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A lush tropical jungle scene. In the foreground, a large, flat, moss-covered rock sits on the ground. To the left, a banana tree with large, dark green leaves stands prominently. The background is filled with dense, vibrant green foliage, including various ferns and palm trees. A waterfall is visible on the right side, with white water cascading down and creating a misty spray at the bottom. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating dappled light and shadows throughout the scene.

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FEATURES

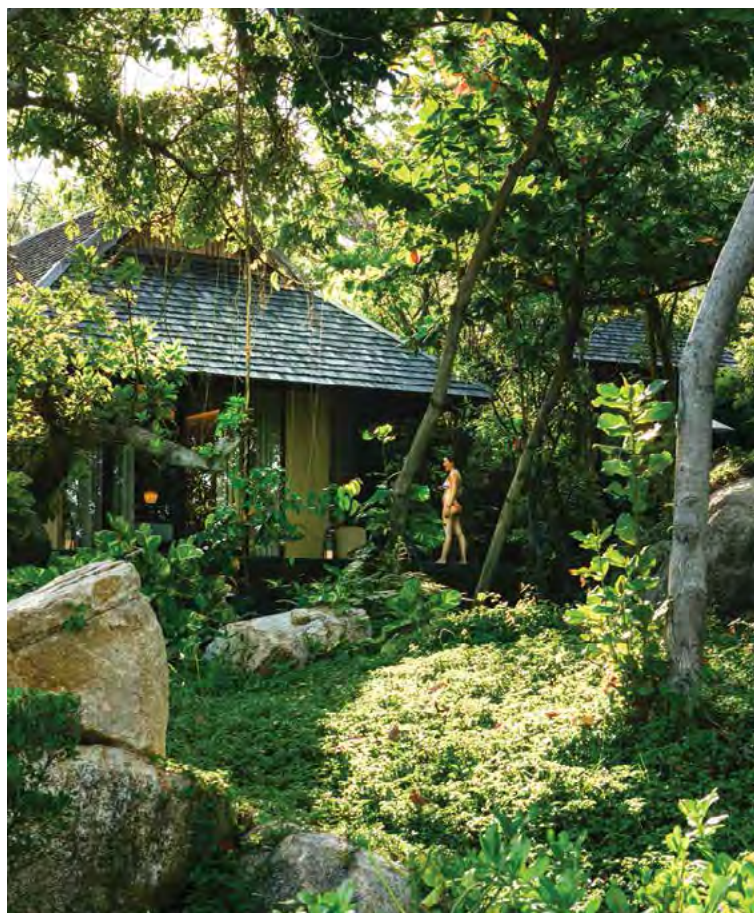
74 2015 LUXE LIST

A converted Tasmanian pump station and a gorgeously contemporary *ryokan* in the countryside of Hokkaido are just two of the outstanding properties to make it onto our annual roll call of the region's best new hotels.

.....



ON THE COVER At The Sanchaya on Indonesia's Bintan Island. Photographed by Panji Indra. Styled by Peter Zewet. Model: Reti Ragil. Outfit by Diane von Furstenberg.



84 SETTLING IN JUST FINE

Thailand's most popular holiday island after Phuket, once-sleepy Koh Samui is now firmly on the luxury-travel map thanks to a growing number of upscale resorts—and all the trappings that go with them.

By *Simon N. Ostheimer*

.....



94 TUSCANY AT A TROT

An off-the-radar corner of Tuscany's Maremma region has plenty to commend it, not the least of which is the chance to saddle up with Italian cowboys.

By *Mavis Teo*

.....



106 STILL WATERS

Kerala may have its crowds, but they don't typically make it as far north as the serene backwaters of Kasaragod. You should.

By *Isobel Diamond*

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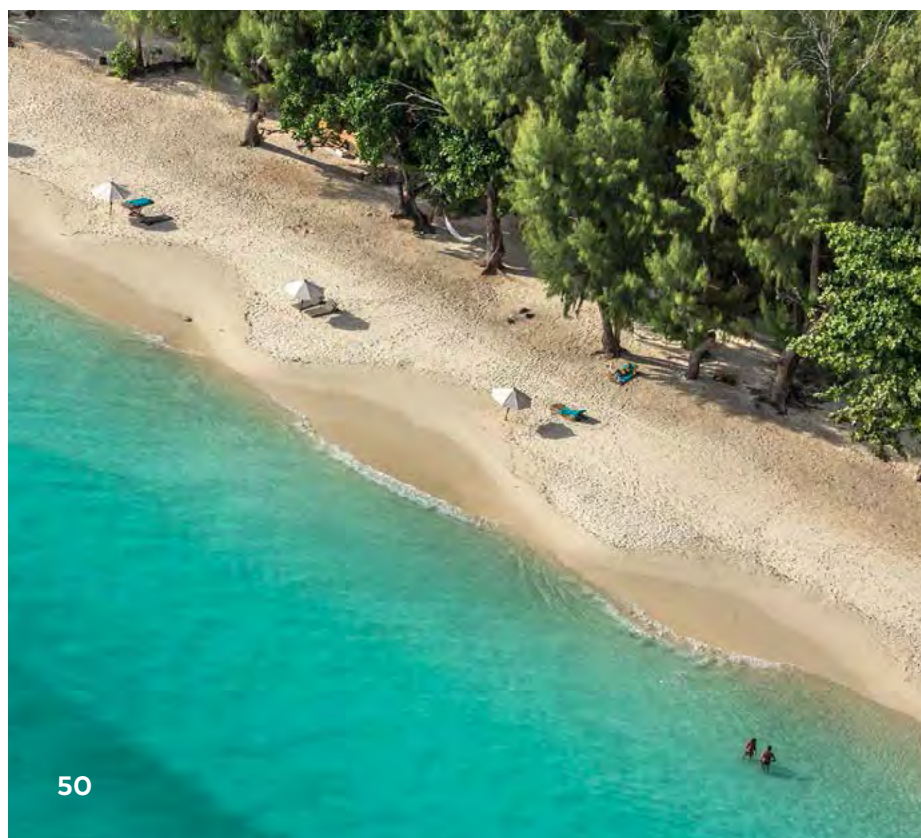
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Culinary riches await on an island-hopping journey off the Madagascar coast.

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Hiding in the jungles of Central Vietnam, some of the world's most spectacular caves are finally coming into view.



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LUXE LIFE

in Asia Pacific. But as this issue goes to show, luxury has many meanings and comes in all different forms. It's not just about the finer things in life but also the finer moments—the irreplaceable experiences that we're fortunate to have in our memory banks. In our feature about Italy's Maremma region, this comes as riding on horseback with a band of native *butteri* cowboys through the early morning mist and feasting on local food and wine (see page 94). What more unique way to see one of the world's most traveled countries? In India, cruising the backwaters and biking the islands of the little-visited Kasaragod region is like going back in time to a way of life where modernity has been held at bay (see page 106). And in central Vietnam, trekking through the jungle to recently discovered caves with the cavers who first explored them is a reminder that there are still wonders in the world yet to be found

(see page 56). I, for one, find comfort in knowing that.

As for our Luxe List, the best hotels and resorts to have opened in the region over the course of the past year are testament to this rise of experiential travel and appreciation for places that are thoughtful, conceptual, and authentic to their settings. From a hydro pump station in Australia converted into a plush eco-retreat to gloriously renovated shophouses in George Town and Jakarta's new artist-inspired Raffles, the entries on this year's list are impressively diverse, each imaginatively pairing the highest levels of comfort and hospitality with a distinct sense of self. Cheers to them, and to your next big experience.



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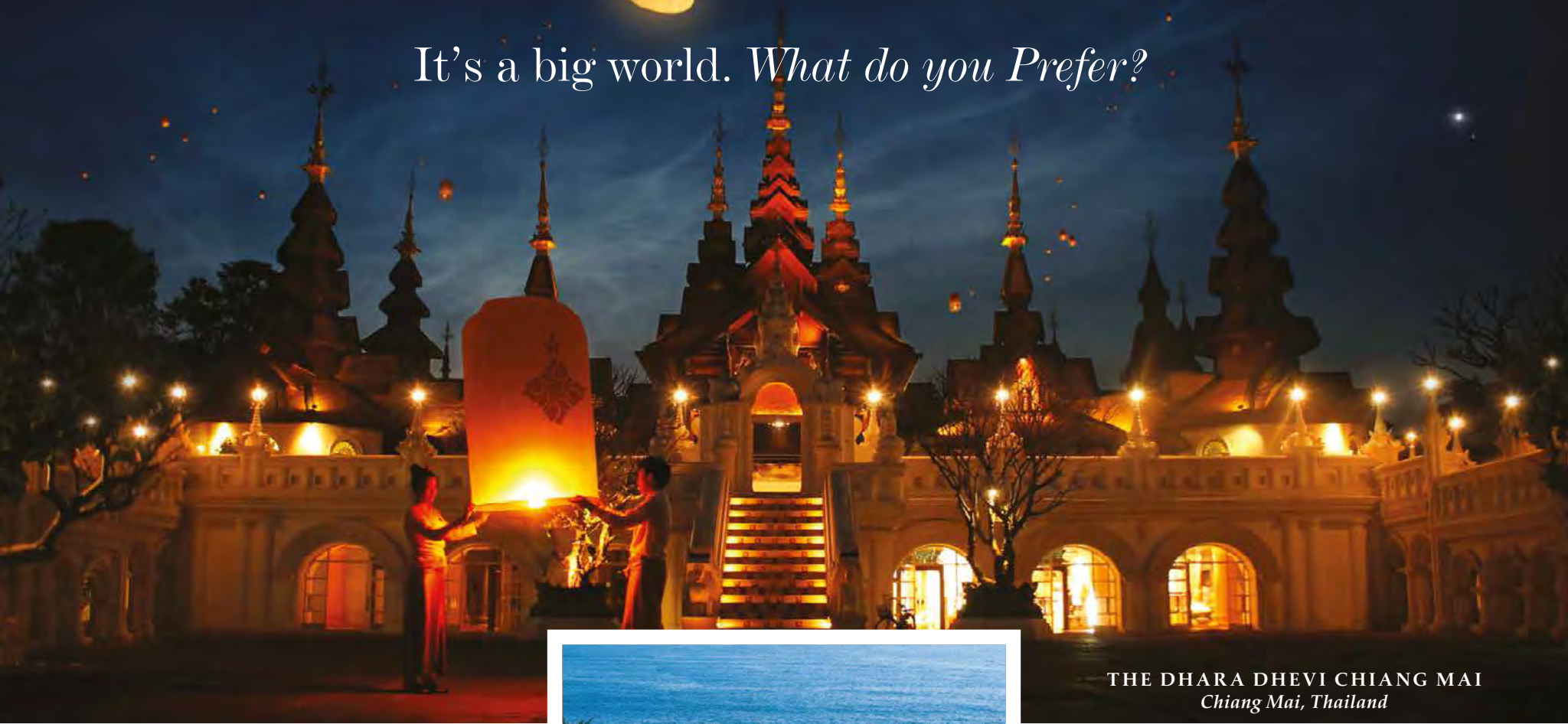
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**MAVIS TEO****Home Base:** Singapore**Wrote:** “Tuscany at a Trot,” p. 94

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My week in Maremma was easily among the most memorable trips of my life, as I got to experience all the things I love in one go—horses, good food and wine, and a beautiful wilderness.

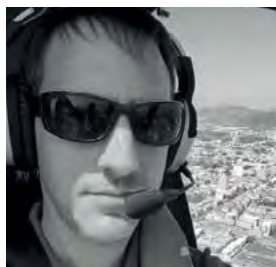
If I ever ride with Tuscan cowboys again, I’ll be sure to wear light-colored clothing and douse myself with insect repellent so as not to get eaten alive by those vicious Italian horse flies. As they say, once bitten, twice shy.

**CHRIS DWYER****Home Base:** Hong Kong**Wrote:** “Dim Sum, and Then Some,” p. 44

.....

Among my many new discoveries (courtesy of the Four Seasons Hong Kong), Mido Café really stood out. It provides a fascinating glimpse of 1950s Hong Kong, frozen in time.

I definitely won’t forget the snake soup specialist Shia Wong Hip, both for its extraordinary decor and the food. Founded 50 years ago and seemingly unchanged since, this old-school establishment is not for the squeamish.

**SIMON OSTHEIMER****Home Base:** Phuket**Wrote:** “Settling in Just Fine,” p. 84

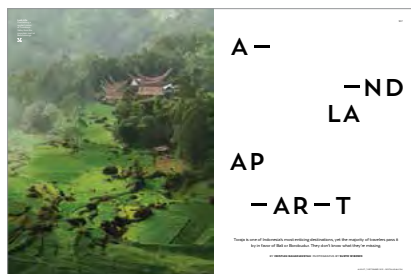
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Much as I love Phuket, Samui has more of the “island paradise” thing going on. Whether it’s the increased isolation, lesser development, or just the people it attracts, I found myself thinking, “maybe I should move here.”

The next time I visit, I want to try Chez François in Bophut. It’s said to be an amazing bistro where the menu changes daily depending on what the French chef buys from the market.

**PALAWAN PERFECTION**

Like writer Johnny Langenheim [“Secrets of the Sulu Sea,” August/September], I just returned from a weeklong trip to Palawan, the Philippines’ so-called “last frontier.” But instead of island-hopping around the Sulu Sea, I stuck to the mainland (or is that “main island”?) for my adventures: snorkeling the reefs of beautiful El Nido Bay, paddling a canoe through the underground tunnels and caverns in Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, and hiking around the Tabon Caves near Quezon. It was a great trip, one that I would recommend to anyone. —Ron Atanaz, Manila



A TRIBUTE TO TORAJA Thank you for sharing Cristian Rahadiansyah’s fascinating story about Toraja [“A Land Apart,” August/September] and the beautiful photos that went with it. Indeed, we have many beautiful remote places in Indonesia, but not necessarily the transport and infrastructure to make them more accessible.

—Deni Siswani, Jakarta

ARABIAN NIGHTS We had the privilege of staying at the Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara and enjoyed every

second of the experience. Its setting amid the golden dunes of Abu Dhabi’s Liwa Desert is breathtaking, and the service proved sublime. There are lots of activities to be done in and around the resort as well. We would recommend this getaway to anyone. —Gordon Desodt, via Facebook

THANKS FOR ASKING I appreciated your recent interview with Petra Nemcova [“Love and Haiti,” June/July]. She is a beautiful woman with a beautiful cause, and Haiti should always be in our thoughts. —Dawn Krisel, San Diego

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.



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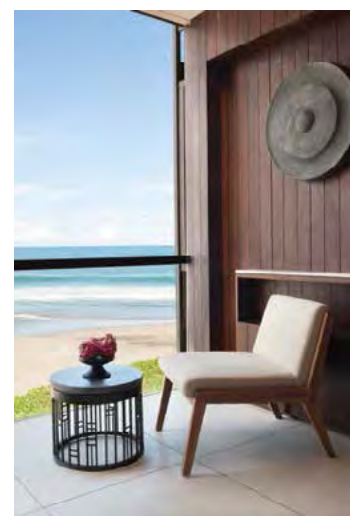
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/ **Maldives** /

ONE & ONLY REETHI RAH

Until December 20, this all-villa resort in the North Male atoll is giving guests good reason to extend their vacations by offering complimentary nights (including half-board and return boat transfers to the airport in Male) with its Stay 7 Pay 5 and Stay 4 Pay 3 offers. Another enticement is the Water Villa Upgrade offer running through December 18. For bookings made 45 days in advance, guests can stay in a villa staked in the azure ocean for the same price as a Beach Villa, saving a difference of US\$610 nightly (oneandonlyresorts.com).



Indonesia **ALILA SEMINYAK**

.....
This stylish newcomer to Bali's southwest shore—the Alila group's fifth property on the island—is marking its arrival with a Gift to Share program that gets you a complimentary night's stay for every two nights booked, providing you donate a minimum of US\$50 to one of the hotel's community causes. Nightly rates start from US\$265, and anyone who books before November can also receive a voucher for a 60-minute spa treatment by e-mailing seminyak@alilahotels.com and mentioning *DestinAsian* magazine (alilahotels.com).



Indonesia **PADMA RESORT UBUD**

.....
Indonesia's Padma Hotels group has just opened its latest property on an 11-hectare expanse in a river valley just north of Ubud and is running a Soft Opening Promo in celebration. Rooms start from US\$262 until December 26—a 25 percent discount off normal rates, inclusive of daily breakfast and afternoon tea (padmaresortubud.com)



Malaysia

THE DANNA LANGKAWI

.....

Looking for a Malaysian beach getaway that delivers equal doses of value and comfort? Then consider The Danna, a waterfront hotel overlooking Langkawi's Telaga Harbour where, until December 20, booking two weeks in advance gets you 35 percent off best available rates and stays of five or more nights earn discounts of 40 percent. Both promotions include daily breakfast for two with champagne at The Planter's, a poolside restaurant done up in the same elegant colonial style as the rest of the five-star property (thedanna.com).



China

ROSEWOOD BEIJING

.....

With its Suite Life deal, the Rosewood group's posh hotel in the Chinese capital is making stays in some of its top guest rooms even more tantalizing. Through the end of this year, bookings of two or more nights in either a Manor or Rosewood suite are met with a CNY1,880 (about US\$295) credit to be used at any of the six on-site restaurants, which range from a contemporary French bistro to private Cantonese dining rooms (rosewoodhotels.com).



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GOOD *to* GO

WALKING TOURS

Stepping out
in Mumbai

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DESIGN

Keeping
Japan's kimonos
relevant

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Five must-do
Dubai dining
experiences

p. 32

As the Wind Blows

The traditionally built
Naga Pelangi will
soon be sailing from
Langkawi's Datai Bay
to the southern Thai
island of Koh Tarutao.



SMOOTH SAILING

Between the isle-studded seascape of the Andaman Sea and the joys of a traditional sailing adventure, there are plenty of reasons to get on board the *Naga Pelangi*. Built for its German skipper Christoph Swoboda six years ago by a team of Malaysian shipwrights, the 30-meter *pinas* (junk-rigged schooner) will be starting its second season in December as an exclusive amenity for guests at The Datai, one of the top resorts on Malaysia's Langkawi Island. The tie-up means the service and catering are all top-notch, while four- or six-hour cruises (starting from about US\$98 per person) across the strait to Thailand's Koh Tarutao give passengers the chance to learn the ropes—literally—or just take in the passing scenery from the *chengal*-wood deck. Sunset cruises and private charters are also available (thedatai.com). —David Tse

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Pictures from left to right: The Royal Begonia, Sanya; Suiran, Kyoto; ITC Mughal, Agra; The Naka Island, Phuket; The Laguna, Nusa Dua, Bali

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Tiki Treats
Hawaiian-style
poke now features
on the menu
at Mahalo Tiki
Lounge.

ALOHA, HONG KONG

Upping its South Seas quotient, Hong Kong's months-old **Mahalo Tiki Lounge**—the Wan Chai offshoot of Central's laid-back Honi Honi bar—has upgraded its weekday menu with a selection of *poke* (pronounced “po-kay”), a ceviche-like Hawaiian staple of cubed raw fish typically marinated in soy and sesame oil. The food, which comes courtesy of a tie up with the city's first poke takeaway shop, Pololi, just also happens to reflect one of the hottest culinary trends in the mainland United States at the moment, and one bite is enough to explain why. At Mahalo, variations include a California roll poke—salmon, avocado,

cucumber, flying-fish roe, and mayo—and a spicy Thai poke made with tuna, chili, lemongrass, lime leaves, cilantro, and spring onions. You could of course sample these and more at Pololi, which occupies a shoebox-size shopfront on Graham Street. But then, you'd be missing out on the lounge's lush, Polynesian-inspired atmosphere and its “treasure map” of tiki cocktails; we recommend the Kaizoku, a blend of oak-aged rum, wasabi, yuzu, pineapple juice, lime, and coriander (29/F, QRE Plaza, 202 Queens Rd. East; 852/2488-8750; mahalotikibar.com).

—David Tse



JUST BREW IT

Riding the tail of Oktoberfest, three beer festivals are raising a glass to craft brews this October. **Hong Kong's Beertopia** (Oct 9–10; beer topiahk.com) lines Central Harbourfront with vendors of more than 500 different beers from 117 international breweries. Next up, **Sydney Craft Beer Week** (Oct. 17–25; sydneycraftbeerweek.com) sees hotels, restaurants, and bars hosting tap takeovers and even a craft “beerlympics.” Similarly citywide, **Singapore Craft Beer Week** (Oct. 24–31; singaporecraftbeerweek.com) is highlighted by micro-brewery tours, beer trivia nights, and the local launch of Italian *birra* Menabrea.



BROAD SHOW

The high priest and priestess of America's art scene, Eli and Edythe Broad have at long last opened **The Broad** museum, a temple to their 2,000-plus collection of contemporary art. Inside the 11,000-square-meter white honeycomb by Diller, Scofidio, and Renfro in downtown Los Angeles, the rotating selection of works by familiar names—Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, Takashi Murakami, Cy Twombly, et al.—is as accessible as it is impressive, just like the museum itself: admission is free (1-213/232-6200; thebroad.org).

COURTESY OF MAHALO TIKI LOUNGE; COURTESY OF SYDNEY CRAFT BEER WEEK; COURTESY OF THE BROAD

London Calling

A stop on the "Interiors Motives" tour led by creative director Benjamin Kempton. Inset: Graffiti artist Karim Samuels is another of SideStory's insiders.




INSIDE STORY

According to new travel site **SideStory** (sidestory.co), there is no better way to uncover a destination and enrich a journey than by spending a few hours with locals who are at the heart of a city's creative community.

Its USP? A selection of intimate, tailored tours conducted by a pool of insiders ranging from street artists and photographers to fashion stylists, foodies, and coffee gurus. London is the first city to be rolled out with other capitals in Europe and North America in the pipeline. Says co-founder Rachael Moloney, the former editor of the Wallpaper City Guides, "We were keen to tap into the creative energy that London is celebrated for and share this aspect of the city with travelers directly." On offer are unexpected experiences—among them, bar dining, exploring urban graffiti, learning about monochrome photography, deciphering contemporary art, and going behind the scenes with heritage brands such as Asprey and Lock & Co. Hatters—all under the casually informative guidance of creative-industry experts. One could, for example, join art critic Joshua White for an exclusive introduction to Frieze London (Oct. 14–17), or explore the emerging shopping mecca of Marylebone Village with fashion stylist Hannah Teare. The half-day tours are designed for groups of no more than four people, which makes for a more personal and rewarding travel experience. The aim, says Moloney, is "for both the traveler and the insider to come away from their trip with lots of interesting conversations and stories to remember." —Daven Wu

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Character Reference

Left: Outside the Ocean Financial Centre, *Singapore Soul* by Catalan sculptor Jaume Plensa pays tribute to the city-state's multicultural milieu in a figurative composition of letters and ideograms from Singapore's four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil.

WELL SCULPTED

Can't wait for Singapore's hotly anticipated National Gallery to open in late November? Then consider exploring its public art installations instead—an impressive cast of international talent awaits. BY KIM INGLIS

With the pace of change accelerating in recent years, it can be hard to keep up with developments in Singapore. One noticeable difference has been the new commitment to art and artists; in addition to the soon-to-open National Gallery, a packed calendar of art fairs, and even some officially sanctioned works of graffiti, the city-state's streets and parks are now home to a number of spectacular sculptures.

A surprising number of these can be found in the central business district, some sponsored

by industry, others by the government. At the recently built CapitaGreen tower, for example, real estate giant CapitaLand has bequeathed some evocative works by international artists to enliven the glass-and-steel behemoth. At the entrance is Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's installation of 60 root-like steel columns and illuminated polyhedron spheres called **Above Below Beneath Above**, which gives way to a pair of Carrara marble figures by Antony Gormley and French artist Etienne's **La Rencontre**, a verdigris bronze depicting three men in conversation linked by a swirling torso; the bird flying through their middle represents freedom of expression. In a totally different vein, a stroll around the corner reveals an everyday group of 10 life-size figures by veteran Taiwanese sculptor Ju Ming. Part of his ongoing **Living World** series, the roughly cast forms range from a pair of pink-frocked ladies to lone businessmen with an umbrella.

Across the road at Finlayson Green, **Momentum**, a 44-ton, 18-meter-high Christmas tree-type sculpture by Israeli artist David Gerstein, stands as Singapore's tallest public sculpture, while nearby Raffles Place is home to works by Anish Kapoor, Aw Tee Hong, and Jaume Plensa, to name a few. More homegrown is the award-winning piece in stainless steel by Singaporean Tan Wee Lit. Titled **All the Essentially Essential**, it was originally designed as a site-specific work for East Coast Park and looks like an unassembled frame from a giant plastic-model kit, with parts that include a gym bag, bicycle wheels, cutlery, even a pet dog. The artist describes it as a "tongue-in-cheek take on the ever-efficient Singaporean packing for a day trip to the park," and viewers are welcome to step inside the frame to add a deliberately excluded human element to the composition.

The obvious place to head next is Boat Quay, where outside UOB Plaza Colombian figurative artist Fernando Botero's plump **Bird** has

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Public Display

Above, from left: One of the 10 figures from Taiwanese artist Ju Ming's installation at the CapitaGreen tower; Olafur Eliasson's *Above Below Beneath Above* is a cluster of sinuous columns inspired by the aerial roots of trees.

delighted visitors since 1990. Here you will also find **Homage to Newton** by Salvador Dalí and one of the largest bronze sculptures ever created by Henry Moore, all donated by industry. More recent is a series of bronzes by pioneering Singaporean sculptor Chong Fah Cheong, dedicated to the early migrant people who lived and worked along the Singapore River. One of my favorites is **First Generation**, a group of boys seemingly jumping into the river in front of the Fullerton Hotel; their expressions of naive gusto provoke feelings of nostalgia for the past and a delight in the simple pleasures of childhood.

Singapore is rightfully proud of its "City in a Garden" status—surprisingly, about half of its 700 square kilometers of land is dedicated to green space—so there's plenty of sculptural eye candy to be found among the foliage as well. The Botanic Gardens, recently awarded UNESCO World Heritage status, is justly celebrated for its innovative approach to conservation and biodiversity. Less well known is its commitment

to public art. The latest addition to its 20-plus collection of sculptures is an expressive piece by James Surls called **Fifty Wings**, donated this year by a Hong Kong-based couple to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence. The work features the artist's interpretation of dipterocarp seeds found in the gardens, with each of the 50 wings representing a year of achievement.

Back in the Marina Bay area, Gardens by the Bay is also home to some significant works. Stroll though the waterfront park's Meadows area and you'll come across **Planet** by British artist Marc Quinn. Originally installed on the lawn of Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, England, in 2008, it's a gigantic white sculpture of Quinn's baby son that seems to float above the grass. The seven-ton bronze-and-steel infant is meant to say something about the illusion of weightlessness, but it could equally serve as a metaphor for the new life that has been injected into the city's art scene. ☉



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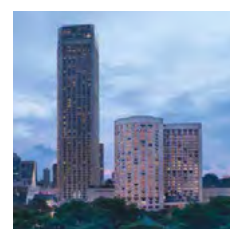
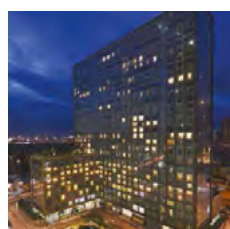
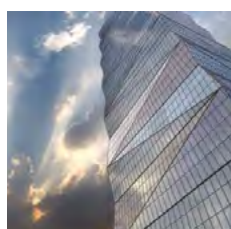
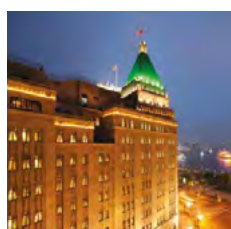
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MUMBAI, STEP BY STEP

From food to flea markets, these five themed walks are anything but pedestrian.

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

Fancy Footwork

Above, from left: Bombay Heritage Walks take guests past such historical landmarks as Flora Fountain, which has stood in the Fort district since 1864; naan bread features among the street fare sampled with Food Tours of Mumbai.

MUMBAI MAGIC

Polish up your bargaining skills and prepare for some voluble haggling before embarking on ex-banker and city expert Deepa Krishnan's walk through Chor Bazaar. As one of the largest flea markets in the country, the Thieves Market (as its name translates) is a warren of lanes lined with shops selling teak furniture, cuckoo clocks, brass and bronze utensils, painted lamps, old film posters, and more. Prepare to be tempted, but be sure to seek your guide's advice on what's an antique worth bargaining for and what's just old kitsch. After your deals are done, this tour also takes you to meet some

Koli fishermen, whose ancestors were the city's original inhabitants (mumbaimagic.com; from US\$46 per person).

BEYOND BOMBAY

In South Mumbai, the Kala Ghoda art precinct is home to some of the best galleries and museums in town—and in India, for that matter. In February, the streets fill with street art and installations for the annual Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, but at all other times of the year, the best way to explore the area is with Beyond Bombay's Art Musings tour, which lets you customize your itinerary and have a chance to meet some of the area's artists and gallerists. There are plenty of options to fill your route, but don't miss the nearly 65-year-old Jehangir Art Gallery, the David Sassoon Library, and the National Gallery of Modern Art, which houses one of India's top 20th-century art collections,

including works of F. N. Souza (*beyondbombay.in*; US\$46 per person).

BOMBAY HERITAGE WALKS

With its mix of styles ranging from Victorian and Gothic to Indo-Saracenic and the highest number of Art Deco buildings after Miami, Mumbai is a goldmine for architecture buffs. And those visiting the city should look to Bombay Heritage Walks, a group founded by local architects Abha Bahl and Brinda Gaitonde-Nayak that offers design-focused tours of the numerous landmarks concentrated in South Mumbai's Fort district. Led by experts in architecture and art history, the Horniman Circle Walk takes in a host of sights including the Asiatic Library, the Mumbai Samachar Marg (Asia's oldest stock exchange), and St. Thomas Cathedral—all in just two hours. Bombay Heritage Walks has been the tour group of choice for numerous foreign dignitaries and Chelsea Clinton, though it's also popular among Mumbai residents thanks to an increasing interest in heritage conservation among locals (*bombayheritagewalks.com*; US\$40 per person).

FOOD TOURS OF MUMBAI

Some say the best way to discover a city is through its food, but in India, it's easy to be fearful of being put out by a bad case of "Delhi Belly" (or in this case, "Mumbai Malaise"). Thankfully, Mihir Govilkar comes to the rescue with Food Tours of Mumbai. His three-hour walking tours take you to the best street carts and local restaurants in the Fort area, experiencing not only Mumbai flavors and delicacies but also popular dishes from other Indian regions. You'll sample berry *pulao*, a pilaf traditional to Mumbai's Iranian-Parsi community, as well as Mughlai tandoori chicken, Kerala fish curry, and more. Eating where Mumbaikars do is the best way to feel like one for an evening (*foodtoursofmumbai.com*; US\$55 per person).

RACONTEUR WALKS MUMBAI

While many head to the hip Bandra neighborhood in the western outskirts of Mumbai for its designer boutiques and nighttime watering holes, Raconteur's Bandra, the Queen of the Suburbs Walk shows a different side to the area. The group strives to take visitors to the places they won't find in guidebooks, which here translates to a three-hour route through the 400-year-old Koli fishing hamlet of Chimbai, the Portuguese-style homes in Ranwar village, the legendary Mehboob film studios on Hill Road, and the Castella de Aguada—also known as Bandra Fort—overlooking the Arabian Sea (*mumbaiwalkingtours.com*; US\$23 per person). ●

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TUSCAN TREASURES

If there's a single structure that cemented Florence as the birthplace of the Renaissance, the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (pictured here) is it. And just in time for Pope Francis's visit to the city on November 10, the adjacent Museo Dell'Opera Del Duomo (museumflorence.com) is reopening on October 29 as a masterpiece of its own after a two-year renovation. Now more than double its old size, the museum has 25 exhibition halls housing a re-creation of the cathedral's original facade featuring Ghiberti's gilded bronze *Gates of Paradise* door panels, Michelangelo's *Pietà* statue, materials and models used to construct the cathedral's iconic brick dome, and numerous works from the museum's collection of sacred art—the second largest in the world after the Vatican. —Gabrielle Lipton

named after the architect and engineer of the dome, views of which are framed by big windows in many of the 96 rooms.

Must-have Meals The three-Michelin-starred **Entoca Pinchiorri** (enotecapinchiorri.it) is one of the most exclusive restaurants in Italy, while for casual Tuscan cooking, lunch-only **Trattoria Mario** (trattoria-mario.com) is as authentic as it gets—try the massive *bistecca fiorentina*.

What Else? The **Florence Biennale** (Oct. 17–25; florencebiennale.org) is celebrating its 10th edition this year with the theme of “Art and the Polis,” exploring the notion of an ideal city through works from leading international artists.

How to Get There

There are no direct flights between Florence and Asia, so expect a stopover in Europe. Frankfurt is a well-connected hub, as is Rome, from which **Alitalia** (alitalia.com) runs multiple daily flights to Florence.

Where to Stay Just steps away from the cathedral, a sixth-century prison tower now houses the very fashionable **Hotel Brunelleschi** (brunelleschihotel.florence.com; doubles from US\$435). It's





MIX MASTER



When it opened last year at The Langham in Hong Kong (langhamhotels.com), the Artesian bar was an instant classic on the city's drinking scene, in part because of its note-taking from the Artesian at the Langham flagship in London, which has repeatedly been named as the world's best bar, and in part thanks to its manager, Nepalese mixologist Rajendra "Rush" Limbu. Here, he tells how he's given things a Chinese twist.

● **ART AND CRAFT** Cocktails first attracted me because of their similarities to art in the way they're inspired by colors, textures, style, and presentation.

● **BOTTLED UP** Artesian is a whiskey bar, and we carry more than 50 types of bourbon including new varieties from Japan and Taiwan. We also have 34 kinds of gin and an extensive rum selection.

● **FLAVOR FILE** I use flavors and ingredients that reflect Chinese heritage and culture. Lavender and violet liqueurs make the Liquid Bouquet aromatic, and for The Langham, spiced bourbon is mixed with goji berries, which are popular in Hong Kong for their health benefits.

● **SHAKING THINGS UP** I love improvising cocktails for guests and watching their reactions. I recently made a *tom yum*-flavored cocktail for a customer from Thailand, and some of my regulars bring me unique spirits from their travels that I then use to make personalized drinks. One was with a vodka from Mongolia.

● **POUR TOUR** My own travels include a cocktail tour to all the Langham hotels in China, standardizing their menus and training the staff on my creations, such as how to properly infuse gin with tea for the Jasmine Tea Sour. I hope one day to visit more spirit houses in Europe, as I think it would help me grow as an artist. ☺



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ROBE NATION

In Japan, kimonos are anything but a thing of the past.

BY MANAMI OKAZAKI

Kimonos are the national dress of Japan and are known for being traditional, extravagant, and emblematic of Japanese culture. However, while researching my latest book, *Kimono Now*, I found that the kimono industry is also incredibly multifaceted. Rather than being solely about traditional costumes imbued with symbolic significance, the world of kimonos is dynamic, open to interpretation, and diverse. From the classic to the outlandish, here are nine designers I met who are ensuring that kimonos remain relevant to a new generation of enthusiasts.

● **DENIM DOSU** This Kyoto company gives the familiar kimono format a contemporary twist by using shuttle-loomed denim from the Okayama

region of southwestern Honshu. The looms were imported from the United States starting in the 1960s after they were replaced in American factories by faster and more efficient projectile looms. Despite being difficult to maintain and unsuitable for mass production, the shuttle looms turn out durable, top-quality selvedge denim. And it's this that makes Denim Dosu's chic, streety kimonos stand out. These have proven to be especially popular among young Japanese men, as they can be machine-washed and are easily paired with sneakers and hats (denimdosu.jp).

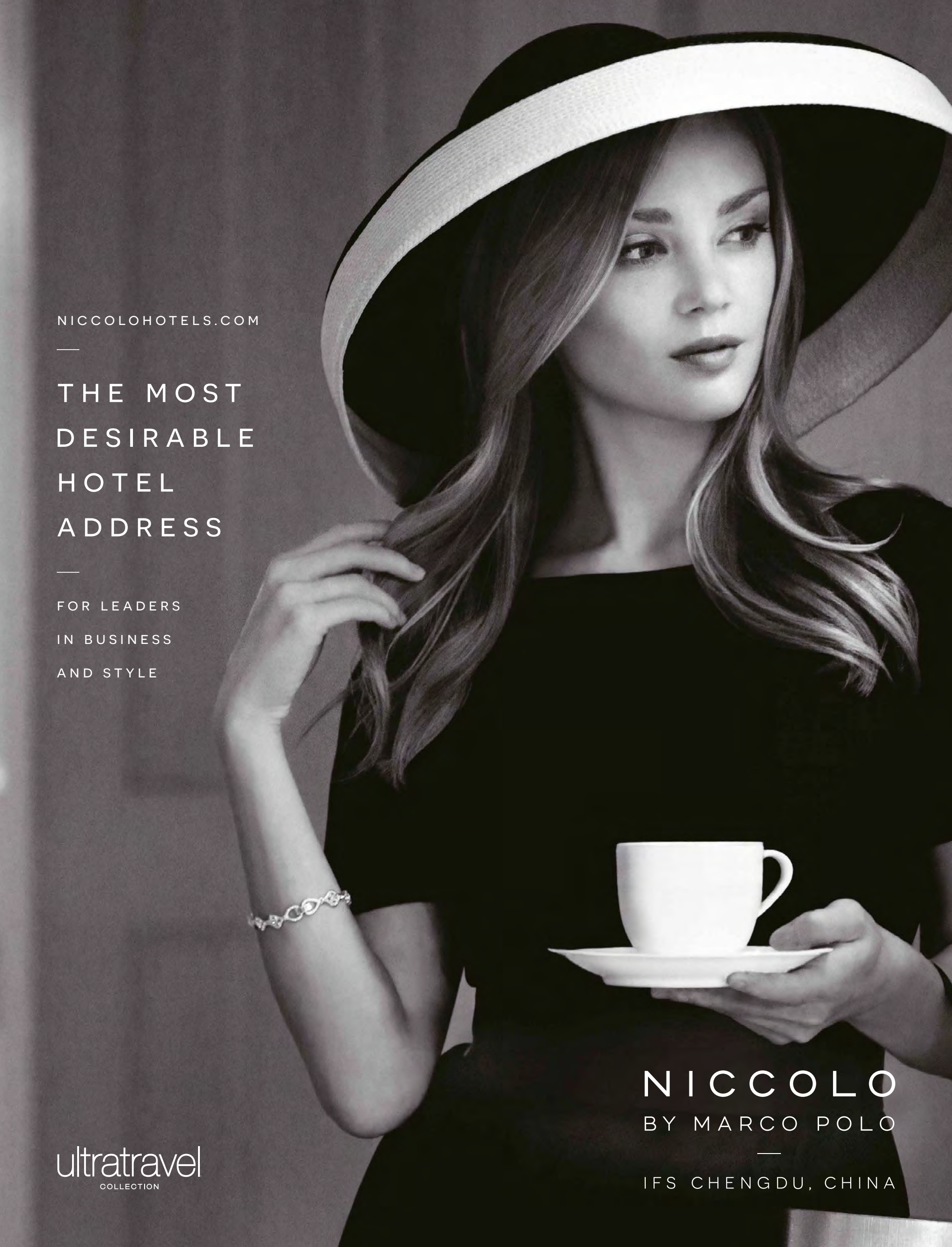
● **KURIYAMA KOUBOU** *Kyo-bingata* kimonos are the specialty at this small atelier in northern Kyoto. They are gorgeous—laboriously hand-dyed with stencils in vivid hues and bold motifs. Each stencil is made of paper soaked in persimmon juice and is hand-cut by a master artisan. Even though the method of production is true to tradition, the garments are given a contemporary feel by utilizing colors such as a bright aqua (kuriyamakoubo.com).

● **JOTARO SAITO** A third-generation kimono designer, Jotaro Saito courts a young, progressive audience with dramatic themes like Gothic Camelia; celebrities such as visual-*kei* (glam rock) singer Gackt and *enka* singer Jero have donned Saito kimonos for their performances. He also experiments with unusual fabrics such as jersey and motifs like stars and roses. His is the only kimono brand to have taken part in Tokyo Fashion Week, with theatrical catwalk shows set to traditional music (jotaro.net).

● **TAKUYA ANGEL** Takuya is one of the best-known designers to come out of Tokyo's Harajuku district, an area known for its flamboyant and individualistic street fashion. He uses kimono fabric that he finds at vintage sales to make incredible fluoro-colored ensembles lined with fake fur and PVC. His eclectic influences range from Sengoku-era warrior outfits to anime and have a decidedly cyber-punk aesthetic (takuya-angel.com).

In the Fold

A sumptuous *furisode* (long-sleeved) kimono by Kuriyama Koubou in Kyoto; Chiso kimonos are distinguished by an incredible attention to detail.



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**Showstopper**

Jotaro Saito is the only kimono maker to show regularly at Tokyo's biannual fashion weeks. Left: A *maiwai*-style kimono by Maiwai Suzusen.



● **MAIWAI SUZUSEN** Maiwai-style kimonos are colorful, bold coats that were traditionally given to fishermen when there was a good catch. The custom is said to have started in Chiba prefecture during the Edo period (1603–1868) before spreading along the Pacific coastline. Yukihiro Suzuki is a third-generation maiwai maker, and his magnificent coats use motifs that are usually ocean related. His studio, Suzusen, is east of Tokyo on the Chiba coast, where Suzuki and his son work side-by-side to handcraft the textiles. While not commonly worn, the garments make for fantastic wall hangings (suzusen.wix.com/maiwai).

● **CHISO** One of the most exclusive kimono houses in Japan, Chiso is also among the oldest—the company was founded in Kyoto in 1555. Its silk kimonos are of the highest quality, utilizing highly skilled artisans who work for several months on a single item. The resulting kimonos display incredible attention to detail, and many also feature embroidered patterns to add volume to the finished product. Magnificent both as worn fabrics and items to hang and display in the home, these pieces embody the pinnacle of Japanese textile production (chiso.jp).

● **RUMIX DESIGN STUDIO** This *yukata* (light summer kimono) studio based in downtown Tokyo is known for its rock 'n' roll sensibility. The brand's designer, Rumi Shibasaki, adorns her new-wave,

top-quality yukatas with motifs inspired by a range of sources, including Alfred Hitchcock films and Yukio Mishima novels. Her credentials also include design commissions from international fashion houses such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Michel Klein (rumixdesign.com).

● **ICHIRU** Specializing in Edo *komon* kimonos, this shop in Tokyo's Nihonbashi neighborhood has a chic, accessible atmosphere. Edo *komon* is a dyeing method that uses motifs so minute that they are only visible when viewed up close. The process has its roots in the Edo period, when sumptuary laws prohibited extravagant fashion, hence people would show their individuality in subtle and playful ways. Ichiru's in-house artisan gives visitors the chance to watch the dyeing process first hand (no website; look for the shop at Nihonbashi Horidome-cho 2-1-11).

● **PAGONG** When sales began to slump in the 1990s, Kazuaki Kameda decided to diversify the kimono company founded by his grandfather in Kyoto. He experimented initially with silk Hawaiian shirts—some of which incorporate motifs from kabuki theater—and when those sold well, he moved on to other clothing items, all made using the yuzen dyeing technique. The colors are incredibly vivid, and the brand is much loved by Kyotoites and visiting fashionistas; Yoko Ono was among Pagong's earliest admirers (pagong.jp). ●



For more insights into the evolution of Japan's national dress, look for Manami Okazaki's *Kimono Now* (Prestel; US\$40), which explores both the evolution of this traditional garment and its current revival as a fashion statement.

A close-up, high-angle shot of a woman's face. She has dark hair pulled back, and her eyes are looking down and slightly to the left. Her skin is smooth and has a natural glow. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white.

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DISHING ON DUBAI

From the world's highest restaurant to dessert in the desert, the U.A.E.'s biggest city offers some exceptional dining experiences. Here are five standouts.

BY CHRIS DWYER



AL MAHARA

Wrapped around an enormous seawater aquarium, the opulent Burj Al Arab hotel's Al Mahara restaurant gives the feeling of dining underwater. Appropriately, executive chef Maxime Luvara's menu focuses on world-class seafood while following the Western seasons, with dishes such as Alaskan king crab and foie gras ravioli served with leeks in vinaigrette and lobster jus. It's all accompanied by a peerless selection of wines (971-4/301-7600; jumeirah.com).

PLATINUM DINNER SAFARI

Desert safaris are *de rigueur* in this part of the world, and this one from luxury tour operator Platinum Heritage whisks you outside the city in a Mercedes four-by-four to experience desert wildlife, falconry, and a Bedouin-inspired gourmet feast under the stars. Sunset canapés including truffle-infused custard and tea-smoked lamb *en croustade* preface the six-course dinner, all served in a *majilis* sitting area set up amid the rolling dunes, complete with silk carpets, a bonfire, and a table fashioned from an antique Arabian door (971-4/388-4044; platinum-heritage.com).



LA PETITE MAISON

Forget its incongruous location in the Dubai International Finance Centre—this little slice of Nice serves some of the finest French-Mediterranean food anywhere. The classic *pissaladière* features caramelized onions studded with black olives and anchovy; lamb cutlets are lifted by honey and cherry tomatoes; and a spoonful of baba ganoush-like eggplant caviar reminds you what region you're in (971-4/439-0505; lpmadubai.ae).

PIERCHIC

Few spots in Dubai are more romantic than Pierchic at the Madinat Jumeirah, perched at the end of a jetty in the Arabian Gulf. British chef Rosalind Parsk oversees a flawless seafood menu, including an extraordinary starter of scallops with tapioca, vanilla, and bergamot. Roasted yellowtail with celery root, allumettes of green apple, and black-truffle jus is the perfect follow-up (971-4/366-5866; jumeirah.com).

AT.MOSPHERE

The dizzying views from the world's tallest restaurant (it's set on the 122nd floor of the Burj Khalifa) are matched by serious prowess from veteran French chef Jerome Lagarde. Lunch à la carte brings artfully plated skate wing or pan-seared veal chop, while a deconstructed Snickers dessert nicely rounds things off (971-4/888-3828; atmosphereburjkhalifa.com). ©



Food With a Flourish

Clockwise from above: Honey-drizzled lamb cutlets and eggplant caviar at La Petite Maison; aquarium-side dining at Al Mahara; views of the Burj Al Arab from Pierchic.

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GRAPE ESCAPES

Wine-themed treatments await at these new or improved vinotherapy spas, ideal for sybarites and oenophiles alike.

BY GABRIELLE LIPTON

1 / France CAUDALIE SPA AT LES SOURCES DE CAUDALIE

Grape-based beauty brand Caudalie has long been the fruit's biggest champion in the wellness world with its much-praised products and spas now flung around the globe. And for Caudalie converts, a visit to the brand's spa at its freshly revamped hotel in Bordeaux is a must-do. It was the world's first vinotherapy spa when it opened in 1999, and with its baths and wraps with vine extracts, massages and facials with fresh grapes, and backdrop of vineyards, it's clear why the trend took off.

sources-caudalie.com

2 / Spain SANTUARIO SPA AT ABADÍA RETUERTA LEDOMAIN

For those who like to combine their pleasures, the Duero wine region's renowned abbey hotel Abadía Retuerta LeDomaine has opened a luxurious and eco-friendly underground spa that offers an astute new take on vinotherapy. Treatments begin with a blind wine tasting led by a spa sommelier, who then recommends treatments—which often incorporate vitamin-rich grape seeds and grape oil—based on the guest's sensory preferences.

ledomaine.es

3 / Portugal THE SPA AT SIX SENSES DOURO VALLEY

A renovated 19th-century manor house overlooking vineyards in the UNESCO-protected Douro Valley is where the latest Six Senses resort and spa opened in July—a setting inspiring enough to move the brand known for its Asian-centric spa therapies to incorporate something of the surrounds. There's an antioxidant body treatment that includes a “vineyard soak” (said to help stimulate new collagen and cell production), a signature scrub with wine pulp, and an Alchemy Bar where guests can create their own masks and scrubs from local grapes and herbs.

sixsenses.com

4 / United States THE HEALTH SPA AT MEADOWOOD NAPA VALLEY

As one of the top retreats in the region, Meadowood is opening a new spa this fall that is set to be the toast of Napa. The treatments are as ingredient-driven as a pairing menu—a skin-softening wine and chocolate ritual, a grape-seed body wrap, a cabernet passion fruit scrub—and the setup is a dream, centered on a courtyard with eight suites overlooking Meadowood's 100 forested hectares.

meadowood.com

Doing Just Vine
Grape- and wine-
based therapies are
on the spa menu at
Six Senses Douro
Valley in northern
Portugal.



PARK HYATT SAIGON REDEFINES LUXURY

When it first debuted on Ho Chi Minh City's central Lam Son Square a decade ago, Park Hyatt Saigon brought with it a sophisticated modern vibe to match the town's vibrant milieu. The service was gracious and discreet; the rooms and lobby gleamed with French-colonial accents; and the hotel's restaurants and spa were among the finest in Vietnam. But resting on its laurels was never part of the program for this urban oasis, which closed for three months earlier this year in order to comprehensively upgrade its facilities, services, and overall guest experience. And the results are stunning.

While still retaining their signature colonial feel, public spaces such as the ever-elegant Park Lounge are now awash in a luminous palette of white and ivory accentuated with handcrafted furnishings and crystal chandeliers. Park Hyatt Saigon's 245 rooms and suites have also been completely redone, adding museum-quality Vietnamese artworks as an aesthetic counterpoint to the latest in-room technology—everything from iPads and Nespresso machines to wireless Bose speakers and sensor lighting systems. Diners, meanwhile, can look forward to revamped menus at the hotel's three restaurants, from chef Jamie Celaya's expanded lineup of Vietnamese dishes and grill items at Square One, to the Bollinger champagne served with the Park Lounge's famous afternoon tea and the extravagant Italian Sunday Feast at Opera. And just as the rest of the property has enhanced its embrace of local culture, the sublime Xuan Spa now incorporates herbs, grains, and fruits from the Mekong Delta in its treatments, capturing the essence of Vietnam as never before.

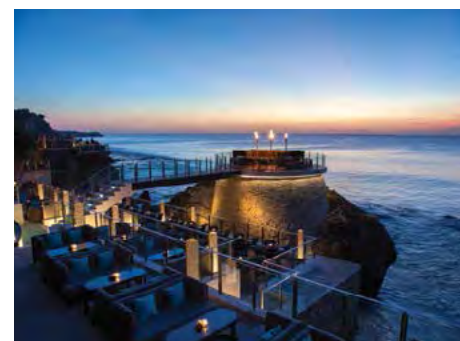
Experience Park Hyatt Saigon A brand-new hotel with 10 amazing years of history

To celebrate both its 10th anniversary and the completion of its renovations, Park Hyatt Saigon has rolled out a stay 3 pay 2 promotional offer for stays in its new-look suites until the end of October 2015. Book before October 27, and you will also get a guaranteed late checkout until 2 pm.

*For reservations, call 84-8/3824-1234
or visit parkhyattsaiгон.com*



Trunk Call
With its wildlife sculptures by French artist Franck Le Ray, Hôtel Vagabond's Salon promises to be a wild place.



ROCK SOLID

.....

Anyone who's visited Bali and tried to get a reservation at Ayana Resort and Spa's famous **Rock Bar** can likely attest that it hasn't always been the easiest endeavor. After all, who wouldn't want to sip a cocktail atop a 14-meter-tall rock in Jimbaran Bay while the waves crash and the sun sets? In response to the perpetual high demand, Ayana has expanded the facility by adding nine wood-floored, glass-walled decks with 225 more seats. The hottest new ticket, though, will be for the exclusive 18-person Round Deck, a circular platform affording 240-degree views of the Indian Ocean (ayanaresort.com). —GL

CALLING ALL NOMADS

With its artist residencies and collection of works from the likes of Marco López and Leon Ferrari, the brand-new **Hôtel Vagabond** (hotelvagabondsingapore.com; doubles from US\$215) is staking out a niche for itself in Singapore's creative scene. As the debut property of the Garcha Hotels group, the Vagabond, which was slated to open at press time, occupies a 1950s Art Deco building in Kampong Glam with 42 rooms and suites (some with fold-up Murphy beds) fashioned by French designer Jacques Garcia with florid textiles, mahogany desks, mosaic tiling, and details like Scottish-leather Roberts Radios. On the ground floor, the Salon promises jazz nights, independent film screenings, and a place to have a cocktail with the artists living upstairs. —Gabrielle Lipton



HOUSE PROUD

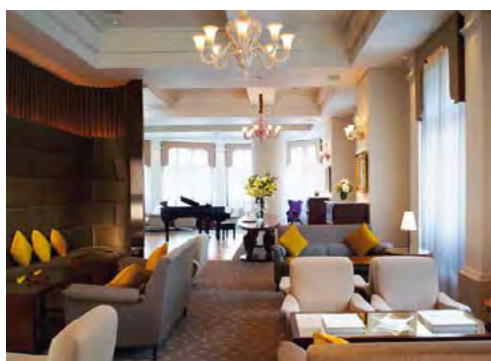
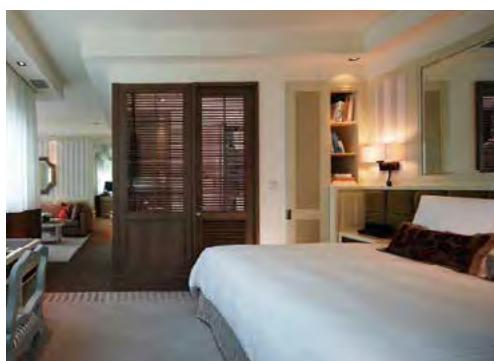
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A neoclassical mansion on the grounds of the W Bangkok, the **House on Sathorn** has finally been reopened as an extension of the hotel's food and beverage offerings. The 1889 building, which initially served as a private residence before becoming a hotel and then the Russian embassy, has seen its carved ceilings, etched pillars, and lavish sitting rooms meticulously restored, with

interiors by AvroKO adding a sleek urbanity to the setting. For his part, young Turkish chef Fatih Tutak has created Asian-accented menus (including the Mumbai-inspired cauliflower dish pictured above) for the main restaurant, while a wide selection of drinks and high tea are served in the adjoining bar. Comfort food is on order in the tranquil courtyard, while a pair of DJ'd lounges will be joining the lineup soon (66/2344-4000; thehouseonsathorn.com). —Ron Gluckman

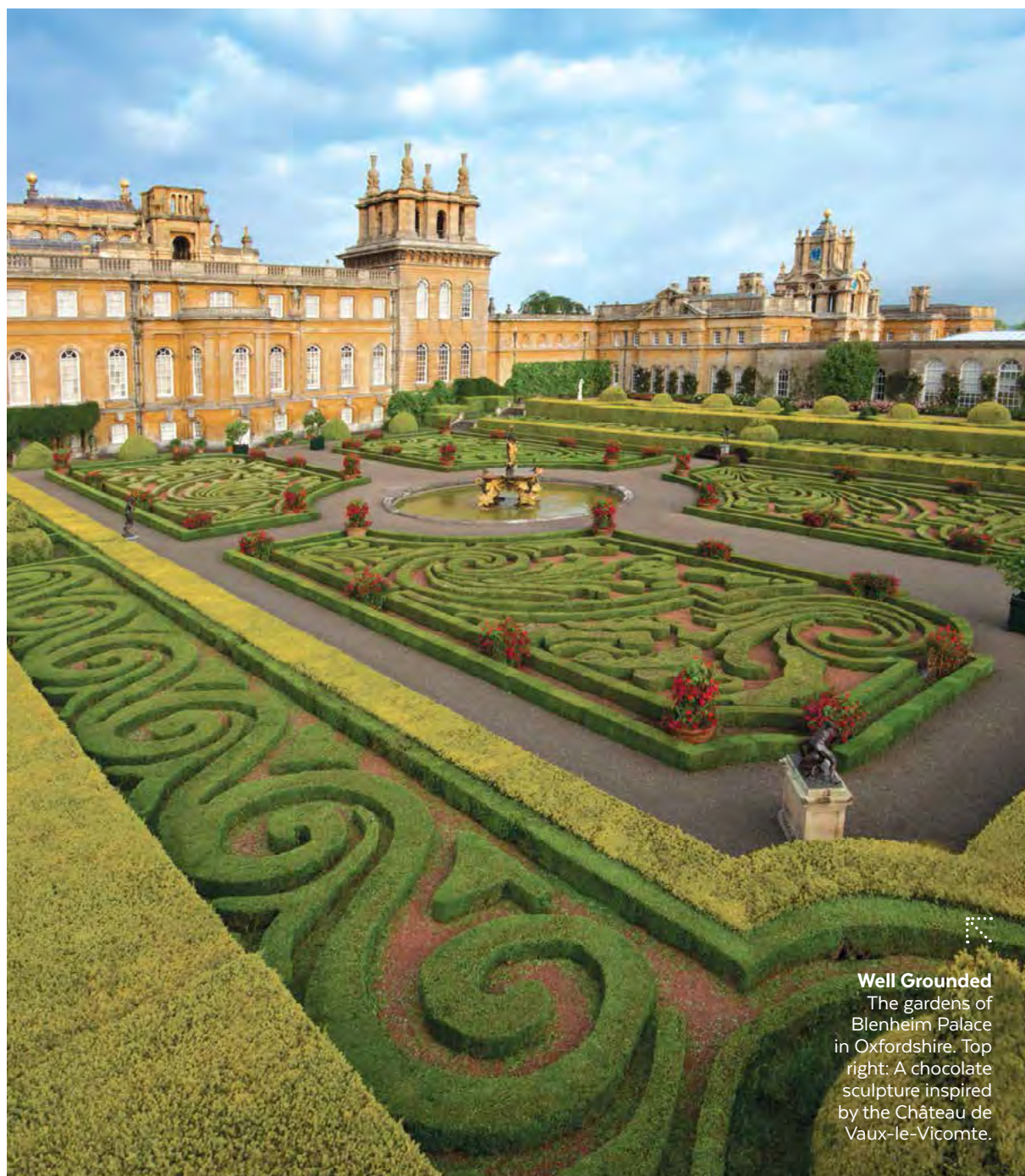


*LANSON PLACE HOTEL, HONG KONG
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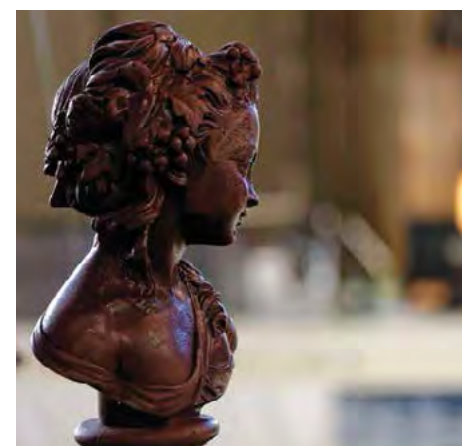


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Well Grounded
The gardens of Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire. Top right: A chocolate sculpture inspired by the Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte.



FRANCE

.....

October is the last month to catch the hashtag-art event of the year, the **Anish Kapoor Versailles** (through Nov. 7) sculpture installation spanning the palace's grounds. Less controversial is the fall lineup at the magnificent Royal Opera theater in the château's north wing, including Gluck's **Orfeo ed Euridice** (Oct. 7–8), back-to-back Monteverdi performances of **Vespro della Beata Vergine** (Nov. 6–7) and **L'Orfeo** (Nov. 8–9), and Lully's masterpiece **Armide** (Nov. 20–22; chateauversailles-spectacles.fr). Meanwhile, the Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte—about an hour southeast of Paris—will be transforming itself into the **Chocolate Palace** (Nov. 6–8; vaux-le-vicomte.com) for the eighth year running. Drawing more than 12,000 visitors, the affair sees the castle filled with creations by renowned chocolatiers, ranging from truffles to statues inspired by the 17th-century baroque setting.

SCOTLAND

.....

Famed as one of the world's most haunted places, the childhood home of the late Queen Mother goes all out for the **Halloween at Glamis Castle** (Oct. 31; glamis-castle.co.uk) festival. The main event begins after dark: a ghost hunt in search of the specter of Lady Glamis, who was accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake in 1537. Late October also sees Balmoral Castle, 70 kilometers to the north, reopen to the public following the British royal family's summer residence there. From then until early December, visitors can join weekly **Luxury Landrover Safari Tours** (balmoralcastle.com) through the historic estate's 20,000 hectares of parkland.

NOBLE PURSUITS

Looking for a new way to experience some of Europe's oldest castles, palaces, and châteaux? Consider some of these on-site autumn events.

BY GABRIELLE LIPTON

ENGLAND

.....

The Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace is running two special exhibitions this fall. **Masters of the Everyday: Dutch Artists in the Age of Vermeer** displays 20 works from the Royal Collection including Vermeer's *The Music Lesson*, while **High Spirits: The Comic Art of Thomas Rowlandson** shows satirical

British wit as it was in Georgian times (both Nov. 13–Feb. 14; royalcollection.org.uk).

National Champagne Week (Nov. 1–7; blenheimpalace.com) gets the royal treatment at Blenheim Palace, which is partnering with Laurent-Perrier Champagne House for a special cuvée rosé daily afternoon tea in the Indian Room. Meanwhile in Kent, Leeds Castle is back with its annual **Fireworks**

Spectacular (Nov. 7–8; leeds-castle.com), one of the biggest displays in the U.K. This year, it's movie-themed, timed to a mash-up of famous score songs and scenes projected onto the castle's facade. And as the holiday season begins, lace up some skates at the **Hampton Court Palace Ice Rink** (Nov. 20–Jan. 4; hrp.org.uk) for a couple of twirls and a drink at its Ice Bar.

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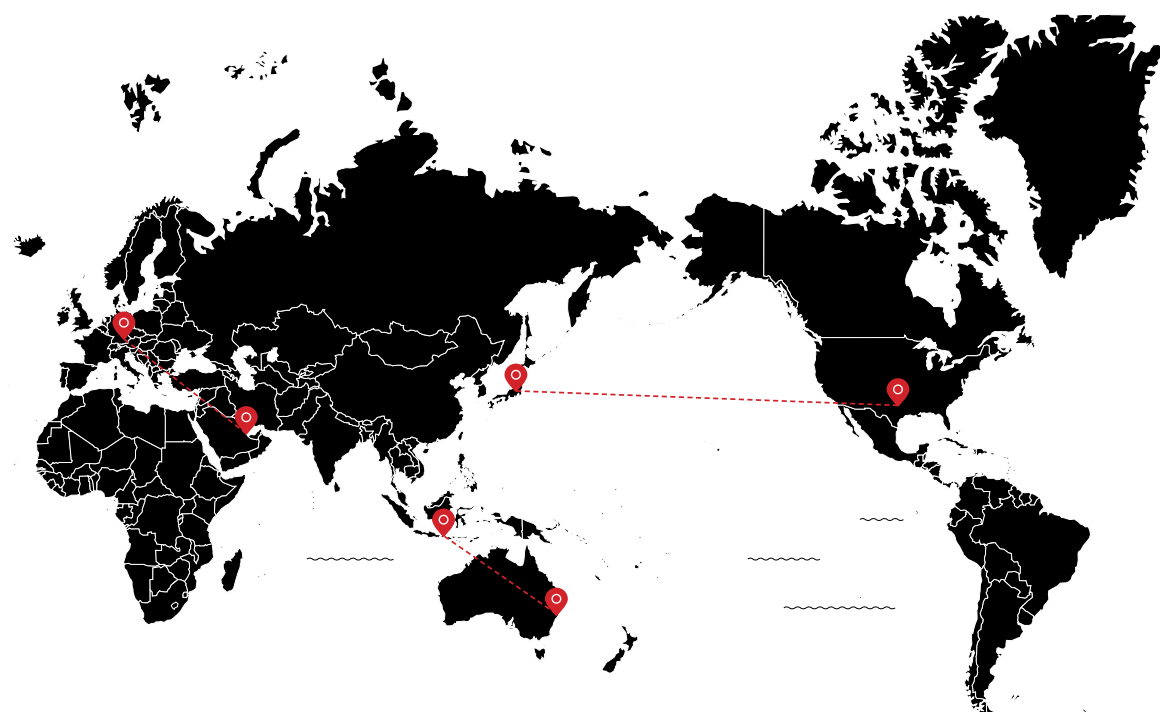
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BULLETIN

Flight Services
Emirates

Passengers flying the U.A.E.'s flag carrier can now buy tickets with the touch of a finger thanks to the incorporation of Apple Pay into the Emirates iPhone and iPad app. The high-security digital wallet uses Apple's fingerprint identity sensor to encrypt card information, replacing having to punch in all those numbers with a single touch. Although Apple Pay is currently only available on devices in the U.S. and U.K., it's soon to expand to more markets, and Emirates' service will follow (emirates.com).

New Look
Korean Air

With cheery teal seats and a two-deck configuration, Korean Air's new fleet of fuel-efficient Boeing 787-8i jets is being hailed as the airline's most comfortable yet. In addition to 314 economy seats, there are 48 staggered Prestige Class seats split between both decks and six of the carrier's new first-class Kosmo Suites 2.0, each with a sliding door and 24-inch entertainment screen. As of September, the plane flies on routes to Frankfurt and Singapore, with services to San Francisco and Hong Kong slated to begin in November (koreanair.com).

Sydney-Bali
AirAsia X

Australia is getting another easy connection to its favorite Indonesian island with Air Asia X's new flights between Sydney and Denpasar. Beginning October 17, the long-haul sister airline of AirAsia will be servicing the route five times weekly with its Airbus A330-300, which includes a Premium Economy class with lie-flat seats (airasia.com).

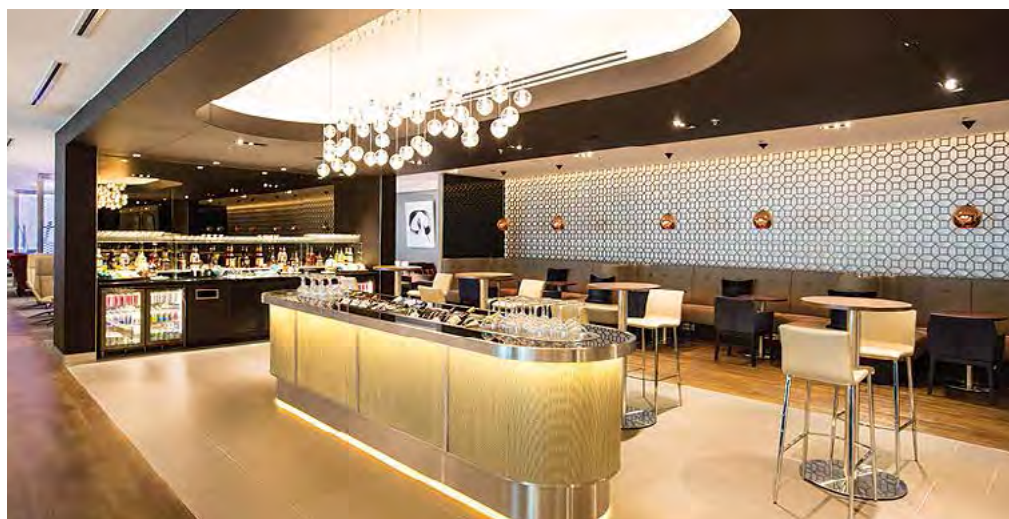
ROUTE UPDATES

Doha-Munich
Qatar Airways

Traveling to Germany is now more comfortable thanks to Qatar, which has begun a second daily flight from Doha to Munich that's serviced by the carrier's A350 XWB, equipped with one of the top passenger-rated business classes in the skies. As of November 1, the A350 will replace the Boeing 787 Dreamliner currently operating the original daily Munich route as well (qatarairways.com).

Tokyo-Dallas
Japan Airlines

After more than 14 years of suspension, JAL is resuming services between Tokyo's Narita International Airport and Dallas/Forth Worth from November 30. The flight—operated by a Boeing 787-8 featuring 38 of JAL's luxe Sky Suites—will run four times weekly. In addition, JAL's code will be put on fellow Oneworld member American Airlines' existing double daily flights between the cities (jal.com).



LUXE LOUNGES

RAISING THE BAR

Following a four-month overhaul, British Airways' revamped Singapore lounge is the toast of Changi Airport. Increased seating comes as elegant leatherback armchairs, and the eating area has been revamped with a glistening champagne bar, pictured above. But the main attraction is the first installation of British Airways' new lounge concept, the Concorde Bar, a posh 40-seat password-protected enclave for first-class fliers with black Nero marble decor and a special attendant (britishairways.com).

KLIA



OMG, KLIA is awesome! There's even a real tropical rainforest in this airport. Can't wait to get to the rest of Malaysia ...

AMAZING SIGHTS AND SOUNDS AROUND IN KL



25 May
2015

klia2



Off to Penang from KLIA2. Wow, are we in an airport or a shopping mall? Malaysia is so full of surprises!

Petronas
Twin Towers



Went on the Skybridge between the two towers. 170m off the ground! I wasn't scared at all.

Central Market



Can't believe this used to be a wet market in the 1800s. Handicrafts, demonstrations, cultural performances, there are so many things going on!

Lake Gardens



Over 150 acres of gardens and greenery, I couldn't walk it all in a day! Fed a Hornbill at the bird park (which they tell me is the largest in the world!).

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Baselworld 2015
Day-Date
Oyster Perpetual Day-Date 40

THE NEW ARTISTRY OF ROLEX

Bringing leading technological advancements to some of the world's most recognized timepieces, Rolex's new models this year set the standard for watches certain to appreciate with time

A master of updating its classic timepieces with cutting-edge watchmaking technology, Rolex's new models once again set the benchmark for chronometric performance and elegant style in luxury watches.

Debuted at BaselWorld 2015, the Day-Date 40 incorporates Rolex's newly unveiled caliber 3255. A mechanical movement backed by 14 patents, caliber 3255 is the brand's most exacting technology yet, with increased resistance to shocks and magnetism and a power reserve that lasts up to three days. Yet the new Day-Date still upholds its handsome look that has made it the timepiece of choice for numerous eminent figures—earning it the nickname of the “president's watch”—with models available in 950 platinum or 18-carat yellow, white, or the brand's signature Everose gold with dial options that include inlaid precious stones. For women, the Lady-Datejust has also been enhanced with the patented caliber 2236 movement and a redesigned case of 28 millimeters, following the demand for enlarged sizes in women's watches.

Another highlight of Rolex's new collections is the 18-carat Everose gold version of the pared-down and streamlined Yacht-Master timepiece, known for

becoming the world's first waterproof wristwatch when it was created in 1926. Ideal for an active wearer, the watch is fitted with an innovative Oysterflex bracelet, which has a superelastic metal blade at its core to give the metal the flexibility and comfort of an elastomer strap. The new Yacht-Master is offered in 40- and 37-millimeter cases, and its bezel features a new Cerachrom insert in black ceramic for a sharper look.

Two of Rolex's primary lines of watches also offer new models. From the Oyster collection, the Oyster Perpetual has been updated with new colored dials in the 26-, 31-, 34-, and the new 39-millimeter sizes. Three new jewelry-watch versions of the Oyster Perpetual Datejust Pearlmaster in the 39-millimeter size have also been unveiled, incorporating a caliber 3235 chronometer as well as bezels inlaid with 48 baguette-cut sapphires aligned in a color gradient—blue to fuchsia, blue to green, or yellow to orange. And four new gem-set versions of the Cellini Time have been introduced to the classical Cellini collection of Rolex's dressiest timepieces. Offered in 18-carat white or Everose gold, the watches dazzle with a single or double diamond-set bezel and 11 diamonds at the tips of the hour markers on the black lacquer dial.



DISPATCHES

MADAGASCAR
An island-
hopping culinary
adventure
p. 50

VIETNAM
Exploring
the caves of
Tu Lan
p. 56

Cantonese Classic
Steamed garoupa
fillet at the Four
Seasons Hong
Kong's Lung King
Heen restaurant.



DIM SUM, AND THEN SOME

A five-star tour of some no-frills Kowloon eateries whets the appetite for what could be the best Cantonese dinner in Hong Kong.

BY CHRIS DWYER

THE RESIDENCE

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In the center of the wooden workbench sits a metal bowl of sweet and fragrant *char siu* pork topped with pine nuts. To one side, balls of dough are being swiftly flattened using a small rolling pin. The meat mix is gently eased onto the surface of the dough with a wooden spatula, before nimble fingers fold the edges and place the buns on a baking tray—120 in total for the day's diners.

It's a rare privilege to access any Cantonese restaurant kitchen, and even more so to watch dim sum being made in the only one in the world to boast three Michelin stars. Lung King Heen at Hong Kong's Four Seasons Hotel has held this unique distinction since 2009, under the watchful command of its affable head chef, Chan Yan Tak.

Back in his kitchen, an enormous bamboo steamer hisses and bellows white clouds like a dragon as though to affirm the restaurant's name, which means "view of the dragon." Inside individual steamers, it takes one to two minutes for vegetarian dim sum to cook, three for sheets of rice paper rolls, and five for the pork-filled *xiao long bao*. Timing is critical as nothing can leave the kitchen even so much as seconds late, lest texture and mouthfeel is compromised. Elsewhere, whole chickens marinated in salt are being hung to air dry; this ensures the skin gets tougher before frying, delivering perfect crispiness as a result. Below them the kitchen god's shrine looks out for the safety and success of the 25 staff chopping and steaming, working the searing heat of woks, or plucking red snapper from pristine tanks.

Across its portfolio of properties the Four Seasons group offers a range of what it calls "extraordinary experiences," allowing guests to enjoy unique and bespoke adventures. You can dine onstage at the Hungarian State Opera House in Budapest, join a seaplane surfing safari in the Maldives, or stargaze with an astronomer in Costa Rica. In Hong Kong, cuisine is the star of an experience dubbed "In the Footsteps of a Dragon," an exploration of the city's culinary landscape that starts with this kitchen tour of Lung King Heen, visits the backstreets of Kowloon (where Tak was born), and finishes with a wine-paired dinner. Participation is limited to in-house guests and tours are led by a "cultural ambassador" from the hotel who takes care of all the arrangements and bills and explains the ingredients, preparation, and backstories of each venue and dish.

We leave Lung King Heen behind (temporarily at least—we'll be back for dinner) and begin the next stage of our program, eating in a selection of chef Tak's favorite spots. Some are legendary, some unusual, but all are utterly fascinating

windows into one of the world’s greatest food destinations.

This being the Four Seasons, things are naturally done in style, so a Mercedes limousine pulls up to whisk us under Victoria Harbour to Kowloon. Nathan Congee and Noodle is the first stop. As with most of the places on the day’s itinerary, the decor here has changed little if at all since it first opened 60 years ago. The secret to the eatery’s success is the base of its sampan congee, so called because it would have originally been prepared with the day’s catch by people living on sampan boats. At Nathan the cooks wake up in the middle of the night to make theirs, using three types of fish, pork skin, and definitely no MSG. It’s good stuff, and we use *yauhjagwai* dough sticks to soak it up. More surprising and unusual is a serving of fish skin, which is not fried but simply boiled and served with soy sauce and scallions.

Next we walk across busy Nathan Road to the Australian Dairy Company, which celebrates the city’s unique crossover of British and Chinese cuisine. The notoriously surly staff are surprisingly all smiles once we take our seats at a round Formica table. Thick toast with creamy scrambled

Star Turn

Opposite: The views from the dining room at Lung King Heen are impressive, but it’s the exquisite Cantonese cooking of executive chef Chan Yan Tak that has earned the restaurant its rave reviews—not to mention three Michelin stars.

egg, double-boiled milk custard pudding, kaya toast, and Cantonese-style milk tea (sweetened with condensed milk) gives us a taste of some of the most iconic items on the menu. The room buzzes with energy and noise from the calling out of orders, the banging of pots, and the hum of conversation and people enjoying other dishes such as macaroni soup with Spam.

Infinitely quieter is our next stop, Mido Café, but not before we’ve walked through Temple Street Market and sipped a chrysanthemum herbal brew at a tea stall formerly owned by a man known as the “One-eyed Doctor.” (You don’t need me to tell you how he got his name.) Overlooking Tin Hau Temple and its park, Mido is an absolute gem that dates back to the 1950s. But you don’t come here for the food. You come for the old-timey atmosphere and the throw-back to a gentler, slower age. Not to mention some really odd drinks, three of which, in the spirit of discovery, I try. Hot Coke with ginger and lemon is exactly that—doubtless good for the throat, but not so much for the teeth. Cream soda with milk is a do-it-yourself affair, pouring both bottles into the glass at once. It’s interesting, to say the least. Finally, there’s a mug of



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boiling water with a raw egg in it. I'm skeptical, but once stirred vigorously with white sugar, it's surprisingly delicious—a warm, watery custard.

We make our way down a narrow staircase, over the original tiled floors, and back out to the streets of Yau Ma Tei. In case you're wondering, we're not finishing everything we order—the experience is more about tasting. This is certainly the case at our next stop, Shia Wong Hip, which specializes in snake soup, a dish particularly popular in the winter. An old press clipping hung proudly on the wall describes what the restaurant used to serve, including fox, cat, dog, owl,

and monkey. Thankfully, those days are well behind us. As for the snake soup, it's strangely tasteless, but the brisk business around us testifies to its enduring popularity, especially among an older clientele.

Soon we're back in the limo for the short drive to Sham Shui Po, a working-class neighborhood where our final three culinary pitstops await. First up is Kung Wo Dou Bun Chong, an old-school tofu shop that looks straight from a film set, complete with a century-old stone soybean grinder. The wobbly tofu *fa* pudding is a delicate delight—all subtle sweetness and cream—while fried tofu is enlivened by a smear of shrimp paste. Then comes Lau Sum Kee, famous for its noodles with shrimp roe. Cantopop stars and local celebrities look down at us from photos on the walls as we dig in to the signature dish, which is rich and deep and indisputably fishy, but not overpoweringly so. Finally we head to Tim Ho Wan, known as the world's cheapest Michelin-starred restaurant—dim sum for two will set you back no more than US\$15. Chef Tak can take some of the credit for the place's extraordinary success, as its owner, Mak Kwai Pui, formerly worked under him at Lung King Heen.

After a few hours' rest and digestion, we're ready for dinner—a special menu devised personally by Chef Tak. The dining room at Lung King Heen is a calming space, all warm tones and gentle music, with spacious banquette seating for couples as well as more traditional round tables for families and groups. Like its two-starred neighbor Caprice, the restaurant boasts stunning views over the harbor, where the neon rises as the sun goes down.

As the champagne cart glides effortlessly toward us, I spy a Taittinger Comtes De Champagne Blanc De Blancs Brut 2005, an extraordinary *cuvée de prestige* made famous as James Bond's bubbly of choice. Like 007, it's smooth yet occasionally effervescent, always polished and oozing class.

The amuse-bouche is the ultimate chef's calling card, a signifier and tease as to what lies ahead. Chef Tak's is a simple shrimp wonton. But there are wontons, and then there are three-Michelin-star wontons. The gossamer-thin skin of my dumpling is almost translucent, enveloping the plump and sweetest shrimp you could ever hope to find. Humble, but brilliant. The marker is laid down.

Next comes a trinity of flawless *siu mei* roast meats: goose, suckling pig, and char siu pork. White porcelain sauce bowls contain the usual suspects, including chili soy, shrimp paste, plum, garlic, and a dangerously good vegetarian XO. But in this course they're pretty superfluous as the meats shine brightly on their own.

Backstreet Bounty

Above: Owner So Sung Lim and his daughter at their longstanding Kowloon tofu shop Kung Wo Dou Bun Chong. Opposite from left: A dim sum selection at Tim Ho Wan; savoring the snake soup at Shia Wong Hip.



The room is now buzzing, its tables packed even on a Monday evening. Chef Tak's next dish helps explain why: an amazing superior potage with chicken, brimming with collagen to deliver a breathtaking wave of umami. Crab is then served dressed in the shell, creamy but cut through with Worcestershire sauce, the whole glorious carapace topped with breadcrumb. No sous vide or liquid nitrogen in sight, just the pinnacle of Chinese cuisine—with an Alto Adige Gewürtztraminer as the perfect companion. The course that follows is garoupa, arguably Hong Kong's favorite fish. Here it is steamed simply with ginger and spring onion before being served in a bamboo steamer. The results are delicate and fragrant, lifted by the unusual but effective pairing of 10-year-old Shaoxing rice wine.

Dinner crescendos with straight-edged cubes of Australian wagyu, Technicolor capsicum, seared asparagus, and beautifully cut morels hurried from searing wok to bowl. It's yet another

The Details

For more information about the Four Seasons Hong Kong's **In the Footsteps of a Dragon**, call 852/3196-8888 or visit fourseasons.com. Tours are limited to a maximum of four guests and cost HK\$11,800 (US\$1,522) for two people.

er dish that is not deconstructed or innovative, just perfectly executed, and well matched with a stunning Brunello di Montalcino Tre Vigne 2009 from southern Tuscany that reminds us that pure Sangiovese can do no wrong.

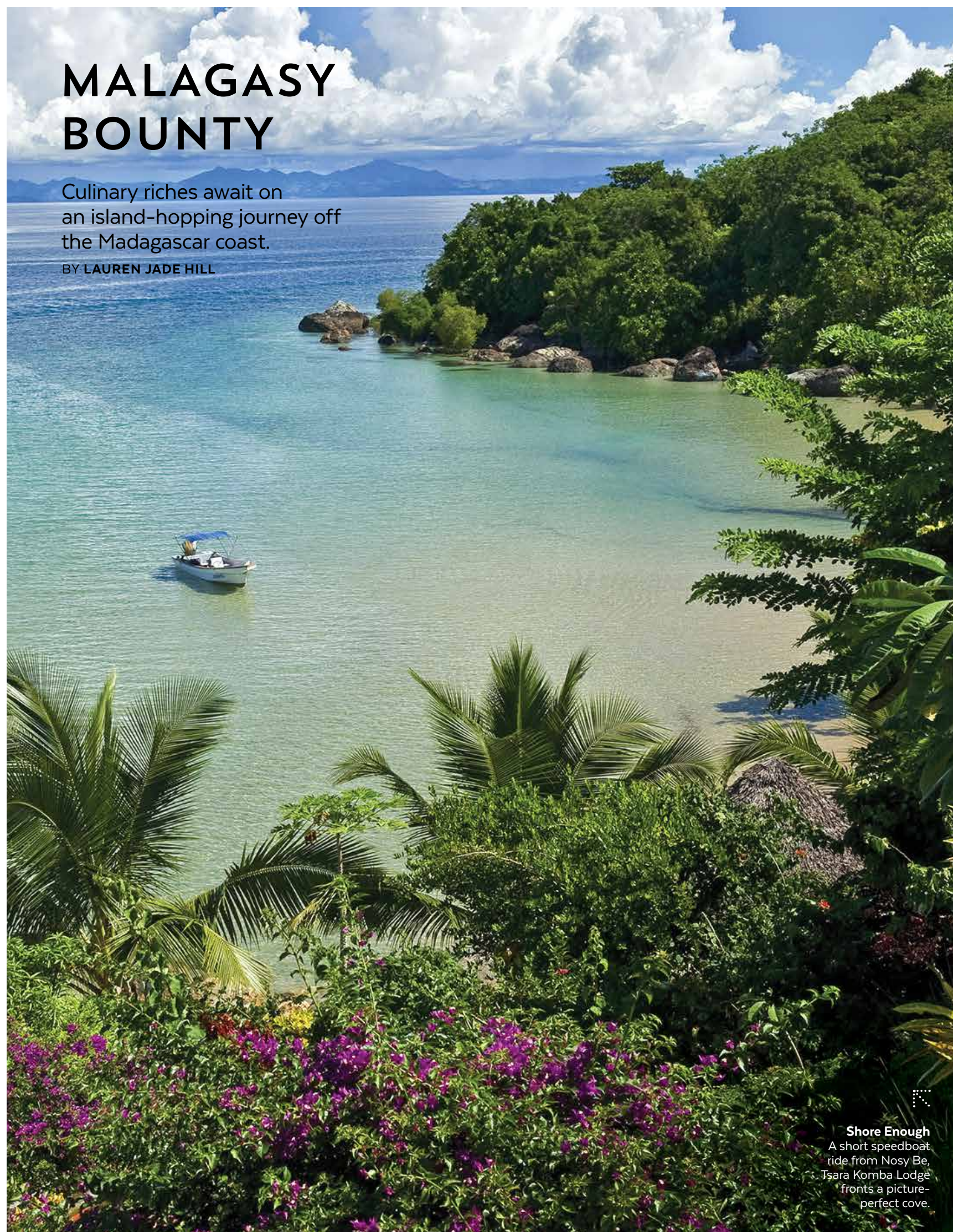
Chinese desserts are not traditionally sought-after, but chef Tak breaks the mold here too. Chilled mango and sago cream with pomelo is ideal as a sweet counterpoint to the rich and decadent courses that preceded it, even if the creative petits fours that follow are not so beneficial for my waistline.

The day ends as it began, with chef Tak joining us for a chat. This time he asks us about our Kowloon adventure and the evening's dinner. We thank him for both and, humility personified, he says that his formula is simple: "Without good leadership, good teamwork, and good communication, you will never have a truly strong kitchen." And here in Hong Kong, that may well be the ultimate recipe for success. ©

MALAGASY BOUNTY

Culinary riches await on
an island-hopping journey off
the Madagascar coast.

BY LAUREN JADE HILL



Shore Enough

A short speedboat
ride from Nosy Be,
Tsara Komba Lodge
fronts a picture-
perfect cove.

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Madagascar is known for many things—sublime sandy coastlines, dense tropical rain forests, lemurs—but not so much for its food. And that, as I discover during a week-long trip to the African island nation, is an injustice. With its history of piracy, spice trading, and colonization, Malagasy cuisine has taken on a mélange of flavors from Southeast Asia, India, and South America, tinged with the cooking traditions of the Portuguese and French. The waters here are remarkably rich with seafood, and the forests provide an abundance of vanilla, pink peppercorns, ginger root, cinnamon, and chilies. Supplement this with rice, a miscellany of tropical fruit, and the local sugarcane rum, and it all combines into one of the most intriguing cuisines in Africa.

Madagascar's premier beach destination is Nosy Be, a Penang-size island situated off the mainland's northwest coast. But surrounding Nosy Be is a smattering of even smaller, quieter

Spice Island

Above, from left: One of the beach villas at Constance Tsarabanjina, which occupies a private 22-hectare island in the Mitsio Archipelago; chefs Claude Raherivelo and Fidele preparing Malagasy fish curry in the resort's kitchen.



islands. The closest is Nosy Komba, a volcanic outcrop lush with tropical rain forest and encircled by boulder-studded shores of golden sand. A sunbaked village sits on the northeast coast of the 25-square-kilometer isle, and nestled into the forested slopes are smaller settlements where families cultivate vanilla, peppers, coffee, and cacao.

I'm staying at Tsara Komba Lodge, a cluster of beautifully crafted wooden villas set amid bougainvillea-filled gardens that lead down to the beach. Time is passed here watching traditional dugout pirogues sail past in waters visited by dolphins and, from July through November, southern right whales. And what with the island's natural bounty and the lodge's distinct French influence, it's no surprise that cuisine is another highlight.

Originally from southern Madagascar, chef Tina Hary worked alongside the lodge's former French chef de cuisine before taking the helm of the kitchen, and as a result, his dishes marry Gallic technique with Malagasy recipes and local ingredients. Tina's menu changes daily depending on what produce is available from the markets or what the fishermen bring in, which might include hand-caught lobster or crabs plucked from the mangroves on moonlit nights. He buys from farmers and foragers in the area and supplements his larder with vegetables and herbs from his own kitchen garden. The results are sumptuous dishes like ballotine of kingfish with lemongrass; wahoo carpaccio; lobster grilled in



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a marinade of vanilla, fresh garlic, and peppercorns; and homemade sorbets of coconut and tropical fruit.

Tsara Komba's naturalist guide Raymond also once trained as a cook, but he now takes guests on treks to see the island's endemic black lemurs and to visit plantations. I set out with him one day along a rain forest trail that leads up to the volcanic summit. It's a wild hike. Stepping over tree roots and ducking beneath vines, our footsteps send snakes slithering into the undergrowth. "Of the 36,000 species of plants in Madagascar, about 82 percent are endemic," Raymond explains as we walk. "Many of the rest came from Southeast Asia, India, and South America."

"*Mbola tsara!*" he calls out in greeting as we enter a small clearing with three bamboo huts, home to a family that cultivates a plot of cacao trees nearby. Cockerels strut in the undergrowth, and cacao beans and vanilla pods are laid out to dry in the sun. This side of Nosy Komba may be dotted with small plantations, but they're so wild looking that they blend in seamlessly with the surrounding forest.

The land is teeming with food. Bananas, jackfruit, and lemons flourish in the trees, and sprouting up from the ground are pepper, chili, and ginger plants. Vanilla also grows in abundance, and spotting clusters of the green pods hanging over the pathway ahead, Raymond makes a beeline up the steep slope to show me. "In Madagascar, people use vanilla for savory food as well as in desserts, like plantains cooked with coconut milk and vanilla," he tells me, talking breathlessly as we continue clambering to the top of the island. We finally reach our goal and pause to soak up the view of the rain forest stretching out before us and the island-dotted ocean beyond.

A 70-kilometer boat ride north of Nosy Be brings me to the Mitsio Archipelago, a cluster of about a dozen mostly uninhabited isles with palm-fringed beaches backdropped by sculptural rock formations and baobab trees. My destination is the tiny private island of Tsarabanjina, whose sole occupant, the Constance Tsarabanjina resort, comprises 25 thatch-roofed villas built by local craftsman and fitted with Malagasy art, sculpture, and textiles.

Many guests are here for the scuba diving, which is said to be the best in Madagascar, while others venture out by boat or on snorkeling excursions with the resort's resident marine biologist. Wanting to get a taste of local life, I instead hop into a pirogue for a fishing trip with a Seychellois guide named Francis and a fisherman named Jick. From the sugar-white shore, we



Fishy Business
Showing off the morning's catch at Nosy Komba.



Getting There

Nosy Be is connected to the Madagascan capital Antananarivo by daily flights with **Air Madagascar** (airmadagascar.com), which also operates a twice-weekly service to Bangkok. Speedboat transfers to Nosy Komba take 30 minutes, while the crossing from Nosy Be to Tsarabanjina takes about 1.5 hours.

Where to Stay

Tsara Komba Lodge
Nosy Komba; 261-20/869-2110; tsarakomba.com; doubles from US\$447, all-inclusive.
Constance Tsarabanjina
Tsarabanjina Island; 261-34/021-5229; constancehotels.com; from US\$300 per person, including meals.

paddle out into deep water so clear that fish can be seen dashing all around our boat.

"This looks like a good spot," Francis says assuredly. The pirogue tips gently as Jick hands us each a fishing line, and then we sit and wait with the sound of the water lapping against the hull. Jick is the first to get a bite; grinning from ear to ear, he reels in a snapper as we cheer him on. Between us, we catch five or six more fish before the morning slips away. Jick says it's a modest catch for these parts.

Back on the island, chef Claude Rahevirelo and his assistant Fidele are busy preparing the day's catch in an open-fronted restaurant that overlooks the resort's private beach. It's lunchtime, and they're concocting a traditional Malagasy coconut-milk curry with wahoo. Succulent cubes of the white fish sizzle as they're tossed in the hot pan, seasoned with vanilla, pepper, and fragrant spices from the neighboring islands. Once golden, the fish is set aside to make way for the finely sliced onions, ginger, garlic, and tomatoes, combining into a heady aroma. Claude adds the peppercorns, a little salt, curry powder, and kaffir lime leaves, then finally pours in the fresh coconut milk and dishes it up with steamed rice and salad from the garden. "*Et voilà!*" he announces, and we start digging in. Like everything else I've eaten on this journey, it's delicious. ●

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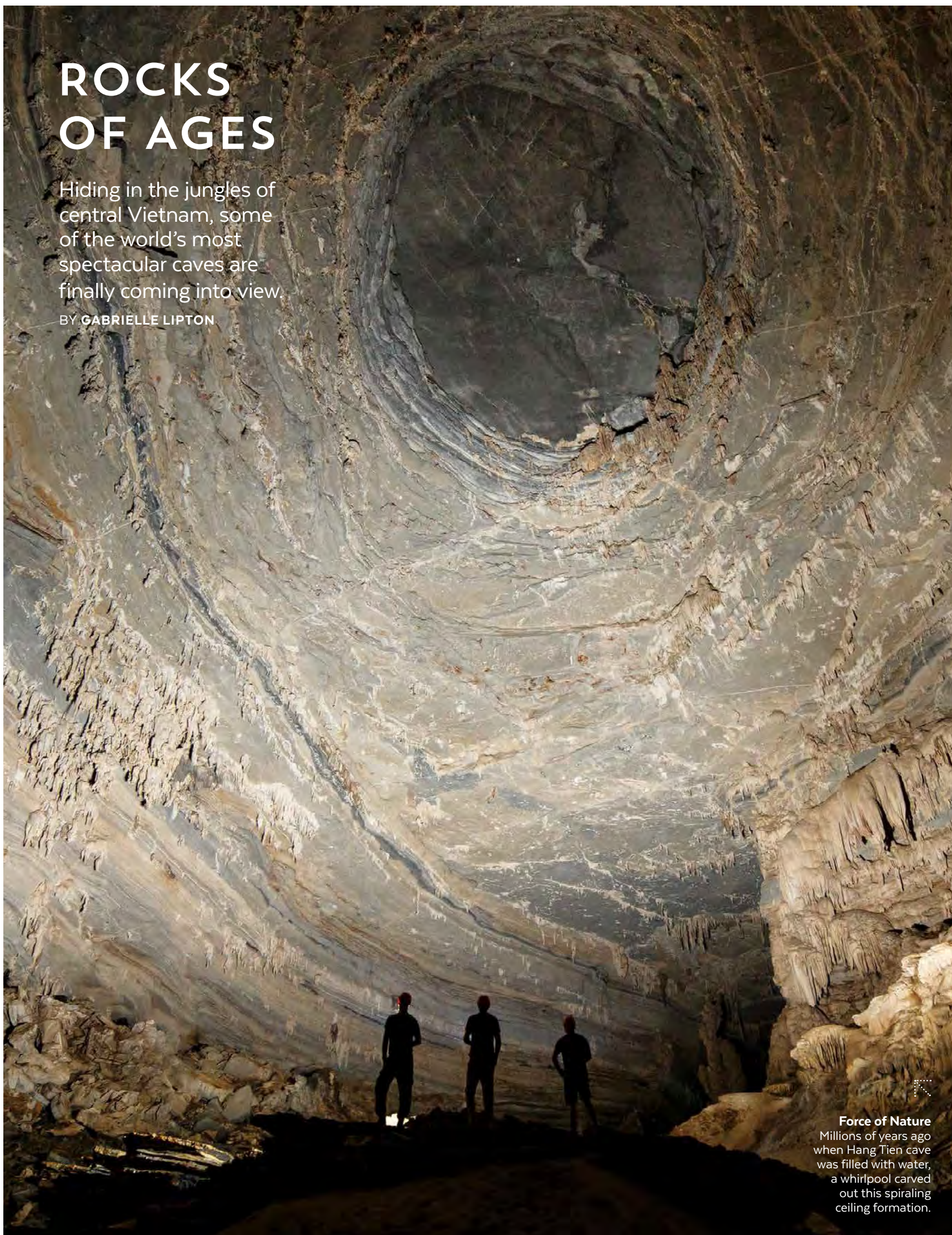


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ROCKS OF AGES

Hiding in the jungles of central Vietnam, some of the world's most spectacular caves are finally coming into view.

BY GABRIELLE LIPTON



Force of Nature
Millions of years ago when Hang Tien cave was filled with water, a whirlpool carved out this spiraling ceiling formation.

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Nestled on a stretch of gorgeous shoreline, The Sanchaya is just the spot for luxury lovers, featuring nine colonial-themed suites and 21 villas each uniquely fashioned with a blend of art and design from around Southeast Asia. Among the appeals that have made it one of the region's top new hotels is a spa with indoor and outdoor treatment rooms, an infinity pool, a wine-and-cheese tasting room, and the Sanchaya Yacht for private Singapore transfers and romantic sunset cruises. Nearby, the Swiss-Belhotel Lagoi Bay is the perfect base for carefree time spent with family and friends, complete with 195 contemporary rooms, a kid's club, an Asian and Indonesian restaurant, and a fantastic rooftop swimming pool with views that stretch to the ocean.



In addition to basking in the crystal waters of the South China Sea, there's plenty to do around Lagoi Bay. There are local shops and a marketplace vending Indonesian snacks and souvenirs aplenty as well as the impressive Plaza Lagoi mall, whose 60 high-end storefronts make it all too easy to take a break from the sun and enjoy a leisurely shopping day. The mall's tourist information center is a great resource about the area where visitors can book tours to discover the hidden gems of rich heritage and unique local lifestyle of Bintan Island. Another way to get your bearings here is with the Air Adventures Flying Club. Those wanting an alternative holiday can take a 30-hour course to receive a basic flying license and pilot the Club's seaplanes themselves, while those just looking for some adventure and a great view can be whisked up in an open-cockpit seaplane for a breathtaking tour of Bintan from above.

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I have a newfound belief that caves are nature's most underrated attractions. I've traveled far and wide for a good reef, woken at 3 a.m. to drag myself up a mountain for the sunrise, and shivered across glaciers. But I've never really considered going to lightless, muddy places to see various versions of rocks, for reasons I think are self-evident. However, I'd like to announce that my predilections have changed. I've joined the dark side.

What won me over was a recent trip to central Vietnam near Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, where in 2009 a group of British cavers became the first expedition to enter Son Doong, now considered the world's largest cave. Soon after, Chau A Nguyen—a native of the park's base town, Phong Nha—founded a tour company called Oxalis that not only specializes in caving, but also serves as the region's guardian, employing and educating locals on responsible environmental practices (there's a waiting list of 200 who want to work as guides, chefs, and porters) and striving to instill similar ethics with the local government and get jungle-protection laws put in place. It seems to be working; Oxalis is the only outfitter allowed to operate in certain parts of the region, resulting in a fantastic bunch of tours ranging from day trips to a five-day Son Doong adventure. Because the latter is in such high demand, I opted instead for Oxalis' Tu Lan Expedition, a four-day trip covering 35 kilometers of jungle trekking and six different caves and guided in part by Deb Limbert, one of the discoverers of Son Doong.

Our trek began through dry open fields, poking fun at the lazy water buffalo bobbing in



Lighting the Way
Above, from left: Cavers on Oxalis's Tu Lan expedition; the lush Laken Valley, whose river formed the Tu Lan and Hang Ken caves.

the Rao Nan River, whose many branches have carved through the limestone mountains over hundreds of millions of years, forming the Tu Lan cave system we were out to explore. But for better or worse, part of the thrill of being in the wild is that—to recall the words of Joan Didion—it changes in the instant. As soon as we reached our first hill, the jungle was in full force. Our flat stroll suddenly became a steep climb, requiring us to pull ourselves up and over rocks while trying to avoid the lime-green leaves that we were warned would leave us itching for five days. But just when I could nearly hear my quadriceps screaming in agony, the trees parted, and Secret Cave appeared. Short and compact with spectacular stalagmites, it would have been a highlight attraction anywhere else, but here it was just a shortcut to where we needed to go. Our guide—an en-

thusiastic young man from Phong Nha who calls himself Jungleman Ken—promised that better things awaited at our campsite, which he repeatedly declared was “The most beautiful campsite in the world!”

About an hour later, after bounding down the side of Mango Mountain over rocks and roots, we arrived just as it began to rain. Our porters had already built a small village of tarps complete with a dining area and bamboo-walled compost toilets, set on a riverbed in front of a towering wall of white limestone. On one side gaped a massive black mouth with a waterfall spilling out of it into a two-tiered lagoon. Okay Jungleman, you earned my trust.

One member of our group was a British caver named Martin Holroyd, a longtime friend of Deb’s who has been coming to the region since 1997 to find and survey new caves. It was Martin, in fact, who discovered this cave, Hang Ken, in 2010. While preparing a lecture about Son Doong, he came across a posting in a Vietnamese forum about a new entrance spotted in the jungle and came out to take a look, finding what he describes as an explorer’s dream. As we swam through the cave’s river, the enormous

The Details

As the only tour operator allowed in certain parts of this region, **Oxalis** (oxalis.com.vn) runs a variety of Adventure Tours (from US\$93 per person for the Tu Lan 1-Day Experience) and more physically demanding Expedition Tours (up to US\$3,000 per person for the Son Doong Cave Expedition).

How to Get There

Jetstar Airways (jetstar.com) and **Vietnam Airlines** (vietnamairlines.com) fly from Ho Chi Minh City to Dong Hoi, and from there it’s about an hour’s drive to Phong Nha, the base town for Oxalis’s tours.

When to Go

Take note that certain Oxalis tours aren’t available during the region’s rainy season, which runs from approximately September through January. For the best jungle weather, April is the month to book.

cavern quickly swallowed the outside light, and we were left playing I Spy with our headlamps, illuminating swaths of the water-sculpted walls each entirely different than the last. The most impressive formation was hidden in the back: a six-story-tall column, its surface like Braille with the drops of minerals that formed it one by one. With Martin jogging my memory, I remembered having seen it before in a *National Geographic* photo. But from the cliff where the photographer had stood to take his shot, it was clear that no device could ever capture what I was seeing.

Maybe it was the fantastic sleep I’d had in my hammock, or maybe it was because I’d already fallen in love with caves on that cliff top in Hang Ken, but I woke up blissfully clear-minded the next morning ready for day two of what I now refer to as adult summer-camp in paradise. At Tu Lan cave, we slipped into harnesses and absailed down a 15-meter rock wall into its river, then paddled in rafts to a waterfall deep in the middle, shutting off our headlamps to listen to its rush in complete blackness. We paddled back out through a Hollywood scene of the dawn of the earth, the sunlight illumi-



Skytrex at Machinchang Cambrian Geoforest Park

NATURE’S THEME PARK

There are so many exciting ways to experience the natural wonders of the islands in the Langkawi archipelago.

Take a kayak and explore the magical fresh water lake at Dayang Bunting or get really up close with nature on the Skytrex Adventure at the Machinchang Cambrian Geoforest Park for an adrenaline rush.

Naturally, you will be spoilt for choice and may have to stay longer.

Naturally LANGKAWI

Kayaking at Dayang Bunting Marble Geoforest Park

nating stalactite silhouettes against the misty jungle behind. After a lunch of DIY fresh spring rolls—foraged jungle mushrooms included—we swam through a mountain via Hang Kim to a sparkling lake on the other side, where we floated on our life vests and sat under shoulder-massaging rapids before continuing to Hung Ton, the “Porcupine Cave,” with its dense sculpture gardens of enormous stalagmites.

Jungleman Ken had repeatedly warned us that our third day would be a doozy: a 13-kilometer hike to a campsite with “the best swimming pool” that was in easy reach of “the most beautiful cave,” opinions that by this point I held to be uncontested truths. But rather than counting the kilometers, we made our way from point A to point B quite leisurely, stopping at every river and lake along the way. It turns out those water buffalo had it right. Floating, walking, floating, walking, and soon enough we were diving into the pool’s cool waters and tucking into an incredible barbecue dinner prepared by our porters: pork, beef, chicken, fried tofu, boiled eggs in a fresh tomato sauce; egg drop soup with vegetables; sautéed morning

Notes from the Underground

Below: A chamber deep inside Hang Tien, one of the largest and oldest caves in the region. It’s estimated to have been formed 550 million years ago.



glory and cabbage; and local rice wine.

Between the wine and the day’s endorphins, I was just thinking that I couldn’t be more content when the porters suddenly broke into a series of Vietnamese folk songs. One particularly animated young man was the lead, his expressiveness leaving us totally transfixed until suddenly, as if on queue, they all turned to us. Evidently, it was our turn to perform. Dumbstruck, we tried to figure out what songs our motley crew of an Australian, a German, six Americans, and three Brits had in common, eventually resorting to what you’d probably find on a ’90s cassette tape for kids: “Country Roads,” “Comin’ Round the Mountain,” and the “Hokey Pokey.” (For the record, the latter is a huge hit if you throw in the dance moves too.)

In 1994, the rainy season upended one of Deb’s expeditions. The cave she was trying to reach was flooded and impossible to enter without proper scuba diving equipment, so a local took her to another entrance he knew of instead. It turned out to be Hang Tien, our final cave of the trip and—yes, Jungleman—the most beautiful by far. It’s older than many others in the system at an estimated age of 550 million years, and feels like the palace of a pre-human god. We reached its yawning mouth via a long approach of increasingly large boulders, entering the sunlit foyer where countless stalactites hung some 30 stories above us like a ceiling of icicles. Tiers of petal-shaped pools made from eroded calcium lined the pathway into the dark interior, where we walked through one enormous room after the next, soaking in our last stint of doing what you do in caves—sitting in the darkness, listening to bats and echoes, and marveling at each new sight.

Just when I thought the thrills were over, Deb asked us if we wanted to try a difficult passage to the very back of the cave. It turned out to be an obstacle course of an encore. We balanced across limestone edges thin as tightropes, negotiated water-filled chambers of glossy black rock, and wedged ourselves between walls until finally we arrived at a green lake extending into a dark void. Deb told us that no one has ever been beyond this point, as that would require somehow carrying scuba gear through the passage we’d just climbed. She doubts anyone ever will.

The unfortunate thing about caves as impressive as these is that as soon as you’re out of one, it immediately begins to recede from your mind. They’re just too vast to compress into a memory, leaving you with just a vague visual and a strong desire to return. Which is why, while I’m as much a sucker for once-in-a-lifetime experiences as anyone else, I think I’ll have to try this one again. ●

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Vibrant cities, ancient cultures, and amazing natural wonders await in the 17,000 islands of Indonesia, promising holidays and adventures of a lifetime.

The scenic beauty of Flores.

Scenes of Sumatra

THE LARGEST AND ONE OF THE MOST intriguing of Indonesia's islands is Sumatra. The backbone of this 470,000-square-kilometer landmass is the Barisan Mountains, a volcanic range that endows the land with fertile soil and beautiful scenery. Its centerpiece is the Toba caldera, a vast crater formed millennia ago by the explosion of a super-volcano, and the site of the largest volcanic lake in the world. Home to almost a quarter of the country's population, Sumatra also harbors a rich variety of flora and fauna, including rarities such as the Sumatran tiger, rhinoceroses, and clouded leopards.

Padang, on the southwest coast of Sumatra, is the launching pad for tourists visiting the west Sumatran highlands and for surfers heading out to Nias and the Mentawai islands. The Mentawais are a wave-rich cluster of about 70 islets that have a reputation for possessing some of the world's most consistent surf. Nias Island and the nearby Asu and Bawa islands also have world-class waves. Among the more than 17,000 islands of Indonesia, of which two-thirds are uninhabited, the surfer's ultimate fantasy of crowd-free and unnamed breaks can still be experienced.



The town hall of 17th-century Batavia now houses the Jakarta History Museum. Below left: Surf's up in Sumatra.

Javanese Joys

JAKARTA, THE BUSTLING INDONESIAN capital, will keep you entertained for days with its sprawling shopping malls, diverse restaurants, and lively night-clubs. The city of more than 10 million people also has a beguiling history, best witnessed in Kota, the old Dutch quarter, popular for its historic buildings, museums, and galleries. The National Museum houses more than 140,000 artifacts from across the archipelago and showcases Java's artistic side with wayang kulit puppet performances accompanied by Sundanese gamelan music every Sunday morning.

Only a two-hour drive from Jakarta, Bandung is one of West Java's most attractive destinations for weekend get-aways. Aside from dozens of trendy shops and eateries, Bandung is popular for its proximity to Mount Tangkuban Perahu—an awe-inspiring (and still active) volcano some 30 kilometers north

of town. The westernmost tip of Java is the home of Ujung Kulon National Park, a World Heritage Site. The park encompasses the peninsula for which it is named as well as several offshore islands, among them the young volcano that has risen from the sunken remains of Krakatoa, which blew itself to pieces in 1883.

For a glimpse into Indonesia's royal heritage, step into the regal surrounds of the Keraton, the 18th-century sultan's palace in Yogyakarta. Behind it is Taman Sari, a restored water palace where the sultan's concubines once bathed among ornate sunken pools. Don't miss the early-morning climb up Borobudur, a stupa-topped temple that is the world's largest Buddhist monument. To Yogyakarta's northeast is Solo, another historic Javanese town, renowned for its traditional music and dance, the Surakarta Keraton embellished with European-style decorations, and for some of the tastiest street food you'll find in Indonesia.



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Clockwise: *Tau tau* effigies line a cliff in Tana Toraja; an old missionary church in the highlands; a vibrant reef wall in Bunaken.



Sulawesi Odyssey

MANADO, AT THE NORTHEASTERN TIP OF Sulawesi Island, is on the doorstep of one of the archipelago's best-known dive destinations. Here, Bunaken National Marine Park boasts beautiful coral gardens and dramatic drop-offs, and its palm-fringed

beaches host an array of comfortable accommodation. Back on the mainland, Manado is home to a fiery local cuisine, and makes an ideal base for exploring nearby crater lakes and the scenic Minahasa Highlands.

Heading south across Sulawesi's mountainous interior, visitors will arrive in Tana Toraja, where unique architecture and elaborate funeral ceremonies—usually carried

out in July and August—make for a truly memorable experience. Travelers should also visit the haunting cave graves guarded by life-sized wooden effigies known as *tau tau*. The area's rich cultural offerings are matched by its stunning natural beauty. The valley of Tana Toraja is surrounded by mountains and trimmed with limestone cliffs, making it a veritable wonderland for hikers.



TASTE OF THE TIMES

Jakarta's new 1945 restaurant serves Indonesian fare at its finest

IN THE INDONESIAN capital, nowhere brings together the vast and diverse flavors of the archipelago quite like 1945. Combining traditional dishes and dining customs with innovative flavors and finesse, 1945 offers a world-class dining experience that's distinctly Indonesian.

Just in time to celebrate Indonesia's 70th anniversary of independence this year, 1945 opened as the newest name from Jakarta's Sari Rasa Nusantara restaurant group. Here, dining is an experience meant to be enjoyed at a slower pace. Located on the third floor of the new Fairmont hotel in the centrally located Senayan area,

the restaurant's sophisticated design of dark woods, frosted glass, and handsome slate-toned furnishings sets a refined ambiance. Each meal begins with a procession of batik-clad servers presenting diners with complimentary amuse-bouches to sample while choosing from the extensive menu and wine list.

Classic Indonesian dishes are prepared with modern techniques and hints of global fusion, such as curried lamb chop cooked sous vide and duck served with a poached duck egg and foie gras. Committed to ingredients of the highest quality, 1945 prepares spicy coconut rendang and satay with wagyu beef, and Indonesian fried rice comes with the option of stuffed baked lobster. Even the desserts are impressively innovative, such as cheesecake infused with fermented cassava, and for individual diners, there's a rijsttafel menu with a variety of options for one of the most elaborate feasts in the city.

Fairmont Hotel, Jl. Asia Afrika No. 8, Jakarta; 62-21/2903-9179; 1945.co.id

The cliffs of Bali's southern Bukit Peninsula. Below: Taco Casa, one of Seminyak's many trendy eateries.



Balinese Beauty

BALI'S REPUTATION AS INDONESIA'S most popular destination is well-deserved; the island attracts people from all over the world in search of peaceful holidaymaking, exciting nightlife, and more. While there is plenty to do and see all over the island, the southern areas radiating outward from the international airport are consistently some of the most well-liked.

Bali's Bukit Peninsula is a land of white-sand beaches, crystal-clear waters, dramatic cliff vistas, and luxurious resorts. On the east coast of the Bukit lies Nusa Dua, a tourist enclave that has been developing along one of the best beaches on the island. Well-maintained courses, spectacular views, landscaped gardens, world-class



golf facilities, and a good range of children's activities all serve to make Nusa Dua's resorts popular with families and those looking for an indulgent getaway.

The bustling tourist towns just northwest of the Bukit are a haven for shoppers, gourmands, and night owls. Kuta, Legian, and Seminyak are dynamic and busy day and night, with a high concentration of shops, cafés, restaurants, and bars. Kuta is perhaps best known for its surfing, sunsets, and nightlife, while nearby Legian is a hotspot for stylish hotels and gourmet dining. For the hippest visitors and locals, Seminyak is the place to see and be seen. The area is one of the trendiest spots on the island, with a gamut of specialized boutiques, interior decor stores, and upscale bars and restaurants. Some of the best international cuisine can be sampled here alongside a youthful and fashionable set that makes this a vibrant and exciting area.



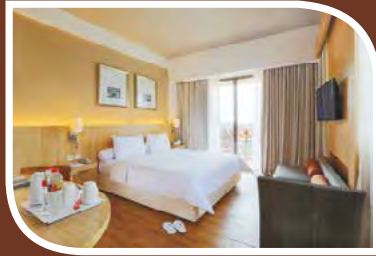
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The Pasola war ritual is one of Indonesia's oldest and bloodiest traditions.

Allures of the East

LONG OVERLOOKED, NUSA TENG-gara, or the Lesser Sunda island chain, is a treasure-trove of fascinating cultures and natural wonders. Arcing from just east of Bali toward northern Australia, these largely unexplored gems offer visitors an unparalleled opportunity to range far off the beaten track.

Just a short hop from Bali, Lombok entices with white beaches, prime surf breaks, and stunning vistas of Mount Rinjani, the island's towering volcano. No diehard diver can forego the allure of Lombok. A short ferry ride from Bali, the island may not have the flashy restaurants and night-spots of its neighbor, but it does offer a wide variety of leisure activities, from diving and snorkeling to hiking through the tropical jungle. Just off the coast, the enchanting islet trio of Gili Trawangan, Gili Meno, and Gili Air

promises laid-back beachside stays and access to some fairly impressive reef life.

Further east, the windswept hills and valleys of Sumba have nurtured a cultural and artistic heritage of their own. Traditional ikat textiles are still woven by hand, their bold patterns imbued with deep spiritual significance. Throughout the island, monolithic stone tombs and high-roofed houses give a glimpse of Sumba's living culture. The thrilling Pasola, an ancient war ritual, sees scores of warriors mount horses and charge with raised spears, spilling blood to appease the gods.

On Flores, Mount Kelimutu is one of Indonesia's most mysterious and dramatic sights. Hikers who ascend its cone will be rewarded with a spectacular view over its three crater lakes, each with a distinct hue. The lakes have continuously changed their colors over the years, adopting hues such as dark turquoise, milky white, rusty brown, and red.

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1919

Without a doubt, Stonehenge remains one of the world's greatest mysteries. It's easy to say what it is—a prehistoric ceremonial monument that now draws more than one million annual visitors to its wide grassy plain near Amesbury in southwest England—but exactly why or how it was constructed has yet to be determined. Rounded and built into trilithons, the Sarsen sandstones and Pembroke bluestones, some weighing as much as 40 tons, were transported from up to 240 kilometers away without so much as a wheel. Some researchers estimate it took 1,500 years to erect. Nevertheless, by the 20th century,

Stonehenge had fallen into a sorry state, and the efforts since to restore it have unearthed various clues to its meaning. Between 1919 and 1926, archaeologist William Hawley was appointed by the Society of Antiquaries of London to work on excavating and re-stabilizing the structure, and during the process, he found some of the site's most intriguing artifacts, including cremated bones, hammer stones, and picks made of antlers. But the most significant find to date came this September, when a group of scientists announced that using advanced radar technology, they had discovered what's now being called Superhenge: a row of some 90 stones buried underground less than three kilometers away, covering an area five times larger than that of Stonehenge. The new chapter to the mystery brings to mind the feelings of Hawley at the end of his eight years: that he was no more enlightened on the meaning of Stonehenge than when he'd begun. —**Gabrielle Lipton**



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Colonial Chic
On the grounds of
The Sanchaya, a
ravishing newcomer
on the shores of
Bintan's Lagoi Bay.

THE TOP HOTELS 2015

From Delhi's latest pleasure palace to a cliff-side resort in Sri Lanka, our reviewers have scoured the region to pull together this year's roster of the top hotel openings. Read on to discover which new properties stood out from the rest in terms of service, setting, and a singular sense of style.



The Reverie Saigon

HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

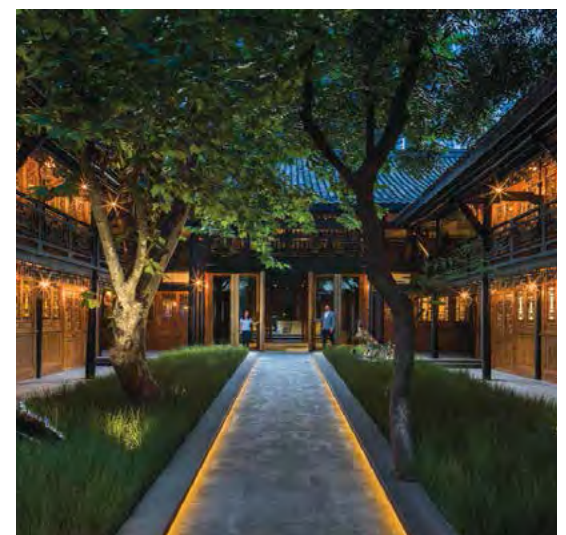
Situated on the upper floors of the 40-story Times Square tower in downtown Ho Chi Minh City, this US\$600 million property is as opulent as they come. While the views are spectacular, particularly from rooms overlooking the snaking Saigon River, the Reverie's focus is firmly on the inside. Outré decor centers on furniture from four Italian brands— Provasi Colombo Stile, Giorgetti, and Visionnaire—giving interiors the feel of a doge's palace. Other notable pieces include the lobby's gold-accented Baldi clock, reception desks finished in solid silver, and a scattering of Swarovski crystal prints. The initial effect is a little overwhelming, but soon you'll start to notice subtle details: the abalone-shell accents in the ground-floor entryway, bedside lamps of delicate stained glass, textured ceilings that look like clouds. The 286 Italianate rooms are more subdued than public areas (think soothing colors, monotone padded-leather headboards), while the spa is a model of restraint, cocooning and outfitted in dark wood. Meals promise quiet precision and include fine Cantonese fare at the Royal Pavilion. —84-8/3823-6688; thereveriesaiagon.com; doubles from US\$350



The Temple House

CHENGDU, CHINA

➔ Chengdu's Daci Temple provides a stunning contrast at Taikoo Li—a millennium-old shrine now surrounded by an outdoor mall dedicated to Gucci, Zara, Apple, and other icons of modern consumption. The restored temple is the centerpiece of a Swire renovation bigger than its landmark Sanlitun project of the same name in Beijing. While the latter spawned the ultra-modern Opposite House hotel in 2008, this development boasts the equally impressive Temple House. Designed by Make Architects (whose founder, Ken Shuttleworth, was formerly with Foster and Partners), the 100 rooms and 42 residences are awash in dark wood and stone, and while stark, they're spacious: rooms start at 63 square meters and come with large living rooms, giant tubs, plenty of gadgetry, and private balconies with views over central Chengdu. Gorgeous art and sculpture are scattered across a site that includes seven heritage structures, though space constraints forced some facilities below ground, like the indoor pool, cleverly tucked under a courtyard. Other highlights include the excellent Italian restaurant Tivano and a tranquil, apothecary-inspired teahouse that serves vegetarian dishes. —86-28/6636-9999; thetemplehousehotel.com; doubles from US\$300



COURTESY OF THE TEMPLE HOUSE; COURTESY OF THE REVERIE SAIGON. OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF PUMPHOUSE POINT. PREVIOUS: PANJINDRA. STYLED BY PETER ZEVET. MODEL: RETI RAGIL. OUTFIT BY DIANE VON FURSTENBERG.



Pumphouse Point

TASMANIA, AUSTRALIA

➔ Built in 1934 on the edge of remote Lake St. Clair in Tasmania's Central Highlands, the brick-and-stucco buildings of Pumphouse Point were originally part of a hydropower system. In 1995, after the lake—Australia's deepest—was included in the 1.5-million-hectare Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, the project was decommissioned and left to the elements. Now, it's the island's latest eco-retreat. While the facades of the property's two buildings have deliberately been left rustic, inside it's a different story, with 18 smart guest rooms sporting wood paneling and a charcoal-and-beige palette. (Book a room in the original pump house; set at the end of a 250-meter-long jetty, it comes with wraparound views of the lake and forest.) Services are limited and the ambience is laid back, with communal three-course dinners each night and convivial public spaces with cast-iron fires, board games, and well-stocked honor bars. Solitude-seekers will want to pack a picnic hamper with delicacies such as smoked quail and King Island blue cheese from their mini-bar and head into the great outdoors.

—61-428/090-436; pumphousepoint.com.au; doubles from US\$172



Seaside Seduction

Opposite, clockwise from top left: A dining pavilion at Cape Weligama; one of Amilla Fushi's Tree House villas; the pristine beachfront at The Sanchaya.

The Sanchaya

BINTAN, INDONESIA

➔ The first luxe property to open on Bintan Island in a decade, The Sanchaya occupies a prime seaside location in up-and-coming Lagoi Bay. Set on the grounds of a former coconut plantation, the resort centers on its colonial-style Great House, whose dual-tone exterior is a nod to the old black-and-white houses of Singapore, a 45-minute ferry ride away. Here you'll find guest suites, a salon-style library with clubby leather sofas and a wine cellar, the Dining Room restaurant, and a reflecting pond that preludes a 50-meter saltwater swimming pool. Surrounding this are shingle-roofed villas with decor and furnishings from across Southeast Asia—Burmese colonial window frames, sketches of Philippine tribesmen—all done up in classy white and steel-gray hues and attended by “estate companions” schooled at the British Butler Institute. The simply named Bar, with the look of a late-1800s explorers' club, stocks spirits from boutique producers, while the food on offer ranges from mod-European and pan-Asian at the Dining Room to Bangkok street fare at the beachside Tasanee Grill. A cute spa with freestanding pavilions offers Thai massages, while other diversions include croquet, archery, and pétanque. —62-770/692-200; thesanchaya.com; doubles from US\$390

Cape Weligama

WELIGAMA, SRI LANKA

Acclaimed Thai architect Lek Bunnag hasn't missed a beat at this five-hectare property, set on a promontory east of Galle on Sri Lanka's beautiful southern coast. Designed to evoke a traditional village, Cape Weligama's cluster of *walauwa* (mansions) and *watta* (garden) compounds 39 butler-serviced villas and suites, all ringed by tropical gardens; the two-bedroom Residence also comes with a top-floor swimming pool overlooking an unbroken expanse of the Indian Ocean. Food is a focus here, and you can opt to eat fragrant curries with your hands, Sri Lankan-style, at Kumbuk restaurant, or dine in style at cliff-side Misaki, where upscale Japanese stars on the menu. Nodding to tradition is waterside Taylor Pavilion, where high tea is served by white-gloved waiters. Be sure to have a spa treatment—therapists can come to you, and they specialize in organic spice rubs made from cloves, nutmeg, and sandalwood. Afterward, slide into the resort's crescent-shaped infinity pool or sign up for something a little more strenuous: activities here include diving, kayaking, surfing, and, from November through April, whale watching. —94-11/774-5730; capeweligama.com; doubles from US\$710, all-inclusive

Amilla Fushi

BAA ATOLL, MALDIVES

➔ A singular newcomer to the Maldives, Amilla Fushi offers a welcome mix of high and low—lodgings, that is. Contemporary white villas are staked out in the cerulean waters like oblong sugar cubes or nestled into the sand, while five two-bedroom villas are set 12 meters high at eye-level with the fronds of the surrounding coconut trees. And while the views may vary, the comforts here are never below top-level. Nautical-chic designs aside, each villa is stocked with Aesop amenities; tech from Bose, Blu-Ray, and Samsung; a wine fridge of selections from the resort's 8,000-bottle cellar; and iPads pre-loaded with menus from the three restaurants created by Australian celebrity chef Luke Mangan. One could easily imagine lingering forever beside their private pool—which even the tree houses have—if it weren't for all the other appeals. There's a beanbag-lined infinity pool, an ocean-facing yoga pavilion, and the Javvu Spa with all-organic body treatments. Snorkeling and diving in this UNESCO-protected area is always spectacular, but between November and March, an excursion to nearby Hanirafu Bay could very well include the company of manta rays and whale sharks. —960/660-6444; amilla.mv; doubles from US\$1,300



**The
LUXE LIST
2015**



The South Beach
SINGAPORE

This tower soft-opened early September across the road from Raffles Hotel and has serious pedigree of its own—it was designed by Foster + Partners and Aedas, with interiors by Philippe Starck. The rippled glass facade curves like a billowing dhow sail that catches the wind and directs air to the street level, while a wave-like environmental canopy links the hotel to the South Beach office tower, with four heritage buildings in between. The 654-room property (of which only 100 rooms are currently open) is as much about theater as thread counts. Starck's imprint on the conversation-starter furniture and decor is ubiquitous, hence high-legged Lucite chairs, aluminum rockers, antler chandeliers, and sofas that border on the surreal. The sole restaurant, ADHD (which stands for All Day Hotel Dining), is a dramatic rectangular space, while three bars include the boisterous, colorful Laugh and the more adult Prefix, characterized by wood, marble, chrome, and a working fireplace. The best roost, though, is at Floor, the 18th-story sky garden that, in addition to a gym, pool, table football, and table tennis, comes with fabulous wraparound city views.

—65/6818-1888; thesouthbeach.com.sg; doubles from US\$320

Keemala

PHUKET, THAILAND

➔ Upon check-in at this intriguing new hillside resort above the west-coast town of Kamala, guests are assigned to one of four villa categories inspired by fictional “clans”—the earthily designed Clay Pool Cottages of the Pa-ta-Pea clan; the safari-styled Khon-Jorn Tent Pool Villas; the sleek Tree Pool Houses of the We-Ha people, which feature suspended furniture; and the cocoon-like Rung-Nok’s Bird’s Nest Pool Villas. It sounds like a concept that could go terribly wrong, but Keemala pulls it off with aplomb. Welcome touches include fabrics and textiles produced by hill tribes in northern Thailand, while meals at Su-Tha restaurant use chemical-free fruit and vegetables grown in its own garden. Crisscrossed by jungle walkways, the leafy, quiet landscape incorporates the site’s original trees and waterways, creating a rural atmosphere that is underscored by Keemala’s trio of resident water buffalo.

—66-76/358-777; keemala.com; doubles from US\$540





Raffles Jakarta INDONESIA

➔ For its seventh Asian hotel, the Raffles group has, at the behest of the property's owner—Indonesian tycoon and art collector Ciputra—assembled a lavish tribute to the late Hendra Gunawan, one of Indonesia's most acclaimed modern artists. While no actual canvasses by Gunawan adorn the hotel (to see his works, guests can visit the adjacent Ciputra Museum, part of an impressive new arts center that includes a 1,200-seat theater), his oeuvre is well represented in enormous tile mosaics that reinterpret some of his best-known paintings, as well as in motifs from his vivid, expressionistic paeans to village life that appear in carpets and chandeliers and etchings. This being a Raffles, there are also nods to the brand's old-world heritage in the form of distressed mirrors and the wooden shutters that line the walls of the Writers Bar (pictured). More than anything, though, this sophisticated newcomer is about modern comfort. Starting at 60 square meters, its 173 rooms and suites are among the biggest in the city, decked out in pale woods and creamy marble alongside a host of thoughtful amenities: Asprey toiletries, bars of artisanal Indonesian chocolate, batik *yukata* robes by fashion designer Oscar Lawalata. Guests will have to wait until the end of the year for the hotel's spa to open, however. Also in the works? The Long Bar—Jakarta's answer to the iconic establishment at the original Raffles in Singapore.

—62-21/2988-0888; raffles.com; doubles from US\$480

ITC Grand Bharat

GURGAON, INDIA

➔ Nestled amid sweeping yellow mustard fields at the edge of the Aravalli mountain range, the ITC Grand Bharat provides an opulent respite from New Delhi, a 45-kilometer drive away. Part of Starwood's Luxury Collection, the multi-domed hotel is an homage to India's rich architectural heritage, taking its cues from Mughal and Maratha palaces, the ghats of Varanasi, and the temples of Odisha, among other inspirations. The result is a stunning amalgam of styles that works just as well in the 100 suites (which come either with plunge pools or private terraces) and four presidential villas, all of which strike just the right note between old-world and contemporary. Food is a highlight, with four restaurants including the poolside Apas Promenade for local Mewati food and the more formal India Room with a menu of nouvelle European dishes such as eggplant-stuffed tortellini and Gouda soufflé. And adding to the retreat's credentials as a destination hotel are a 3,200-square-meter spa with beautifully carved neem-wood massage tables and an exotic treatment menu; a 27-hole Jack Nicklaus golf course; and a gamut of activities ranging from Zorbing and yoga classes to day treks and rock climbing in the surrounding hills.

—91-1267/285-500; itchohels.com; doubles from US\$760



Loke Thye Kee Residences

GEORGE TOWN, MALAYSIA

Converted shophouses may not be a revelation among accommodations in Penang's George Town, but Loke Thye Kee Residences is raising the benchmark. Under the direction of local development group 1919 Global, Singaporean architecture firm Ministry of Design took five shophouses that date back to the 1870s and massaged them into loft-like suites best described as "George Town Modern." Their original shells of brick walls, wood floors, and soaring ceilings have been finessed and filled with contemporary white furnishings, glossy glass vanities, works from local artist Ch'ng Kiah Kian, and kitchenette areas stocked with all the obligatory local snacks. Large windows overlook bustling Penang Road; in the back, each has its own charming garden area and patio. More rooms are additionally set to come as part of the larger development project 1919 Global is carrying out in the area, including the restoration of the Straits-Chinese black-and-white Majestic Theatre and the adjacent namesake Loke Thye Kee building, whose restaurant is remembered by an older generation as the requisite spot for matchmaking teas. Now, it serves some of the best Hainanese food around. —60-4/264-1919; lokeध्येkee.com; doubles from US\$205

Aman Tokyo

JAPAN

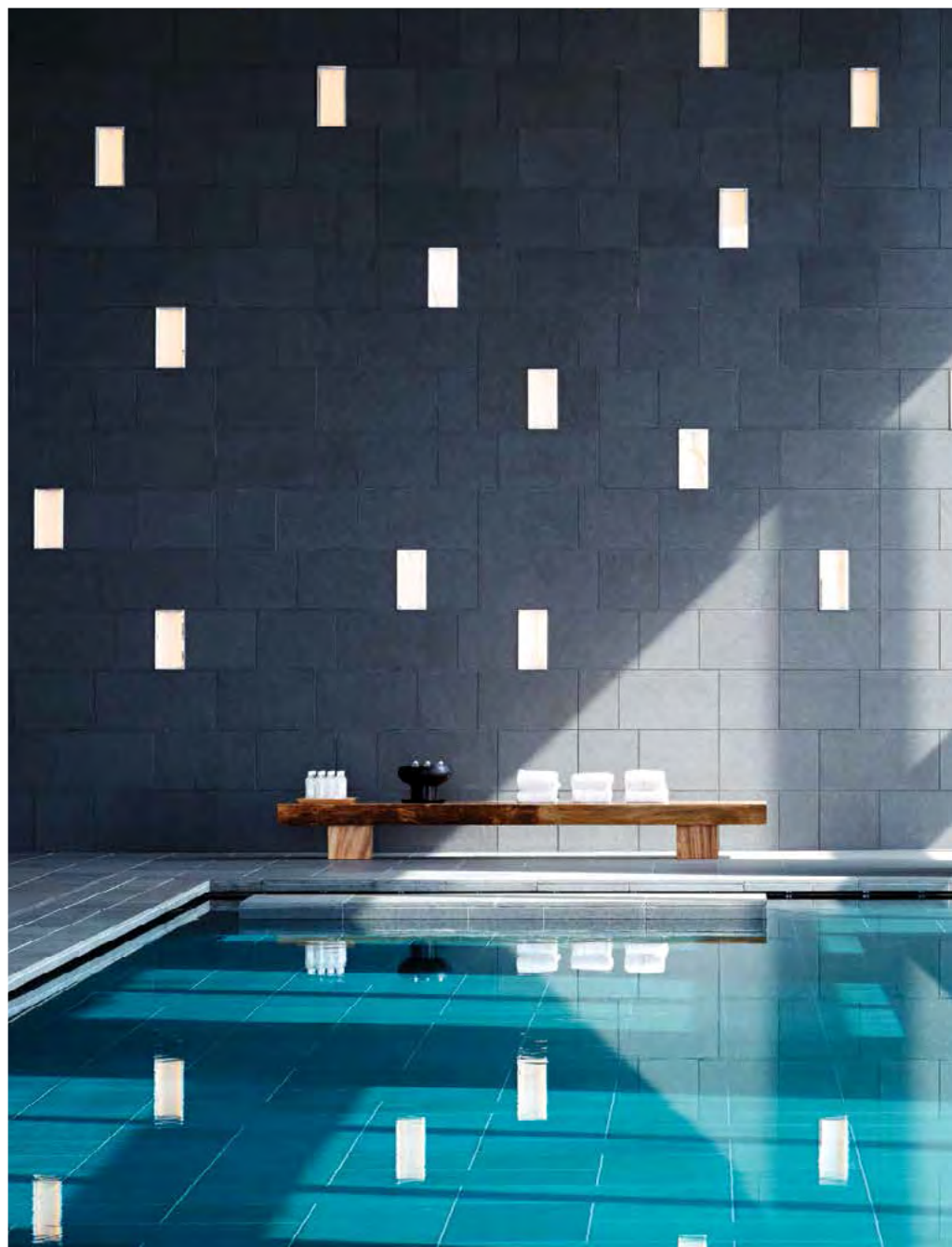
➔ In a city where luxury hotels abound, the newest Aman property, set high in the Otemachi Tower not far from Tokyo Station, is hard to fault. Australian architect Kerry Hill (who also designed the Amans in Sri Lanka and Bhutan) has managed to capture a sense of place from the moment you step into Aman Tokyo's 33rd-floor lobby. Centered on a raised rock garden and crowned by a soaring ceiling feature of backlit *washi*-paper designed to resemble a huge traditional lantern, the space is immediately welcoming, thanks in part to kimono-clad staff who seem to float around the room pouring tea and arranging cherry blossoms in the tradition of *ikebana*. Traditional materials are used throughout, from sliding *shoji* screens to *furo* soaking tubs, elegant *yukata* robes in the wardrobe and black cotton slippers waiting for you by the door to your lodgings. Views from the 84 rooms and suites take in the Imperial Palace gardens and Tokyo Skytree, but the best vista in the house is from the 34th-floor infinity pool. Here, the water has been set at a level to block out Tokyo's sprawling cityscape, allowing swimmers to bliss out while gazing at Mount Fuji on the horizon.

—81-3/5224-3333; aman.com; doubles from US\$870

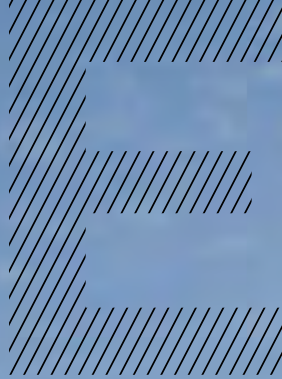
The Luxe List continues on page 116 ➔

Overnight Sensations

Opposite, clockwise from top: Indian opulence at the ITC Grand Bharat; Aman Tokyo's 34th-floor swimming pool; the reception area at Loke Thye Kee Residences.



Lush Life
Overlooking the
Taling Ngam
area on Koh
Samui's sedate
west coast.



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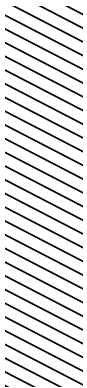
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JUST

Once-sleepy Koh Samui may not be Thailand’s most visited holiday island (that distinction goes to Phuket), but it is the uncontested leader when it comes to upscale accommodations—and all the trappings that go with them.

N

FINE

G

BY **SIMON N. OSTHEIMER**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JASON MICHAEL LANG



hen I was a child, there was nothing here,” my driver Tom tells me as we cruise along the cliff-hugging road on Koh Samui’s east coast. Born and raised on the southern Thai island, the 36-year-old remembers a simple childhood centered on farming and family. “I used to walk the five kilometers to school every morning, then the same back in the afternoon. Once I got home, I helped with the chores and then played in the fields. Occasionally, everyone

in the village would gather at the house of the one person who had electricity to watch a football game on TV.” While the richer islanders often sent their children to finish high school on the mainland, families that couldn’t afford the expense—like Tom’s—had to put their kids to work. “I didn’t mind it, everyone helped everyone else. You have to realize that for a very long time, Samui was cut off from the rest of Thailand. We had to look after ourselves.”

Up until the 1970s there were no paved roads on Koh Samui, and it was only in 1989 that the island’s Samui Airport was built. Fishing and farming were the mainstays of the local economy, making for a strong culture of self-sufficiency. When backpackers first started arriving on rickety wooden ferries from the mainland, they rented rooms from villagers, which led to the construction of simple beach huts, then guesthouses, and eventually high-end hotels. Now, Koh Samui is arguably Thailand’s most luxurious island destination, besting Phuket (where I’ve lived for the past four years) with an impressive stock of big-name hotel brands—Four Seasons, InterContinental, Banyan Tree, W, Conrad, et al.—and a crop of sophisticated beach clubs, design-centric shops, and restaurants that wouldn’t look out of place in Bangkok.

Bill Barnett, the managing director of Thailand-



based hospitality consultancy C9 Hotelworks, has been a regular visitor to Samui for more than 30 years. “In the 1980s it was idyllic—bungalows, fresh fish for dinner, no nightlife,” he tells me. “The only full-moon party was sitting in the hammock and staring at the stars.” One of his theories for the island’s successful growth as a destination over the past 30 years is its geography—a blindingly obvious reason once he points it out. First, Samui is less than half the size of Phuket, and its center is mountainous, squeezing the population to the coastal edges. By default, the land available for development is restricted. Secondly, it’s only accessible by plane or boat, meaning the number of daily arrivals is limited, and on top of that, Samui Airport is privately owned by Thai airline Bangkok Airways, with very few other carriers flying in. While Phuket has a bridge connecting it to the mainland—which in recent years has led to a sea of tour buses bringing the island’s roads to a near standstill—Samui’s accessibility is more exclusive, appealing to well-heeled travelers. Phuket may be home to the original Aman resort (Amanpuri) and other fine boltholes like Trisara and Sri Panwa, but it caters to a much broader spectrum of tourists, as any visit to the notorious party town of Patong will attest. I’m keen to discover just how divergent the two islands’ paths have become.

Island Style

From far left: Samui-style bling at The Wharf’s Blue Vanilla shop; Sassathorn Srihongkul, owner of the nearby Bar Baguette; Think on Lipa Noi Beach comprises a café and guest cottages made from converted shipping containers; inside Barracuda restaurant at The Wharf.

My 55-minute flight from Phuket lands around lunchtime, and I’m immediately whisked to Vana Belle, part of Starwood’s Luxury Collection. Overlooking the ocean at the southern end of Chaweng Beach, the 80-room property occupies a prime piece of real estate, with rooms—many boasting picture-postcard views of the sea—cascading down the hillside toward an enticing freshwater pool, a wonderfully secluded spa tucked away in the trees behind the resort, and Panali, a beachside Italian restaurant. The bad news is my room won’t be ready until 2 p.m., as the hotel is fully occupied. I’m apologized to profusely, but being full is obviously a good problem for any hotel to have. While I wait, I get to talking with Jodie Clark, the hotel’s director of sales and marketing, who moved here from Bangkok just over a year ago. “Samui felt much slower paced, a little quaint in some respects,” she tells me of her first days on the island. “I sometimes yearn for the city landscape, yet when I’m away, I miss the fresh sea air and the slower pace of life. You always want what you can’t have, right?” As for her take on Samui’s rising status as a luxury destination, she says that it’s definitely grown since when she first came here as a tourist five years ago, which she attributes to its stunning beaches, amazing views, and some of the best dining she’s had in Thailand. From my position reclined on a plump sofa in the breezy lobby,





**Visions of
Vana Belle**

Canopied daybeds flank the swimming pool at Vana Belle. Opposite, clockwise from top left: One of Vana Belle's gracious staffers; foie gras at Panali, the resort's beachfront Italian restaurant; settling into a suite; alfresco dining at Panali.



Away from the main road, the surroundings quickly become bucolic, with farms and villages dotted among the coconut groves. In the near distance I see a small arena, which the driver identifies as a stadium for water buffalo fights, a sport distinctive to Samui



refreshing drink in hand and gazing at the sun-flecked water beyond, it's all too easy to agree with her.

Later that day, I rent a scooter and head up the road to experience the island for myself. My first port of call is Bophut on the north shore. Just 15 years ago, this area was a quiet fishing village of Chinese-style homes and just a few shops and bars catering to the backpacking set. But as time passed and tourists began flocking to Samui, its main thoroughfare became home to the Friday-night Bophut Walking Street, filled with restaurants opening directly onto the beach and a variety of shopping and food stalls competing for visitors' attention. That still runs weekly, but more emblematic of the island's upward direction is The Wharf, a new 24,000-square-meter mall at the western end of the strip.

One of The Wharf's most noticeable tenants is Barracuda, a stylish concrete-and-chrome restaurant close to the sand that serves Mediterranean-influenced dishes using locally caught seafood and organically grown vegetables. "Like a lot of people I know here, I first came to Samui as a tourist, in 2009," says German chef and owner Ferdinand Dienst when I ask him how he ended up on the island. "I found great street food but very little in the way of fine dining. I realized there was a gap in the market." So he came back the next year and opened the first incarnation of Barracuda in the backpacker area of Maenam on the northwest coast. It had just 18 seats and less-than-inspiring views of a car park, but Barracuda's concept was such an innovation for Samui that people traveled from all over the island to eat there. "After four years in Maenam, moving to a prime location like The Wharf was the only logical step."

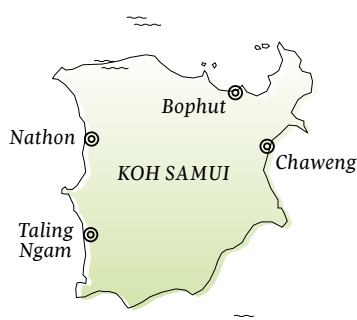
The higher rents here make for more upscale neighbors. Next door to Barracuda, a twee shop called Blue Vanilla sells handcrafted souvenirs inspired by the flotsam that washes up on the nearby beach:

signboards bearing cheeky slogans such as "I Need Vitamin Sea"; pastel-colored wooden starfish wall hangings; stacking blocks that spell out SAMUI. Around the corner is A Little Me, stocked with recycled products from funky Thai brands like Rubber Killer, which sources old truck tires and inner tubes from northern Thailand and employs locals to transform them into a range of chic black clutches and day bags. It reminds me of a posher version of Phuket's laid-back Lard Yai market. And as the late-afternoon sun begins to cast its glow, tourists and locals alike head down near the shoreline to Bar Baguette to sip macchiatos and nibble on homemade pastries in the tiled courtyard. It's all rather sophisticated with an almost European atmosphere, and seemingly worlds away from the raucous full-moon parties that still take place on the island of Koh Phangan, visible across the water to the north.

"When they finish their shift on a Friday night, my staff sometimes catch a boat across to Phangan, party all night, then get back here to start work the next day!" laughs Matthew Rubin. Rubin is the gregarious American executive chef of Stacked, a bright and bold California-style restaurant on Chaweng's Beach Road. While lining the street outside are ubiquitous neon-signed bars and fluorescent-lit tailor shops, the contemporary yet comfortable design at Stacked is unlike anything else I've seen in Samui, with an open kitchen of yellow brick, a bare-bulbed chandelier, and surfboard signs of electric green. In keeping with the laid-back atmosphere, the menu is full of American classics like grilled Caesar salad, New England clam chowder, and a selection of ribs. The main draw, however, is the burgers, including the Stacked Burger Challenge: four beef patties and eight strips of bacon on a sesame-seed bun served with a double helping of fries and slaw. It's yours free of charge if you can finish the monster in 20 minutes. Despite Rubin's prodding me to try, I decline and opt for the excellent Samui Bad Boy pulled-pork burger instead.

Born and raised in San Francisco, Rubin worked around Southeast Asia for a regional restaurant group before moving here in 2014 to work at Stacked. "When I landed, I hadn't visited Samui since 2008. I was both impressed and shocked to see all the new development." While the chef bemoans the increased number of chain restaurants, he is upbeat about Samui's growing identity as a luxury destination, and says many of its eateries are now on par with those of any major city. "And the beaches are still in good shape—definitely better than many others in Thailand."

The next day, I'm sitting in the back of a taxi as it wends its way slowly to the southwestern part of the island. The road from Chaweng climbs a steep hill before passing restaurants with names like The Cliff and Rock Salt, all boasting astonishing ocean views. But as it flattens out, we enter the town of Lamai,



Getting There

Bangkok Airways
(bangkokair.com)
operates daily direct flights to Samui from Singapore, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur.

Where To Stay

InterContinental Samui Baan Taling Ngam Resort
Taling Ngam Beach;
66-77/429-100; samui.intercontinental.com; doubles from US\$220.
Vana Belle, A Luxury Collection Resort
Chaweng Noi Beach;
66-77/915-555; vanabellekohsamui.com; doubles from US\$375.

Water World
Like the rest of
the hilltop resort,
the swimming
pool at the
InterContinental
Samui Baan Taling
Ngam comes
with staggering
views of the Gulf
of Thailand.





Where to Eat & Drink

Bar Baguette

The Wharf, Bophut;
66-94/804-1221;
no website.

Barracuda

The Wharf, Bophut;
66-77/430-003;
barracuda-
restaurant.com.

Bangpo Seafood

A family-run, sand-
floored beach
shack with terrific
local fare. Bangpo
Beach, Tambon;
66-77/420-010.

Nikki Beach

Lipa Noi; 66-77/
914-500; nikki-
beach.samui.com.

Rock Salt

Mod-British food by
former London chef
David Lloyd, served in
a beachside pavilion.
Crystal Bay Yacht Club,
Lamai; 66-77/963-471;
rocksaltsamui.com.

Stacked

South Chaweng Beach
Rd.; 66-77/915-210;
stacked-samui.com

The Larder

A no-fuss gastro
pub with a mix of
comfort food and
Western classics.
Chaweng Beach
Rd.; 66-77/601-259;
thelardersamui.com.

West-coast

Wow Factor

Scenes from the
InterContinental
Samui Baan Taling
Ngam. Opposite,
clockwise from
top left: A jungle-
shrouded walkway
leads from the
beach to the resort;
service with a smile;
overlooking the
InterContinental's
private stretch of
sand on Taling
Ngam Bay; a statue
outside the lobby
depicting a kinnara,
a half-human, half-
bird creature from
Thai mythology.

where familiar Thai retail names like Tesco Lotus and Makro can be seen among a blur of Family Mart and 7-11 convenience stores. Tiring of the scenery—or lack thereof—I ask the driver to take the long route to the west coast instead. Away from the main road, the surroundings quickly become bucolic, with farms and little villages dotted among the extensive coconut groves. In the near distance I see a small arena, which the driver identifies as a stadium for water buffalo fights, where two male animals battle each other in the ring. Although understandably controversial, this sport is distinctive to Samui and has been practiced here for generations. It was once a local distraction from working in the fields, but as rice farming has gradually disappeared on the island, the animals are now mainly reared to take part in these fights, which take place several times each year—and no, the buffalo are not harmed. It's a rural vista that, sadly, has mostly disappeared in Phuket, with its rush to urbanize and concrete the landscape.

"This part of the island is where the locals live," my driver tells me. He explains that most of those who work on the north and east coasts—where you'll find the lion's share of Samui's resorts and entertainment outlets—are migrants from elsewhere in Thailand who come here for work. The south and west coasts, meanwhile, are where the original Samuians tend to reside. The difference in atmosphere is immediately noticeable; it's almost like a parallel universe. As I contemplate this we turn onto a steep driveway that ends at a hotel lobby—a vast open-air space suffused with blindingly bright sunlight. The scale of the panorama staggers me. Far, far below, a series of green waves are rolling in, while white clouds stretch out across a cobalt-blue sky—a view so wide it's impossible to take in all at once. This is my first impression of the InterContinental Samui Baan Taling Ngam Resort.

Given a multimillion-dollar renovation in 2012, this nine-hectare property was the first luxury hotel in Samui when it originally opened in 1993. Seventy-nine traditionally designed rooms and villas dot the steep, forested hillside, along with seven pools, four restaurants and bars, a 150-meter-long private pier, and a spa at the very top of the site. But there's no escaping the main attraction—the view, best seen at Air Bar, which claims to have the best views of any bar on the island. Call me jaded, but I tend to take pronouncements like this with a pinch of salt. After dropping my stuff in my room, I make my way through the maze of corridors to check it out, eventually emerging onto its large open deck where a backlit bar juts out over the hillside, flanked by sofas and armchairs facing out to the vast ocean. I choose a seat set a little back from the rest and order a Long Island iced tea with a chili twist from a list of cocktails curated by renowned Bangkok-based mixologist Joseph Boroski. Despite the refined design, the setup at Air is really focused on one thing only: the slowly

setting sun. As I sip my drink, the sky goes from blue to yellow to orange, and finally to a deep purple, bathing us all in its soft light. Sometimes, the hype is worth believing.

After a filling breakfast the next morning, I borrow one of the hotel's mountain bikes and set off for the Samui capital, Nathon, which lies 10 kilometers up the coast from the hotel. It's a small settlement squeezed between a beach road and the island's 51-kilometer-long ring road, but before the east coast began its rapid development, it was the biggest town on the island. The main reason for Nathon's existence is its pier, where ferries from the mainland arrive every hour from dawn until dusk. Along with the airport, these boats are the lifeline of Samui, bringing in everything the island needs from produce to petrol as well as backpackers and locals looking to get to Samui on the cheap.

To get there, I avoid the ring road and instead follow a rough map that takes me through a series of backcountry lanes, passing small villages, fields with water buffalo, ramshackle beach huts, gold-adorned temples, random pizza restaurants (if there's one food besides Thai that you can find anywhere in Thailand, it's Italian), and a cool little café called Think, made out of old shipping containers. I'm about halfway to Nathon when, just as a dusty dump truck thunders by me followed by a scooter laden down with four generations of the same family, I come to a large sign that reads "Nikki Beach Samui."

I certainly know the name. The global Nikki Beach network includes branches in a host of the world's most desirable destinations including St.-Tropez, Marrakech, Ibiza, Bali, and—until its recent closure—Phuket, each a rampant success thanks to the brand's ability to create a world of glamor and indulgence. I decide to go in, though I've arrived a bit on the early side, and staff members in crisp white uniforms are still setting up tables as a glamorous young Thai hostess escorts me to my seat. But soon, immaculately dressed guests start arriving too and settling into the plush daybeds sheltered by starched white umbrellas, sipping on champagne while listening to a soundtrack of the latest DJ beats. Put together, it's an enticing scene, but you have to wonder: Besides the hot weather and palm trees, how does the location factor into the equation? Couldn't this be anywhere? It seems that this is really the challenge Samui faces in the years to come, as it leaves Phuket behind and becomes Thailand's luxury destination of choice: how to embrace change without losing its soul.

"Life was much simpler before," Tom the driver had told me. "Sure, we have electricity and opportunities now, but everything is developing. There are cars everywhere, hotels being built all over, and people coming from around the world. I'm not complaining about change, but we have to make sure we don't lose sight of who we are." ●

Italian Idyll

With its medieval ramparts and expansive sea views, Castiglione della Pescaia makes an excellent base for exploring this unspoiled slice of Tuscany.



Hugging the
Tyrrhenian Sea,
an off-the-radar
corner of Tuscany's
Maremma region has
plenty to commend
it—not the least
of which is the
chance to saddle
up with the *butteri*,
Italy's traditional
cowboys.

BY MAVIS TEO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
MARTIN WESTLAKE



WITHTHIN

of the sun rising, Frumento already has bloody spots on his face. They mark where *tafani*—Italian horse flies—have sunk their knife-like mandibles into his flesh. Any flies that land on his rump he can swish away with his tail, and those that alight on his shoulders he nudges with his nose. But the 16-year-old gelding is

helpless against the insects that settle on his cheeks and muzzle. I do my best to help brush them off, but they're as vicious as any I've ever seen in the various parts of the world where I've ridden, even the wilds of eastern Indonesia.

This surprises me; I am, after all, in Tuscany, a region characterized by soft rolling hills, vineyards, charming old farmhouses, and medieval ruins. But while the hinterland of the Maremma is certainly picturesque, it is also wild country, as locals will tell you with pride—a once impoverished and mosquito-infested marshland resuscitated only in modern times by drainage programs initiated by Grand Duke Leopold II in 1828 and expanded under Mussolini's regime in the 1920s and '30s.

Despite its size—it covers about a quarter of

Tuscany, stretching inland to Montalcino and along the Tyrrhenian coast through the provinces of Livorno, Grosseto, and Lazio—the Maremma has remained largely off the tourist radar and a well-kept secret among blue-blood Italians, some of whom have hunting lodges here. More visitors are passing through these days, though it's still relatively free from the throngs that descend on Siena or Florence.

Nature is one draw: in place of reclaimed swamps, national parks and wetlands have sprouted, teeming with floral and fauna. There are also deep, dark forests and unspoiled beaches fringed by cliffs and dunes. Agritourism has taken off here as well. Farmhouses have been refurbished into country-chic hotels with olive groves, vineyards, and orchards to supply their own locavore-leaning restaurants. The Maremma's ideal microclimate of soft sun and fertile soil has also attracted numerous investors—among them, New York restaurateurs Joe Bastianich and Mario Batali—to buy up local vineyards.

And then there are the *butteri*. As hardy as the Maremmano horses they ride and the long-horned Maremmana cattle they herd, Tuscany's cowboys trace their heritage back to Etruscan times, though they are few in number these days. To preserve their traditions, they allow visitors to join them on horseback while herding livestock in the protected Ente Parco Regionale della Maremma. For a horse-crazy

Maremma Moments

Opposite, clockwise from top left: The tree-lined driveway that leads up to L'Andana; a *buttero* getting ready for a ride at the Azienda Regionale Agricola di Alberese; a field of sunflowers near Castiglione della Pescaia; one of the horses stabled at Le Cioccaie riding center.





adrenaline junkie like me, it promised the perfect combination: a unique equestrian experience paired with good eating, fine wines, and a comfortable place to lay my head at night.

Though other parts of the Maremma beckoned (the hot springs of Saturnia, for instance), I chose L'Andana in the seaside town of Castiglione della Pescaia as my base, it being the nearest hotel to the butteri. Set on a 500-hectare estate with a vineyard, winery, olive groves, and pastureland for free-ranging cattle, the former Medici hunting lodge was converted into a gorgeous 33-room inn by industrialist Vittorio Moretti and chef Alain Ducasse in 2004, complete with a spa and a Michelin-starred restaurant, Trattoria Toscana. Besides the usual five-star facilities, L'Andana can also arrange hunting trips and horse riding with the nearby riding center, Le Cioccaie. Before my arrival, Andrea Alocci, the 27-year-old Tobey Maguire look-alike who manages the front office, had prepared a program for me to sample the wines and cuisine of the Maremma on horseback. "It would be a pity not to ride and eat at the same time, because we are famous for both," he told me earnestly of his hometown.

I wake up on my first day at L'Andana to orange blossom-scented air and a soft light falling on lemon-hued stucco walls. I'm raring to ride under the Tuscan sun, but unfortunately by the time I've finished breakfast, it's drizzling outside. My guide from



Le Cioccaie, Laura Elsaesser, and I decide to saddle up anyway.

The rain starts coming down stronger when we're halfway up the 200-meter-high La Badiola hill. We press on to Romitorio di San Guglielmo, an abandoned 16th-century chapel, before entering the woods that will take us down the other side of the rise. The air is nippy and filled with the woody smell of decaying autumn leaves. Wherever hooves land, dry twigs crackle against the pebbly ground. Irrutentox, the bay eight-year-old I'm riding, stumbles a few times on slippery rocks during our steep descent, but as we make our way to the Le Mortelle estate, the weather finally clears. There we tether our horses for a guided tour of the Antinori family's state-of-the-

Wine Country

Above, from left: A platter of salumi and cheese accompanies tasting sessions at L'Andana's winery; vineyards at the Le Mortelle estate.



Getting There

From the international airports in Rome or Florence, catch a train, bus, or rent a car. The latter is probably the best option as public transport is scarce within the Maremma; the drive from Florence takes about two hours.

When to Go

Spring and autumn are preferable to the summer, when the beaches are packed with locals and horses are banned from the sand.

Where to Stay

Besides being fully equipped with a winery, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, a Michelin-starred restaurant, a small golf course, and an ESPA-run spa, **L'Andana**—part of the Leading Hotels of the World portfolio (lhw.com)—is also able to organize day trips in the area on horseback or bicycles (Castiglione della Pescaia; 39-564/944-800; andana.it; doubles from US\$370).

Horseback Basics

Azienda Regionale Agricola di Alberese
Riding with the *butteri* costs about US\$68 (alberese.com).

Centro Ippico Le Cioccaie

The riding center doesn't have a website, but arrangements can be made directly at 39-564/944-047 or through L'Andana.

art winery, finishing the morning with a wine tasting accompanied by a platter of salumi, pecorino, and crostini.

More wine awaits us after we trot back to L'Andana through olive groves and vineyards. With typical Italian exuberance, Elena Antinucci, who runs the hotel's cellar, pours us wines from three of the four estates owned by the Morettis—Petra in the Tuscan province of Livorno, Bellavista in Lombardy, and Tenuta La Badiola right here in the Maremma. We've probably sampled most of the 19

labels from these vineyards by the time Laura decides she better ring a colleague to pick her and our mounts up with a horse trailer.

At Trattoria Toscana that evening, I keep the wine to a minimum in order to better appreciate the food. Though Alain Ducasse only supervises and visits twice a year now, the restaurant has kept its Michelin star under a succession of chefs, the latest being Gianluca Bennardo. The dishes of risotto with pigeon breast that a hunter brought in that morning and cured octopus from the Tyrrhenian Sea are remarkable, but what stands out most is the *pappa al pomodoro*, a Tuscan soup traditionally made from stale bread and tomatoes. Here it is rich, robust, and tangy. Not wishing to scandalize the posh-looking Swiss couple at the next table, I refrain from licking the bowl clean.

The next morning, I meet up with Laura at Le Cioccaie. The stables' owner, Nello Raffi, is to take us on an eight-kilometer ride from Punta Ala to Cala Violina beach. His family has been in the Maremma for generations, and he knows the land like the back of his hand. Unlike yesterday, it's a warm 23°C, and the horse flies are out in force. They follow us from the pine-covered promontory of Punta Ala to the beach, biting at Irruentox and the other horses all the way. When we reach the shore, Raffi points out toward the distant lump of Giglio Island, which made international headlines when the *Costa Concordia* cruise ship ran aground there in 2012.

There's only one food kiosk at Cala Violina, and its owner, Massimo Brilli, knows Raffi well. Two other friends of Raffi's, Gianni and Alessia, whom we met riding in the woods earlier, catch up with us there. The impromptu gathering grows even livelier when Gianni's ex-wife, Claudia, who was sunbathing at the beach, joins in. The quality of the food that Brilli whips up in his small unnamed kiosk is beyond my expectations. Out come trays of large ricotta-stuffed tortelli squares drizzled with sage butter and a spread of salumi with pecorino and unsalted bread. All these are typical Maremmani food, except for the pecorino, a ewe's-milk cheese introduced by Sardinian migrants

in the 19th century. Over glasses of crisp sangiovese, the lunch stretches to three hours and enters my notebook as one of the warmest travel experiences of my life.

When we ride back through holm oak, chestnut, and cork trees, Irruentox's gait feels lighter. It seems like I've won him over—perhaps because while the other riders were enjoying a post-lunch coffee, I was busy pinching horse flies off his hide. The bosky foliage provides relief from the sun while a cool breeze carries the scent of wild myrrh through the woods that have come alive with bird song. Irruentox and I are happy.

Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to ride him into Castiglione della Pescaia that evening, as the cobbled streets are still packed with the last of the summer's holidaymakers. So I visit on my own steam, walking past *alimentari* shops, small jewelers, and seafront restaurants before ascending to the town's medieval hilltop fortress to take in the sweeping sea views. After a simple dinner at a local pizzeria of *schacciata*—a crisp Tuscan flatbread lightly perfumed with toasted sage—it's time to turn in.

After four days in the Maremma, my morning ride with the *butteri* is finally here. I wake up at five to hydrate and empty my bladder for my 7:30 a.m. session at the Azienda Regionale Agricola di Alberese, a 4,600-hectare state-owned farm inside the Ente Parco Regionale della Maremma. Marco Locatelli, the farm's director, has stressed that I need to be a competent rider who is able to remain in the saddle for at least four hours. "What about toilet breaks?" I ask. Exasperated, he suggests that I ride in a Land Rover instead with Alessandro Zampieri, the head *buttero*. I decline. I've not come this far to ride in a car.

After a brief introduction to *butteri* history and their gear—weather-resistant jackets, heavy boots, wide-brimmed hats, sturdy saddles with a raised front like a pommel—Zampieri takes me to meet his team and my Bambi-eyed mount, Frumento. He reminds me that they are working cowboys, unlike some who put on shows for tourists. I am to keep up and cause no disruption. I nod solemnly as I look at Frumento. Maremmano horses are a good size—they stand between 16 and 16.5 hands—and live unshod in the open (that is, no stables) even in winter. Cobby with a plushy dense dark-bay coat, they are tougher-looking than the average European warmblood used for dressage, and are exceptionally calm—a necessity for working around cattle.

Alessio Moroni and Stefano Pavin, two of the four ranch hands in charge of rounding up cattle that day, show me how to hold *butteri* reins with just one hand, a technique that leaves the other hand free to hold the *uncino*, a long wooden stick ending in a hook that the cowboys use to prod cattle or to open and close paddock gates. Having ridden polo ponies, which respond to reins in a similar way, I quickly get

Horse Sense

Rounding up cattle at the Azienda Regionale Agricola di Alberese. Opposite: Special saddles and long hooked canes called *uncinos* are among the gear used by Maremmani cowboys.

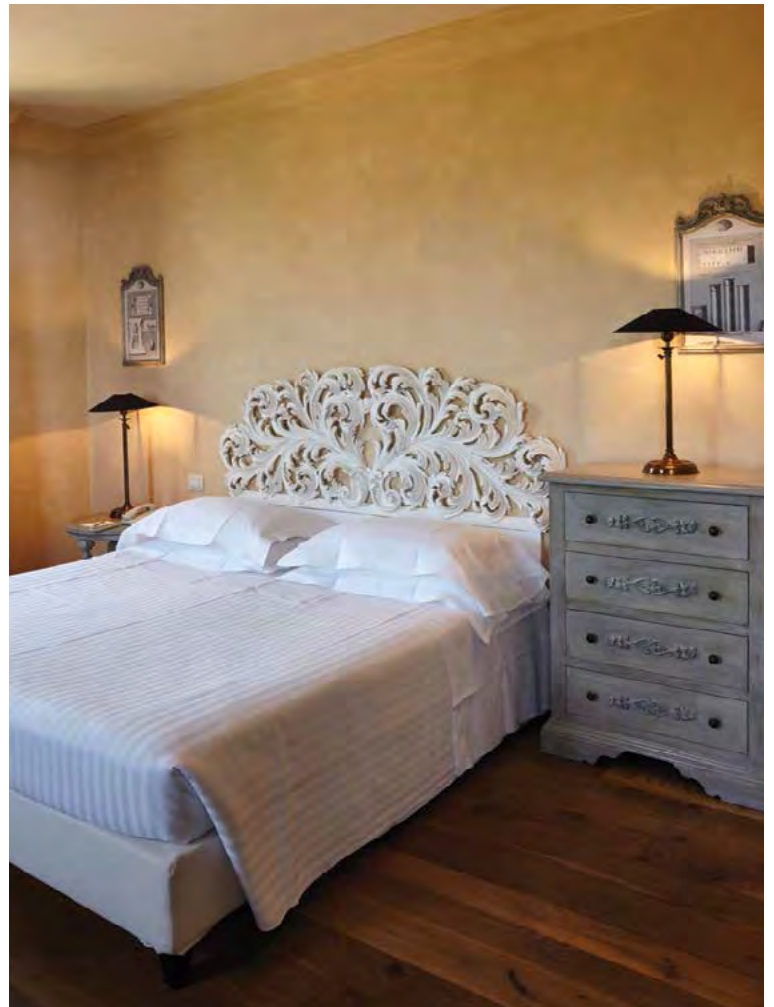






IRRUENTOX,
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EIGHT-
YEAR-OLD
I'M RIDING,
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ESTATE, THE
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CLEARS





A Taste of Tuscany

Clockwise from above: A cut of Maremmana beef at Trattoria Toscana; the bedroom of a suite at L'Andana; Trattoria Toscana's country-style dining room. Opposite: Poolside at L'Andana; the hotel's chef Gianluca Bennardo.

the hang of controlling Frumento.

As we ride out to meet the 67 horses and 450 cows across 1,000 hectares of pastureland, silence falls over us in a kind of reverence (for me, at least). The mist rising into the horizon from the marshy ground turns a picture of bleakness into one of beauty. On a gray, dewy morning before sunrise, the Maremma wilderness is surrealistically breathtaking. The tranquility is at odds with my trepidation. I'm rather nervous as I've seen photos of the massive bone-colored Maremmana cattle with horns that can grow up to a meter long. An adult bull can weigh as much as 1,200 kilograms. Fortunately, I've come at a good time—outside the breeding and nursing seasons when the animals are more unpredictable. I quickly relax as the placid-looking bovines seem more interested in grazing and flicking their tails at flies.

The morning calm is soon broken when we go to a field where Pavin spots some half-feral horses that are supposed to be elsewhere. His gelding breaks into a gallop as he chases them into another paddock. Frumento, switching to autopilot, goes from a languorous walk to a full gallop in two seconds flat, racing to catch up with the cowboys' horses. It's exhilarating. We also move cattle by chasing them in a coordinated fashion. Pavin and Moroni award me with a “brava” more than once—apparently, I've earned their stamp of approval.

Riding with the butteri is not for beginners. The sodden fields are full of holes that might cause a horse to get stuck and lose balance, throwing the rider off even if the saddle is very secure. This is also the second reason that we ride at a rising trot for most of the morning, instead of a *galoppo*. Where the terrain is flat and there's no cattle in sight, we ride at a fast trot for the better part of the 25 kilometers we're covering. We could have cantered, but the butteri don't like tiring out the horses unnecessarily.

As we ride back to the farm near noon with the horse flies in hot pursuit, the 33-year-old Moroni tells me he has a PhD and that he gave up a cushy job as a research scientist five years ago to become a buttero. When I ask why, he shrugs and says he doesn't belong in a lab. “I am a wild man,” he adds with a rakish glint.

After the ride, Locatelli takes me to visit the Azienda's shop in the village of Alberese, where I admire fresh cuts of Maremmana beef and products such as pasta, olive oil, and wine from the farm's own vineyards. I sample the five reds, one white, and one rosé and fall in love with the Barbicato, a Morellino di Scansano with a medium body and a long finish. I buy two bottles. Locatelli, who's been running the winery for 13 years, beams proudly at my choice; he says it's his favorite too.

That night at L'Andana I order a pan-seared fillet of beef reared on the estate. The flavor is remarkable—full, wild, and textured. It's a taste that I will never forget. It's the essence of the Maremma. ●

Coastal Encounters

Below: Massimo Brilli's lone beachside kiosk at Cala Violina produces terrific food like ricotta-stuffed tortelli. Opposite: A view from the ramparts at Castiglione della Pescaia.







Blue on Blue
The beachside
infinity pool
at Neeleshwar
Hermitage.

STILL

WATER

Kerala may have its crowds,
but they don't typically
make it as far north as
the serene backwaters of
Kasaragod. You should.

FRESH

BY ISOBEL DIAMOND
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN HOOPER



A pocket of palm-strewn bliss, soulful and sleepy, Kasaragod moves to an unhurried tempo. Its beaches, backwaters, and outlying towns and villages occupy the northernmost reaches of the state of Kerala on India's Malabar Coast, well off the radar for most travelers. But change is afoot. Stylish resorts

are springing up in the district and soon a sleek new international airport will open in neighboring Kannur, bringing with it an influx of tourists. For now, though, getting here typically involves a seven-hour train ride from Kerala's commercial capital, Kochi. And so I arrive, giddy from the humidity and somewhat rattled by the journey, intent on spending a leisurely paced week exploring Kasaragod's highlights.

My itinerary begins with a cruise on the Valiyaparamba backwaters. Early in the morning, this labyrinth of canals and lagoons is shrouded in mist and an eerie stillness. My vision may be hazy, but my ears quickly attune to the soundscape—the swoosh of a fisherman's oar, the flick of a fish's tail—as these olive-green waterways slowly wake up. I'm about to

embark on a 24-hour expedition aboard the *Honey Dew*, a *kettuvallam* (thatched-roof houseboat) operated by the Oyster Opera, a quirky resort of bamboo cottages on Thekkekadu, one of the seven islands that dot the backwaters. As I wait for our departure, I sit with the resort's owner Gul Mohammed, who plucks at his white, ankle-length *lungi* as we talk. "More and more people are asking for houseboats," he tells me. "There are 12 in this area now, and they'll keep coming."

The *Honey Dew* takes me down the spine of this 30-kilometer-long waterway, which is named for its largest island, Valiyaparamba. Some canoes and a few other *kettuvallams* inhabit the channel, but most often we're alone. From the boat's shaded deck, I spot a profusion of bird life: cattle egrets and pond herons, brahmyny kites and whiskered terns, all seemingly oblivious to our passage. Compared to mid-Kerala's backwater hub Alleppey, where high season can see more than a thousand boats cruising its waters daily, this is the epitome of serenity. Waving to an excited band of village children who call to us from the banks of an island is the most active pursuit of the day.

With a double en-suite bedroom and large open-air deck, the *Honey Dew* is comfortable and modern,



and the food is exceptional: *karimeen* river fish, sea crab, squid, and prawns served in an array of fiery dishes. “It’s all straight from the backwaters and the sea,” says the chef. As if to underscore his words, we soon see the bamboo frameworks of mussel farms. There are hundreds laid in neat rows along the water, hung with coir ropes on which spat—mussel larvae—is grown. Gul introduced mussel cultivation here in 1996 as a way to improve the lives of coastal communities, and the farms have since grown to employ some 6,000 people. Together, they harvest about 15,000 tons of mussels every four months, selling them to local markets. “Mussels have thrived,” Gul had told me earlier. “These farmers now have a crop which is theirs, so they keep 100 percent of the profits.”

Accompanied by the late-afternoon sun, we dock at Monkey Island, so named for the tribes of macaques that reside here. We arrive just in time to see mussel-farming families bring in a harvest. It’s an engaging sight; the green shells shimmer jewel-like against the sand. The islanders speak only Malayalam, but we manage to communicate in other ways as I sit with them and help to pull bunches of muddy bivalves

apart, placing the live ones in hemp sacks.

Later, we cruise northward to the mouth of the Arabian Sea, which feeds into these backwaters. At the widest point where sandbanks have formed, we watch as men in canoes, their heads wrapped in cotton scarves to protect them against the sun, shuttle buckets full of sand back to the mainland for building. Soon the light begins to change, and the day that began as an ethereal haze is now winding down with a rosy pink sunset, the lingering mist turning everything sepia like an old photograph. Soon after night falls, I retire to my cabin, where I’m lulled to sleep by the gentle waters.

My next adventure proves more strenuous: a kayak and bike expedition with a local outfit called Muddy Boots. “Northern Kerala is the only place where you can experience the sea and backwaters so close together,” enthuses the company’s manager, Syed Mehaboob, who’s also leading my tour. We begin in the kayaks, managing to travel a few kilometers up and across the waterway before docking at Valiyaparamba Island. It’s a lively day here. Boys ride motorbikes along pathways, and young children playing among

State Secret

Above, from far left: Commuting, Kasaragod-style; a Theyyam performer in profile; a fragrant chicken dish from the kitchen at Neeleshwar Hermitage; picking coconuts on Valiyaparamba Island.



Getting There

The nearest airport to Kasaragod is across the state border in Mangalore, though international connections are limited to Abu Dhabi and Dubai. From there, it's about a two-hour drive south to Bekal in northern Kasaragod. Otherwise, the seven-hour train ride from Kochi is the easiest approach.

Where To Stay

In the Valiyaparamba Backwaters, **Oyster Opera** (91-944/717-6465; oysteropera.in; doubles from US\$57) offers basic bamboo cottages and house-boat cruises that can last for a sunset, a day, or a night. A bit farther north, **Neeleshwar Hermitage** (91-467/228-7510; neeshwarhermitage.com; doubles from US\$200) is as relaxing as retreats come with 18 thatched-roof cottages, an Ayurvedic spa, and a serene beachside pool. But Bekal is where you'll find the district's most luxurious lodgings, namely **Vivanta by Taj Bekal** (91-467/661-6612; vivantabytaj.com; doubles from US\$150), which comes with 71 stylish rooms and villas and a beautiful domed spa.



the palms come to greet us. And everywhere, it seems, is decorated with an abundance of butterflies. "There are over 400 species here," Syed tells me, "from the Malabar Rose to the Grass Jewel."

We set off by bike to explore the full 24-kilometer length of Valiyaparamba Island. It's ferociously hot for cycling, but the distant vistas of the Western Ghats mountain range in Kerala's Wayanad district help take our minds off the temperature. Bumping across rocky roads, I pass the occasional low-slung house or a wooden-shuttered shop selling basic supplies, but there are no bars or restaurants. A couple of homestays offer the only amenities for tourists.

After an hour's pedaling, we stop at Sandwich Beach, a long honey-colored stretch of sand. Its shores are filled with teenagers chatting in huddles and families are out paddling in the Arabian Sea, but the beach's designation as the central meeting point for islanders has also left it littered with plastic bottles, broken flip-flops, and the like. Soon, we take off again and move inland, where we meet three coconut pickers marching down a narrow path. We stand and watch in awe as they clamber up palm trunks with disks of coir rope as grips for their hands and feet before using cleavers to chop off the fruits, which fall to the ground with a thud. One of the pickers breaks a coconut open for me, and I quench my thirst with its sweet water, the cool liquid running down my chin. "This is the perfect place for people who like peace, away from everything," Syed says. Looking around me at the lush beauty of this faraway island, I couldn't agree more.



The next morning, ascending a snaking road by car, I look down across the landscape. It stays riotously green year-round thanks to the drenching rainstorms and summer monsoons, and the roads that wind through are the shade of saffron. But as colorful as the landscape is, so too is the culture. Presently, I'm being driven to a temple to watch a Theyyam ceremony by Jagannath Chirakkara, an expert on the ancient ritual practiced widely in Kerala. "We believe in reincarnation of the soul and in the existence of the spirit after death," he explains as we drive. "We are bound to attend these rituals to secure lasting peace and prosperity for our family."

Not knowing what I'm in for, we arrive at a



The Quiet Side of Kerala

Above: A scenic stretch of the Valiyaparamba backwaters. Opposite: A mussel farmer on Thekkedadu Island.

small village temple. The air is thick with incense. A drumbeat pulsates and the Theyyam—the ritual leader meant to represent God—chants with a sonorous lilt, his feet dancing to the rhythm. He’s vibrantly costumed in a headdress embellished with silver disks and red petals; his face and body are painted in yellow turmeric dye; and his eyes, highlighted in black, are sad and hypnotizing. “Theyyam is a corrupted form of the word *dhaivam*, meaning god,” Jagannath whispers. Worshippers stand impassively before moving forward to receive a blessing, the performance building with intensity all the while. The Theyyam’s trance-like state is captivating, and as he dances the crowd disperses

to make space. Though I hardly understand what’s happening, I’m left profoundly affected by the whole experience.

Back at the Oyster Opera, the mood lightens, and I’m treated to a *thali* lunch, which I eat local-style with my hands. This typical South Indian dish of curries and chutneys served on a banana leaf here comes with a twist of fried mussels and squid added to the mix. Fresh and delicious, it’s the perfect farewell meal before I hop into a car for an hour’s drive up the coast to reach my next destination.

Ensconced in a coconut grove beside the sea, Neeleshwar Hermitage is the ultimate barefoot





retreat—the kind of place you only need to spend one night to feel utterly restored. Eighteen cottages dot the gardens, which spill out onto a 10-kilometer-long stretch of beach, and a freshwater infinity pool named after the Hindu god of the ocean, Varuna, seems to flow straight into the sea.

It's dinnertime when I arrive, and young men smartly dressed in collarless white *juba* shirts greet me with a garland of flowers and a chilled face towel before whisking me off to taste rich Kerala curries at Annapurna, an open-sided restaurant built entirely from local hardwood and topped with a towering coir-thatched roof. Like the rest of the resort, it was designed using the principles of *vastu shastra*, India's answer to feng shui.

Where the resort ends the village begins, which I explore the following morning. Local boys play football between palm-tree goal posts, and men escaping the sun sit cross-legged under the fronds playing cards on an old sign board. Reaching the beach, I slip out of my shoes and let my toes sink into flaxen sand, pausing to soak in the quietness on this stretch of the Malabar Coast and the pale blue sky streaked with smoky cloud.

Saying goodbye to this captivating spot, I continue by car up to Kasaragod's most northerly point,

Bekal. My drive sweeps past the vast Tejaswini River and empty swaths of patchwork farmland give way to bustling towns. The main attraction is Bekal Fort, built around 1650 and the largest fortification in Kerala. Its red stone structure is striking against the surrounding gardens, and its ramparts offer fine views across the rugged coastline.

Bekal is flush with luxury resorts that have sprung up in recent years. Among them is the Vivanta by Taj, where I stop for lunch. A glistening five-star production from the Taj Group, it boasts one of Asia's largest spas and 71 villas designed by Australian architect Nick Juniper, impeccably stylish and decorated with wall murals inspired by *chitra pothi* (palm leaf) art. A river cuts through the manicured grounds, leading to a private beach. The hotel's winning feature, however, is its coir-and-thatch roofs, which echo those of the kettuvallam boats. It's an elegant touch.

On the night train back to Kochi, I have time to reflect on my journey. Abundant with crops and rich in natural resources, Kasaragod feels self-contained and contented, and thanks to its relative isolation, the culture here remains undiluted. Change is inevitable, but for now, Kasaragod provides a snapshot of life largely unchanged by modernity. I hope it's still this way when I return. ☉

The Simple Life

Above, from left: A kettuvallam houseboat; coconut palms frame empty stretches of beach along Kasaragod's coast. Opposite: A *thali* lunch at the Oyster Opera features local fish, mussels, and squid fried in spices.

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THE LUXE LIST 2015

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InterContinental Sydney Double Bay

AUSTRALIA

The prime patch of Double Bay land that the InterContinental calls home has both an illustrious and infamous past. Princess Diana, Madonna, and Elton John all checked in when the building housed the city's Ritz-Carlton; it's also the location where legendary Australian INXS front man Michael Hutchence was found dead in 1997. But since then, the building has received a US\$17.5 million makeover, transforming it into the only five-star hotel outside of the city's business heart. Offering easy access to the beach, the property's 140 rooms and suites—many with bay views—are all white and charcoal, with splashes of soft blue nodding to the waterside locale. There's still drama in the lobby thanks to a 160-kilogram chandelier, brass-plated lifts, and marble floors, which also spill into the Stillery bar with its impressive collection of 60 types of gin. Fans of chef Shaun Presland's Saké Restaurant in the Rocks district will be happy to hear the hotel is home to a second outpost of the establishment. But the real allure is the rooftop. Enjoying unbroken bay views from poolside cabanas here is the ultimate end to a Sydney day, though non-guests can expect a minimum spend for the privilege over summer months.

—61-2/8388-8388; intercontinental.com; doubles from US\$342

The Langham, Sydney

AUSTRALIA

In a traditionally sleepy pocket of central Sydney, The Langham is slowly breathing life into leafy streets lined with historic buildings. Some US\$21 million was spent on revamping the old Observatory Hotel in a four-month makeover that is quite remarkable. Luxurious trimmings

are effortless and understated, from the hand-designed rugs and vintage mirrors to the bespoke lighting, oversize vases, and marbled fireplaces—there are five in the lobby alone—all complemented by a strong collection of Australian art from the likes of Brett Whiteley and Albert Tucker. A cool palette of amber, teal, cream, and gold works perfectly throughout, splashed with pink in the Palm Court where high tea is served on custom Langham Wedgwood



A room at Sydney's
The Old Clare Hotel.

china. Rooms and suites have classic personality: the Langham Suite's leather-studded guest chairs are the ideal window-side perches for gazing over colonial rooftops to Sydney's western harbor. Below ground, the 20-meter-long indoor pool has retained its original star-dappled ceiling depicting the southern hemisphere skies, while the adjoining spa also sparkles thanks to a recent brush of gold paint.

—61-2/9256-2222; langhamhotels.com; doubles from US\$235

The Larwill Studio

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Named after one of Australia's most philanthropic artists, David Larwill, Melbourne's newest hotel is a colorful addition

to the northern suburb of Parkville. The sixth property in Australia's Art Series group, the 96-room Larwill Studio is a shrine to the late artist's neo-expressionist creations with his prints, quotes, and books on display throughout. Guests are encouraged to take inspiration from Larwill's playfully stylized human figures and animals: you can book an art tour of the hotel's public spaces or retreat to your room and call in art supplies from the reception.

A remarkable value for money, the Larwill Studio offers a host of perks, including lush EVO bathroom amenities and a complimentary in-room yoga and meditation channel, with mats available on request. But if you're looking to get active, it's hard to go past the Royal Park, which many rooms overlook. There are guided running groups through the gardens, and the hotel also rents out Lekker bikes. It's a short ride into the city where cafés and restaurants abound, or to the fabled artisan food stalls of the nearby Queen Victoria Market.

—61-3/9032-9111; artserieshotels.com.au; doubles from US\$101

The Old Clare Hotel

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

It's an unlikely setting for Sydney's newest luxe lodgings, but the Art Deco Clare Hotel—until recently a sticky-carpeted pub

frequented by university students—is now home to the latest project by Singaporean hospitality innovator Loh Lik Peng. With seven boutique hotels and 20 restaurants to his name, Peng brings his playful eye to The Old Clare Hotel, its 62 rooms split across the 1930-built pub and the adjoining Carlton & United Brewery (CUB) headquarters, both heritage-listed. Once the pub's pokies room, the lobby is still a shrine to the Clare of yesteryear—retro band posters line the walls, Deco light fittings are original, and the glass at the reception plays on the colors of beer bottles. Wall tiles in a street-front bar have also been preserved. There are two suites upstairs, but the majority of the accommodations are in the 1915-built CUB building, accessed via a lofty entryway draped with contemporary installations. Most rooms are unique in their



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design and layout: one revolves around the CUB's old show bar with the original fridge turned into a sock drawer; another comes with a mini-keg filled with the beer of your choice. From the rooftop pool you'll glimpse the now-defunct Carlton & United Brewery itself, while back down off the lobby is chef Clayton Wells' Automata restaurant, soon to be joined by Kensington Street Social from British chef Jason Atherton and ex-Noma chef Sam Miller's Silvereye.

—61-2/8277-8277; theoldclarehotel.com.au; doubles from US\$210

The Grand Mansion, a Luxury Collection Hotel

NANJING, CHINA

With a history as the capital of six Chinese dynasties, Nanjing has finally welcomed a luxury hotel worthy of its cultured past. Along with the adjoining Oriental Metropolitan Museum, the Grand Mansion's construction was prompted by the discovery of third-century castle ruins on the site, and its I. M. Pei-built sandstone facade now strikes a stately presence on Changjiang Road, overlooking the historic rooftops of the Presidential Palace. Inside, understated interiors by HBA recall a private noble mansion from the early 1900s—when the Republic of China was ruled from Nanjing—with intimate spaces, parquet floors, and handcrafted textiles. The Traveler Library in the lobby atrium is lined with three-story-high bookshelves, making for a sophisticated spot to sip a signature Mandarin Sidecar, and the 158 rooms are calming and spacious with soft gold hues; get a balcony room overlooking Xu Garden, where black swans glide across a pond. Dressed in lustrous dark woods, the Xuan Ling Ge restaurant serves local cuisine, including Nanjing's famous salted duck, while at the Atrium, guests can dine among lively open kitchens or in the sunken garden beside a partially unearthed section of an ancient city wall.

—86-25/8435-5888; starwoodhotels.com; doubles from US\$280

Rosewood Beijing

CHINA

In a city excited by extravagance, Beijing's most celebrated recent hotel arrival has

opted for a more understated style of residential luxury. Stepping into the three-story lobby, guests at Rosewood's first hotel in China are greeted with a bright and modern vibe, touched with artful vignettes that place you firmly in China's ancient capital: a stack of string-bound scholar notepads, a feature wall of local railway sleepers, an abundance of Chinese art. In the central business Chaoyang District, the hotel sits beside the CCTV Tower, and of the 283 guest rooms—which start at 45 square meters and range all the way up the 177-square-meter grand Beijing House—the choicest face the tower, allowing guests to marvel at the off-kilter icon from window-side chaise lounges. And in a city known for its food, it's impressive that the restaurants here attract plenty of locals. Among the four, Country Kitchen serves up northern Chinese favorites like Peking duck and hand-pulled noodles from fire-flashing open kitchens; and Red Bowl updates Beijing's staple dish—the hotpot—with gourmet add-ins and pairings of craft beer and cocktails such as the Dongzhimen daiquiri flavored with strawberry and Sichuan pepper. But for guests, perhaps the star attraction is the 3,050-square-meter Sense Spa, with 11 treatment rooms including five live-in spa suites, which come with balconies and after-hours access to the glass-topped, sixth-floor pool—because sometimes you need to be pampered like an emperor.

—86-10/6597-8888; rosewoodhotels.com; doubles from US\$300

Six Senses Qing Cheng Mountain

CHENGDU, CHINA

Sichuan's Qing Cheng Mountain is famous primarily for being two things: the birthplace of Taoism, and home to pandas—China's iconic mascot is protected at several local parks that have always been a bit of a slog from any nice place to stay. Now, Six Senses is putting this scenic area on the tourist map, and vice versa. This is by far the largest Six Senses and the Thai brand's big leap into China. A mountain lodge with Chinese features, the resort's 113 luxury suites sit like a village at the foot of Mount Qing Cheng with spectacular cloud-clinging views over rice fields. Environmental sustainability—a core component of any Six Senses—here comes as organic gardens, drinking water purified

and bottled on-site, and a Tesla for airport transfers; understated luxury comes as wood furniture and natural lighting. It's an undeniable great base for exploring the nearby mountains as well as the Panda Valley habitat, a superior alternative to the overrun Chengdu panda research base. But the resort is full of standout features of its own as well, including a circular Six Senses Spa floating on serene ponds, spicy Sichuan dishes at 28Zodiac (one of three restaurants in addition to a smoothie bar and tea lounge), and Sichuan-pepper cocktails at the Moon Bar.

—86-28/8728-9871; sixsenses.com; doubles from US\$310

Ritz-Carlton, Macau

CHINA

Luxury in the gambling enclave of Macau can be an awkward thing, too often characterized by gold-plated bombast and over-the-top consumption. Thankfully, the new Ritz-Carlton gets the balance right, deftly blending opulence with old-world charm and a genuine sense of place. On the outside there's little to distinguish it from the other hotel denizens of the mammoth Galaxy Macau complex. But on the inside it's a different story, with breezy porticos, intricately patterned tiles, and porcelain murals paying homage to the city's Portuguese heritage. The sumptuous suites boast full marble bathrooms and sweeping views of the burgeoning Cotai Strip, but the elegance arguably reaches an apex in the hotel's restaurants. Glittering chandeliers, gilded mirrors, and fuss-free provincial French cuisine give the ground-floor Ritz-Carlton Café claim to bistro status, while the sky-high Lai Heen serves Cantonese delicacies in a striking setting filled with luminous ceramics and dark wood. The gaming tables are not far away, but the Ritz does more to play up its highly feted spa and access to the Galaxy's impressive water park and retail, providing all the ingredients for a perfect escape as well as a glimpse into Macau's more sophisticated, less casino-centric future.

—853/8886-6868; ritzcarlton.com; doubles from US\$460

Ritz-Carlton, Bali

INDONESIA

Ritz-Carlton's much-anticipated return to



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the island of Bali is something of a double feature: Mandapa, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve in the hills around Ubud; and the seaside Ritz-Carlton, Bali on the southern outskirts of Nusa Dua. While the former was just gearing up for its soft opening at press time, its sister property debuted late last year on 13 hectares of beachfront and cliff-top land, and the results are everything you'd expect from the brand. The construction site next door (a behemoth hotel development) is an unfortunate, if temporary, eyesore, but guests will hardly notice it once ensconced in their cream-toned suites (some of which come with direct access to a lagoon pool) or villas. Replete with Balinese design elements—the *kayon*, or tree of life, is a recurring motif—the resort also boasts a dramatic cliff-top lobby that connects to the lower level via a 70-meter-high glass elevator. The views are equally sublime from the elevated terrace at the excellent Indonesian restaurant Bejana, as well as from the one- and two-bedroom Sky Villas that crown the guest blocks closest to the beach, each of which comes with its own butler and an infinity-edge pool. Six restaurants and bars, a perfumery studio, a soon-to-open spa, and a contingent of gracious staff round off the attractions at this exceptional property.

—62-361/849-8988; ritzcarlton.com; doubles from US\$360

Suiran, a Luxury Collection Hotel

KYOTO, JAPAN

The leafy western suburb of Kyoto, Arashiyama has for centuries been the playground of Japan's aristocratic elite who would gather here to write poetry, discuss the fleeting pleasures of this earthly life, and indulge in the finest dishes of the famously food-obsessed former capital. Starwood's Luxury Collection brings this heady mix of pleasure-seeking right up to date with the lovely Suiran, housed on the site of an imperial villa in a prime location beside the Katsura River with views of the famous Togetsu Bridge. The hotel is filled with artistic gems including calligraphy, ceramics, and painted screens dating back to the time of its former owner, the Japanese industrialist Baron Kawasaki Shozo, along with luxuriously appointed guest rooms inspired

by *ryokan*-style accommodation. Each features traditional motifs, neutral color palettes, and perfect vistas of the Arashiyama landscape; several boast their own al-fresco hot-spring baths. And as for the fare, the splendid Kyo Suiran restaurant serves seasonally inspired dishes that blend Japanese and French cuisine in a beautiful neo-Japanesque setting.

—81-75/872-0101; starwoodhotels.com; doubles from US\$420

Zaborin

KUTCHAN, JAPAN

Overlooking rolling pastureland and the volcanic peak of Mount Yotei beyond, Zaborin is a startling architectural gem on Japan's northernmost island, Hokkaido. The property, designed by Makoto Nakayama, is like a traditional *ryokan* hot-springs inn with its devotion to service, privacy, first-rate *kaiseki*-style meals, and staff garbed in head-to-toe gray pajama-style outfits catering to guests around the clock with all sorts of treats. But its floor-to-ceiling glass walls, monumental fireplaces; and adumbrated lighting that heightens its gray, black, and white interior make it seem as if you're in a futuristic Stanley Kubrick movie. In a long, austere corridor above the main areas, 16 rooms are huge and so well furnished as to justify the property's calling them villas, each with an indoor and outdoor sunken tub that pipes in water from the surrounding springs. Tea ceremonies, horseback riding, wine tastings, and cooking classes are among the activities on offer, and nights are best spent in the jazz-filled

bar area, whose 10-meter-long countertop was made from a single log of Indonesian hardwood.

—81-136/230-003; zaborin.com; doubles from US\$600

Loama Resort Maldives at Maamigili

RAA ATOLL, MALDIVES

Loama may not be the most extravagant resort in the Maldives, but it does have plenty



The Suiran's riverside café.

of heart. This is perhaps best personified by the affable Umair Badheeu, the resort's culture and heritage manager, whose role it is to extend Loama's agenda beyond mere hedonism to the realm of cultural preservation. To this end, he has assembled a collection of hundreds of artifacts acquired on trips around the Maldives, many of which—copper medicine kettles, lacquered boxes, antique porcelain bowls—are now displayed in Loama's breezy lobby museum. Like the overwater art gallery that Badheeu also curates, it is the first of its kind in the archipelago. But as much as Loama distinguishes itself with its emphasis on local culture, it doesn't forget to pamper. The sole occupant of a seven-hectare island, the resort features 105 tastefully decorated beachfront and overwater villas that guests would likely never leave were it not for a host of diversions, from the exquisitely fresh sashimi at Meyzu restaurant and the Thai dishes at beachside Thundi, to the citrus- and lemongrass-scented spa where you can gaze down at colorful fishes as you lie prone on a massage table. And there are watersports galore, including technical diving, as well as a pair of motorized *dhoni* boats that you can take out for a spot of line fishing (an easy enough challenge in these fish-filled waters) or a sunset cruise that all but guarantees the added thrill of spotting dolphins.

—960/658-8100; loamahotelsandresorts.com; doubles from US\$995

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**SOHAM WELLNESS
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With its seemingly infinite spas and a massage tradition now practiced worldwide, Bali's health and wellness scene makes pampering come easy, perhaps nowhere more so than at the Soham Wellness Center, one of the most comprehensive retreats on the island. Set in the heart of Seminyak, Soham has a treatment for every want and a cure for every need, whether you're looking for an all-day royal affair, a quick massage to cap off a long day, or a jump-start to your fitness regime.

Designed with pale timber, natural stone, and earth tones, the four-story Soham center relaxes guests from the moment they enter. For those who want to melt their stresses away, the spa offers an extensive massage menu inspired by ancient healing practices from around the region. Among the options is a chakra-opening hot stone massage, an oil-free Thai massage, reflexology, Balinese rubs with traditional herb oils, and five different Ayurveda treatments performed by a resident Ayurvedic specialist.

With a range of more targeted treatments, Soham's spa is also the perfect place to restore your skin to its best state. Combining the natural benefits of herbs and flowers with scientific advancements, facials range from ground-breaking anti-aging treatments such as deep-acting peels and collagen-filled masks to aromatherapy cleanses and moisturizing face massages that renew radiance. The salon is the perfect spot to stop in for a quick manicure, pedicure, or blow-out before a special night, while for those with a bit of time looking for the ultimate indulgence, the signature Soham Rituals combine scrubs, massages, wraps, and facials into luxurious treatments that rejuvenate from head-to-toe.

For vacationers looking to stay active during their getaway, Soham also has some of the island's top fitness facilities, including a 2,000-square-meter gym that is filled with state-of-the-art equipment and personal trainers, numerous classes including hot yoga and cycling, and an outdoor Olympic-



size swimming pool with a Jacuzzi. Topping off Soham's facilities is a lifestyle boutique and café with healthful fare, making Soham truly one of the most all-encompassing sanctuaries in Bali.

Jl. Lebak Sari No. 7, Petitenget, Seminyak, Bali;
62-361/739-090; sohamwellnesscenter.com



**THE KAYON RESORT,
MANAGED BY PRAMANA**

When a break from the bustle of daily life is in order, look to The Kayon resort, managed by Pramana. Set in the forested hills above the Petanu River in central Bali, The Kayon's peaceful atmosphere and traditional design harmoniously fit with the surrounds. Intimate accommodations come as 18 rooms and five villas, and the local wood, stone, and bamboo used in their making are complemented with carvings and art from local craftsmen. If morning yoga, swims in the pool overlooking the jungle valley, and alfresco meals in the riverside restaurant aren't soothing enough, a treatment in the cliff-top spa is sure to see stresses washed away.

Br. Kepitu, Desa Kendran, Tegalalang, Ubud, Bali; 62-361/479-2553; info@thekayonresort.com; thekayonresort.com

**AWAY KOH KOOD
RESORT**

One of Thailand's largest yet most untouched holiday isles, Koh Kood offers a taste of Thailand away from the tourist crowds. Pristine beaches, waterfalls, and ancient forests comprise the island's main attractions, and of the few bases to explore it all, one of the plushest is Away Koh Kood Resort, an intimate retreat of 30 bungalows on the island's west coast. Adding to its appeal, the resort is currently running a promotion through the end of October 2016. Starting from US\$204 per night for a minimum two-night stay, the offer includes three daily meals, a 10 percent discount on further food and beverages, and round-trip bus and boat transfer from Bangkok to the island.

43/8 Moo 2, Baan Klongchao, Koh Kood, Thailand; 66-8/7136-4036; book.akk@awayresorts.com; awayresorts.com

**AMADEA RESORT
AND VILLAS**

In the thick of Seminyak, Amadea Resort and Villas is a tropical oasis where guests can come to unwind. Seven suites and 86 guest rooms are modern in style, while seven two- and four-bedroom pool villas are ideal for families. Conveniently just a five-minute drive from the beach, the hotel also has two lap pools and a kids' pool—not to mention a rooftop spa and garden—for escaping the crowds. Casual dining is offered in Bistro Batu Kali, though guests can order room-service from any of the surrounding restaurants.

Jl. Laksmana No. 55, Seminyak, Bali; 62-361/847-8155; amadeabali.com

**THE SULTAN HOTEL &
RESIDENCE JAKARTA**

Ideally located across from the Sudirman Central Business District, the Sultan Hotel & Residence Jakarta has everything that business and leisure travelers could want for an exceptional visit to the Indonesian capital. Sprawled over nearly 13 gardened hectares are 707 guest rooms divided into five tiers of five-star luxury hotel accommodations—Deluxe, Executive Club, Suite, Lanais, and Penthouse—as well as apartment-style residences, an Olympic-size outdoor swimming pool, several restaurants and lounges, 11 tennis courts, a full-service spa, a retail arcade, and even a 500-meter jogging track. Situated in the center of town, the Sultan also puts guests within easy reach of sophisticated shopping malls, a golf club, and a driving range, ensuring a relaxing and indulgent stay.

Jl. Gatot Subroto, Jakarta, Indonesia; 62-21/570-3600; sultanjakarta.com





SCHOTT ZWIESEL

A brand of Germany's Zwiesel Kristallglas, whose legacy of craftsmanship dates back to 1872, Schott Zwiesel is the global market leader for crystal glass in the sphere of international haute cuisine and high-class hospitality. Its innovative functionality and timeless design is valued by renowned chefs, sommeliers, bartenders,

and an ever-increasing number of private households. The latest line to join the Schott Zwiesel family, Estelle, continues the brand's tradition of innovation and excellence in a graceful stemware series designed for the most demanding wine connoisseur. The smooth transition from stem to bowl gives each Estelle piece a timelessly elegant silhouette, while the prominent bend in the goblets' contours offers a generous surface for the wine to

breathe. With their multitude of shapes, Estelle glasses guarantee an uncomplicated but sophisticated pleasure when drinking wine, as well as a high degree of durability. The series is made with Tritan Protect, a technology that doubles the surface strength of the stem and thus considerably increases scratch resistance and reduces breakages.

4A Temple Street, Singapore; 65/6324-2931; info@zwiesel-kristallglas.sg; zwiesel-kristallglas.com



W LOUNGE AT W RETREAT & SPA BALI – SEMINYAK

Decked out with oversized daybeds, tropical colors, and a back-lit bar glowing with LED lights, the W Lounge isn't your average hotel lobby. It immediately sets the mood for guests' stay at the hip Seminyak hotel, though it's as much a hangout spot as an entryway. After a day in the sun, there's no better place to cool off with a Balinese-inspired cocktail while watching the sky change colors outside.

Frozen Dive Apple

INGREDIENTS

- 20 ml Vodka
- 20 ml Midori melon liqueur
- 30 ml Bubble gum syrup
- 20 ml Lemon juice
- 1 bottle Apple cider

METHOD

Blend all of the ingredients except for the apple cider with one scoop of crushed ice and pour into a pilsner glass. Using a bottle clip, pour in the cider, leaving the bottle in the glass.



Jalan Petitenget, Seminyak, Bali, Indonesia;
62-361/473-8106; wretreatbali.com



L'APPART ROOFTOP BAR AND RESTAURANT AT SOFTEL BANGKOK SUKHUMVIT

High on the 32nd floor of the Sofitel Bangkok Sukhumvit sits a little slice of Paris known as L'Appart. Here, French fusion fare such as scallop tartar and oriental-spiced lamb confit is prepared by chef Jerome Deconick and his team and served in a setting modeled after a luxurious Parisian apartment, complemented with a menu of more than 30 French champagnes.

Steamed Butterfish with Beurre Blanc and Roasted Bell Pepper Risotto

BUERRE BLANC INGREDIENTS

- 30 g Shallots
- 50 g White wine
- 100 g Coconut milk
- 20 g Lemongrass
- 2 Kaffir lime leaves
- 30 g Galangal
- 20 g Butter
- 160 g Butterfish

RISOTTO INGREDIENTS

- 50 g Arborio rice
- 15 g Onion
- 100 g Red capsicum
- 10 g White wine
- 10 g Parmesan cheese
- 20 g Cream
- 10 g Mascarpone cheese
- Water as needed

METHOD

To prepare the beurre blanc, reduce the white wine with the shallots in a sauce pan until almost dry. Pour in the coconut milk and remaining ingredients and simmer until desired consistency is reached, then strain and cool. Whisk in the butter just before serving. To prepare the risotto, sweat the rice in olive oil, then add the onion. Cook for a few minutes, and then deglaze with the white wine. Roast the capsicum, then peel, deseed, and puree them. Finish the risotto by adding a small amount of water at a time until cooked, then add the cream, parmesan, and enough capsicum to give it a nice flavor. Top with a small spoon of mascarpone before serving. Lastly, steam the butterfish for eight minutes, then serve placed atop the risotto with the sauce on the side.



189 Sukhumvit Rd., Soi 13-15, Bangkok,
Thailand; 66-2/126-9999; sofitel.com

connections

UPDATES AND OFFERS FROM DESTINASIAN PARTNERS



TOP TERRACE

After a day exploring a new city, there's nothing like enjoying the sunset from a rooftop perch with a delicious cocktail in hand, and in Taipei, the Terrace at the Humble House Taipei is just the place to do so. Set on the sixth floor of the Xinyi-district hotel, the cozy space looks out over a garden and beyond to the glistening Taipei 101 tower, the setting made all the better by two current promotions for guests and non-guests alike. Every evening, a happy hour offers buy-one, get-one juices, whiskey, cocktails, and beer, while for those looking for a longer night out, the US\$40 Hearty Drinks: All You Can Drink promotion gets you unlimited whiskey drinks and cocktails between 8:00 p.m. and 12:30 a.m.

For more information, call 886-2/6631-8000 or visit humblehousehotels.com

ALL ABOUT UBUD

In a lush river valley outside of Ubud, the Padma Resort Ubud has recently opened as one of the most elegant newcomers to central Bali's luxury hotel scene. Its 149 rooms immerse guests in the enchanting style of Balinese design

with hand-carved wood and locally made furnishings, while spa-style bathrooms and balconies overlooking bamboo forests add an air of relaxation. The peaceful 11-hectare grounds also feature an 89-meter infinity pool, Padma Spa, a restaurant with scenic views, a pool café and bar, and a jogging track that winds through the ground's gardens and beside the river.

For more information, call 62-361/752-111 or visit padmaresortubud.com



FRESHENED UP

After a two-year extensive refurbishment program, The Saujana Hotel Kuala Lumpur has never looked better. With views of the hotel's 160-hectare grounds of lush tropical forests and gardens, all 250 rooms have been revamped with new decor and upgraded technology, as have six new customizable meeting rooms, 10 meeting spaces, and the grand ballroom.

Ideal for business travelers, The

Saujana is in the Shah Alam business district, though it's also a serene base for those in want of a leisurely trip to the Malaysian capital, located a half-hour's drive from downtown with a spa, pool, and easy access to two 18-hole championship golf courses nearby.

For more information, call 603/7843-1234 or visit shr.my



PICTURE-PERFECT IN PHU QUOC

Conveniently located just a 15-minute drive from the Phu Quoc International Airport, Centara Beach Resort & Spa Phu Quoc makes getaways to Vietnam's largest island easy. Set on the golden sands of Long Beach, the hotel features 141 guest quarters ranging from 46-square-meter Superior rooms to 98-square-meter Deluxe Bungalows complete with furnished terraces and separate living rooms. There's plenty to keep busy with at the resort with its Spa Cenvaree, kids' clubs, swimming pool with a swim-up bar, and beachside restaurant overlooking the Gulf of Thailand, but an excursion to the island's notoriously beautiful Sao Beach is an unforgettable must-do for any vacation here as well.

For more information, call 66/2101-1234 or visit centarahotelsresorts.com

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TEL AVIV LIKE IT IS

he chose to capture, but rather the derelict area encircling the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station. Constructed in 1993, the bus station long stood as the biggest in the world, despite falling into increasing amounts of disrepair. “We went to Jerusalem on the third day of our trip, and as is usual in Israel, we took a bus to get there,” Lenecke recalls. “I was so excited by the chaos around the station that I came back and spent the whole following day roaming around it, sketching all sorts of different views. Near an access ramp, I saw this one lonely house rising out from the traffic and felt that I could give it a new life.” ●

“As an urban artist, I always like to draw what are often considered architectural eyesores,” says Till Lenecke, an illustrator based in Germany. “Through my work, I can make them lose their ugliness.” Last year on a trip to Israel, it wasn’t his base in the beautiful, ancient port of Jaffa that



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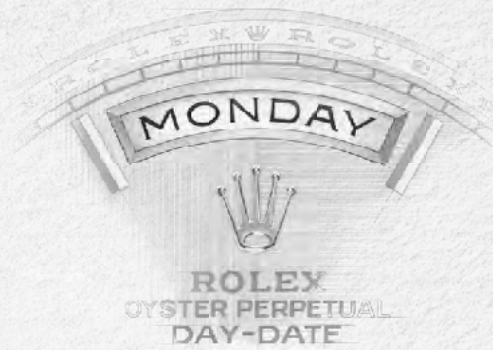
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