the history of Iberá National Park in the country's northeast and about the reintroduction of endangered species (such as the jaguar) to its wetlands, home to more than 30 percent of Argentina's biodiversity. *From $14,225, journeyswithpurpose.org*

8 DAYS OF ACCESSIBLE TRAVEL IN EGYPT

Wheel the World offers multiday trips on six continents, and for each destination it researches attractions, transportation, and hotels to optimize mobility and access for all travelers. On its "Wonders of Egypt" tour, participants visit the pyramids in Cairo, then board a four-day Nile cruise to see such historical hot spots as the Karnak and Luxor temples. *From $3,696, wheeltheworld.com*

7 DAYS OF CHIMPANZEES IN UGANDA

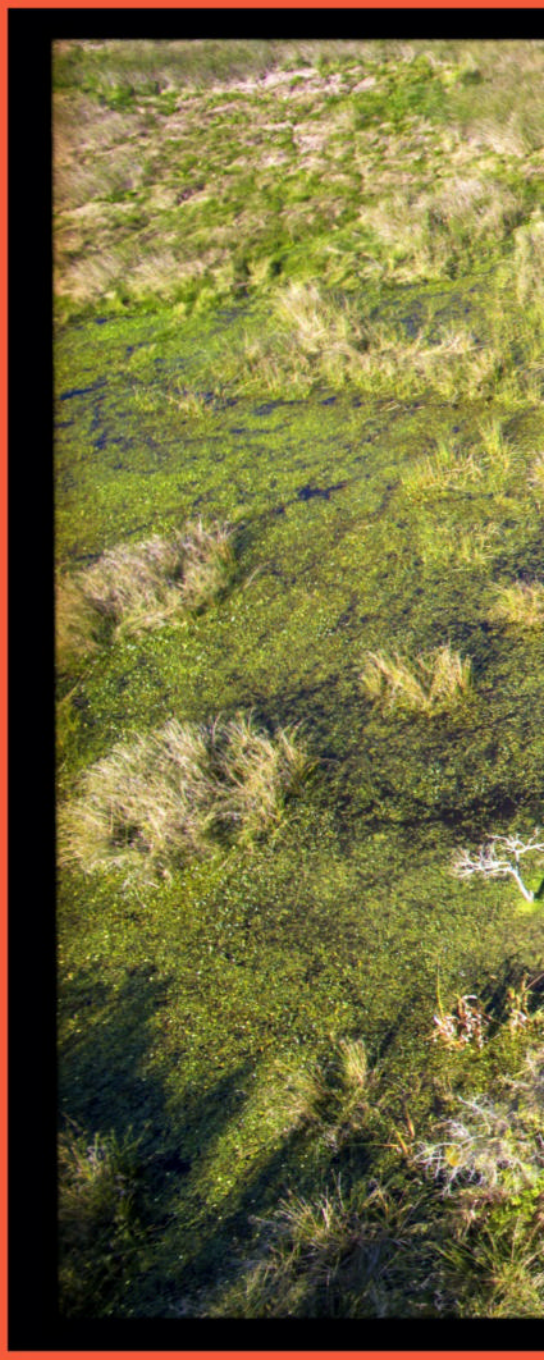
Volcanoes Safaris (a 2022 AFAR Travel Vanguard honoree) is recognized not only for protecting endangered mountain gorillas in East Africa but also for supporting the surrounding communities. Its new seven-day "Chimpanzee Tracking Safari" in southwestern Uganda aims to spot chimps, of course, but elephants, lions, and leopards too. Guests can also meet members of the Kyambura Women's Coffee Cooperative, harvest honey with a beekeeping group, and go birding in a wetland sanctuary. *From $9,448, volcanoessafaris.com*

2 WHEELS (AND SOME SAKE) IN JAPAN

Traveling from Tokyo to Kyoto, **Butterfield & Robinson**'s eight-day "Central Japan E-Biking" journey is loaded with activities on and off the e-bikes it provides. Cyclists stop for a paper-making lesson in an artist's studio and a sake tasting at a fifth-generation brewery, then relax in ryokan accommodations and hot springs. *From $11,295, butterfield.com*

100% CARBON-NEUTRAL BIKING IN SRI LANKA

Intrepid Travel, a 2022 AFAR Travel Vanguard honoree, has been carbon neutral since 2010. Now it's adding carbon labeling to every tour on its website to show how the company is trying to reduce the emissions produced. So bikers on the 14-day "Cycle Sri Lanka" trip, for example, will know that they're not harming the environment when they pedal to see national parks and the UNESCO-designated ruins of Polonnaruwa. *From $2,540, intrepidtravel.com*



24 HOURS OF SUN IN THE ARCTIC

Inuit-owned and -guided **Arctic Bay Adventures** leads a nine-day trip through Canada that brings guests to its camp on Baffin Island's floe edge. There, they'll look for polar bears, beluga whales, and narwhals while surrounded by fjords and red-rock cliffs. Travelers can also try dogsledding and sample traditional Inuit food such as *maktaaq* (whale skin and blubber). *From $9,220, arcticbayadventures.com*

4 NIGHTS BY GREENLAND'S ICE SHEET

The apex of **Natural Habitat Adventures**' 100-percent carbon-offset, 10-day "East Greenland Arctic Adventure" is a stay within view of the Greenland ice sheet at the company's minimal-footprint temporary camp of eight private, heated cabins. There's plenty to draw you outside, too, with kayak excursions through iceberg-dotted waters and hikes to the ice sheet on the itinerary. *From $12,995, nathab.com*

FLORIAN VON DER FECHT

3 ECOSYSTEMS IN ECUADOR

Backroads' 11-day Ecuador journey bundles three destinations into one itinerary. It starts with a river cruise on the Amazon to spot toucans and river dolphins and visit Indigenous Kichwa women. It then heads to the Andean highlands to stay at a 4,000-acre dairy farm and hike through pre-Inca ruins. The trip ends in Galápagos National Park for kayaking and snorkeling. *From $9,999, backroads.com*

10 DAYS OF FJORDS IN NORWAY

In a sustainable twist on the road trip, **Kensington Tours** offers a custom-tailored 10-day self-drive jaunt around Norway's southern fjords in an electric vehicle (EV) such as a Jaguar Pace or Tesla S 70. After picking up the EV in Oslo, travelers can navigate stops in Bergen, Flåm, and Solvorn at their leisure, joined by a private guide at some locations. *From $8,146, kensingtontours.com*

6 NATIONAL PARKS IN THE BALKANS

Mountain Travel Sobek's 22-day "Balkans Via Dinarica Hiking Tour" winds through Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Albania. Guides who grew up in the region point the way through remote alpine villages, old-growth forests, and six national parks. Hikers can also raft the Tara River Canyon and visit Bled, Slovenia, and Stari Grad, Croatia. *From $7,995, mtsobek.com*

Travelers on "The Return of the Jaguar" trip, by Journeys with Purpose, track wildlife with rangers, visit a jaguar reintroduction center, and go kayaking and hiking in Argentina's Iberá National Park.

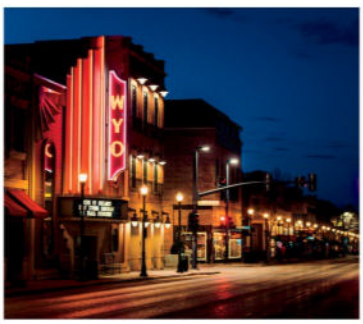
Sheridan
COUNTY, WYOMING, USA.

FRONTIER HISTORY. COWBOY HERITAGE. CRAFT CULTURE. THE GREAT OUTDOORS. THE NATURE OF THE WEST.





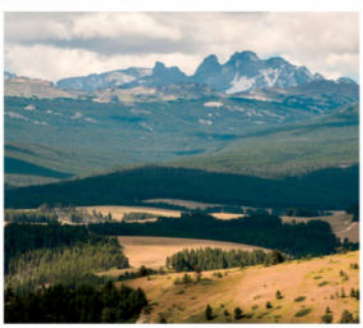








1.1

million acres of pristine wildland in the Bighorn National Forest, encompassing 1,200 miles of trails, 30 campgrounds, 10 picnic areas, 6 mountain lodges, legendary dude ranches, and hundreds of miles of waterways. The Bighorns offer limitless outdoor recreation opportunities.

101

restaurants, bars, food trucks, lounges, breweries, distilleries, tap rooms, saloons, and holes in the wall are spread across Sheridan County. That's 101 different ways to apres adventure in the craft capital of Wyoming. We are also home to more than 40 hotels, motels, RV parks, and B&Bs.

4

seasons in which to get WYO'd. If you're a skijoring savant, you'll want to check out the Winter Rodeo in February. July features the beloved Sheridan WYO Rodeo. Spring and fall are the perfect time to chase cool mountain streams or epic backcountry lines.

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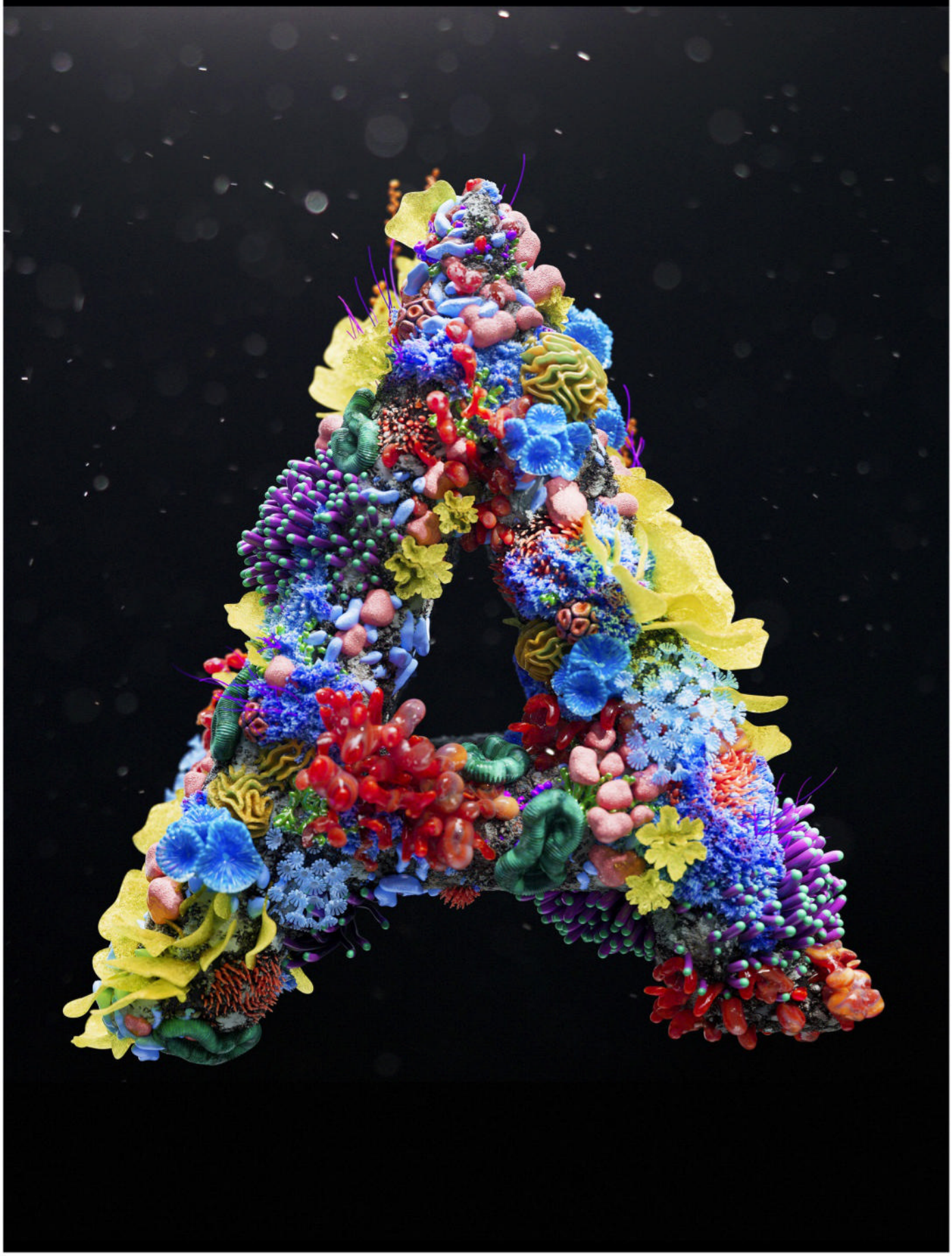
Sheridan features a thriving, historic downtown district, with western allure, hospitality and good graces to spare; a vibrant arts scene; bombastic craft culture; a robust festival and events calendar; and living history from one corner of the county to the next.



Art by **SEAN FREEMAN & EVE STEBEN**

Where the Quiet Things Are

An avid hiker tackles Slovenia's Juliana Trail and discovers why slowing down is sometimes the hardest part of the journey.

by Peggy Orenstein
Photographs by Julia Nimke

For the fifth time in an hour, Vili Črv, a former member of the Slovenian Olympic cross-country ski team and sometime hiking guide in Slovenia's Triglav National Park, apologizes for the weather. As if the low clouds and mist are within his control. "If it were clear," he tells me, "you would be able to see the Alps."

"What about those?" I ask, pointing to a range of snow-capped peaks. They look impressive to me.

Črv shakes his head. If it were sunny, I'd be able to spot Mount Triglav, which, although a relatively modest 9,396 feet, is so dear to residents of this Central European country that it is featured on the flag. But it isn't sunny: My nine days on the 167-mile Juliana Trail, a loop that takes travelers along the edge of the park and the foothills of the Julian Alps in the northwestern part of the country, fall smack in the middle of soggy spring.

I could feel badly about this, as Črv does, but why? The low, flat sky creates a kind of intimacy, a coziness that forces me to look at what's close—the beech leaves fluorescent against the pewter horizon, the reds and blues of a painted wayside shrine. A moss-covered wooden waterwheel whirls faster in the wetness. A yellow-spotted fire salamander, typically seen only at night, peers up at me from the woodland floor. Best of all, on this first day of my trip, I have the trail to myself.

The Vintgar Gorge is one of the most popular sights in Slovenia. It is roughly an hour by foot from Bled, which is the landing spot for stage 4 of the Juliana Trail. Buying tickets online is highly recommended.

The same is true when I arrive in Kranjska Gora that afternoon. In off-season April, the Alpine resort town of chalets, restaurants, and bars is as deserted as the post-apocalypse TV show *The Last of Us*. I am the only diner at Kosobrin, a homey log-cabin restaurant and guesthouse, so Miha Samotorčan, 27, who owns Kosobrin with his mother Mojca, acts as my personal chef. He seats me by the fire and brings a charcuterie assortment on a wooden cutting board. There are slices of his own cured sausages; mild, sweet cheese made by a friend; dried figs, pear jam, and freeze-dried raspberries, all from last summer's harvest; plus a basket of homemade bread. He follows up with pork shoulder draped over coarsely chopped, sautéed potatoes. He then insists I try two desserts: a cheese dumpling, the dough rolled thin enough to see through, and strudel filled with local blueberries. In this case, I'm delighted to exceed my limits.

QUIET SOLITUDE IS INTEGRAL to the Juliana Trail, a venture among 12 municipalities that was developed in response to a rising dilemma. Slovenia, a country roughly the size of New Jersey surrounded by Croatia, Italy, Austria, and Hungary, has historically been a land of shifting borders. For centuries, it was part of the Habsburg empire and later, the Austro-Hungarian empire. After the First World War, it was annexed by Italy, then folded into Yugoslavia after the Second. It became independent in 1991 and joined the European Union in 2004, when tourism began to increase; by 2017, it had exceeded 5.5 million arrivals—more than double those in 1990. It's easy to see why: The climate in this region ranges from Alpine to Mediterranean. Within a few hours, it's possible to hike in the mountains, bike through the vineyards, and loll on the beach. Slovenia is also one of the greenest places on the continent; 60 percent of the land is forested, and a third of that is protected.

The Juliana Trail, which opened in 2019, aims to spread out travelers, boost remote economies, and better preserve natural wonders. Hikers of its 16 stages (there are four additional access stages on a spur on the loop's south side) encounter literary landmarks, traditional cuisine, and folk music, as well as Slovenian history and relics of World War I battles. Travelers can backpack or send luggage through the Julian Alps Booking Center; bed down at campgrounds, inns, or grand hotels; self-cater or eat farm to table. "The concept is to provide an experience where you're part of nature, not just watching other people in front of you," says Viljam Kvalič, director of Soča Valley Tourism. "[The trail is] not about conquering a mountain or reaching a destination and saying 'been there, done that.' It's about the journey, and all the experiences that happen during the journey."

This last bit struck me. I'm the kind of traveler who needs to go a little farther, a little harder, hiking despite

100-degree heat, snorkeling in too-rough waters, pushing past exhaustion to visit one more museum. My natural bent is to do "everything," even if I'm miserable. *What if I never come back?* I don't want to chance regret. But that's the very mentality the Juliana challenges. Hiking an average of 10 miles a day is not exactly slacking, but I can still cover only so much ground. The Juliana Trail would force me to shift my focus from ticking every box to appreciating smaller, slower, and perhaps more spontaneous moments.

THE MUDDY AFTERMATH of an end-of-season snowstorm has closed stage 2, thwarting my next day's plans. So I skip it, getting a ride with outfitter Kofler Sport 14 miles to Jesenice, a former iron-mining town near the Austrian border that marks the start of stage 3. I amble through a chain of villages, the fields between them bright with dandelions. Spring unfurls around me: Narcissus line the roads; tulips and daffodils bloom from front gardens. A cuckoo calls, and I reach for my pocket. According to local legend, if you're carrying money when you first hear the bird in spring, you'll have a prosperous year. I wonder if the credit card on my iPhone counts.

The trail winds past the birthplaces of several of the country's celebrated authors and musicians, whose homes have been turned into small museums. Language, literature, and folk music were crucial to sustaining Slovenian identity during those centuries of outside rule. I stop to eat the lunch packed for me by my hotel—sandwiches of ham and local cheese, along with an apple, an orange, and a chocolate bar—on a wooden bench next to a rough-whittled statue that looks like Pinocchio. There is a barn and an old horse trough across the dirt path. An elderly man swings a scythe, clearing the early spring grass, pausing to wipe his blade every few strokes. When a cow moos loudly he laughs, and turns to say something that I can't understand. I smile back, in no rush, sharing the moment.

The next morning, the trail passes through Radovljica, a town that dates to the Middle Ages. Seventeenth-century frescoes grace some of the pastel-colored buildings on the main square, mostly Bible-themed. Religious motifs were also commonly painted on the front panels of beehives. Slovenians are thought to have pioneered modern beekeeping; the illustrated panels are a long-standing form of folk art. The oldest one known, on display at the Museum of Apiculture across the square, depicts the Madonna and child. Other panels show scenes of hunting and of village life. There is also a man feeding his wife into a flour mill and a devil sharpening a woman's tongue on a grindstone.

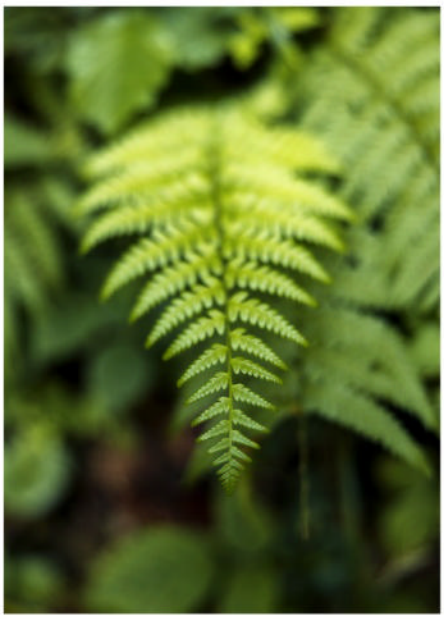
I buy a few homemade bonbons at the Radolška chocolatier. One is infused with tarragon, giving it a mild hint of licorice; another is filled with a sweet-tart mixture of locally produced goat cheese. I enjoy them across from the museum on a "bench of shame"—where those who'd transgressed were once shackled and publicly mocked—feeling unusually grateful to live in the 21st century.

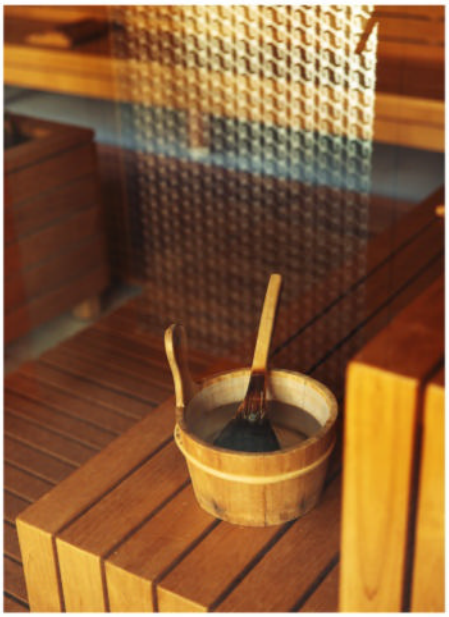
My route continues along the Sava River. Old folks chatting in backyard lawn chairs offer a friendly wave. Even the animals are hospitable: A trio of miniature horses dashes across a field as I pass, stopping to push their velvet noses into my open palm. Alongside the trail, people turn over plots of earth, scatter seeds for their summer haul. One couple plows a furrow with a horse, two children playing around their feet. Eating locally and seasonally is not a province of the privileged in this country—produce is expensive here, so home vegetable gardens are common (in 2020, nearly two-thirds of Slovenians reported keeping a vegetable garden). In addition to the world's highest concentration of beekeepers, the country has the highest per capita rate of tractor ownership.

I land in the resort town of Bled, on the shores of its eponymous glacial lake. A church spire points skyward from an island in the center of the water; a fairy-tale castle built in the 11th century clings to the cliffs above. It is ridiculously picturesque. But the walk from Radovljica was an easy six miles and it's only three o'clock, so my inner overachiever gets triggered: *I can go farther! I can rest when I get home!* I respond reflexively, hiking another three miles to Vintgar Gorge, a canyon carved out by the Radovna River. Like Bled, it tends to be mobbed in the summer, but today there are only a handful of people. By the time I arrive, I'm dragging, but the boardwalk path built into the side of the gorge over water revives me. I crisscross the river, past waterfalls, stone cairns built by visitors, and a stone railroad bridge, then hurry back to town, thinking I can still catch the last boat to the island. I'm too late. Although this has been a spectacular day, I wrestle with a niggling regret.

Opposite page: Restaurant Kosobrin's traditional dishes include cured sausages (top left); hikers on the Juliana Trail can experience sauna culture at the Hotel Bohinj in Ribčev Laz (center right); the open-air World War I museum can be reached from both Slovenia and Italy (bottom right).

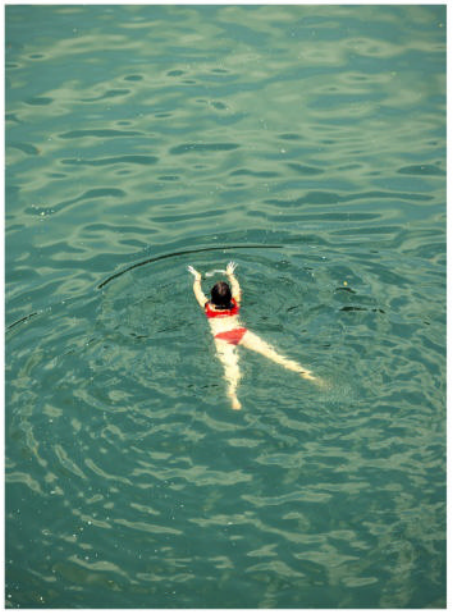

KOSOBE



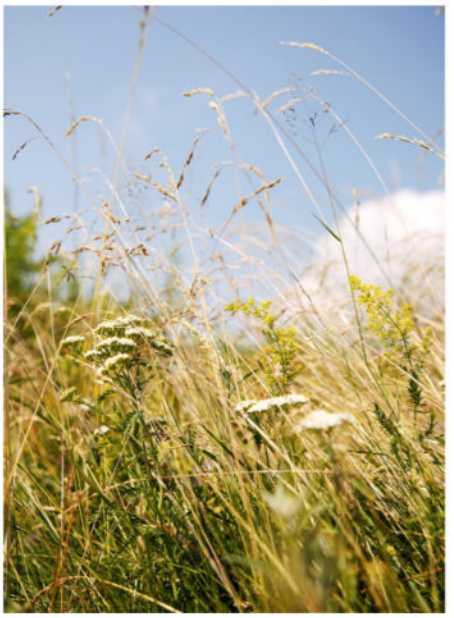


This page: Lake Bohinj is roughly 50 miles from Ljubljana.

Opposite page: The town of Radovljica is known for its chocolate and its Museum of Apiculture.




KOSOBRIN



The next morning, I set out for Lake Bohinj. At the end of the 13.5-mile stage 6, it shines turquoise from a distance, then emerald up close. I gasp out loud at nearly every turn, every new vista; there is a reason the first syllable of its name, Boh, translates to "God." Come evening, I contemplate the landscape from a quiet dock in Stara Fužina, near the minimalist, eco-conscious Hotel Bohinj. It's too cold to swim, so I opt instead for the hotel's "wellness spa": saunas, a steam room, a salt wall room, and an outdoor whirlpool, punctuated by an ice fountain and multijet showers. I'm supposed to shed my robe before entering the Turkish sauna, but I'm hesitant, worried other guests might shout, "OMG! The American took off her clothes!" It works out fine, of course, and after an hour, my shoulders relax and the knots in my calves unwind. A man with a towel wrapped around his waist laughs, passing me in the corridor. "You are cooked!" he says, and it's true.

HIKING AROUND MOUNTAINS instead of up them does not preclude changes in altitude. On stage 10 of the trail, I am guided by Jožko Dakskobler, a firefighter and mountaineer in his seventies. Despite his age, Dakskobler has the dexterity of a mountain goat. I consider that there is "good shape" and there is *Slovenian* good shape—it seems everyone here hikes or skis or kayaks or climbs. The Juliana Trail is not technically challenging, but one does need to be fit.

Today, we will ascend more than 2,500 feet. Dakskobler asks if I want to take a detour to the Sopota waterfall, which will add distance to our day: *Of course I do*. We trudge up a path redolent with wild chives whose lavender-colored flowers bloom all around us. Sweat streams down my face, but then the mist hits me. I see the water cascading down 216 feet, and open my arms wide in delight.

"This," Dakskobler announces, "is paradise number one!" He opens his backpack, fishing out two shot glasses and a small, green, hand-labeled bottle—his own homemade slivovitz, a potent plum brandy. It's tradition, he says, to take a drink at the top of a trail—"but only one," he cautions, "because you have to go down again."

A few hours later, we arrive at "paradise number two," a panoramic view of the Soča Valley, the river snaking through it the precise color of a mermaid's tail, a trick of the light sparkling off suspended bedrock. This is wine country, the southern side of the mountain range, edging toward Italy; there is even the occasional palm tree among the grapevines and red-roofed stone villages. Dakskobler again brandishes the slivovitz—it turns out that the one drink applies to every height you climb—and unwraps three types of salami (which he also made himself), a container of cheese from a friend, and some hard rolls. We down our shots and polish off the snacks. I spend the afternoon relaxing on the riverside patio of the restaurant at the family-run Penzion Šterk, watching boaters and basking in my slivovitz buzz.

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE that the bucolic Soča Valley was once among the bloodiest fronts of World War I. More than 1.7 million people died or were mutilated in this 60-mile region in just two years. That history hit me hard on the seventh day of my trip, on a recently added spur to the trail. Stage 17 cuts south of the original route, ascending to an open-air museum on Kolovrat Ridge. The Šoca Valley spreads out nearly 3,700 feet below, and I can see both the Julian Alps and the Italian border. I spend a few hours exploring the trenches built into the rocky slopes: spaces narrower than an airplane aisle, as cramped and dark as animal burrows. I think of all the young men who lived, fought, and died here. The wind blows strong and chilly.

When I'm ready, a hired car drives me back down to the valley, dropping me halfway through stage 13 near a fast-moving section of the Soča River. Over the next seven miles, the wildness strips away my sorrow related to what we humans do to one another in the name of power. I scramble over boulders, slip along rock faces, and bounce across suspension bridges while the occasional kayaker shoots the rapids below. I emerge a few hours later on the road to Bovec, where I'll spend my last night. I glimpse a waterfall rushing full force after the winter snowmelt and recent rainfall.

He opens his backpack, fishing out two shot glasses and a small, green, hand-labeled bottle—his own homemade slivovitz, a potent plum brandy. It's tradition, he says, to take a drink at the top of a trail.

Opposite page: Along with Bovec and Kobarid, Tolmin is one of three main towns in the Soča Valley (top right); the 86-mile Soča River is a popular destination for swimming, kayaking, rafting, and fishing (center left); roughly 1,000 wildflower and plant species grow in the meadows of the Julian Alps (bottom right).

My room at the intimate Hotel Dobra Vila feels airlifted from the Weimar Republic: a canopy bed, an elaborate claw-foot tub, a vintage phone, floor-to-ceiling casement windows dressed with red velvet curtains. When I wake up on my final morning, it's raining in earnest. As I pull on my waterproof pants and jacket, the desk clerk looks concerned. "It's not a good day for hiking," he says. The river rocks will be treacherous and lightning is forecast. "But I'm here," I tell him. I've committed to walking a certain number of days, of miles. I have a goal. Am I going to let rain defeat me? He shakes his head.

Oops. *Wrong lesson.*

After a moment of internal struggle, I unzip my jacket. I've seen so much on this trip, walked nearly 90 miles across hundreds of years of history, through wilderness and tiny towns. I've seen the awe-inspiring and the heartbreaking, witnessed a season unfold. What if I accepted that as enough? Maybe, rather than push it, it would be OK, more than OK, to sit by the fire in the hotel's library, to gaze out the window at the mountains, to humbly enjoy the view. And so I do. A

Peggy Orenstein wrote about China's Yunnan province for AFAR's January/February 2021 issue. Photographer Julia Nimke is profiled on page 12.

The AFAR Guide to Slovenia

Slovenia packs a lot into a small footprint. Within its borders, travelers will find snowcapped peaks, beaches on the Adriatic Sea, pint-size medieval towns, and a green capital city. *—Bailey Berg*

What to Do

Ljubljana
Slovenia's capital has a thriving arts scene and ample walking and biking paths. Wander Old Town and be sure to stop at Prešernov Trg (the main square) and the Triple Bridge. Then, swing by Central Market for snacks to take on the funicular to the medieval Ljubljana Castle for a picnic.

Juliana Trail
Writer Peggy Orenstein trekked 10 sections of the Juliana Trail, starting in Kranjska Gora and ending in Bovec, over nine days. The trail's official website (julian-alps.com) explains the various sections and provides information on mileage, elevation gain, and scenic viewpoints. For assistance with planning, contact the booking center, which will help organize an itinerary and offers luggage forwarding.

Lake Bled
For some of the best views of this Alpine lake, head up to Bled's clifftop castle, which was first mentioned in written records in 1011. From the ramparts, visitors can see Lake Bled's island, which is accessible by traditional, wooden *pletna* boats. Once on the island, ascend the 99 stairs to the church to ring the wishing bell.

Where to Eat & Drink

Aljažev Dom
Set in Triglav National Park, the shingled Aljažev Dom lodge is a popular spot for a posthike lunch. Named after Slovenian mountaineer, writer, composer, and priest Jakob Aljaž, the restaurant offers apple strudel and house-made soups.

Bled Castle Restaurant
Superlative wines, stellar views: Located in Bled castle, this restaurant also serves a five-course tasting menu with seasonal dishes (such as a Krškopolje pig filet with sweet potato purée, roasted baby cabbage, and chimichurri). Reservations are a must.

Kosobrin
A family-run log cabin restaurant and guesthouse in Kranjska Gora, Kosobrin focuses on hearty Slovenian classics, such as dumplings, sausages, and cream cakes.

Hiša Franko
Chef Ana Roš Stojan's Michelin-starred restaurant in Kobarid, some 75 miles northwest of Ljubljana, draws visitors for its multicourse tasting menu, which is centered on foraged and seasonal ingredients—think watermelon, pimpinella, cucumber, and langoustine from the Kvarner Gulf in the northern Adriatic Sea.

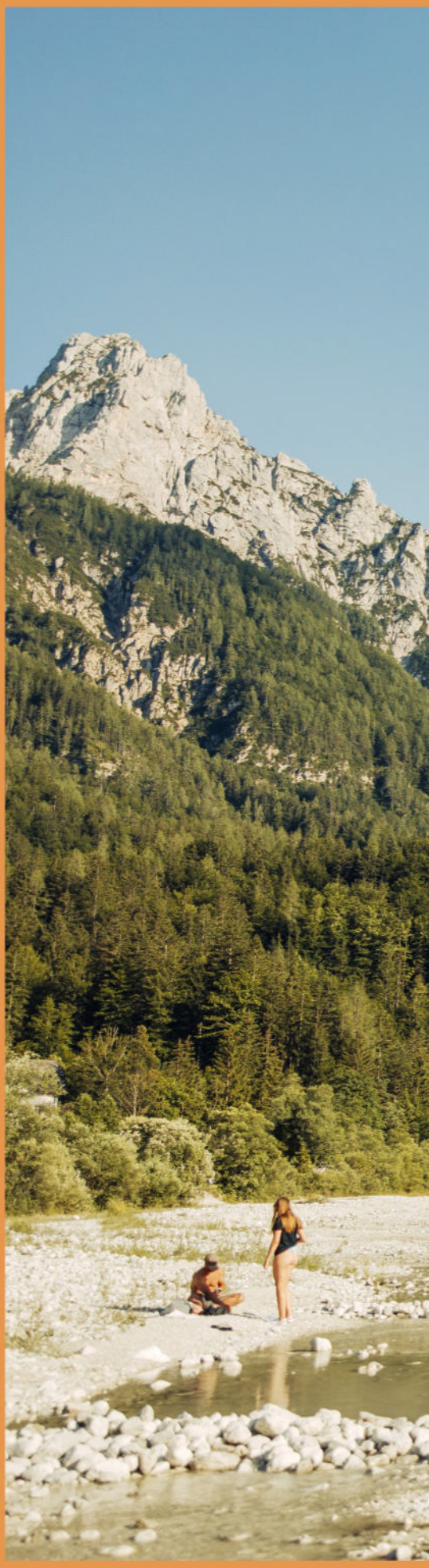
Where to Stay

Grand Hotel Toplice
Paul McCartney and former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright have both been guests at this hotel, which dates to the mid-19th century. The furnishings are decidedly Old World—expect heavy brass keys and antique furniture in the 87 rooms, 28 suites (many of which have balconies overlooking Lake Bled), and presidential apartment. The property is a member of Small Luxury Hotels and includes a spa, a terrace bar, and an indoor mineral pool.

Kendov Dvorec
This Relais & Châteaux hotel is located a couple miles north of Idrija. Historically known for lace and its now-closed mercury mines, the town today draws cyclists, fly-fishing enthusiasts, and hikers. Originally built as a home in the 14th century, the mansion has 11 rooms and landscaped gardens.

InterContinental Ljubljana
Slovenia's first five-star hotel has 165 modern rooms with generous windows, deep soaking tubs, and marshmallow-soft bedding. Take advantage of breakfast: The restaurant is on the 20th floor, with impressive views of the city.

Hotel Bohinj
A few minutes' stroll from Lake Bohinj, this property has an Ecolabel certificate from the European Union for its sustainability practices. It counts 62 rooms, a salt wall room, saunas, and hot tubs among its offerings.



The Pišnica River runs along the edge of the resort town of Kranjska Gora.

FROM K-TOWN WITH LOVE

미국 코리아 타운

Strip-mall restaurants, bustling storefronts, and 24-hour karaoke bars: Behind the scenes of one of Los Angeles's most dynamic neighborhoods.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY EMANUEL HAHN

사진 한효석

글쓴이 메이 해밀턴 by MAE HAMILTON

Kil Chae Jeong once worked as a movie director in Korea. He now owns and is the sole employee of Gol Tong Chicken, one of the most popular fried chicken joints in the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles. He is featured in photographer Emanuel Hahn's new book.

SPANNING ROUGHLY THREE SQUARE MILES, Los Angeles's Koreatown is home to the largest population of ethnically Korean people outside of Asia. Here, among blocks of strip malls, visitors can find storefronts dedicated to day spas, *hanbok* (traditional Korean dress), and some of the best Korean food in the nation, with restaurants serving such homey dishes as *seolleongtang* (ox bone soup), *gamjatang* (pork neckbone soup), and, of course, Korean barbecue. That's to say nothing of the neighborhood's animated mix of nightclubs, karaoke bars, and 24-hour businesses.

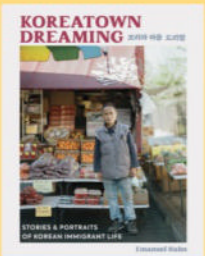
In October 2020, photographer Emanuel Hahn moved from New York to Los Angeles to pursue a career in the film industry. Looking for a way to feel creatively stimulated during pandemic lockdowns and also help promote small businesses in the area, Hahn began visiting and photographing Koreatown on a daily basis. The result is *Koreatown Dreaming: Stories & Portraits of Korean Immigrant Life* (Running Press, 2023), which covers enclaves in L.A. as well as Honolulu, Dallas, New York, New Jersey, and Annandale, Virginia. I spoke with Hahn to learn more about what Koreatowns mean to him.

<

As one of the city's most diverse neighborhoods, L.A.'s Koreatown is also home to a sizable Latino population.

When did you first visit Koreatown in Los Angeles?
It was in 2011, the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college. [My friends and I] did all of the L.A. things, but visiting Koreatown was just amazing. I remember thinking, "Wow, there's so much food!" I also found that it reminded me a lot of Korea; specifically, my parents' hometown in Daegu. Koreatown felt like it hadn't moved on from the 1990s. Seeing a place so locked in time, I don't know, it had this . . . nostalgic feeling.

What was the inspiration for this book?
I started the project late in 2020. I had this hypothesis that with the twin forces of gentrification and COVID, there might be a lot of businesses struggling to stay open. I was thinking of how owners emigrated from Korea in the 1980s and 1990s when L.A.'s Koreatown was first forming, and now they were approaching retirement age during this difficult period. Even in five years, Koreatown will look very different from what it is now. [The book] is a way to honor these business owners and tell their stories before they are gone.



Koreatown Dreaming: Stories & Portraits of Korean Immigrant Life (Running Press, 2023) is available now.

<<

High Society was the first Korean custom tailor shop in the area. The store counts A-list celebrities and film studios among its regular clientele.

<

High Society owner David Lim poses with his mother.

>
In 1980, Koreatown was officially recognized as a neighborhood by L.A. County.

>>
Sung Rae Yang sells fresh fruits from his truck, Eden Food.

<< Sang Heon Lee and Enny Lee are the owners of Kang Nam restaurant, a Koreatown favorite that has been open for more than 40 years.

< *Banchan*, or side dishes, are served with almost every meal in Korean culture.

< L.A.'s Koreatown has the highest concentration of 24-hour businesses in the U.S.

v At Music Plaza, which Seon Hee Chon founded in 1992, customers can peruse Korean pop albums.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What did you learn about Koreatowns while you were taking portraits and interviewing people?
I think I underestimated how much love there was for Koreatowns all across the country, especially from people outside the community. Koreatowns are often the first entry point for non-Koreans to meet Korean culture—whether through food, music, or otherwise—and it was clear that in various cities, people were glad that Koreatowns existed near them. While many immigrants were focused on building businesses, they inevitably opened up a path to share their culture with other Americans.

What do you love to photograph the most?
I love design. I love art. But for me, I think it all goes back to identity. Like, who are we? Through my work, I explore who I am as a person—and the tensions I feel as an Asian American living in the United States.

You're a third-culture kid, meaning that you grew up in a lot of different countries as a child. What was that like for you?
I grew up in South Korea, Singapore, and Cambodia and moved to New York City in 2010 for college. I think it's a bit different from being an Asian American person growing up in the States. Third-culture kids experience constant movement. In my case, I moved every four years. You're constantly having to readjust to a new situation. You gather so many perspectives along the way.

In the introduction of your book, you mention that no matter where you've lived, you always felt like Koreatowns were your home. Why?
When I moved to New York, I met a lot of Korean Americans from all over the country. There were so many things that revolved around having this space [Koreatown] that we could keep returning to and reinforce our identity as Korean people. Sometimes as a Korean person you crave a certain Korean food, and you would go to Koreatown to get it. That's beautiful to me. A

Emanuel Hahn is profiled on page 12.

<< L.A.'s Koreatown enclave coalesced in part thanks to the late Hi Duk Lee, who invested in the area and envisioned it as a hub for the city's growing diaspora.

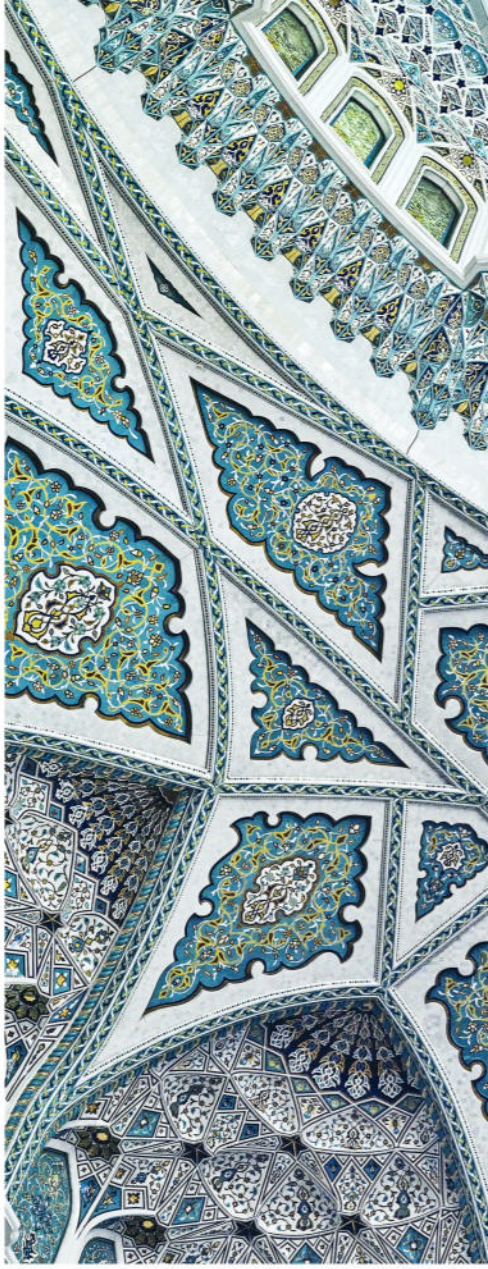
< Audrey Jang founded Chunju Han-Il Kwan, a homey Korean diner, in 1992. One of its specialities is *budae jjigae*, or army base stew. Invented during the Korean War, this fusion dish features American products such as Spam and baked beans.

The Otherworldly, Overwhelming, Oftentimes Unbelievable Natural Wonders of Oman

by
SARAH THANKAM MATHEWS

Photographs by
NATHALIE MOHADJER

Illustrations by
MATT HUYNH



ONCE, A BOY at a college party in Wisconsin asked me where I was from. Born in India to Indian parents, I had done a year of high school in Palatine, Illinois, and spent eight months in Ontario. I usually said, "India," when asked my origins, or if I wanted the conversation to end soon, offered up "the Chicago suburbs." But this boy held a sensitivity in his face that made me wish to divulge something real. And so I said, pulse quickening, "Oman."

He narrowed his eyes, cupping a hand around his ear. "Did you just say you're from *the moon*?"

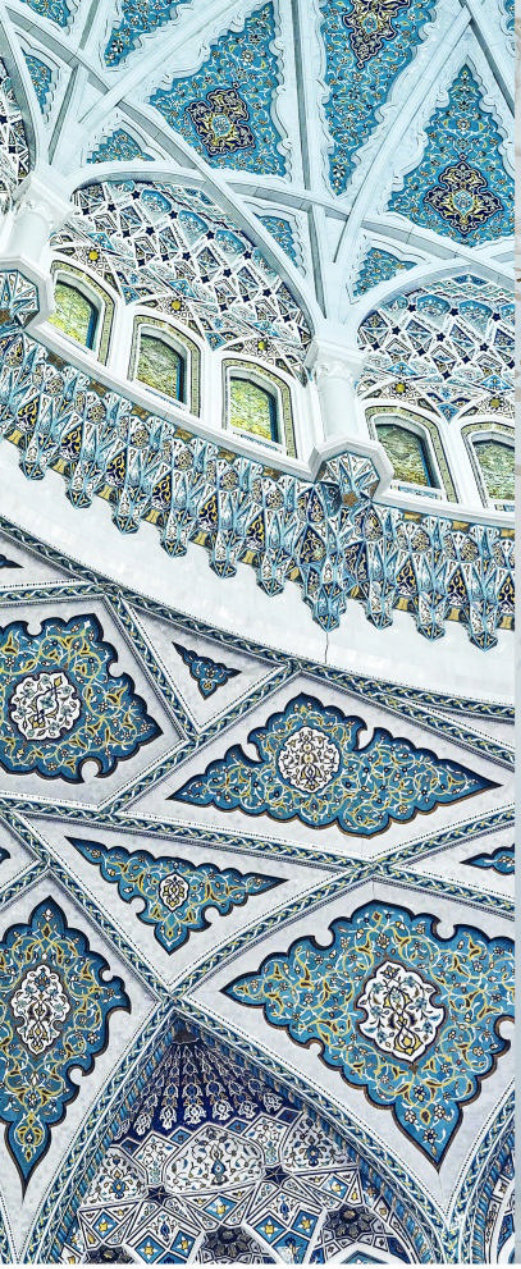
Memory bit me then, drawing blood. Low-slung mountains, cobalt sea. Tawny-gold sand dunes, arched like the back of an animal. Endless date palms lining smooth new roads. Houses smelling of frankincense. The capital Muscat: serene, white-painted city by the harbor, where I'd grown up. And the heat: the throbbing, mauling heat. My parents' injunctions to wear modest clothing, and to always, always be careful around men. My small, airless, fearful life, lived between school and home.

I was 16 when I departed Oman for the States; that was 16 years ago. In the years that followed immigration, I slowly became someone else. I learned to ride a bike, to pitch a tent, to run a meeting, to hold my own. But fear—born of inexperience, overprotection, deep patriarchy, and the second-classness of growing up South Indian in 1990s Oman—has left its mark on me. Being taught to assiduously avoid risk, especially risk to your precious body, changes you. Being encouraged to let adult men do the work of driving or planning or paying or chaperoning your safety—that shapes you, too.

That long-ago moment at the party is what I think of now, as the plane descends. How I'd said *yep, that's where I grew up, the moon*, and stepped away, at once humored and sad, into the cold night air. Now I'm moving through space, voyaging to the moon. On my tray table is a list scrawled on paper: *sinkhole swimming, wadi hiking, mountain climbing, snorkeling*. It is an itinerary I find intimidating. I'm afraid of heights, I possess the upper-body strength of a 10 year old, and I have only about 40 hours of driving experience. But finally, I'm returning to Oman. To chase adventure, to test myself, to see what I can do. To measure how far I've come from the girl who'd never so much as crossed a street alone.

Our plane breaks through the cloud cover. Hanna, a dear friend and my travel companion on this journey, squeezes my hand but I cannot look at her; my eyes burn. Through the window, I see the lights of my old city, glittering darkly below me.

OMAN WAS HOME to trade routes and warring tribes as early as 1500 B.C.E. In ancient times it was a maritime empire whose sailors were renowned the world over. The frankincense in the Biblical telling of Jesus' birth was almost certainly from Oman, then called Magan. In the modern age, Oman was one of the world's least-known countries to all but its neighbors, a place reeling from control by the Portuguese in the 1500s and 1600s and the British from the late 1800s until 1951.



The discovery of oil reserves in 1964, and the 1970 coup that enthroned Qaboos bin Said as sultan, changed things. Helmed by Qaboos and enriched by fossil fuels, Oman modernized at warp speed. Today it is a prosperous nation, home to 4.5 million people, known as the Switzerland of the Gulf for its diplomatic work with Washington, D.C., and Beijing, Tehran, and Jerusalem.

Muscat is a low-slung city of whitewashed houses, the sea rolled out before it like a banquet, the Hajar Mountains guarding its back. At the airport, Hanna and I book an Otaxi, Oman's answer to Uber. Bleary from travel, I stare at the familiar and unfamiliar whipping by, the sense of a place at once ancient and modern.

On day one, we eat shawarma from Al Istanboly, my nostalgic favorite: curls of lamb smothered in garlicky *toum* spread, pillowed by flatbread and french fries. We go to city beaches where the water is as warm as a drawn bath. We wander my old neighborhood of Al Khuwair. Day two, we visit my former school, where I was once punished because a boy gave me a Valentine's Day card and a teacher saw. The school where I was chastised for laughing too loudly, speaking my mother tongue, fainting in the heat. I recount these moments to Hanna as we stand on the school's soccer pitch, where boys played on the field and we girls walked arm in arm on its edge, at an appropriate distance from action, physicality, and the specter of men.

On day three, I wake up to the nearby mosque's call to prayer ringing through the dawn air, my body tight with anxiety. *Can I pull off the adventure ahead?* My mind turns to the limited experience I've had behind the wheel, to the unfamiliar terrain. Hanna is a Renaissance woman—a data scientist who weaves rugs, sings in a folk choir, and speaks four languages, including Arabic—but she doesn't drive. The weight of that responsibility, the responsibility of taking us through the trip and keeping us safe, is on me.

It's fine, I tell myself. Back at the airport, I sign the rental car agreement, feeling shaky but resolute.

From left: One of Muscat's most iconic destinations, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque is covered with intricate tilework on the interior and can accommodate 20,000 worshippers; in Old Muscat, which sits on the Gulf of Oman, many houses have distinctive ironwork. *Opening pages:* Wadi Shab is roughly two hours from the capital.

MUSCAT IS PRETTY ENOUGH, but Oman's true offering is its nature outside of the city. The two-hour route from the capital to the Bimmah Sinkhole brings us up curvy roads, then through valleys with the Hajar Mountains, marbled and craggy, on either side. I think back to the quiet and restrained child I was, of how much I wanted to see and be in the world, to know its beauty firsthand.

Legend has it that the sinkhole was created by a meteorite, giving it and the surrounding park the name Hawiyat Najm—"falling star." Geologists contradict this, arguing that an ongoing dissolution of limestone and collapse of the surface rock above the limestone led to the cavity filled with turquoise water. The sinkhole is more than 200 feet wide and some 65 feet deep.

Wet suit and water shoes on, I walk down a flight of stairs to the water's edge. Families and young men hang out and swim, whooping to each other across the sinkhole. Men are shirtless, women's limbs mostly covered. I enter the pool slowly, my feet slipping on the rocks, surprised by the water's chill. The sinkhole water lapping at my thighs alternates milky and gem blue. *Do it*, I tell myself, feeling a shyness born of the unfamiliar and an awareness of flouting the gender conventions I'd been raised with—a woman swimming with men. I plunge in.

The water is cold, salty, and refreshing against the heat. I lie on my back and float. Hanna and I swim into the middle of the pool and talk, treading water near a young Indian woman who works in Muscat as an aesthetician. She is cheeky and pretty, swimming in a tunic and pants and a wristful of bangles. Her husband is here, she says, tossing her head in mild ennui, but he has left her to swim on her own. He is on the far side of the sinkhole, with a knot of men throwing a ball around in the water, yelling about the Pakistani cricket game. I watch Hanna clamber onto a rock ledge and dive in: a white ripple against the deepest blue.

The next day, we wake early in the city of Sur to set forth for Wadi Shab and Wadi Tiwi, two narrow canyons with natural pools, limestone formations, and waterfalls. Wadi Shab is closer, about 40 minutes from Sur, and has a shorter trek at 3.5 miles.

In Wadi Shab, Hanna and I hand over one Omani rial, about $2.60, to a boatman who takes us across a slim river full of lily pads to the sandy beginnings of the canyon. For two hours we hike deeper and deeper, wading occasionally through shallow pools. Periodically we pause and, evading the 15 or so others also exploring Shab, take pictures in front of the archaic limestone formations and caves that dot the scenery. The water here is jade green, hedged by guarri bushes and date palms. The heat is punishing, but I feel proud for managing to check things off our itinerary with aplomb. We complete the hike in and out, feeling triumphant, wait for the boatman to return us to our car, and begin the drive to Wadi Tiwi.

Farther inland from Wadi Shab, Wadi Tiwi is a 22-mile-long gorge that snakes from the Hajar Mountains to the Gulf of Oman. We have not decided whether to drive it or walk it. Daoud, an Omani I speak with at a gas station, says that a "strong person" can traverse all of Wadi Tiwi in "14 hours on foot," but "it

From left: Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque allows non-Muslim visitors to enter, but they are asked to dress modestly; in Oman, dates are a sign of hospitality, and are typically served before and after meals; some 150 miles from Muscat, Wadi Bani Khalid is a popular swimming hole with locals; the road to Mibam village is characterized by steep climbs and a four-wheel-drive vehicle is recommended.

will push most people to their limits." Bader, Daoud's friend, a kind-eyed, stocky captain in the Omani coast guard, cautions us against this approach. It has continued to rain, and the brown water in the wadi, so different from its typical blue and jade hues, is dangerous to swim in. "You could get swept away," he says.

Still, Hanna and I reason, we could drive to Mibam village, within Wadi Tiwi, and hike our way to waterfalls. I set the car to four-wheel drive; a new beast within the engine comes to life. Plowing forward into shin-deep water, over gravel road, we begin the journey.

THE ROAD NARROWS, climbs, narrows some more, climbs again. It is now barely wider than our SUV, with no barrier to protect us from a sheer drop. Another car appears, easing toward us, and with no room for either to advance, I reverse until I can find a spot with enough shoulder to pull over. Once the first car passes, I try again, only to be beaten back by another, one that is not afraid to honk its way through matters. Sweat begins to pop in beads all over my body.

"You can do this," Hanna says. "What are we going to do if you can't, anyway? Turn back?"

I want to turn back, rearrange the trip, return with enough rials to hire a guide. But motivated by pride and desperation, I keep going. And then, up one particularly steep incline, we begin to roll backward.

With a roar of pure terror, I accelerate, steering the SUV over to the side of the road, feeling nausea and rage. "I need a few minutes," I say curtly to Hanna, who nods. I bury my head in my hands, breathing hard.

Minutes later, a car full of five Omani men in traditional dishdasha robes pulls up. I am unable to do anything but smile tightly and continue looking at my phone. Hanna, lowering her window, begins to talk to them in Arabic made poetic by its limitations. "She is afraid of the car," she says, gesturing at me, "and also, the car is afraid of the mountain."

The men are from the towns of Fins and Izki, and they are traveling together for the Muslim holiday Eid. One of them, Yasser, knows Wadi Tiwi well and offers to help. He climbs into our car and drives the remaining hour and 20 minutes to Mibam. The road curves up and down sharply, jolting us hard. Primitive houses and oases of greenery dot my sight lines. In Mibam, the group accompanies us over the concrete steps that lead to the waterfalls. The waters, typically teal and placid, are a foamy brown and white, rapids forming from days of rain. Yasser exhorts us not to let any of our limbs touch the rushing water, lest we get sucked in.

Afterward, the friends insist we join them for a picnic under the palms. They give us their WhatsApp numbers, show us pictures of their families. Seated on their rug, they

The boat ride across the river to Wadi Shab takes less than three minutes.

offer us dates, water, coffee, watermelon, and mangoes. I think of how this kind of scene would be wholly unimaginable in the patriarchy I'd grown up within.

An hour later, storm clouds gather, and we pack up. Yasser drives us all the way back to Route 18, his friends following in their car. Once returned to the coast, dizzy with gratitude, Hanna and I thank and bless these men. They ask us to call them the next time we come to Oman, say they will pick us up from the airport, show us their home villages, introduce us to their wives and children. Taking in their warmth, I feel something in me begin to dissolve. Perhaps it is my narrative of the world I once left behind.

THE NEXT DAY, I drive for four hours toward Jebel Akhdar, Oman's famed "Green Mountain." The road from the base of the mountain to our hotel is the steepest I've ever attempted. Still I find, to my pleasure, that I've leveled up.

> To visit the sites of the far past is to grapple with loss. Of the place, of one's former self.

I make hairpin turn after hairpin turn, some at ski-slope angles, with alacrity.

The plan is to spend the next two nights at Alila Jabal Akhdar, a stone-walled hotel with lavish rooms and views alike. While we are in the mountains, we'll be checking off another test of my endurance: climbing.

The Alila manages a *via ferrata* route that is the highest protected passage in the Middle East. The via ferrata, Italian for "iron way," comprises steel rungs bolted into rock faces, linked by steel cable thick as a wrist. The cable snakes up and across an expanse of mountainside, into a cave, then turns into a tightrope walk across a chasm. At the end of the tightrope is a second, secret cave.

Our guide, Mahmood Alamri, who hails from a nearby village, shows me how to put on my harness and explains the safeguarding of this two-hour course: At all points my harness will be clipped with two carabiners to the steel cable, which can "support more than three tons of weight," he says breezily, "so you will have no problem." I begin to climb, Hanna to my right, a Saudi woman who is building an outdoor adventure company to my left.

My greatest difficulty is keeping my legs straight and leaning my whole body backward into the void. My legs and arms strain, but not as much as my mind, which does its best to convince me that risk is a terrible idea. *Breathe through it*, I counsel myself, *you're strapped in, now look at the view, this is insane, stop looking, next step next step, you can do this*. Heart thudding and limbs burning, after 50 minutes, I stagger into the first cave.

This is when we see, blowing toward us, the iron-gray head of a tempest. It's clear that we must modify our plans. The via ferrata is extremely safe in almost every context, turns out, except when you're clipped to an enormous steel cable amid a lightning storm.

Alamri and his two supporting guides navigate us up an emergency route back to the Alila. The climb is far shorter but made more challenging by its swift vertical ascent and the fact that the rock faces are slick with rain. Ten minutes of the hardest physical exertion of my life follow. Gasping for breath, I make it to the end, unclip myself from the cable, and run toward the hotel for shelter.

Turning around to view the mountainside besieged by storm, I don't feel the expected disappointment in having a plan rerouted. This, truthfully, is the meaning of adventure. Sometimes you are handed a setback; sometimes you witness the sublime.

The world flashes dark, then violet white. Another peal of thunder gongs out. The canyons and peaks turn bruise-purple against a tea-green sky. A thousand tiny crashes sound. In an instant, the vista before me is littered with marble-size pellets. Hail in the desert.

THE DAYMANIYAT ISLANDS are an archipelago of nine uninhabited islands 26 miles off the Muscat coast. To snorkel around them, Hanna and I take a 45-minute boat ride to the coral reefs in the bay northeast of the main island. We see humpback whales in the middle distance and shriek.

The boat drops anchor. I've never snorkeled before. My pulse quickens slightly as I latch on my flippers and place my mask, but in a certain sense I'm calm. What's one more boundary-pushing experience?

I lower myself down from the boat, swim out, and then lie flat, taking in this world with disbelief. On good days, the visibility underwater here is more than 70 feet. Water that is clearer than glass and somehow bluer than precious stones. Heart pounding with joy and adrenaline, I glide above unbleached coral in deep purple and pale marigold. I swim over a green sea turtle seven feet below me, keeping pace, feeling an unutterable tenderness toward it, toward everything living in this new and alien world.

On the boat back to Muscat, realization settles in. To visit the sites of the far past is to grapple with loss. Of the place, of one's former self. I grieve the young person I was, so fearful and vulnerable and lonely—although it's a grief veined with knife-sharp, potent joy. Because she became someone confident, someone capable, someone so much more brave, someone so much more free. This is what I understand in the juddering boat, watching the shoreline I once called home come into focus, before I begin to weep. I have returned to the moon and found it both familiar and profoundly changed. A

From left: Dates are so significant in Oman that two museums have exhibits dedicated to them; nearly 65 percent of Oman's population is under 29 years of age; in Omani cuisine, mangoes are often pickled or used to sweeten food; a tourist takes a boat ride to the Daymaniyat Islands, which UNESCO has called a "nationally, regionally, and internationally important conservation area."

Writer Sarah Thankam Mathews is profiled on page 12. Photographer Nathalie Mohadjer is based in Paris. Her work has been featured in the New York Times *and* Le Monde.

The AFAR Guide to Oman

by Chloe Arrojado

Oman is the oldest independent state in the Arab world. Historically reputed to be one of the most prized producers of frankincense, the nation—located in the southeastern portion of the Arabian Peninsula—has quietly become an adventurer's paradise in recent years, with multiple ways to experience the beauty of its deserts, mountains, and beaches.

TOUR THE CAPITAL(S)

Situated on the Gulf of Oman, Muscat is the country's capital and home to more than 1.4 million people. One of its best-known sights is the **Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque**, Oman's largest, which is an icon of the city skyline and features an intricate hand-loomed carpet and a massive chandelier. Don't miss a performance at the storied **Royal Opera House**, another of the capital's architectural landmarks. At sunset, walk the **Mutrah Corniche** along Muscat's harbor, which is lined with restaurants and markets.

To stay, check into the 162-room beachfront resort **Chedi Muscat**, which welcomes guests into a palm tree–filled oasis on the north side of the capital city. The hotel is known for its elegant design, expansive spa and beauty treatments, and six restaurants featuring cuisines from around the world. The **Jumeirah Muscat Bay** is another option: Opened in December 2022, the resort is 30 minutes by car from downtown Muscat, with views of the Gulf from each of the 206 rooms and villas. The property also offers a PADI-certified diving and water sports center and access to trails for exploring the surrounding Hajar Mountains.

Roughly two hours south of Muscat by car is Nizwa, the country's capital in the 6th and 7th centuries C.E. Once there, walk through the cylindrical **Nizwa Fort**, then head to the **Nizwa Souq**. (It gets especially lively on Fridays, when the camel and livestock trading takes place.) Have time for an excursion? Visit the gleaming new **Oman Across Ages Museum** in Manah, a 20-minute drive south of Nizwa.

DIP INTO OMAN'S WATERS

Take a day trip from Muscat with tour company **Husaak Adventures** and wade through the canyon waters of Wadi Tiwi and Wadi Shab, or swim in spots such as the Bimmah Sinkhole. Beach-goers will enjoy the Dhofar region on a custom trip with tour operator **Geographic Expeditions**; travelers can expect coconut and banana groves as well as pristine beaches. To visit the Daymaniyat Islands, writer Sarah Thankam Mathews booked an excursion with marine tour company **Daymaniat Shells**, which offers daily snorkeling trips from Muscat.

EXPLORE THE MOUNTAINS

Best accessed by a four-wheel-drive vehicle or by hiring a tour operator such as **Elite Travel & Tourism**, the Hajar Mountains stretch for roughly 430 miles from the United Arab Emirates to Oman's eastern coast. In spring, pink damask roses cover Jebel Akhdar, making this hiking area even more beautiful. A good base is the luxurious **Alila Jabal Akhdar** hotel atop Jebel Akhdar, which is surrounded by some of the highest mountains in the region. The Alila Jabal Akhdar also offers outdoor excursions that include a *via ferrata* cave adventure and a hike around Jebel Shams (Mountain of the Sun), so named because it is the first place to see sunrise in Oman due to its height.

HAVE A DESERT EXPERIENCE

South of Oman's fertile northern coast, the dunes of Sharqiya Sands are a good entry point to the country's sprawling desert. Tour the region in a 4x4 and consider an overnight stay at the Bedouin-style camp **Sama Al Wasil**.

AFAR's **Travel Advisory Council** *can help plan a trip to Oman. For more information, visit afar.com/about/travel-advisory-council.*

1 *Jebel Akhdar*
2 *Daymaniyat Islands*
3 *Bimmah Sinkhole*
4 *Wadi Shab*
5 *Wadi Tiwi*
6 *Wadi Bani Khalid*
7 *Sharqiya Sands*
8 *Dhofar*

This page: Known for their sea turtles, the Daymaniyat Islands are a protected marine reserve.

Opposite page: Sharqiya Sands stretches for more than 125 miles.

Train of Thoughts

BY LAUREN TAMAKI

Riding the train is one of my favorite ways to propel my body through space: Since I'm not driving, I can enjoy the terrestrial delights that pass me by, and when I put on a good song, *poof* I'm in the opening credits of a movie. A railway enthusiast once told me that the Ethan Allen Express—a 7.5-hour ride from New York City to Burlington, Vermont—was exceptional. And so I avoided technologies old and new and stared out the window . . . and I let my mind wander.

2:25PM *We're off! It's novel to travel with a whiff of dignity: a handwritten seat tag and no security scans.* **2:45** *Apparently there is a "good side" to be*

on for long train journeys. Of course, I'm not on it . . . but I soon snag a better seat! **3:33** *Wait, was that a castle?!* **4:12** *The Hudson River is brimming*

with boats! I wonder if I could become a boat person? **4:45** *What's shaking in the café car?* **5:01** *How many biomes have I passed in the past few hours?*

5:28 *Is there anything sweeter than someone waiting for you on a platform?* **7:02** *Was the turkey sandwich the best choice?* **7:28** *I'll bet the people*

who live this close to the train curse it on schedule. **8:03** *Are we moving backward? Where am I really going?* **9:50** *We're here! What's for dinner?*

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