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FROM ASIA TO THE WORLD



2015 Readers' Choice Awards

THE
REGION'S
BEST:
HOTELS
RESORTS
SPAS
CITIES
AIRLINES
and more



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Photograph by
Martin Westlake



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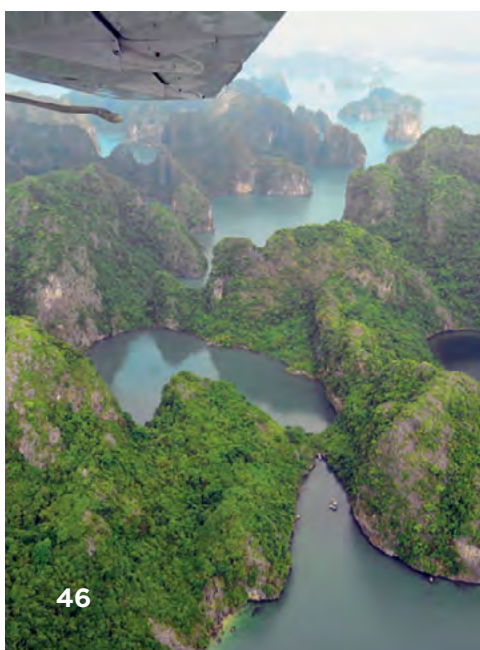
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NEW YEAR, A NEW LOOK

redesign of our pages to put forward a cleaner, sleeker version of *DestinAsian*. I hope you will find this issue both as classic and forward thinking as the content it contains. Speaking of what's up and coming in the travel world, river cruising is trending in that category, and as he recounts in "Life Aquatic," our editor-in-chief was one of the first passengers aboard the *Aqua Mekong*, a dream of a vessel that cruises the waterways between Siem Reap and Ho Chi Minh City in an exploration of Cambodian and Vietnamese river life. Also offshore, Mark Eveleigh reports on a new seaplane service that's offering the first aerial tours of Vietnam's storied Halong Bay.

However, we'd be remiss if we didn't also keep tabs on those places that appreciate rather than weather with time. For that, we have our annual Readers' Choice Awards—who better to pool for recommendations than our own base of eyes and ears? While there are a couple of newcomers to the list, many of this year's awards go to repeat winners, which is all the more reason to return to them; they're like those trusted wardrobe staples that always fit and never go out of style.

In the rest of our pages, we have a journey by foot along an ancient route through Japan, a sensory narration of India's Golden City, and a tasting of Yunnan's wine. We also have a compendium of everything one should know about Milan—an archetype of established form and function, presently flowering anew ahead of Expo Milano 2015. Here's to looking the part.



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**BARRY STONE****Home Base:** Picton, New South Wales**Wrote:** "In the Footsteps of Samurai," p. 84

.....

Best moment while working on this story:

Trying to stay awake while stealing an additional after-dinner ofuro session before bedtime.

The next time I visit Japan I'll revisit my favorite Kyoto watch designer, Izumo Senko, to purchase my seventh handmade timepiece. That will put me one Senko-designed watch ahead of the six owned by comedian Billy Crystal!**JASON MICHAEL LANG****Home Base:** Bangkok**Photographed:** "The Life Aquatic," p. 74

.....

Best moment while working on this story:

Cruising through the floodwaters of Cambodia's Prek Toal bird sanctuary on the Aqua Mekong's military-style skiffs. Flocks of rare spot-billed pelicans, white-shouldered ibises, and sarus cranes were everywhere to be seen.

Advice for other travelers: Bring a telephoto lens. In Prek Toal, you're often quite a good distance from the action.**CLAUDIA FLISI****Home Base:** Busto Arsizio, Lombardy**Wrote:** "Milan on the Move," p. 102

.....

Hardest part of writing this story:

Deciding which restaurants, cafés, and food emporia to mention. The city lives and breathes food (along with money).

Neatest Italian phrase to whip out: *In bocca al lupo*. It means "good luck" but translates to "in the mouth of the wolf," along the lines of the theater idiom "break a leg." The correct response is *crepi il lupo*, or "die wolf."

BULGARIAN RHAPSODY I'm a complete fan of your Asia-based stories and those are the reasons I keep picking up your magazine; being based in the region, I find stories about destinations in Asia to be the most relevant (and practical) for me. But I have to say that the recent article on Bulgaria's southern mountains was an eye-opener ["Road to the Rhodopes," Dec. 2014/Jan. 2015]. What remarkable costumes and customs they have, not to mention the ancient ruins dating back to the days of Alexander. It's a long way to go from Hong Kong, but my interest is sufficiently piqued to consider making the trip and braving the cold weather. I just wish the story came with an accompanying guide to Sofia, which I'm sure anyone would want to explore en route to the Rhodopes. —Matt Heston, Hong Kong

BALANCING THE BOOKS I may not be a bibliophile, but I am a fan of contemporary design, so you may want to add to your list of cool libraries ["Stack Stars," Oct./Nov. 2014] the Mansueto Library at the University Chicago. It's basically a big elliptical dome by local architect Helmut Jahn that inverts the conventional library layout, with the reading room above and the books below—in this case, in a vast underground storage space where volumes are retrieved by robotic cranes. Now that's cool. —Jessica Tsui, Hong Kong

SPANISH SENTIMENTS I came across your magazine on a recent trip to the Maldives and found it to be really interesting. If only I could get my hands on it in my native Spain! —Luis Ubach, Madrid

POWDER TO THE PEOPLE I'm just back from Niseko and you were right—the powder there is insane ["The White Stuff," Dec. 2014/Jan. 2015]. I couldn't see Mount Yotei through the clouds, but every day I woke up with another

20 centimeters of snow piled on my balcony. This really is the best skiing in Asia bar none, and the vibe in town is, as you say, pretty cool too, though I didn't see any naked dancers. Maybe next time? —Dan Sadinsky, Sydney

HOORAY FOR WEST HOLLYWOOD

I enjoyed Rachel Will's piece on Downtown L.A. ["L.A.'s Downtown Story," Oct./Nov. 2014] but would also direct any of your L.A.-bound readers to West Hollywood, which I recently visited and loved. It's the in-the-know burg for uber-cool fashion, galleries, and great restaurants, from vegan Gracias Madre to Cecconi's, an Italian classic. Another highlight? The rooftop "park" at the new Restoration Hardware store on Melrose. It's done up like an Italian garden, complete with an olive grove. —Eva Zuliana, Semarang

We welcome your views and recommendations. Letters to the editor should be sent via e-mail to letter@destinasian.com or by post to The Editor, DestinAsian Magazine, P.O. Box 08, JKPPJ, Jakarta, 10210A, Indonesia. Published letters may be edited for style, clarity, and length.

THE RESIDENCE

by Cenizaro

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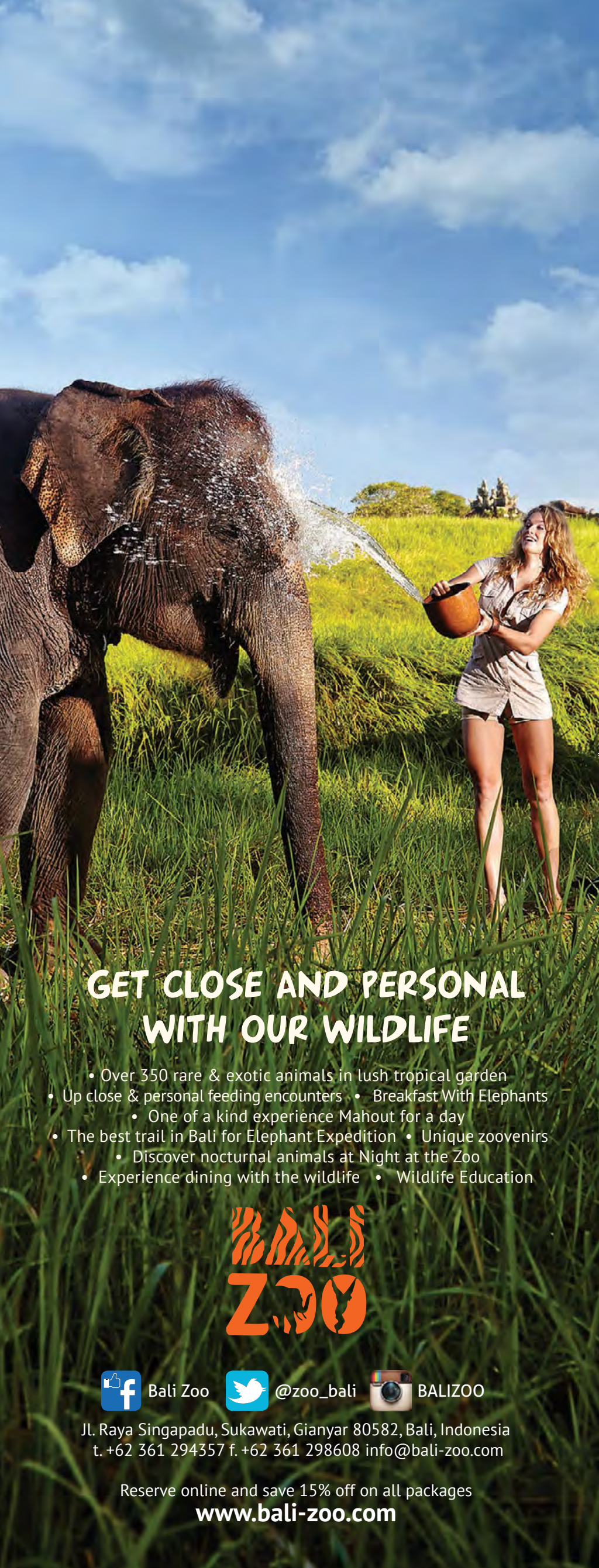


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SPECIAL DEALS



/ Indonesia /

FAIRMONT SANUR BEACH BALI

Less than two years after opening, the former Regent resort in Sanur, Bali, has been rebranded as a Fairmont, and its new managers are marking the occasion with two introductory offers. Until the end of March, book a night in one of the property's 26 pool villas at the best available rate (starting from US\$750 for a one-bedroom unit) and receive a second night's stay for free; book a suite, and a 25 percent discount applies. Both deals include breakfast for two, butler service, and a 2 p.m. checkout (fairmont.com).

Maldives COMO HOTELS AND RESORTS

There's no better way to shake off the winter blues than with a spring getaway, and COMO is offering special incentives to do so at their two Maldivian resorts: Maalifushi and Cocoa Island. Seven-night stays at either of these private-island oases come for the price of six through the end of April, and with some foresight, you can combine this with their Early Bird offer—five and 10 percent off all bookings made

30 and 60 days in advance, respectively—for even better rates (comohotels.com).

Thailand THE SIAM

Chic and private on the banks of the Chao Phraya, The Siam is one of Bangkok's best places for an urban escape, especially now. Running until December, its latest deal offers two nights for the price of one for stays in a pool villa, inclusive of daily breakfast, boat shuttles to Sathorn pier, and butler service (thesiamhotel.com).

China HOTEL ICON

An extensive Chinese art collection and one of the world's largest indoor vertical gardens are not the Hotel Icon's only draws. Through the end of June, the Hong Kong hotel is discounting its best available rates by 35 percent, though you may be enticed to upgrade to a Club room, whose nightly rates now start at US\$300—a discount of 40 percent—and include breakfast and access to the hotel's Above & Beyond lounge, perched 28 stories above the street of Tsim Sha Tsui (hotel-icon.com).



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Pictures from left to right: The Castle Hotel, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Dalian; The Azure Qiantang, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Hangzhou; The Naka Island, a Luxury Collection Resort & Spa, Phuket; ITC Grand Chola, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Chennai; Keraton at The Plaza, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Jakarta

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The Castle Hotel, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Dalian The Grand Mansion, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Nanjing (Q2, 2015)
The Hongta Hotel, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Shanghai The Royal Begonia, a Luxury Collection Resort, Sanya
Twelve at Hengshan, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Shanghai

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GOOD *to* GO

ADVENTURE
Skiing (and
sailing)
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ROOM REPORT
Luxe digs
in Chengdu
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TOP TABLE
Que Vinh
Dang's Quest
opens in
Wan Chai
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Reef Respite
Clean-lined and
contemporary, villas
at the Amilla Fushi
include these
one-bedroom Ocean
Reef Houses.



RAISING THE STAKES

Co-founded by the creator of the world's first underwater spa, **Amilla Fushi** is adding cool twists to the ultra-luxe Maldivian resort scene. Opened in December on a palm-covered island in the Baa Atoll, it features pool villas set 12 meters high in the treetops as well as on the beach and over the water; a gourmet café and deli; an 8,000-bottle wine cellar; and a jetty restaurant serving dishes created by Australian celeb chef Luke Mangan. There is plenty to ogle offshore too: the surrounding waters are part of a UNESCO biosphere reserve, including Hanifaru Bay, renowned for its seasonal concentrations of manta rays and whale sharks (960/660-6444; amilla.mv; doubles from US\$3,200). ©

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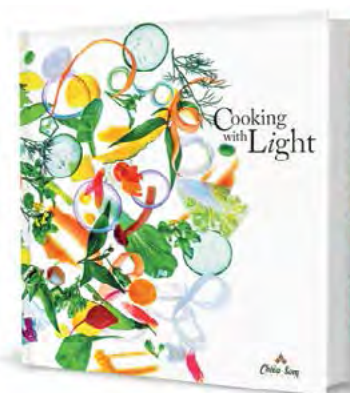
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**Basel and Beyond**

An untitled work by Austrian artist Tina Lechner, on display at Art Basel Hong Kong this year.

**THE LIGHT STUFF**

.....

If ever there was a thing one should binge on, it's clean eating. In his new cookbook **Cooking with Light**, Thai chef Paisarn Cheewinsirawat helps extend the spa diet into kitchens, sharing the recipes, techniques, and ingredients that have earned him several culinary awards during his time as cuisine director at Chiva-Som, southern Thailand's renowned health resort. Primarily Thai with European twists, dishes are filled with antioxidant-rich spices—lemongrass, turmeric, galangal—and plenty of fishes and greens (US\$132; chivasomproducts.com).

**WALK STARS**

.....

It's been 65 years since Nathan Clark created the Desert Boot, and the crepe-soled suede chukka is celebrating by revamping its image. In a collection called "**Clarks: Rebooted**," Clarks enlisted 14 British and U.K.-based artists and designers to use the iconic shoe as a canvas, and the results will travel as an exhibition to Milan, New York, and London after debuting at Design Shanghai on March 27. Limited-edition pairs will be sold to benefit the Halo Trust, the world's leading landmine-clearing agency (clarksrebooted.com).

HONG KONG IN THE PICTURE

.....

March sees Hong Kong at its most brushed up, when a deluge of art events makes the city a stage for the best galleries, artists, and performers from the region and the world.

Art Basel Hong Kong is the crux of the month's events, attracting the world's top galleries—half from Asia-Pacific—to the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, along with independent films, exclusive installations, and the who's who of the art world (March 15–17; artbasel.com).

Art Central debuts this year as the city's first world-class satellite art fair, bringing 70 galleries (as opposed to Basel's some 170) to harbor-front tents in Central (March 14–16; artcentralthongkong.com).

Asia Hotel Art Fair is an intimate alternative, once again using the posh rooms of the Marco Polo Hong Kong

Hotel as galleries for more than 5,000 works strictly from the region. The fair extends its premises this year as well, showcasing larger installations and sculptures in nearby Harbour City mall (March 13–16; hotelartfair.kr).

Hong Kong Arts Festival, now in its 33rd year, brings the cream of the world's classical-arts crop to stages citywide throughout the month. Bobby McFerrin, Pink Martini, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and The Bolshoi Ballet and Opera are a few of the stars on this year's program (February 27–March 29; hk.artsfestival.org).

FANCY FOOTWORK



As the saying goes, we'll always have Paris, but guests at the Four Seasons Hotel George V can have it up and running at sunrise, thanks to **Frédéric Pichon**. The hotel's director of security of 14 years, Pichon leads hour-long Run My City tours every Tuesday, running along the Seine past eight iconic landmarks, all before breakfast.

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- **I CREATED RUN MY CITY** because I have reached the age when one wants to share more than learn, and I wanted to share Paris with our guests in an unusual way—to watch the sun rise over its architecture, to be part of the Parisian morning magic.

- **OUR PRESENT ROUTE** is nine kilometers along the Seine, past the Eiffel Tower, the Trocadéro Gardens, the Champs de Mars, the Louvre, the Tuileries, and the Champs-Élysées. Before returning to the hotel, we stop for coffee and croissants at this small bistro where dustmen and clerks like to sit and catch up on the news.
- **PLEASURE, NOT PAIN** is the goal of these outings. Whether it is someone who had a long, romantic night or a businessman squeezing in a workout before a 9 a.m. meeting, each guest is promised a comfortable pace. —GL



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Opposite: *The*
Rembrandt van Rijn
in the icy waters off
Maniitsoq.



GLACIAL PROGRESS

Untouched snowfields abound on a ski-centric schooner trip through the fjords of Greenland's wild west coast. BY WILL HIDE



The Details

KE Adventure's eight-day Alpine Peaks of Greenland tour operates in April and May only, priced from US\$4,551 per person not including return airfare from Copenhagen (keadventure.com).

You've thrown snowballs in Hokkaido, chiseled ice sculptures in Harbin, posed with a penguin in Antarctica, and gazed at the northern lights in Lapland. So if you're a fan of holidays as far away from a sun lounger as you can possibly get, your next excursion should be ski touring in Greenland.

If nothing else, it's exclusive. Each season, the 56-meter schooner *Rembrandt van Rijn* offers just three sailings along the island's southwest coast, carrying a maximum of 33 passengers per trip. Cruises begin and end in the tiny, ice-bound town of Maniitsoq, which you access via a 40-minute turboprop flight from the even tinier settlement of Kangerlussuaq, home to Greenland's largest airport. Once on board,

your days unfold under the shadows of snow-clad mountains and ice-strewn fjords patrolled by guillemots and bowhead whales, with inflatable Zodiacs on hand to shuttle skiers ashore for daily sessions on the slopes.

For those of you thinking, "Who builds a ski lift in Greenland?" the answer, of course, is no one. Here, getting up a mountainside means climbing for several hours on touring skis fitted with specialized bindings and detachable "skins" on the underside that grip the snow. After that, it's all downhill, speeding through fields of knee-deep snow secure in the knowledge that apart from your group, the nearest powder hounds are thousands of kilometers away in Europe and New England. (Alternatively, you can just go snowshoeing, if all that climbing sounds far too energetic.)

A well-appointed former fishing boat, the *Rembrandt van Rijn* has 16 en-suite cabins, all on the cozy side, though no one spends much time below deck when the scenery outside is so spectacular. There is a large dining area and library where guests—on my trip, mostly Germans, Austrians, and Swiss—meet to chat about the day's skiing, play cards, or catch up on their reading. The English-speaking crew of 12 is a mini United Nations, originating from the Philippines, Germany, Siberia, and South America, including a jovial Argentine chef who does an amazing job of preparing restaurant-quality food in his small galley.

By late April and May, when the short season operates, the days are already long, and I enjoyed a week of unbroken sunshine. That said, good weather is far from guaranteed at these latitudes, and you have to accept a large degree of flexibility on the itinerary in case winds pick up and make a landing impossible. You have to be a good skier, too, with previous touring experience, to come along.

On my trip passengers split into two groups: the hard-core skiers, who climbed up to around 1,500 meters or more each day, skied down, then did the whole thing all over again in the afternoon; and a smaller band, of which I was one, who ascended in a more leisurely fashion to 1,000 meters or so, with plenty of stops for photos and snacks, then swooshed down just once, content with that being enough exertion for the day. The highlight came on our last day near Kangaamiut Kangerluarsuat Fjord, when we skied a wide bowl on crisp, forgiving snow, sweeping past glaciers in complete solitude under a cloudless blue sky, with magnificent scenery of endless ice and mountains all around. Afterward, back aboard the schooner, we sat out on deck with wide grins, soaking up the arctic rays. Who needs a sun lounger? ☉

CHECKING IN ON CHENGDU

Given the slew of fresh attractions and facilities that have popped up in Chengdu in recent years—new museums and arts centers, two subway lines, the restored laneways of the Kuanzhai old quarter—it's no surprise that upscale hotels have been scrambling to position themselves in the fast-rising capital of China's Sichuan province. The most recent arrivals on the scene—a St. Regis and the Diaoyutai Boutique—are the city's most luxurious digs yet. Here's the lowdown.

BY VICTOR PAUL BORG

St. Regis Chengdu

With 279 rooms set in a new 29-story high-rise in the city center, the St. Regis packs in all the brand's legendary opulence (Art Deco accents intermingled with locally inspired touches such as carpeting patterned with stylized Sichuan peppercorns), sophisticated service (including a cadre of deferential butlers), and an impressive lineup of F&B offerings, ranging from an excellent Sichuan-centric dining room to a sommelier-curated wine bar and a rooftop lounge. Tech lovers will appreciate the in-room gadgetry. Lights and air-conditioning flick on automatically as soon as you step through the door; electronically operated curtains slide open to reveal floor-to-ceiling views of Chengdu's bristling skyline; you can order room service via an iPad; and spacious marble-clad bathrooms come with high-tech toilets and heated floors. And when it comes time to step out, there are a few well-selected excursions to choose from, including a private tour and tasting at China's oldest *baijiu* distillery, Shui Jing Fang. 88 Taisheng Rd. South, Qingyang District; 86-28/6287-6666; stregis.com; doubles from US\$250

Diaoyutai Boutique Chengdu

This gem of a hotel is tied with the St. Regis for the largest guest quarters in town (entry-level rooms at both start at 65 square meters). But the similarities end there. The third property to be opened by a joint venture between Beijing's historic Diaoyutai State Guesthouse and MGM Resorts International, it inhabits two restored Qing-era courtyard buildings in the atmospheric Kuanzhai area. Gray-brick exteriors give way to interiors by French designer Bruno Moinard, with silk wallpaper, modish furnishings, gold and jade objets d'art, and a soothing, earthy palette enlivened by pops of color. The Diaoyutai's 45 rooms come in 16 different configurations, all with richly grained wooden floors and big bathrooms outfitted with bronze sinks. Equally inviting is the Royal Court restaurant, which painstakingly replicates many of the haute Chinese dishes that chefs at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse have presented to visiting dignitaries over the decades—things like matsutake mushroom consommé and braised pork meatballs simmered in a clay pot, which was the best I've ever tasted in China. The verdict? While the Diaoyutai may be a ways off from achieving the service standards of the St. Regis, it's a beguilingly original property that could get by on looks (and taste) alone.

38-39 Kuan Alley, Qingyang District; 86-28/6625-9999; dytchengdu.com; doubles from US\$333



Fine China
Inside the Governor Suite at the St. Regis. Right: Diaoyutai Boutique's Club lounge.



COURTESY OF ST. REGIS CHENGDU; COURTESY OF DIAOYUTAI BOUTIQUE

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FAROE AWAY

Adrift in the North Atlantic midway between Norway and Iceland, the 18 tiny Faroe Islands are as remote as they are beautiful, with thundering waterfalls, brightly painted villages set in hills of intense green, and sharply etched cliffs that tumble to the sea, as pictured here on the main island of Streymoy. Yet for all their elemental appeal, the Faroes—settled by the Vikings more than a

millennium ago and an autonomous Danish province since 1948—may be a bit far-flung to top anyone's bucket list. Those looking for an excuse to venture to the archipelago regardless should mark their calendars for March 20, when the islands will experience their first total solar eclipse since 1612. And though the event will only last for two and a half minutes starting at 9:41 a.m., it will be surrounded by a week of cultural festivities that will showcase Faroese hospitality at its best. —Gabrielle Lipton

Getting There

Via Copenhagen or Reykjavik on the Faroese flag carrier **Atlantic Airways** (atlantic.fo), which also operates seasonal flights to London in the summer.

Where to Stay On a hill overlooking the colorful capital city of Tórshavn on Streymoy, **Hotel Føroyar** (298/317-500; hotelforoyar.com; doubles from US\$286) offers uncomplicated, comfortable rooms and one of the islands' most celebrated restaurants, Koks.

Be Sure to Try

Skerpikjöt, the Faroes' famous wind-dried mutton. It's hung for months in ventilated wooden sheds and served in thin slices like prosciutto.

What Else? Take a boat tour up to the northwest coast of Streymoy, weaving through grottoes and sounds up to the Vestmanna bird cliffs, protected breeding grounds for a flurry of seabirds including fulmars, kittiwakes, guillemots, and puffins.





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BEAU QUEST

Que Vinh Dang's latest Hong Kong venture takes his playfully creative cuisine to a whole new level—28 stories, to be exact.

BY NICK WALTON

It's been little more than two years since TBLS shut its doors, but private-kitchen junkies are still lamenting the loss of their favorite Hong Kong haven. TBLS was the brainchild of Vietnam-born, New York-raised chef Que Vinh Dang, and its 18 seats were some of the most sought after in the city. Perhaps the popularity took its toll on Dang, or perhaps he wanted to focus on his growing family, but in October 2013, he closed the restaurant and opened a laid-back microbrewery, Tipping Point Brewing Co., instead. But as of December, the maestro of the set menu is back with a new venture: Quest.

Set 28 stories above Hennessy Road in Wan Chai, the 30-seat dining room is chic and spacious, with floor-to-ceiling windows, plenty of black lacquer and chrome, and an open kitchen where Dang holds court, putting finishing touches on dishes made with both food and theatrics. Although the chef is quick to point out that Quest is not a TBLS reincarnation, the same daring, experimentation, and playfulness underpins his new eight- and 12-course set menus, which are Vietnamese in name but



All Set
Inside Quest's 30-seat dining room. Left: Beef pho tartare.

ALSO NEW IN TOWN

.....

Gaucha

The first Asian branch of London's acclaimed Argentine steakhouse grills grass-fed cuts of beef from South America over an open flame; the ceviches are excellent too (5/F, LHT Tower, 31 Queen's Rd. Central; 852/2386-8090; gaucha.restaurants.com.hk).

The Continental

With an elegant dining room and the city's most extensive outdoor terraces, this Pacific Place beauty boasts a sophisticated wine list and a Franco-Anglaise menu by London chef Rowley Leigh (Pacific Place L4, 88 Queensway, Admiralty; 852/2704-5211; no website).

Carbone

Channeling the Michelin-starred finesse of its New York namesake, Carbone serves New York-style Italian classics in a dining room with decor straight out of a mafia flick (9/F, LFK Tower, 33 Wyndham St., Central; 852/2593-2593; carbone.com.hk).

global in flavor—course three, for instance, is a glossy mound of beef tartare dusted with a pho reduction and shavings of foie gras. With new rules to be broken and new lessons learned, it's clear that Dang is in his comfort zone.

His Vietnamese heritage is evident at first bite, which comes as yellowtail sashimi served with a zesty tomato jelly, a touch of *nuoc nam* sauce, and *yuzukosho*, a fermented Japanese paste of yuzu peel and chili that slices through the firm, fatty fish. Following that is his take on a traditional *nem cuon*, or spring roll, with silky Alaskan king crab and tangy pickled daikon under bright smoked-paprika foam that explodes on the palate, making for a roller coaster of a few mouthfuls. Black cod comes with sticky squid-ink mochi and a moreish ring of caramelized fish sauce, while grilled Berkshire pork belly nestled on a bed of purple sweet-potato puree makes for a great comfort dish.

Asian-fusion? Molecular East-meets-West? With Dang's plans to tweak menus regularly and completely revamp them each season, don't try to pigeon-hole his style. But if the fact that menus are given at the end of the meal rather than the beginning is meant to signify anything, it's that Quest will always be, if nothing else, a showcase for surprises. Just like old times. ☉

From US\$80 per person for 8 courses; 239 Hennessy Rd., Wan Chai; 852/2554-0888; questbyque.com

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SET IN STONE

Who said cave life is a thing of the past? These four troglodytic hotels offer a rock-solid option for travelers in search of something different.

BY TINA SINDUKUSUMO

Caving In
Arched and vaulted, the two-bedroom Cave 21 suite at Sextantio Le Grotte Della Civita comes with a private terrace overlooking Matera's rocky terrain.



1 / Italy SEXTANTIO LE GROTTA DELLA CIVITA

.....
A ravine-side warren of prehistoric cave dwellings, the Sassi district of Matera was once among Italy's poorest communities. Not anymore. Since achieving World Heritage status in 1993, the area has emerged as a thriving tourist destination, its once dank grottoes converted into galleries, cafés, and hotels. The best of the latter is Le Grotte Della Civita, where 18 spare but romantic cave rooms feature walls of unadorned stone set aglow by candlelight. sextantio.it; doubles from US\$178

2 / France LES HAUTES ROCHES

.....
France's most luxurious troglodyte hotel inhabits a series of *tuffeau* caves that once served as cells for monks from nearby Marmoutier Abbey. A dozen richly decorated rooms are carved into a chalky cliff on the banks of the Loire River just east of Tours; another two are located above a Michelin-starred restaurant in an adjacent 18th-century manor house. leshautesroches.com; doubles from US\$268

3 / Sweden SALA SILVERMINE MINE SUITE

.....
A 155-meter descent down a mine shaft in Västmanland brings guests to the world's deepest hotel room. Excavated by silver miners in the 1700s, the cavern is now done up with silver-toned furnishings and cozy bedding, and a night's stay includes a mine tour as well as a basket of cheeses, chocolate, and sparkling wine. What you won't get is cell reception—the only contact with the world above is via intercom to the 24-hour concierge service. salasilvergruva.se; doubles from US\$617

4 / Turkey GAMIRASU CAVE SUITE

.....
Sculpted into a hillside of volcanic stone in the Cappadocian village of Ayvali, this onetime retreat for Byzantine monks is anything but monastic. Rooms come with modern trappings such as hot tubs and Wi-Fi, while activities include yoga sessions and Turkish cooking classes. gamirasu.com; doubles from US\$173

MY MAGNIFIQUE VOYAGE

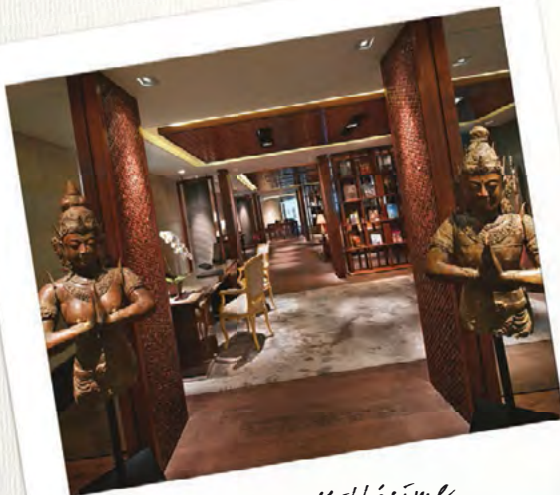
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Culture Bash

The Belfry in Mons, built in the 17th century, alight at night. Top right: A circus performer from Pilsen's Le Cirque Nouveau program.

**PILSEN**

.....

/In Brief/

The birthplace of Skoda automobiles and Pilsner beer, Pilsen is the Czech Republic's fourth-largest city, known for its art spaces, brews, and core of old architectural gems, including the world's third-largest synagogue.

/What to Do/

Watch a performance of contemporary circus arts, with Pilsen's annual Le Cirque Nouveau program bringing 60 performances from nine international circus ensembles (*through December 15*). **See** niche exhibitions at the West Bohemian Gallery, one from Munich's golden age of art—think Kandinski and Klee—at “Munich: Shining Metropolis of Art” (*through April 6*), the other a collection of Maori portraits by native Gottfried Lindauer, on loan from the National Gallery in Auckland (*May 6–September 20*). **Go** on a stroll through otherwise private green areas during the Weekend of Opened Gardens (*June 13–14*). **Hear** spectacular jazz at the Bohemia Jazz Fest (*July 1–31*), an annual highlight of Europe's summer music circuit.

/While You're There/

Take a tour of the Pilsen Historical Underground (plzenskepodzemi.cz), a 20-kilometer-long maze of subterranean tunnels that date back to the 14th century. Relax after with a beer at Pilsner Urquell Brewery (prazdrojvisit.cz), where the first pilsner-style ale was brewed in 1842. ©

FAIR SHARE

This year, two small cities share the title of European Capital of Culture. Read on to see how they'll show off their artsy sides.

BY GABRIELLE LIPTON

MONS

.....

/In Brief/

Once a mining town, the southern Belgium city of Mons—site of the first battle of World War I—is today a dichotomy of old UNESCO-listed sites and a new Silicon Valley-esque identity, full of start-ups and with a Google data center nearby.

/What to Do/

Watch an eclectic array of performance art

ranging from karaoke to séances when the hip British Working Men's Club from London installs itself in an old school building for four days (*February 19–22*). **See** two world-class exhibits at the Beaux-Arts Mons museum: “Van Gogh au Borinage,” displaying works from the start of the artist's career (*through May 17*); and “Verlaine, cellule 252,” about the master of French poetry and his vice-

ridden time in Belgium (*October 17–January 24, 2016*). **Go** get lost in Sun City, a maze of 8,000 sunflowers in the Grand-Place (*July 17–26*). **Hear** auditory exhibitions and installations—the Chapel of Silence, the Room of Sound and Wonder—at the Arsonic theater (*April 3–5*).

/While You're There/

Visit the Mundaneum (mundaneum.org), a massive archive

created by two lawyers attempting to document all the world's knowledge on index cards, often regarded as the first iteration of the Internet. And for a photo op, climb to the top of the Belfry, a World Heritage-listed Baroque bell tower that is the tallest structure in town.

For more information and full schedules, visit plzen2015.cz and mons2015.eu

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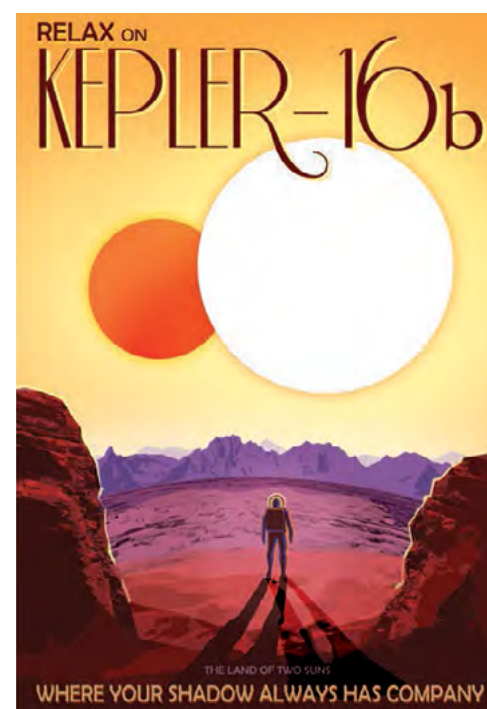
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Flights of Fancy

Don't pack your bags yet—while Kepler-186f is 490 light years from Earth, the much closer exoplanet Kepler-16b is thought to be as cold as dry ice, despite its having two suns.

SPACED OUT

Even if there were plant life on Kepler-186f, it wouldn't likely be green: the red-wavelength photons emitted by the exoplanet's sun probably mean the vegetation there would be a shade of crimson. At least, that's what NASA thinks. Launched in 2009, the U.S. space agency's Kepler telescope recently discovered its 1,000th exoplanet (a planet that orbits a star beyond our own solar system), including some that hold the potential of being habitable. It's these that the visual strategists at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory have recently been casting in vintage-style travel posters—three so far, downloadable from the center's website, with more to come—imagining their extraterrestrial landscapes as actual destinations. Call it the new golden age of travel (planetquest.jpl.nasa.gov). —**Gabrielle Lipton**



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There's something about the Thai way of life that is inextricably different from other cultures. Perhaps it is the *sanook* attitude of always having fun, or perhaps it is the *mai pen rai* mindset of tossing worries to the wind in favor of kindness and hospitality.

From the traditions of Thai boxing to the contagious excitement of a Thai crowd, days spent on beaches and visiting temples to nights spent perusing markets and partying, the spirit of Thainess offers unique experiences to all who visit Thailand. Use our guide to discover the country in a new way, and see the true beauty of Thainess.



MUAY THAI FESTIVAL

MARCH

Fast, furious, and frightening, Muay Thai is one of the world's most ritualistic martial arts. This March, head to the sport's birthplace in Ayutthaya Historical Park for the Muay Thai Festival, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to witness fighters paying their respects to the art's masters in a grand Wai Kru ceremony.



SONGKRAN SPLENDOURS

APRIL

One of Thailand's biggest summer draws is without a doubt the Songkran festival. More readily known as the Thai New Year tradition of water splashing, the festival sees crowds flocking outdoors to splash one another amidst the summer heat. But underlying the fun, Songkran is all about harmony and community. Before youngsters take to the streets with their buckets of water, well-wishes are exchanged in homes as water is gently poured on elders' hands, and solemn ceremonies are held at local temples. In Songkran, the water doesn't just provide refreshment but also signifies the familial joy of a community where people's lives flow together in harmony.



THAILAND MUSIC FESTIVAL

MAY

Ever heard of a Japanese band that solely plays Thai rock songs? How about the recent music festival sensation, The Paradise Bangkok Molam International Band, putting Thai folk music in the limelight? From a classical maestro to a teen idol group, Thai musicians have made their way onto the international stage, and each year, they join one another at the Thailand Music Festival.

This year, Hua Hin will take its turn hosting the festival, where headliners as well as up-and-coming artists will fill stages in front of audiences of thousands, enjoying the musical vibes with a backdrop of one of Thailand's top beach destinations.



THAILAND GRAND SALE

JUNE 15 - AUGUST 15

Every year, the Grand Sale sees Thailand turn into a shopper's heaven. From Bangkok's Siam district to retail outlets in cities around the country, the sale's unique shopping experiences and special privileges are reasons why Thailand is one of the world's top shopping destinations.



ASEAN MUSIC & ARTS FESTIVAL

JULY

At the dawn of the ASEAN Economic Community, music is a vehicle that helps form a strong bond between the AEC's 10 cultures. In July, join a celebration of aesthetical exchange where music from all over the region is brought together in Chiang Mai.



IN ROYAL MELODY

DECEMBER

Imagine looking out at night over the curves of the Chao Phraya riverbanks sided with glittering pagodas and shadows of historical buildings. Add to this dazzling scene the sounds of His Majesty's Blues, and the experience will be a magical delight.

Aside from his extensive philanthropic work throughout the country, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej is also known for his classical jazz compositions. In honor of his birthday in December, a selection of his famous tunes performed by leading Thai and international musicians is sure to make for an unforgettable concert.



FOOD FESTIVAL

SEPTEMBER

Since ancient times, Thai people have developed recipes and cooking techniques to harness the best of what Mother Nature offers each season. In addition to its much beloved spiciness, authentic Thai cuisine is kept fresh and healthy with abundant raw ingredients, which help bodies acclimate to changes in the climate. Toward the end of September when the rainy season ends and the cooler breezes start blowing in, Bangkok will hold the Thailand International Food Festival, bringing Thai and international chefs together to share their stories of spice through live demonstrations and gastronomic creations.



THAILAND TIME TRAIL

OCTOBER

For serious bikers, the Thailand Time Trial will offer a thrilling race through the stunningly beautiful mountain roads of northern Thailand's Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces.



LOI KRATHONG FESTIVAL

NOVEMBER

In a tradition that dates back seven centuries, the Loi Krathong water festival will be held along the Chao Phraya on the night of the full moon, signifying the river's importance in Thai life.

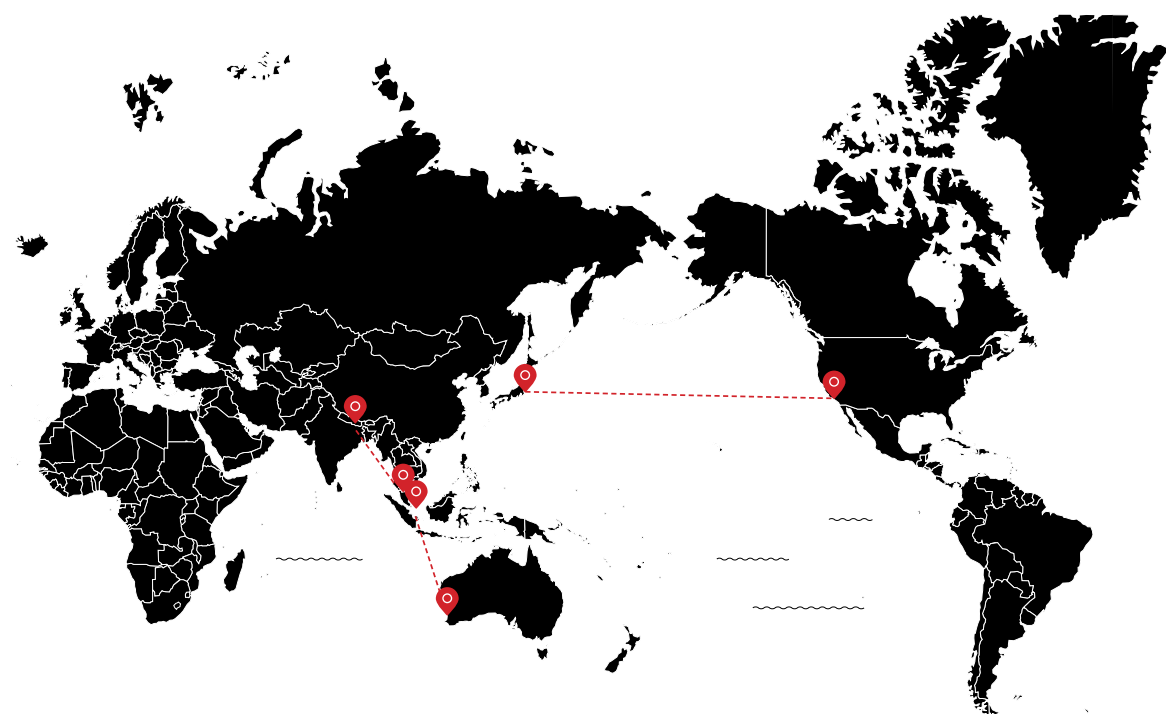


QUEEN OF SILK FESTIVAL

AUGUST

Sought out by young designers and major fashion houses alike, Thai silk is known for its unique sheen and velvety texture. Held in Bangkok, this festival takes a look into the rich history of techniques that make each piece of Thai silk a true work of art.





BULLETIN

Debut Flight
Qatar Airways

The newest aircraft from Airbus—the A350 XWB—has been released, and Qatar Airways is the first carrier to fly it, operating the plane on its Doha-Frankfurt route as of mid-January. Impressive inside and out, the A350 is powered by Rolls Royce Trent XWB engines, produces 25 percent lower carbon dioxide emissions than existing wide-bodied jets, and has LED mood lighting to counter the effects of jetlag (qatarairways.com).

Luxe Lounges
Cathay Pacific

Attention lounge-lovers: as part of its brand revamp, Cathay Pacific is giving its lounge network a major makeover. First seen in its new lounge in Tokyo Haneda, which opened December 9, a living room-like ambience and an expanded version of its signature Noodle Bar will be staple components of the five new airport oases rolling out over the course of 2015: Manila in April, Bangkok in May, Hong Kong in June, Taipei in September, and Vancouver by early 2016 (cathaypacific.com).


Osaka-Los Angeles
Japan Airlines

In addition to marking its first new international flight out of Osaka in six years, JAL's soon-to-launch daily service between Kansai International Airport and LAX makes it the only Japanese carrier operating a nonstop on this route. Operated by a 161-seat Boeing Dreamliner, the flight commences March 20 and can connect passengers with 37 destinations on partner American Airlines (jal.com).

ROUTE UPDATES

Perth-Singapore
Scoot

As of February 1, Singapore Airlines' low-cost offshoot Scoot has begun flying daily between Perth and Singapore, up from five times a week. Passengers on the route will also enjoy an upgraded aircraft, with Scoot's inaugural Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner replacing the Boeing 777-200 that has been operating on its Western Australia run since 2013. The plane will feature 375 seats and Wi-Fi connectivity for a fee (flyscoot.com).

Kuala Lumpur-Kathmandu
Malindo Air

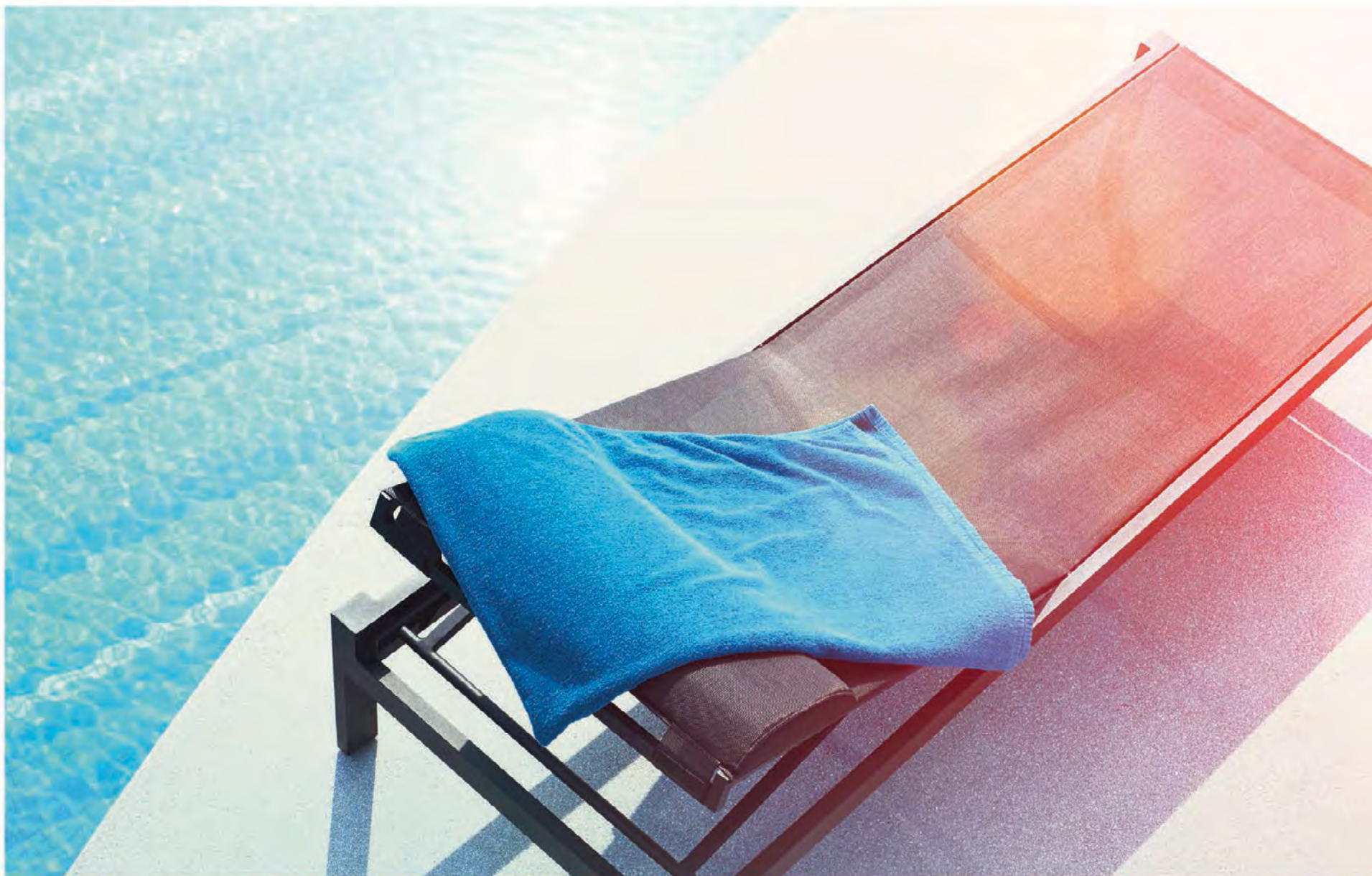
On February 6, Malindo Air will commence daily flights between K.L. and the Nepali capital, operated by new Boeing 737-900 aircraft. Kathmandu marks the seventh Southeast Asian destination for the nascent budget airline, a Malaysian-Indonesian joint venture that will continue to expand its regional network this year (malindoair.com).



IN-FLIGHT SERVICES

CLASS ACTS

Etihad has upgraded the onboard amenities on its long-haul flights, offering something new for every passenger. In first class, niceties range from an enhanced menu to turn-down service with pillow mist and pulse-point oil; business seats come with cotton loungewear and plush comforters; and those flying economy can rest easy with convertible neck pillows and eye masks that read "Wake me up to eat" on one side and "Do not disturb" on the other (etihad.com).



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That Was Then

Sampans along the hazy Victoria Harbor waterfront, as pictured in “Dream of Old Hong Kong,” an image shot by Fan Ho in 1957.



/ Hong Kong /

MID-CENTURY MEMORIES

Call it selective memory, but there is something dream-like about the way we recall places we love as they once were. A master at the art of capturing this is Fan Ho, one of Asia's most accomplished photographers and film directors. Born in Shanghai but raised in Hong Kong from 1949, Ho, now 83, began his career as a teenager, documenting life on the streets of the then British colony in the 1950s and '60s through the lens of his Rolleiflex camera. It's images from this period that fill the last installment of his trilogy of photography books about the city, *Fan Ho: A Hong Kong Memoir* (Modernbook Editions), some previously unpublished, and some created by combining two black-and-white negatives into one image for a result far more about feelings than facts. —**Gabrielle Lipton**





Focusing on the Past
Clockwise from above: A rickshaw driver crossing Central's tramlines in 1955 is pictured in "End of the Day"; "Coolie and Kids"; Fan Ho's work often portrays solitary figures, as in this image, "Back Lane," from 1960. Opposite: Newly montaged photographs from 1966 appear in "Life Goes On."

DISPATCHES

VIETNAM
Plane
sailing in
Halong Bay
p. 46

ROMANIA
Exploring
the Danube
Delta
p. 50

Around the Bend
The Mekong River
carves through a
gorge below the road
to Cizhong.



VINTAGE YUNNAN

A world away from Bordeaux, old-world grapes are finding new purchase in the high-altitude terrain of China's Diqing prefecture.

BY LEISA TYLER



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It's early evening as Xiao Yu Ying plucks a small bundle of grapes from a spindly vine. Pea-sized and pink-skinned, the fruit are plump and sweet with a distinct tartness. Xiao doesn't have to look at a calendar to know that it will soon be harvest time. Autumn is encroaching; the thickly forested slopes of Tacheng Valley are already washed in fall colors, a palette of turmeric, sunflower yellow, and fiery red.

A sprightly septuagenarian with an oversize laugh that begins as a tremor in her slender shoulders before erupting as a full body lurch, Xiao is new to grape growing. She used to plant corn and wheat on her four *mu* (about a third of a hectare) of land, enough to feed her family and livestock with some left over to sell at the market. Then the local government approached Xiao and the other farmers with plots of land on the valley's north-facing slopes to grow grapes for ice-wine production. Xiao says it was too

Wine of the Times

Above: A grape grower on her vineyard in Tacheng Valley, in the far northwest of Yunnan. Top left: Cizhong's vinegary wine comes from vines planted by French missionaries more than a century ago. Opposite: The village's old stone church.



lucrative to pass up: she can earn four times as much from grapes as she ever could from grain. Even in a bad year, like 2013, when torrential summer rains caused an outbreak of mold, she still cleared double, and with half the effort. But having tasted the wine, she tells me she's not quite sure what the fuss is about, erupting into another body-shaking giggle.

Tacheng Valley lies in the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, a sliver of land in northwestern Yunnan province that encompasses the upper Mekong (known here as the Lancang) and Yangtze rivers. With poor soils, long summers, and plenty of clean water tumbling down from the Tibetan Plateau, Diqing is being tagged as Asia's answer to Bordeaux, albeit one with vineyards situated well above the 2,000-meter mark. And its wine business is booming. From the terraced fields cut into the slopes below the Mingyong Glacier of Meili Snow Mountain, to the moonscape setting of the Tibetan village Benzilan and the forests of Tacheng, farmers like Xiao have been uprooting their traditional crops of wheat, corn, and barley to grow vines.

Since the early 2000s, the market has been dominated by local ice-wine makers Shangri-La and Sun Spirit, which produce mediocre products aimed squarely at the domestic market. But with French luxury wine behemoth Moët Hennessy and Western Australia's Cape Mentelle Vineyards currently tending more than 30 hectares of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and cabernet franc grapes, Diqing is one step closer to securing a place on the world wine map.



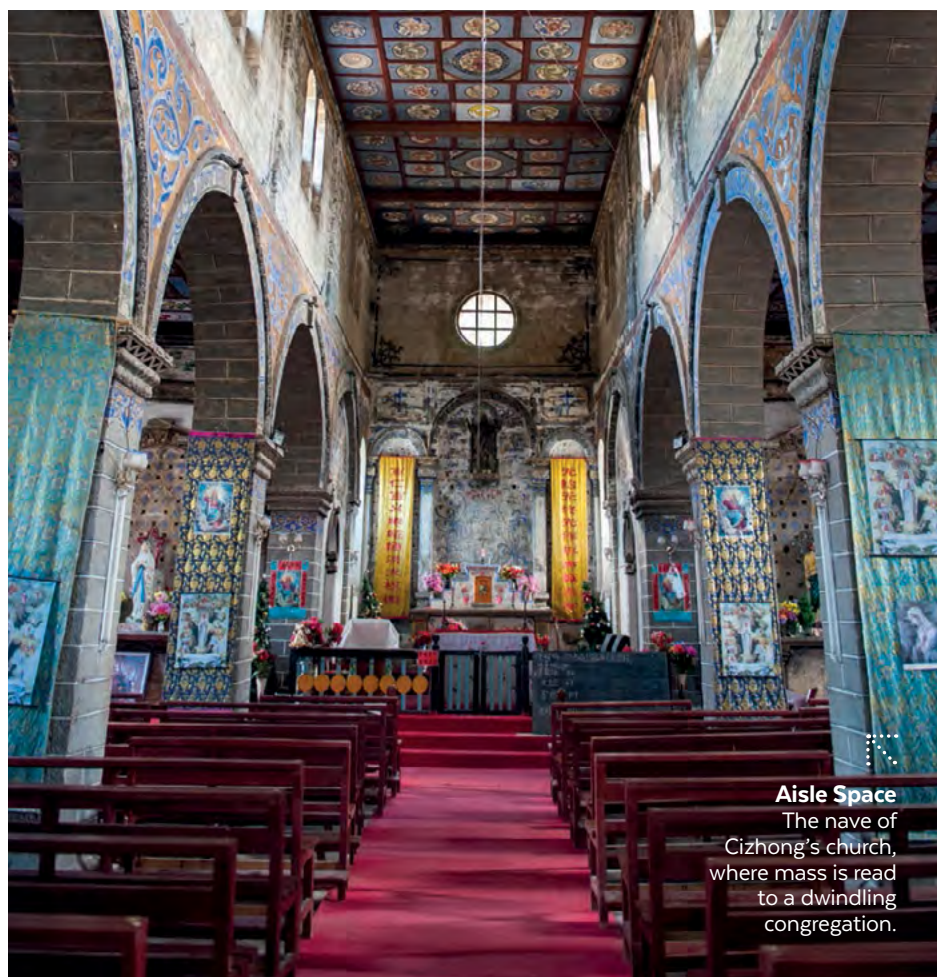
Yet not everybody is convinced. “Wine is a high-value cash crop, but a very risky business,” says Kunming-based academic Brendan Galipeau, an expert in the prefecture’s burgeoning wine economy. “Farmers are making more money now than they ever made. But few companies, apart from Moët Hennessy, know how to properly tend the grapes. Every year the harvesters come late, the grapes have started to dry up, and the villagers often can’t sell them. This produces food security issues. You can eat corn and wheat; you can feed it to your animals. But you can’t live off grapes.”

Still, with Moët Hennessy’s winery at Adong village planning to launch its first “Bordeaux-like blend” this year alongside a new visitors’ center, the prospects for Diqing’s unlikely harvest seem bright.

Wine isn’t as alien to Diqing as one would suppose. In 1910, French Jesuit missionaries built a bell-towered stone church and vineyard in Cizhong, a hamlet of whitewashed courtyard houses that peer over a turbulent stretch of the Lancang River north of Tacheng. Here they planted a variety of grape known as rose honey, first brought to Yunnan from France in the mid 1800s to make altar wine and now extinct in Europe. Flushed with a purple hue and producing a crimson drop with a slightly sweet nose, the grapes flourished on Cizhong’s gentle slopes, protected from the fierce winds of the Tibetan Plateau by a 1,000-meter-high gorge. Winemaking back then was rudimentary. Harvested each September when the sun had started to wane, the grapes were hand-squeezed before being buried in clay amphorae to ferment.

A hundred years on, the villagers of Cizhong still produce wine from cuttings of those early vines using the methods handed down by the last missionaries, who left in 1949 on the eve of the Communist Revolution. The results are a little rustic. The first wine I try, over dinner at the Songtsam Cizhong Lodge, is clearly off—an intense hit of acid followed by a very odd but distinct taste of yak cheese.

Lui Wan Zhen’s winemaking skills fare better. A Christian of the Naxi ethnic group, he learned the craft from his grandmother. Sitting in the sunroom of his family’s blue-and-white-tiled courtyard house, Lui pours me a 10-year-old red that has been aged in oak barrels purchased in northern China. It shows several characteristics of a great wine—dark cherry in color with a plush blackberry nose and syrupy texture that sticks nicely to the side of the glass. Except, like all the others I try in Cizhong, it has long since acidified and turned into vinegar. Sharp and rich, it would fit perfectly with some olive oil as a salad dressing.



Aisle Space
The nave of Cizhong’s church, where mass is read to a dwindling congregation.



Getting There

China Southern Airlines flies daily to Diqing Shangri-La Airport from Kunming, Yunnan’s provincial capital (csair.com).

Where to Stay

Songtsam Lodges operate five small luxury hotels in off-the-beaten track locations in Diqing prefecture, including **Songtsam Meili** (doubles from US\$225) in the tiny village of Gujiunong, which overlooks the peaks of the Meili Mountain Range; and **Songtsam Cizhong** (doubles from US\$220), set amid vineyards and rice fields near the banks of the Lancang River (songtsam.com).

“It’s really good for the digestive system,” says Lui, reading my mind as I ponder the health benefits of antioxidant-rich vinegar. Lui produces around 500 liters of the stuff a year from his organic vineyard, selling what he doesn’t drink at home to the few intrepid tourists who make the six-plus-hour drive from the nearest airport.

Cizhong’s little Romanesque church is still standing too, surrounded by the thick blackened trunks of the original rose-honey vines. The resident priest, Father Yeoh, a jovial man with two missing front teeth, tries his hand at making wine from them, although he admits he isn’t very good at it yet.

That evening I attend mass. It’s a balmy night for October, still warm enough to forgo a jacket. Still, such weather hasn’t persuaded the local faithful to venture out. Only five people have come to hear Father Yeoh preach about community and forgiveness. All are elderly: two Tibetan women brandishing walking sticks, their heads wrapped in pink and blue scarves, sit next to Lui Wan Zhen’s mother, across the aisle from a pair of Naxi men in faded blue suits.

It makes for a surreal experience, sitting on a pew in a French-built church high in the remote mountains of northern Yunnan, surrounded by century-old grape vines. Bordeaux may be more than 8,000 kilometers away, but for a brief moment, I feel transported to its distant climes. ☉



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Up in the Air
Looking down on
Halong Bay from
the seat of a Cessna
seaplane.



HIGH TIMES OVER HALONG

A new seaplane service provides a bird's-eye view of Vietnam's most famous bay—and the perfect start to a cruise through its myriad myth-inspiring islands. BY MARK EVELEIGH



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I'm no stranger to bumpy landings, but as I looked down onto the wind-chopped waters of Halong Bay, I'll admit that I was getting nervous about my first descent in a seaplane.

We had taken off from the runway at Hanoi's international airport 30 minutes earlier, just as the sun was starting to burn the early-morning mist off the rice fields. Banking away from the Vietnamese capital, the 12-passenger Cessna Caravan Amphibian was soon soaring over the great snaking zigzag of the Red River as it neared the end of its 1,200-kilometer run from China's Yunnan province, its waters tinted ruddy brown from the runoff of the countless paddies that have made Vietnam one of the world's largest exporters of rice.

Before long we caught sight of the first limestone spires of Halong Bay's mythic islands, looking like the towers of some prehistoric cityscape rearing above the shimmering coastal flatlands. It's not every day you get an aerial view of what might well be the most spectacular bay in the world—Hai Au Aviation, Vietnam's first commercial seaplane service, only began operating out of Hanoi last September after attaining special permission to operate scenic flights over Halong. For travelers with limited time and a sense of adventure, it's an ideal way to see this 1,500-square-kilometer World Heritage Site, if only to skip the seven-hour car journey from Hanoi.



The Details

A five-day Historic Hanoi and a Flight of Fancy tour with **Backyard Travel** costs from US\$1,599 per person and includes two nights' accommodation at the Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi and two nights aboard the *Jasmine*, as well as the seaplane flight from Hanoi to Halong Bay (backyardtravel.com; most meals included). For those looking to make their own arrangements, **Hai Au Aviation** flies daily between Hanoi and Halong Bay with the option of adding on a 15-minute scenic flight over the karst-strewn waters (seaplanes.vn; one-way tickets from US\$258).

Out over the jade-green water, the Cessna banked hard above the modest summit of Ti Top Island. Of all the outcroppings in Halong Bay, this is the only that takes its name from a person: Ho Chi Minh himself rechristened it in 1962 while visiting the island with his friend Gherman Stepanovich Titov, the Soviet cosmonaut who was the first person to spend an entire day in space. As the pilot tilted the wings in a playful victory salute I found myself looking directly down on a rocky pinnacle that seemed to be just a hundred meters below us.

Most of the islands rise in sheer cliffs, and it was hard to imagine that they had ever seen human footprints. I wondered if anything at all could have evolved in such spectacular isolation since this flooded mountain chain first emerged from the sea 250 million years ago. But Halong teems with biodiversity: hundreds of fish species have been recorded here, and researchers have identified 14 endemic plant species and no less than five dozen species of endemic animals.

Halong Bay is part of a great limestone ecosystem wedged between the tectonic bookends of Bai Tu Long Bay to the northeast and the Cat Ba Archipelago to the southwest. Its 1,900-plus islands and islets punctuate the sea in great sweeping ranges, cragged and scaled with rock, looking exactly like the backs of the dragons that a Vietnamese legend holds them to be.

Here and there in sheltered bays, we could see the odd fishing boat or a lonely houseboat, tethered to its floating fish corrals. Swooping over one of the main channels we suddenly had an aerial view of half a dozen gleaming white tourist junks, heading back to port to pick up a new batch of passengers.

I wondered if the boat we would be sailing on was among them.

The water landing I'd been fretting about was, in fact, smooth and uneventful, though it must have traumatized the dozen or so small silvery fish that suddenly found themselves hitching a ride on the seaplane's floats. After depositing us at its wharf on Tuan Chau Island, the Cessna taxied off to refuel for its return flight, giving us time to enjoy a couple glasses of aromatic Vietnamese coffee before our mid-morning transfer to the *Jasmine*, one of three junk-rigged boats owned by boutique cruise operator Heritage Line. With 23 roomy, wood-paneled cabins and an elegant dining room and lounge area, the 55-meter *Jasmine* is among the bay's most luxurious vessels, though the upper deck tends to be where passengers spend all their time. And with good reason: no matter how attractive the boat may be, it's the spellbinding labyrinth of karst formations that people come here to see. With your bare feet planted on the warm timber deck of a slow boat in the Gulf of Tonkin, under the shade of a tawny-colored sail, it's hard to imagine a better way to explore this other-worldly seascape.

But to truly experience the bay you need to get your feet wet—or better yet, your whole body. Over the next couple of days we swam in the balmy waters and paddled kayaks through limestone tunnels into lagoons where the only other creatures to be seen were golden-headed langurs, one of the world's rarest primates. The monkeys are endemic to the bay's largest island, Cat Ba, which we visited for a cycling excursion and a taste of *hoanh bo*, the fiery local rice wine. We also paddled around a floating fishing village and explored a nearby cave complex where the villagers claim their ancestors were born some 10,000 years ago—they call it the “honeymoon suite.”

I spent my last evening relaxing on the *Jasmine*'s sun deck, an icy gin and tonic in hand. It wasn't nearly as thrilling as that first barnstorming view from the air, but with the wind cracking in the sails and Halong Bay's surreal archipelago slipping slowly past, I had all the drama I needed. ☉

Karst Away

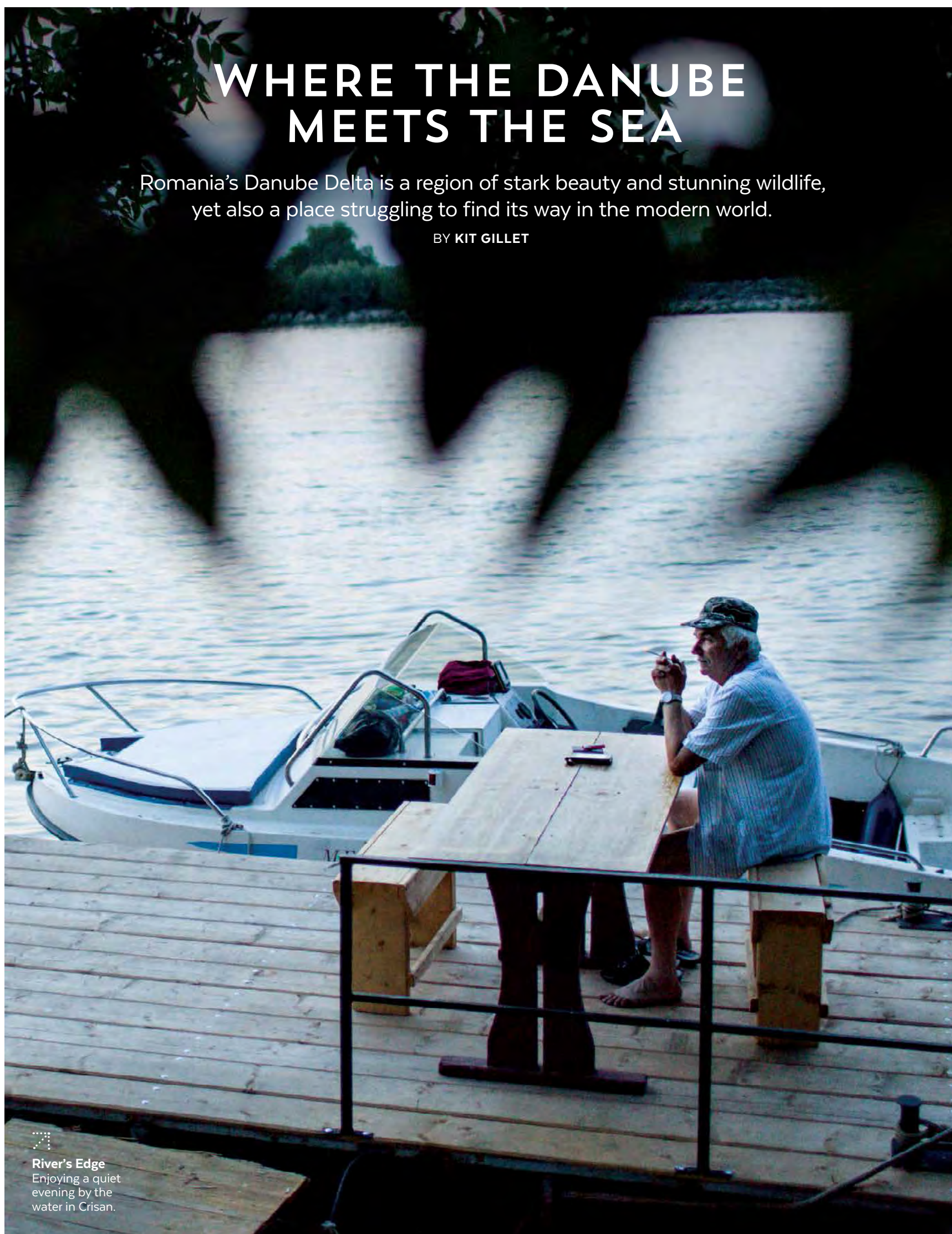
Right, from top: Hai Au Aviation's Cessna float-plane taxiing for takeoff; sunset over a cluster of the bay's karst islands. Opposite: Admiring the passing scenery from the sundeck of the *Jasmine*.



WHERE THE DANUBE MEETS THE SEA

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From atop a 19th-century lighthouse in the small Romanian port town of Sulina, I stare out toward the mouth of the Danube, the endpoint of a river that stretches almost 2,900 kilometers through the heart of Europe. In the fading light a few others have gathered to take in the views over Sulina, the nearby cargo ships, and, in the direction away from the sea, the vast labyrinth of waterways that make up the Danube Delta.

Completed in 1870, the lighthouse, as with much of the town's architecture, was built at a time when Sulina was home to a mix of nationalities—British, French, Italians, Austrians, Russians, Turks—who, as part of the European Commission of the Danube, monitored and maintained the entrance to one of the greatest rivers on the planet; in a nearby cemetery, weathered gravestones etched with foreign names attest to the cosmopolitan milieu of those times. That era is long gone. Today, Sulina is a largely forgotten place on the far reaches of Europe, yet it sits within one of the world's most stunning natural regions—the “Everglades of Europe,” as some call it.



End of the Line

Above: A view over town from the Sulina Lighthouse Museum, with the domed bell towers of the Church of St. Nicholas rising above the south bank of the Danube as it flows toward the sea.

Considered by many to be the very lifeline of Europe, the Danube River flows through 10 countries as well as four European capitals. Its delta, in the Dobrogea region at the edge of the Black Sea, has been a UNESCO biosphere reserve since 1998 and is considered one of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet, with an abundance of rare and endangered fish and bird species. Egrets, white pelicans, and great cormorants can be seen swooping over the estuarine water, while down in the depths many of the Danube's remaining wild sturgeon live out their long lives.

I had arrived in the delta a week before, traveling up by train from Bucharest and then catching one of the little ferries that link the gateway city of Tulcea with the handful of villages that exist within the delta itself. Accessible only by boat, these communities are among the most traditional in the country, inhabited by Romanians as well as by ethnic Ukrainians and Lipovan Russians—descendants of old-rite Orthodox Christians who fled religious persecution in the 18th century—who continue to depend on the delta for their livelihood.

A man in a dark suit and blue tie stands in a newsroom, gesturing with his hands. The background is filled with blurred computer monitors and red office chairs.

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Delta Denizen

A Sfântu Gheorghe local in his vegetable garden. Right: A speedboat en route to Crisan.

Sfântu Gheorghe, four hours by ferry from Tulcea, is little more than a blip on the map, a village of 860 people with few roads and even fewer vehicles; with no overland links to anywhere else, there is little need for cars. The ferry docked at a small wooden landing, where groups of locals gathered to meet returning family members, visiting tourists, and to carry off vegetables and other supplies brought in from outside. A schedule pinned to the wall of a ticket booth listed the days the ferry comes from Tulcea and the days when it returns. Wooden *lotca* fishing boats were moored up all around.

Most of the men in Sfântu Gheorghe continue to make their living from fishing, heading out every night to net carp, perch, pike, and bream, among other species. In the morning they bring home their catches, then gather at a rundown bar near the water to have a customary drink or two. It's been this way for generations.

At dawn on my first full morning in the delta I sat with a group of weatherworn fishermen who, over glasses of inexpensive home-made wine, lamented the changing realities

Getting there

Fly to Bucharest via Istanbul on **Turkish Airlines** (turkishairlines.com) and then take a train from Gara de Nord station to Tulcea, approximately six hours away. From Tulcea there are daily ferries to Sulina and Crisan and less regular services to Sfântu Gheorghe and other delta communities.

Where to stay

Tulcea has a handful of decent hotels, but once you are in the delta proper it is mostly a case of staying in family-run guesthouses or hotels. In the smaller communities you will simply need to ask someone to point you in the direction of a family that rents out their spare rooms. Alternatively, arrange a visit through **DiscoverRomania** (discoveromania.ro), a leading Romanian tour company.



for those who rely on the waters. "It's much harder for us than our parents' generation," one said. Decades of overfishing in the region has damaged the delta's fish populations, and in recent years Romania has been tightening catch regulations to give the fish a chance to recover, notably wild sturgeon, a valuable source of caviar; in the past, fishermen could make thousands of dollars on a single lucky catch. "I once caught a sturgeon that weighed 220 kilos, with 58 kilos of eggs," another fisherman told me. "I made 45,000 lei [US\$11,600] just from that one time."

As fishing has become less sustainable, eco-tourism has emerged as an alternative source of income, and walking along the main road in Sfântu Gheorghe, it's easy to pick out the new hotels and guesthouses that cater to mostly domestic tourists. For the most part, however, the houses in the village are traditional, one-story reed-thatched cottages fronted by gardens and vegetable patches.

"Tourism is never going to replace fishing here, but it is becoming a strong addition for many," confirmed Dimitru Dimanche, a 44-year-old local, sitting on a waterside bench one evening in the fading light.

After a few days spent exploring Sfântu Gheorghe and its surroundings I moved on to the village of Crisan, two hours away by boat. In a small wooden *lotca* powered by an outboard motor, we navigated the thin and winding channels, ducking under fallen trees and following a route that the fisherman had clearly done a hundred times before; even so, we still needed to double back on occasion,

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as one channel can look very much like any other. As we progressed, narrow, overgrown channels suddenly opened out into majestic freshwater lakes, with pelicans and cormorants circling over vast expanses of reed beds. It was hard to focus on anything for more than a few seconds before something else caught my eye.

Crisan is barely more than a single road running alongside the water's edge; it didn't even exist until the late 19th century, when engineers began straightening the central of three main branches of the Danube that run through the delta. In the village church, just 20 meters from the water, Father Aurel Codris guided me around his small chapel, pointing out the 100-year-old paintings of saints that adorn the walls.

"I went to agricultural school to train as a vet before joining the priesthood," he told me, adding that he moved to Crisan five years ago and fell in love with the place. "With God's

help I will retire here," he said. His church was once the center of the community, but like elsewhere in the world, fewer and fewer people of the younger generation are attending; later I joined around 20 villagers, mostly elderly, for Sunday service.

A picturesque village, Crisan in recent years has become a hub for those looking to explore the Danube Delta in a more adventurous way. Rowmania, an organization set up by former Olympic canoeist Ivan Patzaichin, has a tour center in the village where people can hire "canotcas" (a cross between a lotca and a race canoe) for daytrips or several days' exploration. "We have route maps and people can just rent the boats, or they can be guided by me, my brother, or my son," said Adrian Oprisan, the 48-year-old owner of the small guesthouse that partners with Rowmania.

As in many of the smaller delta communities, when the sun sets in Crisan, those left in the village go to sleep. So I whiled away my one evening there sitting on a small jetty watching the sun set over the still water, and then the stars filling the sky.

I spend my final two days in Sulina, the largest community in the delta. With 3,600 people, the town feels like another world: young couples, families, and tourists crowd the waterside restaurants and bars, with live music played into the evening. A short walk outside town is a beautiful sandy beach that marks the end of the delta and the start of the Black Sea.

Legend has it that a community first sprang up in Sulina in the 10th century, when Greek pirates established a base here. The population boomed during the time of the European Commission of the Danube, the international body created in 1856 to ensure that the mouths of the Danube remained navigable. But the town was heavily bombed during World War II, and the commission was eventually superseded by a Soviet-controlled agency. Over the last few decades Sulina has lost even more relevance with the closure of its fish canneries and shipyards.

Despite this, it's easy to spend hours just wandering along the banks of the Danube watching the boats go by and checking out Sulina's old merchant buildings, the European Commission's neoclassical former headquarters, and the various churches, all of which appear to be dedicated to St. Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors. On my last night in town, I sit down to a plate of grilled catfish, a local specialty. It's a final, succulent reminder of the Danube Delta. ●

Still Waters

Above: Modern guesthouses like this one, located midway along the channel between Crisan and Sfântu Gheorghe, have sprung up in the delta to cater to the region's growing ecotourism business.

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in guest rooms elegantly designed in French-
colonial style, relax with the So Spa's L'Occitane
treatments, or perfect your game on the 18-hole
golf course—all a short distance from the ancient
Khmer ruins of Angkor.



CONTEST

WIN A FOUR-NIGHT STAY AT THE ANDAMAN, A LUXURY COLLECTION RESORT, LANGKAWI

It's hard to imagine a more idyllic Malaysian getaway than The Andaman, a Luxury Collection Resort, Langkawi. Here, five-star accommodations come as contemporary rooms, swimming pools surrounded by 10-million-year-old rain forest, four unique restaurants, and V Integrated Wellness—Southeast Asia's first spa to use exclusively certified-organic food-grade products—set on a hill overlooking the Andaman Sea.

Simply answer the following questions and fill in your details for the chance to win a four-night stay in an Executive Seaview Suite, valid from April until September 2015 and inclusive of daily breakfast for two and a V Signature Couples Romance Getaway treatment.

1. Tonle Sap Lake is located in which country?

.....

2. Name a hotel listed in our Readers' Choice Awards.

.....

3. What is Jaisalmer's nickname?

.....

Each entry must state the entrant's full name, address, and telephone number and be returned to DestinAsian by March 15, 2015.

Please send your answers either by post: DestinAsian, P.O. Box 08 JKPPJ, Jakarta 10210 A, Indonesia; fax: 62-21/574-7733; e-mail: competition@destinasian.com; or via destinasian.com

Your information

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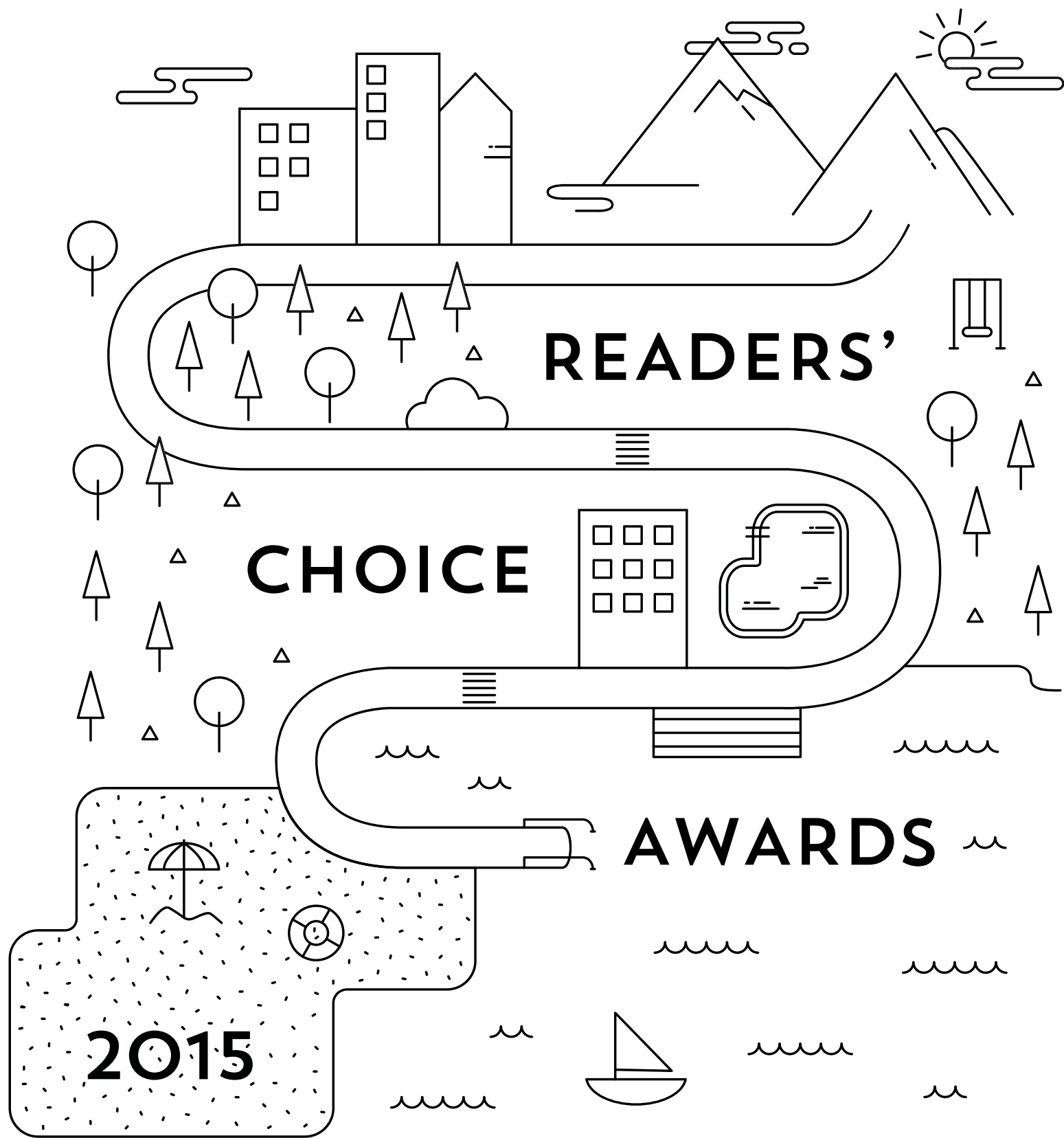


DestinAsian



Congratulations to the winner of our Oct/Nov 2014 issue's draw, Wong Teck Wu of Singapore, for a 3-night stay at W Retreat & Spa Bali – Seminyak.

TERMS & CONDITIONS One entry per person only. • Competition is open to all readers who are 18 years of age or older except for employees of DestinAsian and prize sponsors. • The prize is not transferable, with no cash alternative. • Rooms are subject to availability. • Advance booking is necessary. • The winner will be notified within 14 days after the draw and results will be published in the June/July 2015 issue of DestinAsian. • No purchase is necessary to enter. • Please tick this box ☐ if you do not wish your details to be used by a third party.



It's the 10th anniversary of our annual poll, where we turn to readers for their favorite hotels, spa brands, destinations, airlines, and more, compiled here into a tried-and-true guide to Asia-Pacific travel at its best.



TOP HOTELS AND RESORTS

© There's something to be said for having accommodations you can count on to keep you comfortable no matter where you are in the world, which is why we asked *DestinAsian* readers to select their favorite global brands. For the second year running **Hilton Hotels and Resorts** was voted the best hotel chain in both North America and Europe for its "consistency in quality and service" and "loyalty program that always ensures great value for money." Back in the Asia-Pacific region, **Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts** remains the brand of choice, beloved for its "standard-setting hotels all over Asia" and "heartfelt hospitality." As for the region's individual hotels, the results vary considerably more in name—but not in quality. Read on to discover this year's class of winners.

BEST SERVICED RESIDENCE BRAND

When it comes to staying in serviced apartments, Singapore-based **Ascott The Residence** is your brand of choice for the eighth year in a row. Readers say it has "great service, impeccable rooms, and is always well-located" and the imperative quality: "they think of everything." **Fraser Suites**, your second-favorite name in short-term rentals and extended stays, likewise has "ample amenities" and "hominess."

1 Bali

W RETREAT & SPA

Sleek resort on the Seminyak shoreline fronted by a multi-tiered lagoon pool.

STATS: 237 rooms and villas; 3 bars; 2 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "A hip atmosphere in a spectacular location."

DON'T MISS: The oxygen lounge at Away Spa.

Jl. Petitenget; 62-361/300-0106; wretreatbali.com

RUNNER-UP: Banyan Tree Ungasan

.....

2 Bangkok

MANDARIN ORIENTAL

Legendary riverside hotel on the banks of the Chao

Phraya; Noël Coward, Somerset Maugham, and James Michener all stayed here in their day.

STATS: 393 rooms; 2 bars; 7 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "A timeless cocoon of comfort with direct access to the river." **DON'T MISS:** Crossing the river for Thai cooking classes and a turn at the hotel's Oriental Spa.

48 Oriental Ave.; 66-2/659-9000; mandarinoriental.com

RUNNER-UP: Banyan Tree

.....

3 Beijing

SHANGRI-LA HOTEL

Landmark in the western part of the capital, close to Financial Street and many historical sites.

STATS: 670 rooms, 2 bars; 4 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "A benchmark of luxury." **DON'T MISS:** Handcrafted French pastries and desserts in the Pastry Library.

29 Zizhuyuan Lu; 86-10/6841-2211; shangri-la.com

RUNNER-UP: Grand Hyatt

.....

4 Dubai

BURJ AL ARAB

Iconic, sail-shaped landmark on its own islet in the Arabian Gulf, linked by causeway to Jumeirah Beach.

STATS: 202 suites; 2 bars; 6 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "Iconic design" and "luxuriously grand."

DON'T MISS: Splurging on a helicopter tour of the city, which depart from the hotel's 211-meter-high helipad.

Jumeirah Beach Rd.; 971-4/301-7777; burj-al-arab.com

RUNNER-UP: Atlantis, The Palm

Living Legend

Classic French style pervades the Sofitel—originally opened in 1901—from the richly appointed rooms to the on-site patisserie.

5 Hanoi

SOFITEL LEGEND METROPOLE

Colonial-era grande dame in the heart of the Vietnamese capital's former French quarter.

STATS: 364 rooms; 3 bars; 3 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "Consistently great, exuding colonial grandeur and great service in a prime downtown location. A place to aspire to."

DON'T MISS: A look at the old air-raidshelter rediscovered in 2011 beneath the hotel's Bamboo Bar. Ngo Quyen St.; 84-4/3826-6919; sofitel-legend.com

RUNNER-UP: InterContinental Hanoi Westlake





BEST HOTEL SPAS

Once again, the No. 1 position in this category goes to **Banyan Tree Spas**, the spa arm of the Singapore-based Banyan Tree hotel group. Pioneers of the tropical garden spa and staffed with therapists trained at the Banyan Tree Spa Academy in Phuket, Banyan Tree's 69 spas in Asia and beyond deliver "very professional therapists" and "sheer enjoyment and pure relaxation." The Shangri-La group's in-house spa brand, **CHI, The Spa**, came in second place for "pampering you as if you were a VIP" and a reliable "beautiful ambience."

6 Ho Chi Minh
PARK HYATT SAIGON

Colonial-inspired standout with central location on Lam Son Square, across from the historic opera house.

STATS: 244 rooms; 2 bars; 2 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "Central, clean, and comfortable with immaculate service" and "a magnificent pool."

DON'T MISS: Weekend champagne brunches on the terrace of Opera restaurant. 2 Lam Son Square, District 1; 84-8/3824-1234; saigon.park.hyatt.com
RUNNER-UP: InterContinental Asiana Saigon

7 Hong Kong
THE PENINSULA

Glamorous old-world (but high-tech) landmark with a fleet of bespoke Rolls-Royce limousines and stunning waterfront location in Kowloon.

STATS: 300 rooms; 2 bars; 6 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "Welcoming, elegant, and with amazing skyline views." **DON'T MISS:** Afternoon tea in the Peninsula's Neoclassical lobby, an institution in its own right.

Salisbury Rd., Kowloon; 852/2920-2888; hongkong.peninsula.com
RUNNER-UP: Mandarin Oriental

8 Jakarta
GRAND HYATT

Bay-windowed high-rise set above one of the city's premier shopping malls, Plaza Indonesia.

STATS: 450 rooms; 2 bars; 5 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "Spacious rooms in the best location in the city."

DON'T MISS: Watching the spectacle of Jakarta's notorious rush-hour traffic from the serenity of the Fountain Lounge. 28-30 Jl. M. H. Thamrin; 62-21/

2992-1234; jakarta.grand.hyatt.com
RUNNER-UP: Shangri-La Hotel

9 Koh Samui
FOUR SEASONS RESORT

Serene bluff-side resort on 17 lush hectares, overlooking Laem Yai Bay.

STATS: 60 villas; 1 bar; 2 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "A reason alone to visit Koh Samui." **DON'T MISS:** A cruise through the islands of Ang Thong National Marine Park on the resort's 20-meter yacht, Minor Affair. 219 Moo 5, Anghthong; 66-77/243-000; fourseasons.com
RUNNER-UP: W Retreat

10 Kuala Lumpur
MANDARIN ORIENTAL

Thirty-story tower dwarfed by the neighboring Petronas Twin Towers, with a swimming pool overlooking KLCC Park.

STATS: 643 rooms; 4 bars; 5 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "Superb dining options" and "polite service." **DON'T MISS:** Taking in a performance at the nearby Dewan Filharmonik Petronas, home to the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra. Kuala Lumpur City Centre; 60-3/2380-8888; mandarinoriental.com
RUNNER-UP: Shangri-La Hotel

11 Macau
THE VENETIAN MACAO

Gargantuan Venice-themed casino resort on the Cotai Strip with a dizzying array of dining options, a 15,000-seat arena, indoor canals, and a Vegas-style theater.

STATS: 3,000 rooms; 1 lounge; 20 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "Very glamorous and full of entertainment, including a great casino" and "the rooms are massive." **DON'T**

MISS: A show by Circo Veneziano, the in-house acrobatics troop. Estrada da Baía de Nossa Senhora da Esperança; 853/2882-8888; venetianmacao.com

RUNNER-UP: Banyan Tree

12 Maldives
W RETREAT & SPA

Sleek private-island resort with over-water and beachside accommodation, each with its own infinity or plunge pool.

STATS: 78 villas; 3 bars; 3 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "There's no question it's the place to be in the Maldives." **DON'T MISS:** Hitting the dance floor at 15 Below, the only underground nightclub in the Maldives. Fesdu Island, North Ari Atoll; 960/666-2222; wretreatmaldives.com
RUNNER-UP: Angsana Velavaru

13 Manila
MAKATI SHANGRI-LA

Towering five-star address with facilities to match at the crossroads of Metro Manila's business and shopping districts.

STATS: 696 rooms; 3 bars; 5 restaurants.

READERS SAY: "Excellent rooms in walking distance from Manila's best attractions."

DON'T MISS: Dinner at Sage Restaurant and Bar, where French chef Gilles Galli's modern European cuisine is matched by an extensive wine list. Ayala and Makati Aves.; 63-2/813-8888; shangri-la.com
RUNNER-UP: The Peninsula

Winning

Combination

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Inside The Peninsula Hong Kong's Philippe Starck-designed Felix restaurant; old-world opulence at The Leela Palace in New Delhi; cooling off in a villa pool at the W Retreat & Spa Bali; Koh Bar, the Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui's hilltop lounge.



14 Mumbai

THE TAJ MAHAL PALACE

Original 1903 building with modern tower on the Colaba waterfront has hosted everyone from maharajas to movie stars. **STATS:** 560 rooms; 3 bars; 7 restaurants.

READERS SAY: “Majestic architecture, with such a rich history” and “pampering.” **DON’T MISS:** A harbor cruise or Elephant Island excursion aboard the hotel’s private yacht. *Apollo Bunder, Colaba; 91-22/6665-3366; tajhotels.com*

RUNNER-UP: The Oberoi

.....

15 New Delhi

THE LEELA PALACE

An opulent, neoclassical-styled beauty in the Diplomatic Enclave; the most costly hotel built in India at the time of its opening, and the country’s first hotel built with Gold LEED certification requirements. **STATS:** 254 rooms; 1 bar; 1 lounge; 4 restaurants.

READERS SAY: “The gracious staff makes you feel like royalty here” and “the rooftop infinity pool is breathtaking.” **DON’T MISS:** Holistic treatments in the two-floor ESPA. *Diplomatic Enclave, Chanakyapuri; 91-11/3933-1234; theleela.com*

RUNNER-UP: Taj Palace



16 Phuket

BANYAN TREE

All-villa retreat laid out village-style between Bang Tao Beach and the Laguna Phuket Golf Club.

STATS: 173 villas; 2 bars; 5 restaurants.

READERS SAY: “The first Banyan Tree and still the best, with villas and food to die for.”

DON’T MISS: A longtail-boat dinner cruise in the lagoon. *33/27 Moo 4, Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherngtalay; 66-76/372-400; banyantree.com*

RUNNER-UP: JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa

.....

17 Seoul

LOTTE HOTEL

A two-building extravaganza, part of the Lotte World entertainment complex in the heart of downtown.

STATS: 1,120 rooms; 1 bar; 2 lounges; 6 restaurants.

READERS SAY: “Cozy rooms” and “an unbeatable value.”

DON’T MISS: South Korea’s only Michelin three-starred restaurant, Pierre Gagnaire à Séoul, a 35th-floor French standout with skyline views. *30, Euljiro, Jung-gu; 82-2/771-1000; lottehotel.com*

RUNNER-UP: Banyan Tree Club & Spa

18 Shanghai

MANDARIN ORIENTAL PUDONG

On the banks of the Huangpu River, a fashionable address in the Lujiazui financial district with a dazzling mosaic lobby mural and rooms with views.

STATS: 362 rooms; 1 bar; 1 lounge; 3 restaurants.

READERS SAY: “From staff to river views, it’s has the best of everything.” **DON’T MISS:** Eclectic cocktails and celebrity DJs in the hip lobby-level Qi Bar.

111 Pudong Road; 86-21/2082-9888; mandarinoriental.com

RUNNER-UP: Pudong Shangri-La

.....



19 Singapore

THE FULLERTON BAY HOTEL

A jewel-box of a glassy low-rise right on Marina Bay, with Andre Fu interiors, panoramic views, and heritage touches.

STATS: 98 rooms; 1 bar; 3 restaurants.

READERS SAY: “Super stylish design” and “a small but fantastic boutique hotel.” **DON’T MISS:** Hawker food given a gourmet twist at The Clifford Pier, opened last June on its namesake 1927 heritage site.

80 Collyer Quay; 65/6333-8388; fullertonbayhotel.com

RUNNER-UP: Ritz-Carlton, Millenia

BEST AIRLINE AND AIRPORT

With its “efficient and friendly service” and “good safety record,” **Singapore Airlines** once again came out on top in all categories of our airline poll, including Best Premium Class and Economy Class service, Frequent-Flier Program, In-Flight Entertainment, and Best Airline overall. Another perennial favorite from Singapore is **Changi Airport**, which earned top honors in the Best Airport category for being “easy to navigate and connect between flights” and its “first-class dining and shopping options.”

BEST ISLAND AND CITY

Followed closely by the Maldives, **Bali** remains your favorite island destination the world over—and you’ll get no argument from us. As one reader says, Indonesia’s holiday isle has “the full package: nightlife, nature, culture, and a calmingly slow pace of life,” while another commented, “there’s never a dull moment and always a new place to explore.” On the urban front, **Bangkok** takes the top spot for the world’s best city, offering an “exhilarating buzz shrouding everything from street food to shopping.”

High Style
Taipei 101 views from the 31st-floor Yen Bar at W Taipei, left. Bottom: Park Hyatt Sydney's rooftop pool deck. Opposite, from top: Poolside at the Banyan Tree Phuket; a soaring reception area greets guests at The Fullerton Bay Hotel in Singapore.



21 Taipei
W TAIPEI

The hippest digs in the Taiwanese capital, complete with eye-catching artworks and a panoramic 31st-floor nouvelle Chinese restaurant. **STATS:** 405 rooms; 3 bars; 2 restaurants. **READERS SAY:** “Modern, eclectic, and hospitable—the embodiment of Taipei.” **DON’T MISS:** Skating over the 10th-floor swimming pool, which converts into an “ice” rink around Christmas time. 10 Zhongxiao East Rd. Sec. 5, Xinyi; 886-2/7703-8888; wtaipei.com **RUNNER-UP:** Grand Hyatt

22 Tokyo
PARK HYATT

Celebrity magnet perched high in a Shinjuku tower designed by Kenzo Tange, with smart, spacious rooms, buzzing restaurants, and a glass-roofed pool. **STATS:** 177 rooms; 2 bars; 4 restaurants. **READERS SAY:** “Pure class and sublime service that loses nothing in translation.” **DON’T MISS:** Dinner at the 52nd-floor New York Grill; on a clear day, the views stretch all the way to Mount Fuji. 3-7-1-2 Nishi Shinjuku; 81-3/5322-1234; tokyo.park.hyatt.com **RUNNER-UP:** Mandarin Oriental



20 Sydney
PARK HYATT

Sleek low-rise waterfront property at the base of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, with impressive views of the Opera House and specially commissioned works by renowned Australian artists. **STATS:** 158 rooms; 1 bar; 2 restaurants. **READERS SAY:** “With Sydney Opera House right out your window, you can’t ask for more.” **DON’T MISS:** Lazing in a private cabana beside the rooftop swimming pool. 7 Hickson Rd., The Rocks; 61-2/9256-1234; sydney.park.hyatt.com **RUNNER-UP:** Four Seasons Hotel

COURTESY OF W TAIPEI; COURTESY OF PARK HYATT SYDNEY; OPPOSITE, COURTESY OF BANYAN TREE PHUKET; COURTESY OF THE FULLERTON BAY HOTEL



/ Japan /

1964

When it began service 50 years ago last October, the world's first high-speed commercial rail line, Tokaido Shinkansen, revolutionized travel on Japan's most densely populated island. Two inaugural bullet trains (*dangan ressha*) made the 515-kilometer journey between Tokyo to Osaka in just four hours—two hours faster than a regular train. And that was just the start for the Shinkansen. Today, the network stretches some 2,400 kilometers, from the top of Honshu to Kyushu in the southwest. Pictured above are passengers in a 0-series bullet train, the first model to run on the Tokaido line starting in 1964. An estimated 10 billion people have since ridden Japan's high-speed rails, and at ever-faster speeds. From the 210 kmh clocked by the 0-series, Shinkansen trains can now reach up to 320 kmh, though even that will seem a snail's pace once the planned Chuo Shinkansen maglev line opens by 2027. Connecting Tokyo with Nagoya, it's designed to run at a maximum 505 kmh, though without the benefit of scenery: most of the line will be underground. —Eric Wight

AT YOUR SERVICE

From suites to spas, housekeeping to child care, these serviced residences bring five-star comforts to cities far and wide, ensuring every guest feels at home while living or traveling abroad.





Clockwise, from bottom right: The pool at the Somerset Greenways Chennai; a Studio Executive at the Ascott Raffles City Chengdu; a Studio Classic at the Citadines City Centre Frankfurt; the dining and living area in the Ascott Raffles Place Singapore's Finlayson Suite.

of calm in key bustling cities, Citadines Apart'hotel's unique, flexible model lets savvy, independent travelers choose from a wide range of services to suit their lifestyle and budget. With modern comforts, business-centric connectivity, and customizable experiences, Citadines Apart'hotel is optimal for city homes.

Warm and engaging, Somerset Serviced Residence is ideal for executives and their families looking for work-life balance while traveling or living abroad. Stylish yet homely suite designs are paired with a myriad of recreational and child friendly facilities, on-site lifestyle activities, and business support services. Somerset's expertly trained staff will happily assist guests with all of their needs from housekeeping to grocery shopping, letting them prioritize their work, experiences, and leisure time.

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WHEN IT COMES to living abroad, The Ascott Limited assures that there's something for everyone, everywhere. With more than 250 properties including 63 under development in more than 20 countries spanning the Asia Pacific, European, and Gulf regions, it comes as no surprise that the award-winning Singaporean company is the world's largest international serviced residence owner-operator. With three distinct brands—Ascott The Residence, Citadines Apart'hotel, and Somerset Serviced Residence—every traveler can rest easy knowing that Ascott will take care of their wants and needs anywhere in the world.

For top business executives and industry leaders who expect no less than the highest standards of service combined with exclusive and luxurious living, Ascott The Residence offers a ready welcome. The properties are more than serviced apartments—they are homes away from home. Whether for a week's or a year's stay, Ascott The Residence provides the perfect environment to keep its guests relaxed, recharged, and in peak performance during the activities of their travels with comforting details and heartfelt service.

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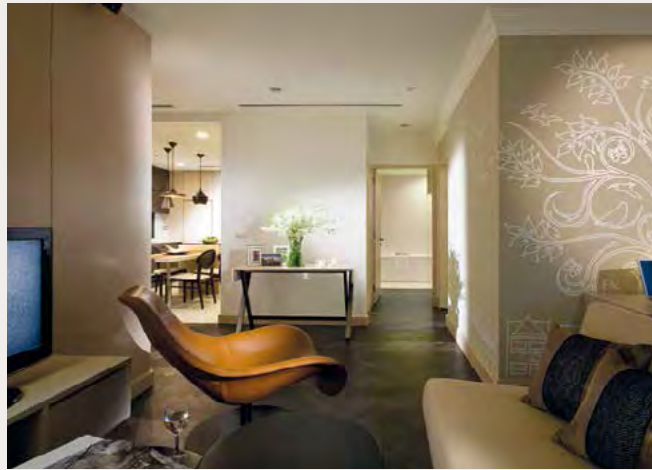
FRASERS HOSPITALITY

NO ONE KNOWS how to make travelers feel at home quite like Frasers. A global leader in serviced residences, the company is continually being awarded as the best in its field, offering a variety of serviced residences around the world ideal for families living abroad, holidays spent with friends and relatives, or simply traveling in comfort. With a portfolio of 92 properties in 49 key gateway cities, it has more than 16,000 apartments worldwide.

For extended-stay travelers in want of the most luxurious abodes, Fraser's Gold Standard Brands—Fraser Suites, Fraser Place and Fraser Residence—offer spacious rooms with state-of-the-art designs and

take care of every home need with premier housekeeping and optional babysitting services. Its second-tier brand, Modena by Fraser, is specifically for emerging business capitals in Asia, located in central business districts and tailored to serve those who travel often in the region for work, while Capri by Fraser, a design-driven hotel residence brand, is geared toward traveling millennials with contemporary decor and a focus on digital amenities. With Frasers, everyone has a place to call home, anywhere in the world.

For more information, call 65/6270-0800 or visit frasershospitality.com



Clockwise, from left: Fraser Suites Singapore; Fraser Place Robertson Walk, Singapore; a playground at Fraser Suites Singapore.



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FRASER
WORLD

Discover exclusive privileges with
our guest recognition programme



Property Awards, one of the most prestigious real estate competitions in the city-state, the suites have risen to the top of the city's hospitality market since they opened in 2013, and it's easy to see why. The spacious rooms range from 45 to 66 square meters and are tastefully furnished, giving a more inviting feel compared to a traditional hotel room.



From left: The view from a One Bedroom Executive Suite; the Suites rising high above Beach Road.

PAN PACIFIC SERVICED SUITES BEACH ROAD, SINGAPORE

ENJOY RESIDENTIAL COMFORTS with luxury hotel-level hospitality at the Pan Pacific Serviced Suites Beach Road in Singapore. Awarded the winner of the hotel category of the 2014 FIABCI Singapore

Each of the property's 180 inviting serviced suites comes with two LCD televisions, a fully equipped kitchenette, and washer and dryer, plus personal assistants available 24 hours a day to help with any need. Business travelers will be delighted to find complimentary professional amenities such as Wi-Fi, meeting room facilities, made-to-order breakfast in the Pacific Lounge, and a shuttle service to key shopping and business districts in Singapore. Located on Beach Road, guests are within walking distance to two MRT stations, and bustling

areas such as Orchard Road and Marina Bay Central Business District are just minutes away via train. Pan Pacific Serviced Suites Beach Road is not only ideally situated for business, it also excels at leisure. The culturally rich areas of Haji Lane and Arab Street are just a stone's throw away, and the lively Clarke Quay and Boat Quay districts are also nearby. Back at the serviced suites, guests can unwind at the state-of-the-art fitness center; take a swim in the rooftop pool with awe-inspiring views of the Singapore Flyer and the harbour; or lounge in the Living Room, which features a library, pool table, and Xbox.

For more information, call 65/6678-8888 or visit panpacific.com

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with the freedom of your own
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The 180-suite Pan Pacific Serviced Suites Beach Road, Singapore boasts a number of unique features and premium services - notably our 24-hour Personal Assistant service. Relax in the comfort of your spacious suite, recharge at our fitness centre or unwind in the evening at our rooftop pool.

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Embrace the Pacific
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PAN PACIFIC
SERVICED SUITES
BEACH ROAD, SINGAPORE

7500B Beach Road, Singapore 199592 Tel: +65 6678 8888 enquiry.ppssbr@panpacific.com



Here's where you won't be staying

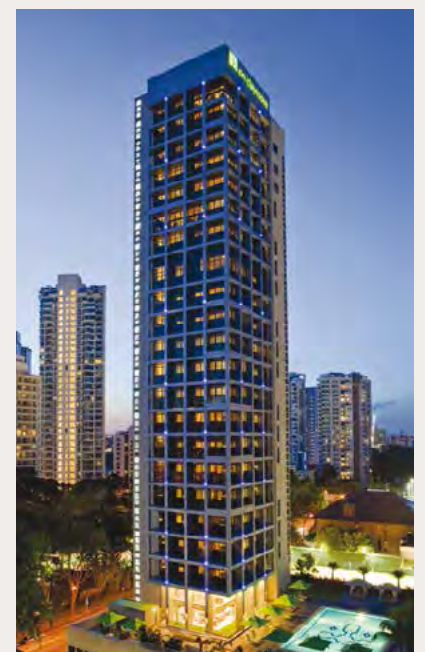
Because most of the time, you'll be out. Which is a bit of a shame, as our new serviced residences are perfect for the modern living. But as we're located at the heart of the Orchard area, you'll have Singapore's best restaurants, shops and entertainment, right on your doorstep. So when you stay at 8 on Claymore Serviced Residences, we'd love to see you, but we have the feeling you'll be out.



8 ON CLAYMORE SERVICED RESIDENCES

LOCATED AT THE heart of Orchard and managed by the award-winning business hotel, Royal Plaza on Scotts, 8 on Claymore Serviced Residences, the flagship serviced residence under Summit Serviced Residences™ of Preferred Hotel Group™, offers 85 varied units of living spaces to discerning travelers and residents. From elegant studios to two- and three-bedroom residences and a spacious penthouse, each unit is provided with essential amenities and furnished in bright, neutral tones.

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Clockwise, from above: The Residences' towering facade; a three-bedroom residence's living area; the outdoor pool.

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Moshe Safdie with award-winning CNBC Anchor Christine Tan
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Trunk Call

One of the Aqua Mekong's skiffs stopping at a tree-top ranger station in the Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary.



The Life Aquatic

A languid cruise from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh
reveals the natural and cultural riches of
this corner of Cambodia, as well as
the pleasures of a well-appointed boat.

BY CHRISTOPHER P. HILL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON MICHAEL LANG



We make our incursion into the flooded forests of the Tonle Sap under a low, cirrus-streaked sky. At least, it feels like an incursion—threading its way through mangrove-choked channels, our aluminum skiff, equipped with muffled outboard motors and painted a green-tinged gray that mirrors the color of the lake water in the filtered morning light, has a stealthy, almost military aspect to it. The mood on board is vaguely surreptitious, too, as we scan the waterlogged wilderness for our quarry. Then comes a rapid-fire set of directions from our team leader, Visoth, that seem better suited to a commando raid: “Ten o’clock, ten o’clock in the bush!” and, “On your 12! On your 12!”

On our 12, about 20 meters up the channel, is a Chinese pond heron, its light brown plumage almost invisible against a thicket of giant mimosa. Startled by our appearance, the bird takes flight, revealing a flash of snow-white wings as it skims away across the water. “Very nice,” says Visoth, adjusting the knot in his checkered *krama* scarf. “Are you ready for more now?”

It’s the start of the dry season here in Cambodia—Visoth tells us the monsoon shifted just three days earlier—and the Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary is already teeming with life. As the morning progresses, we spot more pond herons and one of their larger cousins, a purple heron. There are Oriental darters drying their wings in the sun and young cormorants flapping low over the treetops (Visoth, ever ready with a bon mot, says they hatched a month ago and that “they are now professional fliers”). A fish eagle perches on a distant branch; a little red-headed woodpecker flashes past. “We hardly see *them!*” Visoth beams. What we don’t see are any other people, save for a lone fisherman gathering water hyacinth and a young European couple out on an excursion from Chong Khneas, the nearest dock, 75 minutes by speedboat to the northeast. Prek Toal may be a mecca for birders, but getting here requires serious commitment.

Unless you happen to be a passenger on the *Aqua Mekong*, that is. The newest riverboat to cruise the waters between Siem Reap and Vietnam’s Ho

Chi Minh City—it was launched last October—the *Aqua Mekong* is also the sleekest. Sixty-two meters from stem to stern, it has an undeniably modern profile, with huge plate-glass windows punctuating its sides and a jaunty, tentlike awning shading its pool deck. It’s the third vessel in a small fleet founded by Francesco Galli Zugaro, a handsome Swiss-born Italian-American who launched his first boat, the *Aqua Amazon*, on the Peruvian Amazon in 2008. Now based in Singapore, Galli Zugaro, who just happens to be along for this cruise, says the *Aqua Mekong* is an evolution of his original concept—larger than its sister ships but still intimate, with a high crew-to-guest ratio (20 hospitality staff, all Cambodians, look after a maximum of 40 passengers) and a spare, contemporary elegance that informs everything from the boat’s lacquer-paneled dining room to its 20 streamlined cabins, which feature floor-to-ceiling windows (some of which slide open onto private balconies), bronze-hued walls covered in woven fiber, and black-tiled bathrooms where you can watch the passing scenery as you shower.

But the *Aqua Mekong*’s secret weapon is its trio of skiffs, eight-meter-long runabouts that whisk passengers into shallow channels and backwaters that other cruisers can’t reach. They come in particularly handy on the Tonle Sap, Southeast Asia’s largest lake. Barely a meter deep in the dry season, the Tonle Sap more than quadruples in size during the summer monsoon, when the water level of the rain-swollen Mekong rises so precipitously that part of the torrent is pushed upstream along the 100-kilometer-long channel (the Tonle Sap River) that connects it to the lake, reversing the tributary’s flow and flooding the Tonle Sap basin. The annual deluge reaches its peak in September, when the lake’s depth tops 10 meters, inundating thousands of square kilometers of marshland and alluvial forests. But it’s late November now and the waters are already receding, ushering in the start of the nesting season for the migratory birds that congregate in Prek Toal. Without the skiffs, we’d probably be sitting back on the deck of the *Aqua* wondering what all the fuss was about.

Our course through the mangroves takes us to a ranger station, where we pick up one of its crew to guide us deeper into the 31,282-hectare sanctuary. The station, such as it is, inhabits a partially submerged tree, with a bamboo landing in the fork of its trunk and, six meters above in the branches, another platform equipped with a telescope and a radio. Visoth explains that this is one of more than two dozen such stations scattered around the reserve, used by a roving band of 40 or so rangers to keep an eye out for egg poachers and bird hunters. Many of them are former poachers themselves, making them experts at their job.

We motor on through the flooded forest, past matted clumps of sea-poison blossoms and dense tangles of lianas garnished with little yellow flowers.

Making Waves

Opposite, clockwise from top left: The *Aqua Mekong*’s 20 cabins are kept shipshape throughout the cruise; dining tables on the pool deck; one of the boat’s Cambodian restaurant staff preparing condiments; the *Aqua*’s sleek lounge is outfitted with bespoke furnishings.





**Against
the Grain**

Rice fields in
the village of
Andong Russei,
a short tuk-tuk
ride inland
from Kampong
Chhnang.
Opposite: A sugar
farmer collecting
palm juice from
the top of a
nearby tree.





The Details

The **Aqua Mekong's** four-night cruise from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh costs from US\$4,420 per person and operates from July through November, the Tonle Sap's high-water season. At other times of the year the boat keeps to the Mekong, with three- and four-night itineraries between Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City (aquaexpeditions.com).

Where To Stay

Should accommodations be required before or after the cruise, the best lodgings in Siem Reap include upscale boutique hotel **Shinta Mani Club** (Oum Khun St.; 855-63/761-998; shintamani.com; doubles from US\$150) and the well-located **Park Hyatt Siem Reap** (Sivutha Blvd.; 855-63/211-234; siemreap.park.hyatt.com; doubles from US\$410), known as the Hôtel de la Paix before its 2013 rebranding and renovation.

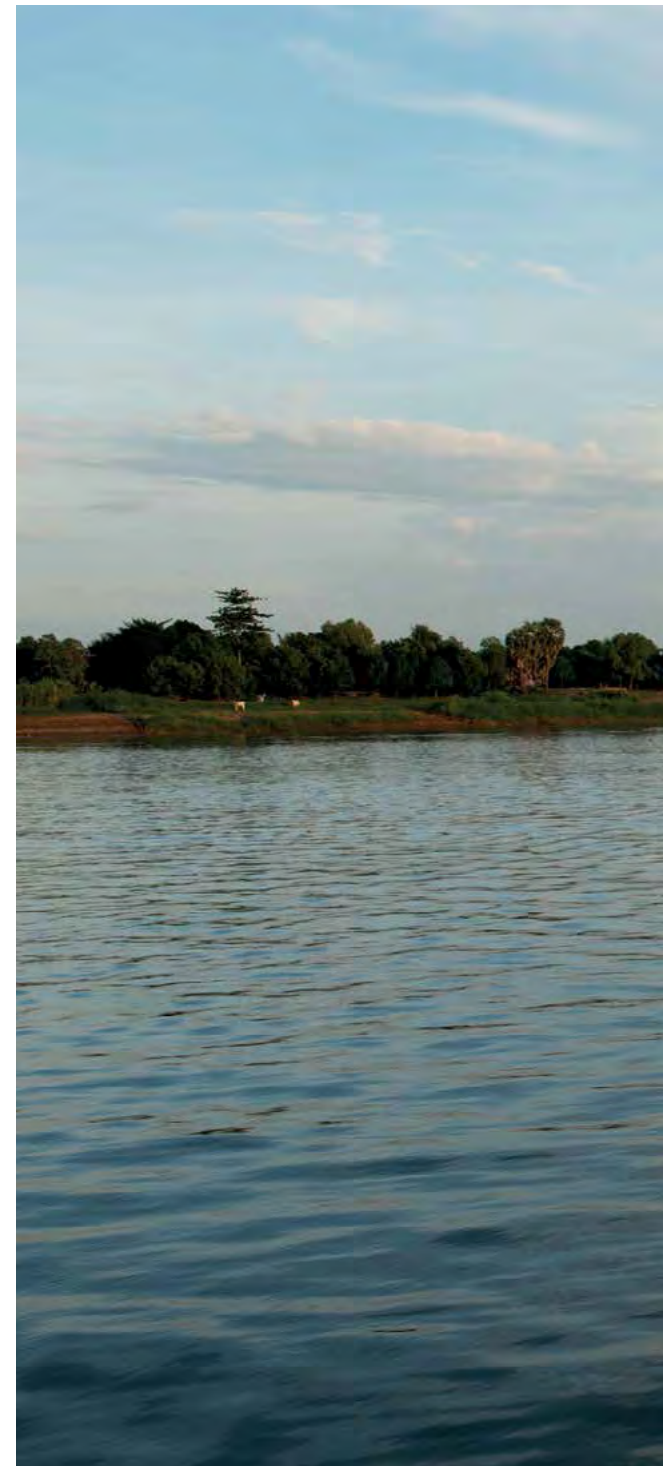
In Ho Chi Minh City, the **InterContinental Asiana Saigon** (Hai Ba Trung; 84-8/3520-9999; ihg.com; doubles from US\$224) is among the town's newer five-star addresses.



From time to time, drowned branches scrape menacingly along the skiff's hull, and in one brief moment of alarm, our canvas canopy catches on a low-hanging bough and rips open. But soon enough the channel widens and we glide to a stop about 100 meters from a pair of treetops that have been colonized by hundreds of Asian openbills, a type of snail-eating stork. The ranger informs us—with Visoth translating—that the birds arrived from the swamps of northern Cambodia two weeks ago, and that here they will stay until April, raising chicks and stuffing themselves on mollusks. It's an impressive sight, as is the spectacle that greets on the way back to the *Aqua Mekong* half an hour later: a sky peppered with spot-billed pelicans, dozens of them, wheeling against the clouds on wings spanning two meters. I'm mesmerized, until the spell is broken by a series of plops just off our bow. Visoth doesn't miss a beat. "Pooping, pooping," he says gleefully. "This must be their WC!"

Of course, the Tonle Sap isn't just for the birds. It's among the richest freshwater fisheries in the world, one that nurtured the Khmer empire in ancient times, to judge by the abundance of fish (including enormous, deer-swallowing catfish) depicted in the 12th-century bas-reliefs at Bayon Temple in nearby Angkor. Today, more than three million people live on the lake's floodplain, and a good many on the lake itself—Tonle Sap is home to 173 floating villages, off-the-grid fishing communities that drift with the lake's seasonal ebb and swell.

Needless to say, village visits are written into the



cruise's script, and after lunch we're back in the skiffs and heading to Moat Khla, home to 190 families as well as a rudimentary Buddhist temple buoyed up by oil drums. We moor alongside the latter for a blessing ceremony with an orange-robed monk and his novices, who chant their mantras under a tin roof festooned with parti-colored cotton bunting. I get the sense that we're not the first tourists to come this way, but we could well be at our next stop, Kong Meas, which we reach via a labyrinth of backwater channels. Home to just 75 families, it's literally off the map; Visoth says this is the first time he or his fellow guides have ventured there. One household, a family of ethnic Vietnamese (a minority that has shared the lake with the Khmer for countless generations), is



Still Waters

The *Aqua Mekong* on its namesake river just outside Phnom Penh, above. Opposite: The boat's Vietnamese captain, Nguyen Ngoc Thu.

kind enough to invite us into their home. About 25 of us—two skiff-loads full—crowd into the floating house and crouch down on its creaking floorboards. It's a rustic affair, with walls of grass matting, a small TV hooked up to a car battery, and rafters packed with fishing gear; the sole concessions to decor are framed pictures of the Madonna and Christ hung behind a cat's cradle of tinsel Christmas garlands. As our guides question the head of the household about life on the lake—"We live in peace, it is good," he says—the water below us thrashes and churns. I briefly wonder if we're being attacked by one of those monstrous Bayon catfish. But no, it's a convulsing mass of snakehead, thousands of dollars worth, that the man raises in a fish pen under his house.

By the time we leave it's getting dark, but we have one more stop. In a patch of open water, the skiffs tie up against each other and the crew begin shaking cocktails—caipiroskas of some sort, muddled with palm sugar. We down them to the beat of a boom box that has appeared as magically as the drinks. "Welcome to Tonle Sap's floating bar!" Visoth shouts over the music.

More drinks await back in the *Aqua Mekong's* lounge, which takes up half the upper deck and doubles as the venue for our morning briefings and midday lectures about Cambodian culture and economy. It's a convivial space and passengers mingle over glasses of wine and Angkor beer, recounting the day's highlights or sharing stories from their



An impressive spectacle greets on the way back to the *Aqua Mekong*: a sky peppered with spot-billed pelicans, dozens of them, wheeling against the clouds on wings spanning two meters

other travels. They're a cosmopolitan and worldly bunch: a German couple from Hong Kong, retirees from Chicago and Boca Raton, a pair of Muscovites, a group of friends from L.A., and two ladies from New York, Debbie and Jocelyn, who tell me they have both sailed on one of the *Aqua*'s sister ships on the Amazon, and who, like most on this boat, are "seven-nighters," doing the full cruise from Siem Reap to Ho Chi Minh City. I'm only aboard for the Cambodian leg, finishing the trip at Phnom Penh, which makes me a four-nighter. But no one holds that against me. And Debbie is great. Having visited plenty of other poor countries in her time, she's taken to toting around a little Polaroid camera and asking villagers if she might take their picture, leaving them with the digital print. "When you visit these places as a tourist, it's all very one-sided. I thought it would be nice to leave something behind," she says. That might sound a bit patronizing, but the villagers we meet don't seem to think so: they giggle and grin as they watch their images slowly materialize on film.

After dinner, I snoop around some of the *Aqua*'s other facilities—there's a library stocked with Kerouac and Steinbeck and a crystal-and-teak foosball table; a movie room outfitted with Eames lounge chairs; a small spa—before retiring to my cabin, where I step onto my balcony and lean against the railing. Dark water races against the hull a meter below me. In the inky distance, fluorescent tubes mark the locations of myriad fishing nets—the lights attract insects, and insects attract small fish. They glow like stars, and for a moment it seems that the water has become the sky, and the sky the water.

Zippering about in skiffs is all very fine, but a cruise boat is a bad place to be if the food isn't good. Thankfully, the *Aqua Mekong*'s is very good, with a menu overseen by Australian chef David Thompson of Nahm, the much-ballyhooed Thai restaurant at Bangkok's Metropolitan hotel. Thompson, who is also aboard for this cruise, is no ambassador for Cambodian cuisine ("Thai food is so much better," he tells passengers while introducing the lunch selection on day three), so we generally eat the sorts of things he might cook back in Bangkok: mud crab with hot basil, chilies, and peppercorns; fish in sour-orange curry; chicken with wild-ginger sauce. It's all delicious. A green Cambodian fish curry does make it onto the menu one day ("vastly gentrified, I assure you," Thompson smirks), as do pizzas, pasta, and a Vietnamese *pho*,

providing ample fuel for our further excursions.

Our last skiff foray on the Tonle Sap takes us to the village of Chnok Tru, a sizeable community near the lake's southern end. On its busy main channel, we pass all manner of floating facilities—a *poste de la police*, a two-pump gas station, a church, a karaoke bar—before visiting a factory barge that produces huge blocks of ice used to keep fish fresh for the markets in Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and beyond. It's a busy place. The ice-making process is explained by the owner, a man who sports two gold teeth, but my attention wanders somewhere between "ammonia" and "expansion coils." Across the channel, a pair of women are batting at a net with badminton rackets, sending a shower of tiny *riel* fish (a key ingredient in the fermented fish paste known as *prahok*) onto the deck. Young men race past on their longtail boats; children play catch at the lake's edge, jumping gamely from one porch to another. It's a water world, complete, self-sustaining, and entirely captivating.

It's lunchtime back on the *Aqua Mekong* when we enter the Tonle Sap River. The flat, shimmering expanse of the lake is soon behind us and the countryside closes in, with the hint of rolling mountains in the hazy distance. We drift on downstream, past high banks studded with sugar palms and stubbly fields that slowly give way to embankments and other signs of settlement. At the town of Kampong Chhnang, we go ashore—our first steps on dry land since the start of the cruise—and hop into waiting tuk-tuks for a drive through golden rice fields to a pottery workshop. The next day we visit an elementary school and a community of silversmiths called Koh Chen, trailed by a posse of village kids. Debbie can't snap her Polaroid fast enough.

Then, almost without warning, we're passing through Phnom Penh, returned once more to a world of office buildings and honking traffic. Beyond the bustle of Sisowath Quay the *Aqua* motors into the confluence of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers, anchoring upstream for the final night of this leg of its cruise. Tomorrow I'll disembark, but not before enjoying one last dinner—a barbecue buffet served *en plein air* under the awning of the boat's pool deck. In keeping with the evening's alfresco theme, dinner will be followed by a movie on the aft sundeck, which has been converted into an outdoor cinema. And the name of this film? "It's the Grand *Buddha*-pest Hotel!" a crewmember announces with exquisite mirth. ●

Water World

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Spot-billed pelicans above Prek Toal; the skiffs returning to the *Aqua Mekong* after a visit to the floating village of Kong Meas; a potter in Andong Russei sifting dry clay powder; the floating church in Chnok Tru.

Steps Back in Time

Traditional straw sandals and a hat on display at the Daikokuya, an Edo-era inn in the old post town of Hosokute that dates from the 1850s.



O F S A M U R A I I N T H E F O O T S T E P S

On a walking tour of an ancient highway between Kyoto and Tokyo, the rhythms of rural Japan mingle with echoes of the country's feudal past.

BY **BARRY STONE**

I T W A S A T I N E

I never intended to establish, a ritual I never imagined I'd have. On a 10-day walk through the Japan Alps I was always the last of our group of 13 to appear at dinner, a fact that had nothing to do with the food (mostly fabulous multicourse *kaiseki* meals) or the company. Night after night I made sheepish apologies, and my tardiness became a talking point. But what could I do? Turns out I had a hitherto undiagnosed weakness for *ofuro*, traditional Japanese soaking tubs—a weakness that manifested itself on the second evening of our tour with my first submersion into one of these

cedar-lined delights. Enveloped by its smooth, tactile wood and steaming spring water, I found the experience utterly addictive, and as I contemplated my miso soup, boiled king crabs, and goodness knows what else getting ever colder on the dinner table, I knew I would never be content with the cold, impersonal touch of a porcelain bath again.

I was walking the Nakasendo Way, an eighth-century footpath between Kyoto and Edo (present-day Tokyo) that later became one of the five official post roads of the Tokugawa era (1603–1867). Feudal lords and their samurai retainers once made their way along this 500-kilometer route through the valleys and over the innumerable passes of Honshu's central mountains, as did pilgrims, traders, and other travelers of Japan's pre-railway age. Today, only a few sections are left, some original, others restored. One can tackle these individually as day walks or altogether as part of a week-plus guided excursion with Walk Japan, a tour company that grew out of study trips run by two Hong Kong University academics, Tom Stanley and Richard Irving, in the early 1990s. The idea was to lift tourists out of big cities like Tokyo and Kyoto and introduce them to the delights of an “older” Japan, accommodating them primarily at traditional *ryokan* inns along the way.

Walk Japan's tour offerings have since expanded to include Okinawa, the Kii Peninsula's Kumano Kodo pilgrimage circuit, and seasonal snowshoeing in the Nagano area. But its Nakasendo itineraries

Happy Valley
Views of Tsumago and the Magome Pass from the hilltop ruins of Tsumago Castle, on the Kiso Road section of the Nakasendo.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF WALK JAPAN





remain the most popular options. It's not all walking: actual trail time on the old post road totals 135 kilometers over nine nights, with bus and train transfers (including a Shinkansen bullet-train ride from Narai to Karuizawa on day nine) connecting walkers with the fragmented sections of the Nakasendo. That averages about five hours of walking per day. Yet there are times when you will be tested, such as on the optional ascent to the hilltop ruins of Tsumago Castle, where, in 1583, 300 men of the Kiso clan held off a 7,000-strong invading army in one of history's great against-the-odds confrontations. By the time I reached the modest summit on what was an unseasonably warm late-autumn day, I was fairly dripping with sweat.

But while it pays to be fit, this is most definitely

a walk, not a huff-and-puff trek. Our baggage was taken ahead by taxi to the night's lodging each morning. There were wayside shrines at which to rest weary feet and original milestones to help gauge how much trudging we had left until the next stop. Losing one's way, even without a guide, was near impossible, thanks to a profusion of trail markers etched with the soon-familiar Japanese characters for Nakasendo—中山道, literally "Central Mountain Road." And while traversing one of the route's 20-odd mountain passes could be hard work on a warm day, gradients were for the most part gentle, taking us along forest roads through tracts of pine and bamboo, past fields of buckwheat and soybeans, trout farms, villagers' backyards, and along the doglegged approaches

Town and Country

Outside the Shinchaya Inn, a family-run guesthouse near Magome, above. Top right: The road to the Kaida Plateau takes walkers past Karasawa Falls, a 100-meter cascade at the foot of the Jizo Pass.



to centuries-old post towns, so designed to slow the advance of attacking armies. On the Nakasendo, history is always just around the corner. Like the Battle of Sekigahara.

In a valley not far to the east of Kyoto, two rail lines (one of which is a high-speed track for the bullet train) and an expressway run past small towns equipped with all the conveniences of modern life. But four centuries ago the Nakasendo weaved its way unhindered through what was mostly empty countryside, and from my vantage point on a nearby hilltop I could see how the slaughter that occurred at Sekigahara on October 21, 1600, played out. By clever use of the terrain, the clans of eastern Japan under the command of Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated

the western clans led by Toyotomi Hideyori in a rout that ushered in the 286-year rule of the Tokugawa shogunate. Sekigahara was a complex battle of attrition involving alliances that were made and broken on the day, and its outcome determined the nation's future. It was a lot to take in on the second day of our tour, but no one was complaining. We were enjoying treading water in the deep end of Japanese history.

Our long walk on the fourth day made us all as agile as Japanese mountain goats, and just as well, because we were now on the Kiso Road, the most popular section of the trail. Running for eight kilometers between the old post towns of Magome and Tsumago, it's also one of the most slippery, as it retains a stretch of the Nakasendo's original interlocking paving stones, or *ishidatami*, which can be as

Taking the Tour

Walk Japan (walkjapan.com) offers its 10-night Nakasendo Way walking tours several times a month in spring and autumn, with shorter itineraries available in summer and winter. The cost per person is US\$3,680, including accommodation (a mix of traditional inns and Western-style hotels), guide, meals, and train and bus transportation for the duration of the tour.

Where to Stay

For lodgings in Kyoto and Tokyo before and after the tour, consider:

Hyatt Regency Kyoto
644-2 Sanjusangendo-mawari; 81-75/541-1234; kyoto.regency.hyatt.com; doubles from US\$215.

Palace Hotel Tokyo
1-1-1 Marunouchi, Chiyoda-ku; 81-3/3211-5211; palacehoteltokyo.com; doubles from US\$625.



OF A MOUNTAIN OUR RAIN L T G T O H I A N L I G D E N A W Y A G A S O L M A K A J T D A S O E P N A U N T S E H S E A E L L

smooth as glass when it rains. Shima Enomoto, our petite guide, explained that these were the very stones over which Princess Kazuno-miya was carried in 1862 on her way to Edo to become, reluctantly, the 16-year-old bride of shogun Tokugawa Iemochi. Her imperial train reportedly included 10,000 retainers and 3,000 horses and was so long that it took three days to pass any point along the route.

Such processions earned the Nakasendo its nickname *Hime no kaido*, or the “Highway of Princesses.” But it wasn’t always so busy. The road attracted many of Japan’s seclusion-seeking hermit-poets too. Among them was Matsuo Basho, now considered the Edo period’s greatest composer of haiku, whose solitary walks through nature inspired such poetry as “A cuckoo cries/And through a thicket of bamboo/The late moon shines.” For our part, we encountered only a handful of other walkers on the trail, including three excitable ladies from Yorkshire and a bawdy group of factory workers from Nagano who, if I understood them correctly, were on some kind of a “beer walk.”

Many of the surviving Edo-era post towns we passed through—Mitake and Hosokute, Tsumago and Narai—must have looked similar to how they did in Basho’s day, when they served as way stations for travelers. Renovation work in the 1970s has preserved their two-story wooden buildings and cobbled streets; electrical wires, telephone poles, and satellite dishes are all hidden from view, and strict building codes ensure the historical illusion is maintained. Sure, they’re touristy, with a profusion of chopstick-filled souvenir shops and the inevitable concessions to modernity (most inns, for example, have long since paved over their original dirt entrances, which once allowed travelers to enter and discuss rates without having to remove their shoes). But they are picturesque. And some, like tiny Okute, whose 1,300-year-old cedar tree is still venerated as a Shinto spirit, retain a genuine flavour. The day we strolled through town just happened to be the anniversary of Okute’s founding, and residents were celebrating with gusto. I was invited to attend a performance by a group of elderly men, all smartly dressed and singing songs of their home accompanied by a piano in the town hall, which children had decorated with paper bunting and balloons. There

were barbecues and laughter and dancing, and not a souvenir store or other tour group in sight.

Other traditions persist in the countryside, where we spotted farmers cutting rice straw in dry paddy fields. But their future seemed tenuous. Many of the rural areas we walked through had a declining, ageing population, their youth having moved to the cities to seek employment. It wasn’t uncommon to see an abandoned house, an unkempt field, a shuttered storefront.

No amount of reminiscing about walking the Nakasendo would be complete without talking about Hideji and Mitsuko Ando, surely one of Japan’s happiest retirement-age couples. Originally from Nagoya, they moved to the mountain-ringed Kaida Plateau years ago to open their dream business: an Italian café overlooking the picturesque summit of Mount Ontake, Japan’s second highest peak. As we dined on miso-laced pizza, pasta, and Mitsuko’s incomparable rum-and-raisin cake, Hideji strummed on a three-stringed *shamisen* with his wife providing backup on harmonica as they led us in a rendition of *Kisobushi*, an old Nagano folk song that lauds the region’s mountains, rivers, and people. A recent visitor from Hong Kong had been so impressed with their playing he gave Hideji his Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club cap, which the 63-year-old was now wearing with pride. Later, I asked Hideji about the explosion last September of Mount Ontake, which caused the death of 57 hikers. “I didn’t hear anything,” he told me, “but I knew something bad had happened. Half the sky was gray. It was very strange.” Even now the mountain was still smoking away, its brooding mass clearly visible on the horizon.

Our last night before arriving in Tokyo was spent in the summer resort town of Karuizawa, an hour from the capital by bullet train. It was here, in 1957, that Emperor Akihito (then crown prince) met his future bride, Japan’s much-loved Empress Michiko Shoda, the first commoner to ever marry into the Japanese imperial family. Other famous guests have included John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who spent a number of summers here in the 1970s. Lennon would ride his bicycle to the very same French Bakery where I just purchased a baguette and a slice of *castella*, a Japanese sponge cake of Portuguese origin. I liked Karuizawa’s festive mood and eclectic main street, where a leisurely stroll takes you past cutting-edge art galleries and chic boutiques and souvenir shops selling everything from local jams to replica Art Nouveau lampshades.

The next day, after saying my goodbyes to the rest of the group, I checked into the Palace Hotel Tokyo and hobbled up to my room. The view from my balcony took in the sprawling grounds of the adjacent Imperial Palace gardens. “There’s a few more kilometers of walking,” I thought to myself as I attended to my trail-sore feet. But that could wait until tomorrow. First, I needed to find myself an ofuro to soak in. ☉

Walk this Way

Opposite: Day seven of the tour sees guests walking an original section of the Nakasendo between the towns of Nagiso and Nojiri, which includes an ascent of the forested Nenoue Highlands.

Show of Faith

A Jain monk of the Shvetambara sect in the sanctum of Jaisalmer Fort's Parshvanath Temple. Shvetambara ascetics wear muslin cloths (*muhapatti*) over their mouths to avoid inadvertently killing insects by inhaling them.



CITY

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N

Centered on
a massive
sandstone
citadel of
towering
ramparts and
exquisitely
carved havelis,
Jaisalmer could
well be India's
most beguiling
fortress city,
with the strange
beauty of the
surrounding
desert only
adding to its
appeal.

BY KALPANA SUNDER

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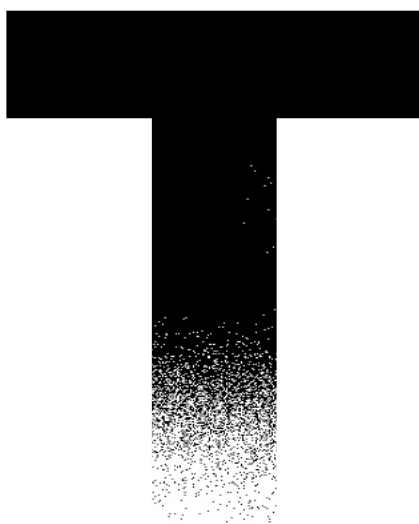
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT DUTILE

E

SAND

Holding the Fort

Outside Patwon ki Haveli, below. Opposite, clockwise from top: Carpets for sale in the market square of Dussehra Chowk; Dr. Bhang at the entrance to his specialty lassi shop; cumin rice, *paneer mutter masala*, and butter naan at a restaurant in the ramparts of Jaisalmer Fort.



The desert is in Jaisalmer's bones—in buildings the color of golden sand with latticework *jaali* screens that shimmer like a mirage; in spice-laden curries prepared with buttermilk and wild legumes; in the dress and songs and sun-burnished faces of its people. An erstwhile stop for the caravans that once crossed the Indian state of Rajasthan, Jaisalmer is ancient, evocative, exotic, an oasis of brilliantly colored turbans and lissome ladies in gauzy veils and mirrored skirts, of caparisoned camels and sand-scoured bastions. For someone who grew up in the sultry coastal

city of Chennai, it's a desert fantasy come to life.

Set on the fringes of Rajasthan's vast Thar Desert, Jaisalmer was founded in 1156 by the Bhatti Rajput ruler Rawal Jaisal, who gave the medieval city both its name and its remarkable citadel, Jaisalmer Fort. For centuries it sat here in near isolation, a week's journey on camel from the nearest town, its nobles and merchants growing rich off the caravans that passed through carrying silk, spices, gold, and opium. Much of their wealth they poured back into the city itself, commissioning elaborate temples and havelis (mansions) hand-carved from the yellow sandstone that speaks to Jaisalmer's nickname, the Golden City.

My base for exploring Jaisalmer and its surrounding wilderness is The Serai, a tented camp set amid scrubby desert terrain half an hour's drive from the city. Inspired by the caravanserais of Rajput princes, it is—almost literally—an oasis of luxury, with 21 canvas-covered suites mounted on plinths of smooth sandstone and decorated with campaign-style furniture that can be taken apart and packed up when the camp shuts down for the hot summer months. On my first evening there, a butler bundles me into a safari jeep and we drive deeper into the desert, passing clusters of mud huts where turbaned men repose in the shade of *ker* trees. After a while, we stop to allow me to switch vehicles—to a camel regally outfitted with hot-pink pom-poms and a silken black harness. A young boy then leads me to the top of a lonely dune, where a spread of dates, nuts, cakes, and a glass of chilled white wine awaits. In the cooling desert air, I watch the orange orb of the sun dip below the horizon, turning the cloudless sky pink.

I quickly learn that it's better to be an early riser in a desert city, as by the afternoon, the sun is too fierce, and the chance of a sandstorm is that much greater. Guiding me on my morning excursions through town is Kanhaiya Lal, a stout local historian dapperly dressed in a black waistcoat and white dhoti. Jaisalmer is essentially divided into two parts: the 12th-century Jaisalmer Fort, which crowns the 80-meter rise of Trikuta Hill; and the "new" town sprawling at its base, where merchant princes of a later era built their havelis. The largest and most ornate of these, Patwon ki Haveli, is our first stop. Begun in 1805, it's a collection of five mansions built for the sons of a fabulously rich brocade merchant. Standing in an airy courtyard, Lal tells me that the entire complex took 50 years to complete, and it shows in the intricacy of the delicate stone grilles, lavishly embellished wooden ceilings, and hand-carved *jharokha* balconies, all 60 of them.

There aren't quite as many *jharokhas* at Salim Singh ki Haveli, which we visit next. But this former home of a debauched *dewan* (prime minister) called Salim Singh Mehta is splendid nonetheless, a confection of filigreed stonework built in the early 19th century by the best craftsmen of the time. It's a visual







It's a Breeze

A hill outside town provides the perfect perch for a young kite flier—not to mention a stunning view over Jaisalmer and its centerpiece fort.



feast, with a projecting gallery on its upper floor and elaborate gateways carved with elephants. Lal says that Salim Singh had the temerity to build his original mansion taller than the palace of the maharaja, who in turn ordered the offending stories to be torn down.

Two minutes away at the Desert Cultural Centre and Museum, I get a better feel for those times amid a collection of old paintings and artifacts ranging from Rajput jewelry and costumes to coins and kitchen utensils and *karal* containers once used to mix opium. But the rest of the city below Jaisalmer Fort holds little attraction for me—too much dust, squalor, and litter. So I head to Trikuta Hill and enter the golden-yellow citadel through one of its four massive gates.

Built at the time of the city's founding, Jaisalmer Fort is the second-oldest fort in Rajasthan and surely among its grandest. Also called the Sonar Quila (Golden Fort) because of the way its color changes from amber to gold as the sun moves across the sky, it has no less than 99 turrets defending its three layers of walls, which kept out centuries of invasions, including multiple sieges by Turks in the 13th century attempting to conquer the city and its wealth.

But after standing sentinel over the city for so long, its bastions and walls have begun to crumble. Its soft foundations are increasingly at risk thanks to the city's leaky and over-worked sewage system, and global climate change has brought increasing rainfall to the arid region, eroding the mud structures built atop the buildings to keep them cool. The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage has undertaken initiatives to protect the fort, as its decay not only endangers a historic site but a residential one too: one of the most extraordinary things about the fort is that people still live here, making it one of India's last "living forts." It has about 2,000 inhabitants, with the rest of Jaisalmer's population—nearly 70,000 people—residing outside its walls.

Immediately after entering the gate I'm plunged into a maze of chaotic residential streets. Motorcycles zoom down twisted lanes, cows lumber through narrow alleys, laundry flaps from ancient balustrades, and at every step, someone tries to sell me something. Tiny souvenir shops vend silk scarves and books bound in camel leather, while incongruous signboards offer everything from "Viagra Bed Sheets" to "CD Burning." Many houses have wedding invitations painted on their front walls, bright murals depicting Ganesha. Presumably in a place where everyone knows each other, there's no need for personal invites.

The most beautiful part of the fort is the cluster

of seven sandstone Jain temples standing at its center. Built between the 12th and 15th centuries and dedicated to various *tirthankars*, or Jain saints, the temples are masterworks of soaring spires, scalloped arches, cornices, and delicately chiseled filigree. The ceiling of one is sculpted with a demonic head encircled by four bodies, which represent the different states of existence that one can be reincarnated as after death: angels, demons, humans, and animals. In the basement of another is the Gyan Bhandar Library, a tiny, dim-lit repository filled with palm-leaf manuscripts, astrological charts, and religious imagery detailed with precious stones and ivory. Eying everything carefully, I spot a giraffe motif on one of the documents, a reminder that Jaisalmer's old trade links once stretched as far as Egypt.

Surrounding the temples is Dussehra Chowk, the fort's central square. It's rimmed with narrow lanes, which I wander along to peruse shops selling turbans in a kaleidoscope of colors, swirling skirts, woven rugs and blankets, and hand-embroidered slippers called *mojaris* and *jootis*. "The vivid reds, candy pinks, and greens of the veils and turbans are meant to break the monotony of the monochrome, sepia desert landscape," Kanhaiya poetically explains. "And the tinkling anklets echo in the desert winds."

In my search for the unusual, I land upon a tiny *bhanga* shop run by a man named Chander Prakash Vyas, known to his customers as Dr. Bhang. Bhang is a paste made from cannabis, and its use is said

to have started in holy cities where Brahmins were not allowed to consume alcohol or smoke. Bhang provided an alternate source of stimulation; Dr. Bhang tells me it's blessed by Shiva. His specialty is *bhanga lassi*, but he also sells *bhanga*-laced chocolates, cookies, sweets, and buttermilk. I try the lassi. Made with pistachios, saffron, and black pepper, it's thick and green and tastes like gritty soymilk. And though I don't start to hallucinate, I do leave with a few more giggles than usual.

The main attraction on the square is the entrance to the city's Rajmahal, the former royal residence. It's now the Jaisalmer Fort Palace Museum & Heritage Centre, but on its sides are handprints, reminders of what once took place here. In the 14th and 15th centuries, royal widows committing *sati*—self-immolation—would dip their hands in henna and press them against the palace walls before jumping into their husband's funeral pyre.

Climbing up to one of the cannon emplacements that ring the fort's ramparts, where these women might have once stood, I'm met with quite a different scene. All of Jaisalmer is below my feet with its flat-roofed houses, kites floating in the sky above, and

I'M PLUNGED INTO A MAZE OF CHAOTIC RESIDENTIAL STREETS. MOTORCYCLES ZOOM DOWN TWISTED LANES WHILE COWS LUMBER THROUGH NARROW ALLEYWAYS

Desert Dreaming

Opposite, clockwise from top left: The main pool and dining tent at The Serai; Prateek Kumar, the camp's general manager; a morning stroll among the cenotaphs of Gadi Sagar, an artificial lake to the south of town; a guide leads the way on a camel trek through the desert surrounding The Serai.





Above and Beyond

Looking down on Dussehra Chowk from the Fort Palace Museum and Heritage Centre, a onetime royal residence that now serves as a showcase for Jaisalmer's rich history.

the vast Thar Desert spread beyond, drenched in blinding sunlight.

It's this desert that many of Jaisalmer's visitors come to explore, which I venture to do on a camel safari and night spent out on the sand. After riding about 45 minutes in a truck, my group arrives at a clearing where a dozen camels await, batting their long eyelashes and grazing on stubby desert cotton trees and spiny *khejri* trees. We hoist ourselves up atop the backs of the animals—mine is named Lala—and leave the road, entering a sparse landscape with squat trees, cacti, and the occasional dune, trotting through small villages along the way where groups of locals walk alongside us, herding goats and sheep. As the sun dips below the horizon, I become mesmerized by the stunning patterns of swirling, rippling sand. Then I catch a glimpse of a lithe desert fox, who trains his tawny eyes on us before scurrying out of sight.

All the rolling and lurching in the saddle makes my back ache, and I'm relieved when, by late evening, we stop at a dune to set up camp. We dine on simple fare of curried vegetables, chapattis, and rice cooked over a wood fire. It isn't fine dining, but eaten under a starry desert sky to the accompaniment of whistling wind and snorting camels, it tastes better than anything I've eaten all trip. In the morning, I wake to the sound of wild peacocks rustling through the distant bushes as the first rays of the sun warm the sand.

The local diet is predominantly vegetarian and shaped by the scarcity of water. "To decrease the use of water, a lot of milk products are used to cook food instead, such as clarified butter and buttermilk," explains the chef back at The Serai. Many of the staple foods were also discovered by Rajasthani villagers in times of famine when they had to survive off of anything they could find, such as *ker*, a type of bean, and

sangri, a thorny tree whose leaflets become edible after being soaked or boiled. At The Serai, they're prepared as part of a five-part Rajasthani *thali* of piquant desert legumes cooked in creamy yogurt, served with the signature dish of the region, *dhal bhati churma*—lentil curry and baked wheat balls dipped in ghee and crushed *churma*. Washed down with a creamy lassi, it's an unforgettable—albeit calorific—feast.

No matter where I go or what I eat, one thing remains constant: Water is Jaisalmer's most precious commodity. This is best appreciated on the edge of town at Gadi Sagar, an artificial lake created in the 12th century by the visionary ruler Maharawal Gadsingh to collect rainwater, which it did so successfully that it served as the city's only water supply all the way up to 1965. Now a more modern network of piping and canals keeps the city hydrated, and Gadi Sagar has become a watering hole of a different sort. Migratory birds flock to its waters, as do locals to bob around in paddleboats and take in the views of the golden-hued temples, shrines, and cenotaphs that line its shores. An imposing, turreted archway serves as the portal to the waters. It's named Tilon ki Pol after a prostitute who is said to have financed its construction, and from a set of steps nearby, I admire yet another stunning sunset.

At the end of my trip, having ticked off my to-do list, I follow Lal's advice and make my way out to Kuldhara, a deserted village 18 kilometers west of Jaisalmer that's said to be haunted. Adjoining Kuldhara are dozens of smaller villages, once the homes of Paliwal Brahmins, prosperous farmers who settled here in the 1300s. However, their fortunes floundered when trade routes were changed and the nearby Kak River began to dry up, and then suddenly in 1825, everyone left, completely abandoning the villages overnight. No one knows the exact reason for their move,

but as I walk through the eerie ghost town, my guide tells a story of how Salim Singh, known to be a lecherous ruler, set his eyes on the head chief's daughter and threatened heavy taxes if she refused marriage. Repulsed and dishonored by Singh, the entire community vacated and cursed the village, so that no one would ever be able to inhabit it again.

I climb a terrace of one of the old homes and look at the grid of houses, broken temples, crumbling walls, staircases that lead nowhere. In the silence, my mind wanders to the lives of the people who once lived here, lost to history. There's a lone caretaker who lives on the premises, the only person who has ever settled here since. He offers up his own explanation for what happened: "The desert takes back what belongs to it." ☉



Getting There

The closest airport is 300 kilometers to the southeast in Jodhpur, which is connected to Mumbai and Delhi by daily flights on **Air India** (airindia.com). Jaisalmer is a four-hour drive—or train ride—away.

When To Go

November to March offer the coolest temperatures in this part of Rajasthan.

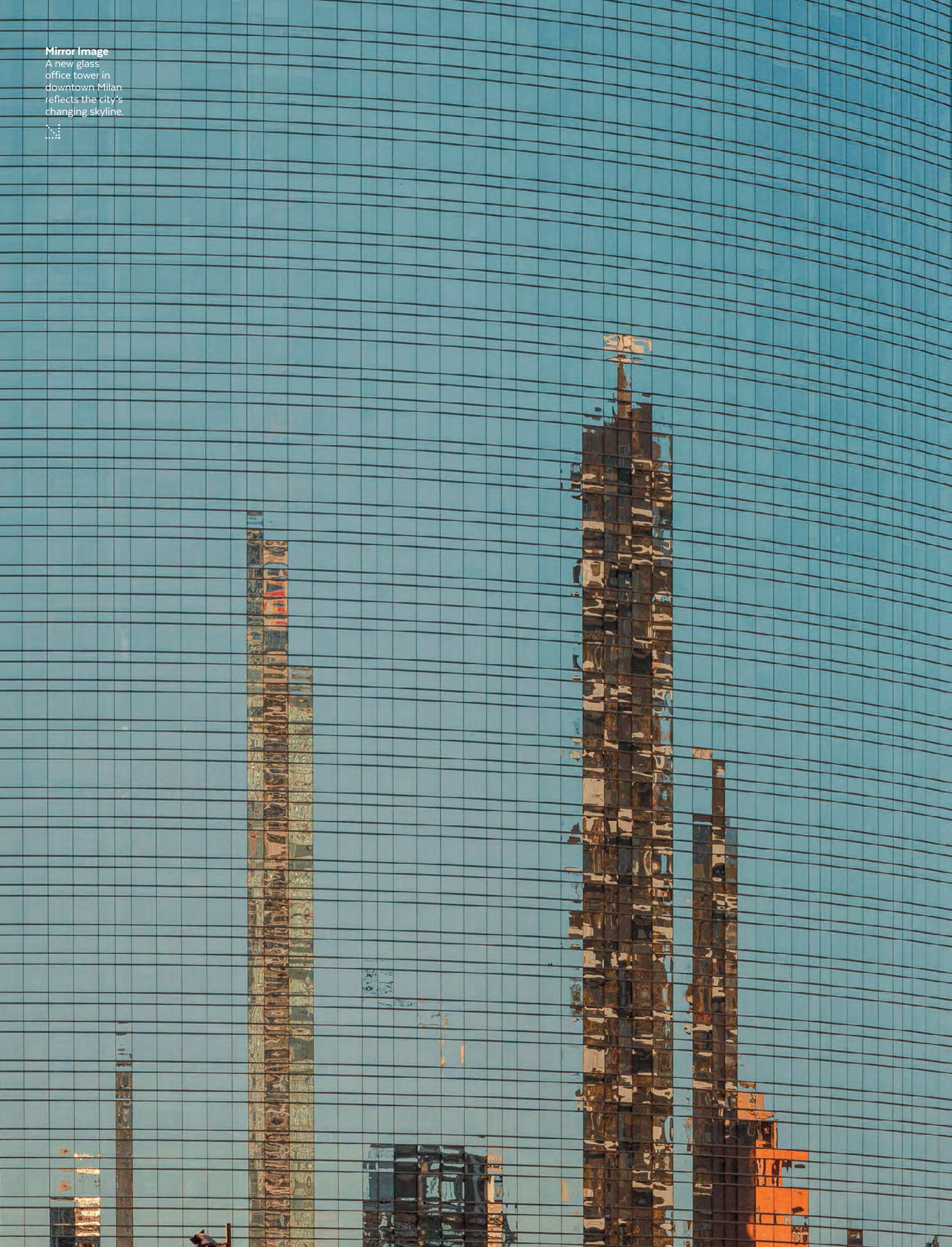
What to Bring Home

The Fort's Bhatia Market is the best place to start hunting for souvenirs; look for chunky tribal jewelry, woolen *dhurries* (rugs), hand-embroidered textiles, and camel-leather slippers.

Where to Stay

Set in the wilderness 40 minutes outside town, **The Serai** (91-11/4617-2700; sujanluxury.com; doubles from US\$525) is a luxury desert camp with 21 tented suites and a walled garden spa that uses organic Ayurvedic oils. Desert drives and camel safaris are among the activities on offer. Alternatively, the 62-room **Suryagarh** (91-2992/269-269; suryagarh.com; doubles from US\$258) is a lavish re-creation of a medieval sandstone fort located on the road to the Sam dunes, complete with rambling courtyards and an extensive collection of Rajasthani artifacts.

Mirror Image
A new glass
office tower in
downtown Milan
reflects the city's
changing skyline.



MILAN ON THE MOVE

If all roads in Italy lead to Rome, all hearts to Venice, and all artists to Florence, then all Italian business goes to Milan. This should put the Italian fashion capital—the country's second city in terms of population and *numero uno* when it comes to wealth—on the itinerary of 20 million travelers in 2015, the year of Expo.

BY **CLAUDIA FLISI**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MAURIZIO CAMAGNA**

TWO women catch my eye on Via della Spiga, in the heart of Milan's most upscale fashion district. Which one embodies this city best? Is it the twentysomething *signorina* on the left wearing a chili-red three-quarter-length fur coat and impossibly high stiletto heels that have no business navigating the cobblestones of this street? Or is it the mink-swathed woman on her right, possibly the girl's mother, judging from the way the two are walking arm in arm?

The younger lady may exemplify the essence of trendy, fashion-impassioned Milan, but her elegant companion, more sensibly shoed and toting a leather Trussardi bag, is demographically more representative of this northern Italian city of 1.35 million. The median age here is 45, with septuagenarians outnumbering people in their twenties.

But you wouldn't know that walking down Via della Spiga, because so many shoppers on this street and throughout the well-touristed Quadrilatero della Moda district are foreigners. Some are trophy wives from elsewhere in Europe out on shopping sprees with seemingly limitless credit lines. Others are buyers; you see them thick as flies during Fashion Week in the spring and autumn. But these are the colorful exceptions. Milan is more often (and more accurately) described as "gray" by visitors and residents alike—not only for its architecture and its smog, but also for its gray-haired population, who are reputed to be a little too staid and a little too conservative, at least by the standards of their fellow Italians.

Milan's movers and shakers expect to improve that image with Expo Milano 2015, which kicks off in May and runs through October. Milan won the bid to host the next world's fair back in 2008, hoping the event would burnish its coveted image of urban dynamism and innovation, serve as a catalyst for infrastructure improvements that needed to be made regardless, and encourage investment. The campaign was spearheaded by Letizia Moratti, Milan's first woman mayor; her incumbency alone suggested a change in direction for the city.

Current mayor Giuliano Pisapia cheerleads Expo as a vehicle for propelling Milan (and the country) out of its current economic slump. He cites surveys documenting the optimism of his fellow citizens about the fair, in spite of a series of corruption charges involving Expo managers over the last year.

"Optimistic" isn't usually the first word that comes to mind when describing a typical Milanese; "fast-moving," "competitive," and "cynical" are more frequently heard adjectives. The latter cling to the vestiges of an earlier era of Italian politics: local son

Silvio Berlusconi was Italy's prime minister three times between 1994 and 2011, making him the country's longest-serving postwar leader.

A photographer friend of mine, Matteo, sums up his fellow Milanese this way: "When you call someone who is late for an appointment and you say, 'Where the hell are you?', the answer is typically, 'Sono già lì [I am already there].' They may still be on the other side of the city, but they want to give the impression of being on time and efficient. Of course it's not true."

Six months before Expo's opening day, the city was already "not there." I have lived in and around Milan on and off for almost 30 years, and when I was walking around in December, the center of town—not to mention the fairgrounds themselves—looked like a huge construction site, with skeletal skyscrapers and scaffolding dotting the landscape. Damiano Gulli, a spokesman for the Triennale Design Museum, one of the city's cultural bellwethers, sees these changes as positive.

"The skyline of Milan has been transformed in recent years," he tells me. "You can see it at Piazza Gae Aulenti [the new regional-government headquarters] and in the Porta Garibaldi area." Gulli also says the art scene has improved, citing a spate of new galleries. "Expo is bringing more changes," he adds.

Yet Matteo laments the fact that his city is not "truly modern and vivacious," in spite of the surge in construction and public spending. Recent expenditures on such projects as transportation upgrades and the Piazza Gae Aulenti were long overdue, he says, and many promised improvements—a new metro line, new waterways—haven't happened. What has gotten lost in the building frenzy, he says, is the architectural splendor created between the 1930s and '70s. "Some of these are really beautiful buildings, but they aren't understood and many have been ruined by careless restructuring. The city has given the green light to changes that have destroyed the value of the original architecture."

He particularly mourns the fate of the Palazzo Mondadori, headquarters for the Mondadori pub-

Style Showcase

Opposite: An exhibition hall at the Triennale Design Museum, which showcases contemporary Italian design.





lishing empire. It was designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer and is the only example of his work in Italy. “It is a marvel every time I see it,” notes Matteo, “but it is ever more choked by ugly buildings, office structures, and roads that make it more and more difficult to admire.”

Change doesn’t always happen quickly in Milan, despite the city’s self-branding as innovative and dynamic. The Triennale Design Museum itself was discussed for years before it opened in late 2007 as the first museum in Italy dedicated to design. You wonder what took them so long, since the words “Italian” and “design” are inextricably linked.

Italian design is more than clothes, shoes, and other leather goods. It is equally—maybe primarily—

industrial design, originally for automobiles with lots of zeros on their price tags. Think Bugatti, Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati, and Pagani, crafted by design rock stars such as Nuccio Bertone, Giorgetto Giugiaro, and Sergio Pininfarina. Yet the latter’s son, Paolo Pininfarina, maintains that Italians have been creating global design long before automobiles. “Since the time of Michelangelo,” he suggests. He sees successful Italian design as chameleon-like—luxurious but affordable, innovative but traditional. “Our strength is the ability to surprise, with rigor and respect for tradition. Plus, a good design should be emotional.”

Auto design in Italy is very emotional. So is the subject of parking spaces in Milan. You don’t see

Spire Calling

Above: Crowds in the piazza of Milan’s Duomo, among the largest and grandest Gothic cathedrals in the world.



Getting There

Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.com) and **Singapore Airlines** (singaporeair.com) both fly daily to Milan.

Datebook

Expo Milano 2015 runs from May to October 31. Visit expo2015.org for more details.

Where to Stay

With just 21 individually designed rooms and suites, **The Gray** (6 Via San Raffaele; 39-2/720-8951; hotelthegray.com; doubles from US\$380) is a chic boutique option just north of the Duomo. For those with deeper pockets, there's the **Armani Hotel Milano** (31 Via Manzoni; 39-2/8883-8888; armani-hotels.com; doubles from US\$740), whose 95 sleek rooms occupy a 1930s palazzo in the heart of the Quadrilatero della Moda.

many Ferraris and Lambos in the heart of town, but you do see a lot of other vehicles: Milan has one of the highest rates of car ownership in the world. So traffic jams, parking congestion, and pollution are big problems, especially in mid April, when the world's most influential furniture and design show, the Salone del Mobile, takes place. You would think it was Fashion Week for the hordes of towering models, temperamental stylists, architects, painters, photographers, and journalists roaming the city. Adding to their numbers is a host of furniture makers, appliance manufacturers, and wholesale buyers, making this the most crowded week in Milan's calendar. Though perhaps not this year: during its six-month run, Expo is expected to draw an estimated 20 million visitors.

Located on 200 hectares of dedicated fairgrounds in Rho, a suburb located outside the city proper, the exposition has taken for its theme "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life," interpreted by 144 participating countries and 11 organizations. The food theme is apt, given Italy's reputation as a chowhound's heaven. But it's a little less so given the lack of gastronomic accolades for many of Milan's specific contributions to that reputation. Authentic Milanese dishes favor rice over pasta, butter over olive oil, and substance over extravagance. *Nervetti* (pork cartilage and tendons), *cassouella* (a pork-and-cabbage casserole), and *fritto misto alla milanese* (fried veal brains, liver, sweetbreads, and kidneys) do not garner Michelin stars as a rule. Locals love them; others maybe not so much. Better bets for the uninitiated might be saffron risotto, *cotoletta alla milanese* (the local answer to schnitzel), or osso buco, which are more convincing examples of Milanese culinary prowess.

Regardless, the city boasts some of Italy's finest restaurants, offering regional specialties from all over the country as well as everything from Tex-Mex to Thai, egg rolls to empanadas. Among my favorites is Daniel, where 34-year-old *enfant prodige* Daniel Canzian brings a rich cosmopolitan dimension to modern Italian cooking. He trained in Japan as well as Europe, and the Asian influence shows in such dishes as risotto with leeks and green tea, and a dessert "origami" of turnip and pistachios with citrus and tarragon. Milan's culinary eclecticism is also on show at Erba Brusca in the Navigli area. Prize-winning chef Alice Delcourt is an amalgam of American, French, and Italian experience, and the *mélange* is evident in signature dishes such as squash velvet soup with gorgonzola crumble and walnuts; risotto with chestnut cream, bacon, and fried rosemary; or eggs Benedict with Dutch sauce, ham, and *tatsoi* greens.

Yet somehow, the effects of all this good eating are not visible on most Milanese. Those living in the city center (the most expensive area) are actually said to be leaner than the average Italian, and Italians in general have the lowest percentage of obesity in Western Europe. You might wonder how they pull *that* off, with restaurants and cafés on every corner and temples of gourmandism like Peck and Eataly. Think of Peck as the mom in mink: founded in 1883 in the heart of downtown, the legendary deli has catered to generations of affluent locals with its voluptuous displays of meats, cheeses, fruits, vegetables, 3,000 wine labels, and 200 offerings of tea and coffee—Fortnum & Mason with an Italian accent. Eataly is Peck's flashier, younger, more cosmopolitan companion. The gourmet market opened last spring on the site of a former theater as the 10th Italian outlet in a growing international empire of food emporia—think separate displays or aisles devoted to *salumi*, cheese, fish, vegetables, pizza, and so on, plus counters where pastas, sandwiches, desserts, and *piadina* are made fresh before your eyes.

Maybe the Milanese stay fit by walking? Although Milan is the second most populous city in Italy, its historic center (where you'll want to spend most of your time anyway) is compact and pedestrian friendly. You can wander, as the locals do, on foot from one locale to another, such as the atmospheric Brera district; a banker friend of mine says it's his favorite place in the city for drinks with friends. Interspersed among the restaurants and nightspots and shoe stores in this formerly working-class neighborhood are boutiques for curios and *oggettistica*, those one-of-a-kind objects that adorn Milan apartments. Eclectica on Corso Garibaldi, for instance, stocks handcrafted pieces by up-and-coming Italian designers alongside screens and rugs from Asia and Africa. And on Via Fiori Chiari, tarot card readers sit at little street-side tables, eager to tell your fortune if you cross their palms with the appropriate coins.

Another fast-gentrifying area is the Navigli neighborhood. The original *navigli* were a network of waterways that flowed through the city. Most have been covered over, but two canals, located in the southwestern part of Milan, remain open. Today they form the nexus of all nightlife with considerably more sparkle than the dank aquatic passageways themselves. The Navigli can be crowded in daytime too. Sunday brunch is a big draw at the innumerable cafés and restaurants, especially on the last Sunday of the month when the canals are bordered by two kilometers of antiques stalls. Don't even think about finding a parking place then.

MILAN'S

historic center is compact and pedestrian friendly.

You can wander, as the locals do, on foot from one locale to another, such as the atmospheric Brera district, a neighborhood filled with restaurants and nightspots



The appreciation of beautiful design has been a tradition since the 13th century, when the Visconti family took power and built Milan into a cultural and political center. Among the Visconti's more substantive contributions were the building of the Duomo and the fortress that eventually became Castello Sforzesco. Today, the piazza fronting the castle is the site of Expo Gate, a pair of airy, translucent pavilions that serve as information centers for Expo-bound visitors. The piazza itself bridges the Castello, with its museums and park, and Via Dante, a major shopping artery decorated with the flags of 130 countries. Beyond Piazza Cordusio to the southeast, the street becomes Via Orefici ("Street of Goldsmiths"), and continues right up to the Piazza del Duomo, the heart of Milan.

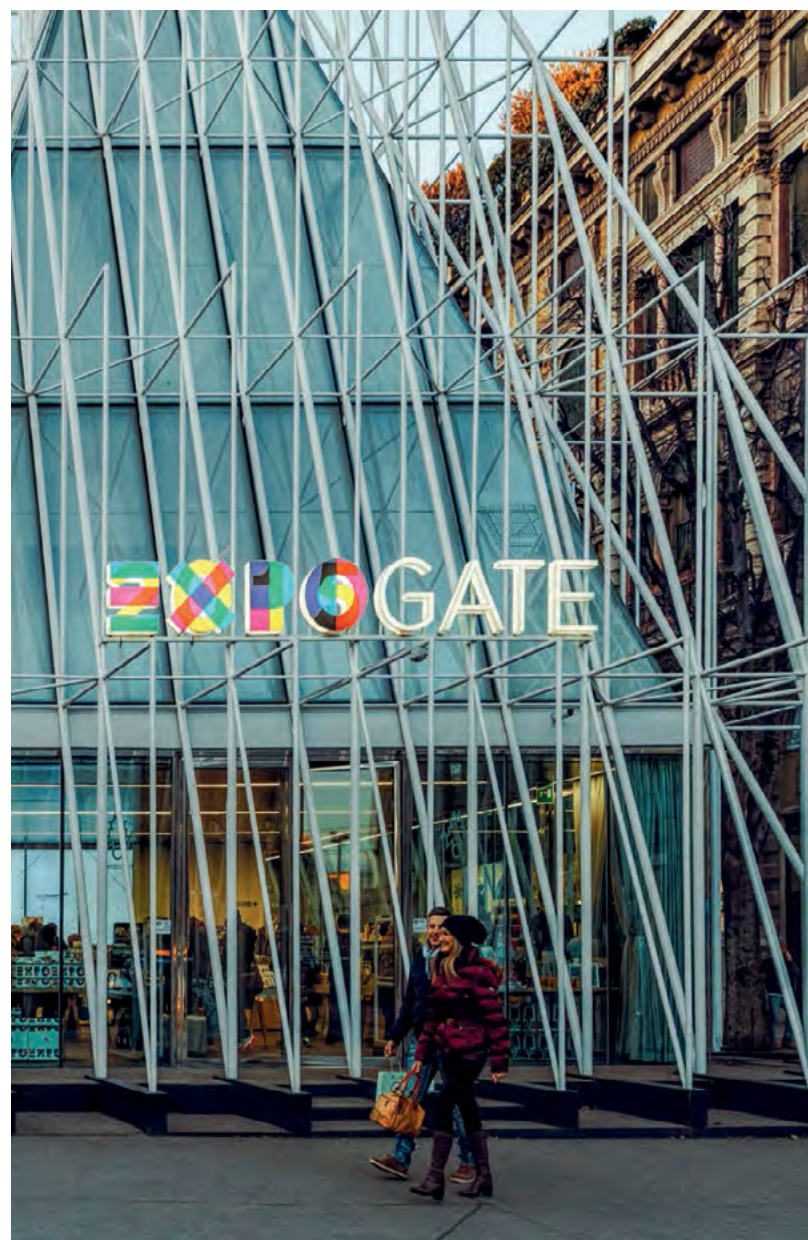
The Duomo is the largest cathedral in Italy and one of the largest in the world. Construction began in 1386 and continued for more than five centuries. The marble-faced Gothic facade is punctuated by 135 spires and 3,400 statues, more than on any other building in the world. A bird's-eye view of this huge lacy wedding cake of a structure confirms its position at the center of the city, flanked by culture and commerce.

One wedding-related enterprise awaits just a few steps from the Duomo. Pettinaroli is the city's most venerable stationery store, founded in 1881. Its reputation is based in part on classic wedding invitations, such as those printed on *carta a mano di Amalfi* (hand-

made paper from Amalfi). About 20 percent of his customers choose this paper, explains owner Francesco Pettinaroli, because of its unique processing and composition. "No other paper in the world is quite like it," he assures potential clients, because it ensures the "clean, serious, conservative look" they favor.

That's a good description of Milanese tastes in general, from art to music. To the south of the Duomo on the piazza is Palazzo Reale, an 18th-century residence that has been home to both the Visconti and Sforza families. Today it is a cultural center hosting world-class art exhibits such as *Leonardo 1452-1519*, a never-before-assembled collection of the artist's works that opens on April 15. And to the north of the Duomo is La Rinascente, Milan's leading department store: everything you want as long as you don't want to push the envelope.

Turn left just before the porticoes of La Rinascente and you find yourself in Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, one of the first covered shopping arcades in the world, constructed during the Industrial Revolution. It's worth eyeballing for its historical and architectural value alone, but there is plenty of shopping and



Made in Milan

Above, from left: Chef Daniel Canzian at his eponymous Daniel restaurant; Expo Gate, the fair's in-town visitors' center, comprises a pair of glass-clad pavilions in the piazza fronting Castello Sforzesco. Opposite: The glass-covered central atrium at Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II.





Where to Eat

Head to **Antica Trattoria della Pesa** (10 Viale Pasubio; 39-2/655-5741; anticatrattoriadellapesa.com) for a taste of traditional Milanese and Lombardy cuisine; founded in 1880, it's an institution for dishes like *cotoletta alla Milanese*. For more contemporary takes on Italian cooking, **Daniel** (7 Via Castelfidardo; 39-2/6379-3837; danielcanzian.it) and **Erba Brusca** (286 Alzaia Naviglio Pavese; 39-2/8738-0711; erba Brusca.it) are well worth seeking out. And be sure to stop by **Peck Italian Bar** (3 Via Cesare Cantù; 39-2/869-3017; peck.it) for a sit-down sampling of the gourmet produce sold at the Peck delicatessen, just around the corner.

In the Bag

Above, from left: Shoppers in the Quadrilatero della Moda; city views through the fretted spires of the Duomo's rooftop terraces.

people-watching to be had too. Tourists and locals throng to such iconic restaurants as Savini, an institution since 1884. Another obligatory stop is the bull mosaic on the floor of the arcade's central atrium. Tradition has it that if you spin your heel on the animal's genitals three times, you will avoid the bad luck that befell the building's architect: Giuseppe Mengoni fell to his death from a scaffold here in 1877, just weeks before the project was completed.

A happier fate awaited Leonardo da Vinci, who in 1495 was commissioned by the Sforza family to paint a centerpiece for the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. That work, completed three years later, is, of course, *The Last Supper*, a masterpiece of Renaissance art.

A statue of Leonardo in Piazza La Scala commemorates Milan's debt to the man. It also faces the world's most prestigious opera house. Since 1778, La Scala has been hosting opera, ballet, recitals, and orchestral performances by the *crème de la crème* of music. "Opening at La Scala has special significance for a singer," says Anja Kampe, a German-born soprano who headlined the opening-night production of *Fidelio* there last December 7. The new season always starts on December 7 because that date marks the Festa di Sant'Ambrogio, commemorating the city's patron saint, St. Ambrose. Media coverage of *Fidelio*'s premiere was inordinately intense, and "well-dressed" does not begin to describe the attire of attendees. The Academy Awards in a cold climate might come close.

Milan is home to beautiful (or at least beautifully dressed) people for good reason. It has the highest per capita income in Italy, enabling its residents to



spend more on clothes than anyone else in the country. The haute couture salons of Paris owe much to Italian fabrics and tailoring, and in men's wear as well as women's, Milan sets the trends.

Capo di tutti capi of this category is Giorgio Armani. Armani is not Milanese-born (he's originally from nearby Piacenza), but he has been headquartered here for 40 years. His block-long emporium on stylish Via Manzoni expresses his refined minimalism in myriad ways—clothing boutiques for men and women, furniture store, food shop, café, hotel. Everything you need to know about his low-key aesthetic can be gleaned in the restaurant at the Armani Hotel. Staff and guests are interchangeable—most everyone is tall, elegant, under 30, and dressed in black. The people-watching is exceptional. The food is excellent. The price is high. And if you need to use the washroom, you'll have to ask for directions. The minimalism is such that toilet signage is all but invisible, and most visitors have to be escorted by one of the invariably amused staff.

Armani's impact on Milan extends beyond fashion, food, and furniture. He is a devoted fan of Inter, one of the city's two football clubs (the other is A.C. Milan, owned by that former favorite son Berlusconi). But that didn't stop Armani from designing a sports line for a onetime Milan player. Inter and A.C. Milan are among Italy's (and the world's) leading football teams, attracting more fans on average in this football-crazed country than all other teams in their category.

Sports may arouse more passion than religion or politics in Milan, but business trumps all. The two women, mother and daughter, on Via della Spiga bypass the shops and turn onto Via Santo Spirito. Past Krizia at the corner and Balenciaga halfway down the street, their destination is one of the city's discreet investment banks—"serious" and "conservative," just the way the *Milanesi* like it. ☉



The Bathroom
Royal Kamuela Villas - Monkey Forest, Ubud, Bali



The Pool
Kamuela Villas & Suites Sanur - Bali



The Bedroom
Kamuela Villas - Seminyak

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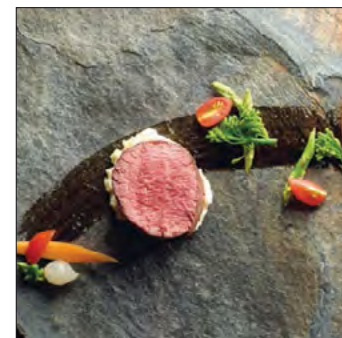
10 AT CLAYMORE @ PAN PACIFIC ORCHARD, SINGAPORE

For meat-lovers in Singapore, there's no better place to dine than at 10 at Claymore, the multi-award-winning restaurant in the lobby of the Pan Pacific Orchard hotel. With state-of-the-art cookware and a chic design, seasonal dishes and a made-to-order buffet, the restaurant balances modern cuisine with all the classicism of a high-grade steakhouse showcasing the world's top prime cuts.

Australian Beef Tenderloin

INGREDIENTS

- 400 g Australian grain-fed tenderloin, trimmed and tied
- 200 g Cherry tomatoes on the vine
- 150 g Balsamic vinegar crema
- 400 g Red wine
- 250 g Beef jus
- 80 g Heavy cooking cream
- 200 g Unsalted butter
- Dash of olive oil
- Pinch of sugar

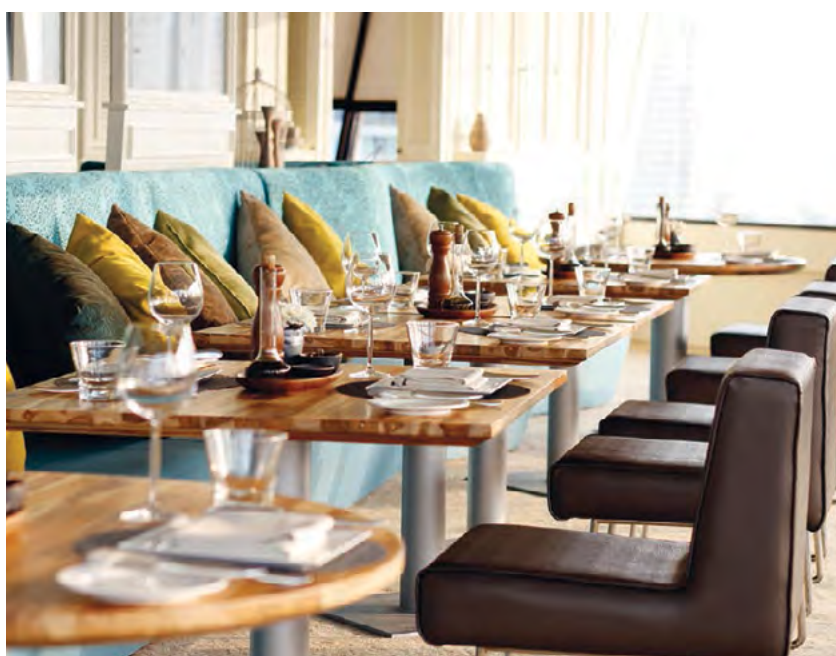


METHOD

Marinate the tenderloin with a dash of olive oil, salt, and pepper, and place on a pre-heated pan. In an oven pre-heated to 80°C, slow-cook the meat to preferred level of doneness, then remove and let the meat rest. When preparing to serve, re-sear the surface of the meat in a hot pan, add a little butter and pinch of salt and pepper, and portion the meat into servings of 100 grams each. Next, take a sauce pot and reduce the wine by half, adding a pinch of sugar. Once done, add the beef jus and bring to a simmer, stirring in the balsamic, cream, and salt and pepper to taste. Stir in the butter until the sauce is mixed and smooth, drizzle over the meat, and serve.



10 Claymore Rd., Singapore, 229540;
65/6737-0811; panpacific.com/orchard



22 KITCHEN AND BAR @ DUSIT THANI BANGKOK

Exotic cocktails, Pacific coastal cuisine laced with Asian influences, and a sky-high setting—there's nothing not to like about 22 Kitchen and Bar, freshly opened on the roof of the Dusit Thani Bangkok in November. With comfy banquette seats from which to enjoy the panoramic views of Lumpini Park and beyond, 22 Kitchen is an exciting new excuse to experience Bangkok from above.

Slow Cooked Kurobuta Pork Ribs with Tamarind Glaze

INGREDIENTS

- 800 g Pork ribs
- 2 Sprigs of parsley
- 1 Sprig of peppermint
- 2 Onions
- 3 Cloves of garlic
- 2 Carrots
- 1 Spicy chili pepper
- 6 Tomatoes
- 1 Bay leaf
- 300 ml White wine
- 50 ml White wine vinegar
- 500 g Tamarind
- 80 g Castor sugar



METHOD

In a large dish, season the ribs with salt and pepper and add the herbs, onions, garlic, carrots, and chili. Cover and transfer the dish to a refrigerator and leave to marinate for 24 hours. When preparing to serve, heat a dash of canola oil in a large pan, remove the meat from the marinade, and pan-fry both sides until golden brown. Leaving as many of the herbs in the marinade as possible, take out the vegetables, tomatoes, and bay leaves and sauté for 10 minutes; add the wine and vinegar; and cook until the liquid is evaporated. Then put the herbs in the pan, add water until the meat is just covered, and simmer for four hours or until tender. Remove the meat and set it aside. For the tamarind glaze, place the tamarind pulp and sugar in a pan over low heat and cook, stirring until it becomes a syrup. Remove from the heat, let it cool, and then brush it over the meat before serving.



946 Rama IV Rd., Bangrak, Bangkok;
66-2/200-9000; dusit.com



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UPDATES AND OFFERS FROM DESTINASIAN PARTNERS



SEMINYAK'S NEW SUITE SPOT

One of Bali's properties has recently gotten a masterful rebranding. On the oceanfront between Legian and Seminyak beaches, what was formerly O-CE-N Bali has been revamped by Furama Hotels International into FuramaXclusive Ocean Beach, Seminyak, now one of the largest all-suite resorts in the area. Ocean Beach is FHI's third Bali property, and adding to the excitement of its opening, the group is running a four-night One Island, Two Vacations package, which for rates beginning at US\$688 allows guests to experience all the beach life, surfing, and night scenes of Seminyak before retreating to the tranquil Furama Villas and Spa set in the rice paddies surrounding Ubud, getting the best of Bali's two major hot spots.

For more information, call 65/6739-6470 or visit furama.com

ANDAMAN APPEAL

Off the coast of Malaysia in the Langkawi archipelago, where luxurious beach resorts intermingle with local villages and wild jungle, The Danna Langkawi falls into the category of the former. With colonial-style rooms and suites, fine restaurants, and a three-tier infinity pool looking out over the Andaman Sea, there are plenty of reasons to plan a trip here, not the least of which is the resort's Advance Purchase deal running through December 20. Book 21 days in advance, and enjoy 25 percent off of best flexible rates with breakfast for two included.

For more information, call 604/959-3288 or visit thedanna.com



SHORE STYLE

The Island of the Gods just got a little more heavenly with the opening of Nikki Beach Bali in December. Since 1998, Nikki Beach has been bringing the chicest lifestyle clubs to the most desirable destinations around the world, and here, on the grounds of the Sofitel Bali Nusa Dua Beach Resort, it's picture-perfect with all-white sun beds nestled beside the cerulean sea. Gourmet international cuisine is coupled with complex cocktails and fine champagne, and as the sun begins to set, the pool is illuminated with 2,500 fiber-optic lights that sparkle into the night.

For more information, call 62-361/849-2900 or visit nikkibeach.com



SIAM STYLE

More than just a shopping center, Siam Center, The Ideaopolis combines fashion, art, and lifestyle with cutting-edge technology and imaginative innovation for an all-encompassing shopping experience. It's no wonder that in just two years since its opening, Siam Center has established itself as one of Bangkok's major retail destinations, recently becoming the only Thai shopping center to be recognized at the 2014 Asia Pacific Shopping Center Awards by the International Council of Shopping Centers, adding the Gold Award in Design & Development to its list of prestigious accolades. With its close partnerships with tenants to continue building brand identities exclusive to the center and plans for more than US\$1.5 million of developments and projects during the next five years, it's sure to stay on top.

For more information, call 66-2/2658-1000 or visit siamcenter.co.th

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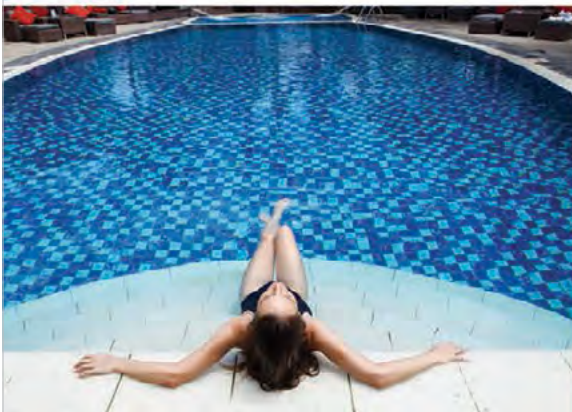


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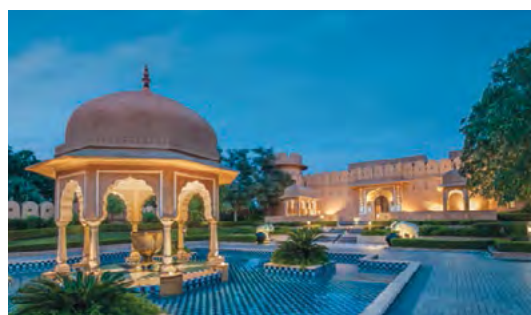
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THE HILL VILLAS



For those seeking tranquility in stunning surroundings, The Hill Villas' secluded spot in Nusa Dua offers the perfect destination. Built with traditional architecture and authentic artifacts, the ten private pool villas exemplify timeless elegance and true Balinese luxury. Perched on the peak of Mumbul Hill, each one- to three-bedroom villa has its own distinct ambience, set by a private garden and breathtaking views of the surrounding Jimbaran and Pecatu hillsides extending out to Tanjung Benoa Bay. With a spa, an assortment of cooking classes, and access to a nearby private beach club, The Hill Villas are a hideaway you won't want to leave.

Jl. Taman Giri, Banjar Mumbul, Nusa Dua, Bali;
62-361/847-8888; thehillvillas.com

OBEROI HOTELS
& RESORTS

From the romance of the Taj Mahal to the vibrant hues of Rajasthan, the tigers of Ranthambore to the tranquil serenity of the Himalayas, India beckons with trips of a lifetime, and Oberoi Hotels & Resorts' 12 Indian properties promise to make them all the more magical. Ease your planning pains with Oberoi's suggested itineraries, and hop to the Oberoi Udaivilas, Udaipur, a castle-like resort on the beautiful banks of Lake Pichola; the Oberoi Rajvilas in Jaipur, whose luxury villas and tents are centered around an 18th-century temple; or the Oberoi Amarvilas in Agra, where guests are chauffeured in private buggies to the Taj Mahal.

oberoihotels.com

METIS RESTAURANT,
LOUNGE & GALLERY

The newly opened lounge at Métis gives Bali visitors yet another reason to head to one of the island's most sophisticated settings. Overlooking a beautiful lily-pond garden and designed with a high-tech retractable roof, the space serves cocktails and Mediterranean-influenced tapas, making it a great starting point for a night out in Seminyak. Or, come earlier for one of its two High Tea Packages and sip carefully selected teas paired with exquisite bites.

The well-established kitchen is always bringing new cuisine to the fine-dining restaurant, most recently with the Meat and Poultry menu, an expertly crafted list of seven new gourmet entrees and classic sides. Keep an eye on adjoining Métis Gallery as well, as it regularly unveils new collections of antiques, artwork, and home goods from around Southeast Asia.



Jl. Petitenget No. 6, Kuta, Bali;
62-361/473-7888; metisbali.com

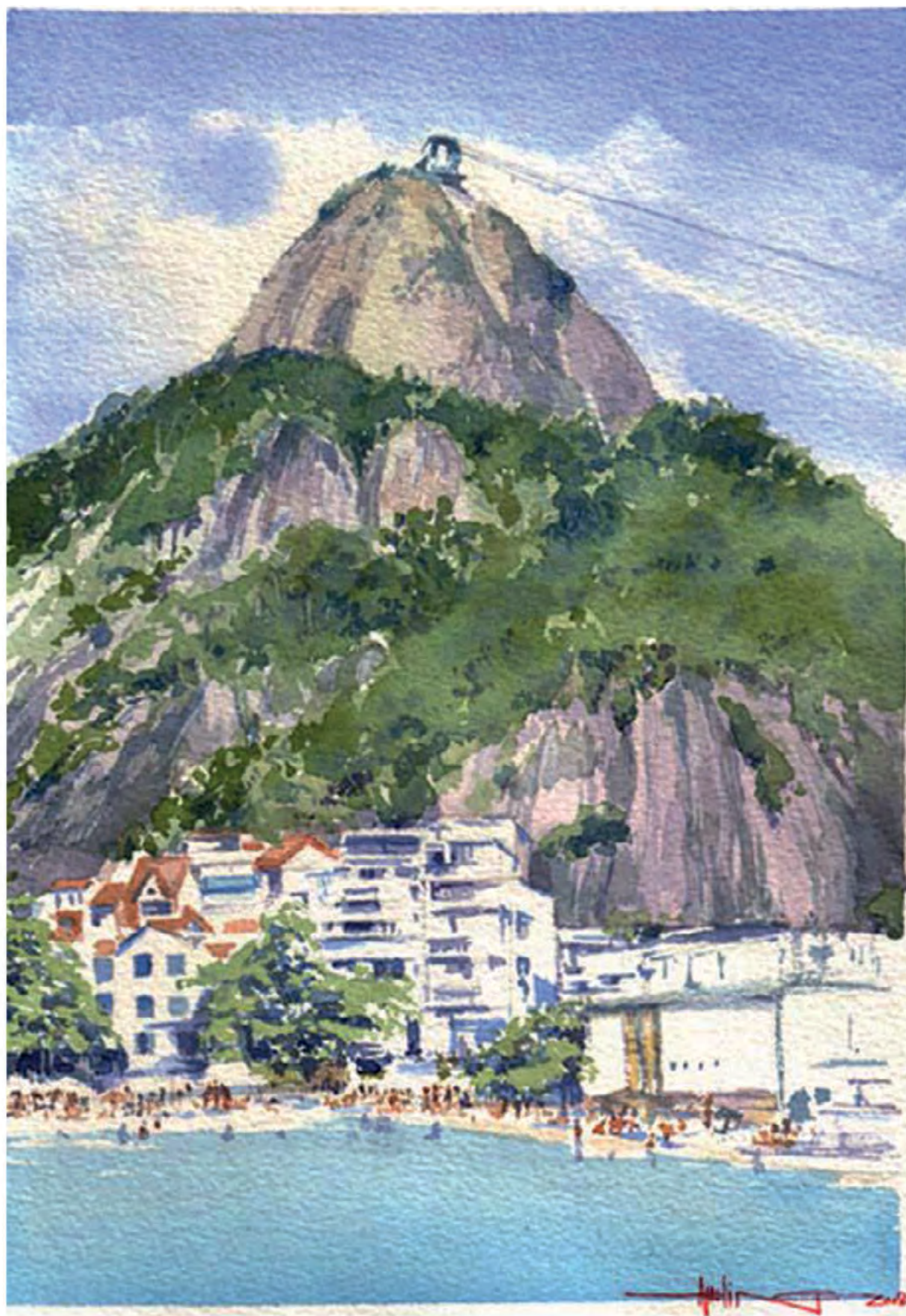
PLAZA BALI



With a convenient location, a range of helpful services, and the widest array of duty-free goods anywhere in Indonesia, Plaza Bali's location at the Soekarno-Hatta International Airport in Jakarta is the ideal one-stop shop for duty-free shopping. Staffed by friendly sales people, the retail space is cool and relaxing, providing discerning customers with the perfect opportunity to make those last minute duty-free purchases or to buy gifts for friends and family back home. The extensive range of goods includes exclusive items from Mont Blanc, Hermès, Lacoste and the like; better still, the shop's pricing policy guarantees that you won't find better priced merchandise anywhere else. Happy shopping!



62-21/559-0338; plazabali.co.id



BRAZILIAN BEAUTY

settlement was founded in the 16th century. Pictured above in a watercolor that the São Paulo-based art professor made during a trip in 2008, Urca is situated between Guanabara Bay and the Atlantic Ocean on a quiet peninsula overlooked by Pão de Açúcar (Sugar Loaf Mountain) and the smaller hill of Morro da Urca. “It’s a very special place, not yet overtaken by urban bustle,” Avelino says. “With lush green slopes rising above beaches of sunbathing locals, I find it perfectly reconciles natural beauty with everyday Brazilian life.” ●

“I could spend years trying to capture all the different personalities of this place in my paintings,” says Carlos Avelino of Urca, the historic Rio de Janeiro neighborhood where Carmen Miranda once lived and performed, and where the city’s first Portuguese



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