

APRIL / JUNE, 2016

# travelife

MAGAZINE

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**WIN A TRIP FOR TWO TO BEAUTIFUL BALI — DETAILS PAGE 4**



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# Where's The Beef?

City's former bullfighting ring is now home to its best steakhouse — **NO BULL!**

*By Marc Atchison*  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**B**ARCELONA — When Aicard Guinovart tells us we'll be dining in a steakhouse that's located in a former bullfighting ring, the wise guy in me can't resist. "No bull?" I respond.

The proud Catalan, who has spent the day showing us around his beloved Barcelona, has arranged for us to dine at Mussol, which sits atop Las Arenes, once Barcelona's main bullrings, and is now the city's most fashionable shopping mall.

"The bullfighting stadium was converted into the shopping mall in 2011 but it was a long and expensive process," Aicard tells us. "The company that started the conversion actually went bankrupt and the project was abandoned for many years until it was finally completed in 2011."

Las Arenes was known as Plaça de Toros de les Arenes when it first opened for bullfighting in 1890 and much of its original red brick facade remains today. Designed by legendary Catalan architect August Font i Carreras in a Moorish style, Las





*Las Arenes, above, was formerly known as Plaça de Toros de les Arenes, and served as the city's main bullfighting ring until 1977. It's now been turned into a high-end shopping mall where the city's best steakhouse is also located.*

Arenes features a monumental horseshoe shaped entrance decorated with colourful tiles. The compact arena — 52 metres in diameter — was built to hold 16,000 fans but was rarely filled.

“Bullfighting was never very popular in Catalonia,” says Aicard, who quickly adds with disdain in his voice, “not like in Madrid and the rest of Spain. The last bullfight took place at Las Arenes in 1977 and the “sport” was officially banned in Barcelona in 2012.

Las Arenes has also been used for concerts and actually hosted a sold-out Beatles performance in 1966.

These days, instead of dodging bulls, shoppers have to dodge high prices because Las Arenes is home to some of city's most expensive shops — 116 — and restaurants — 20 — spread over its six floors.

The mall also features bars, a cinema, a sports centre, concert hall and the Rock Museum of Barcelona.

Mussol's reputation was built on serving up some of the city's best steaks, but its menu is peppered with lots of Catalonia favourites like Paamb Tomàquet, a bread that's topped with crushed tomatoes and olive oil, which accompanies almost ever meal here — yum! — and Escalivada, a medley of smoky grilled vegetables.

I opt for the “*brocheta de cordero y pollo con patata al caliu*” and the chicken and potato dish is superb.

Each meal at Mussol ends with diners gathering on Las Arenes' open air Skywalk Terrace where they feast on some spectacular night-time views of the landmark Montjuic Hill, the twinkling lights of the Plaza Espanya below and its spotlighted Magic Fountain and the Palau Nacional off in the distance.

So if someone asks if you can direct them to a good steakhouse here, point them in the direction of the former bullring Las Arenes. •

### **Just The Facts**

- *Mussol restaurant is located on the Skywalk Terrace of Las Arenes. For more information, go to <http://www.angrup.com>*
- *There's no better way to get around Europe than by train and Eurail Group and its many partners make the experience seamless and fun for tourists, depositing them in the centre of all major cities and close to the major attractions. Eurail has many affordable options available so check them out at [www.eurailgroup.org/railplanner](http://www.eurailgroup.org/railplanner) and don't forget, kids travel free on Eurail. If you are interested in booking a Eurail Pass, go to <http://www.eurailgroup.org/eurail-vendors>*
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PHOTOS BY BIGSTOCK  
ILLUSTRATION BY SHUTTERSTOCK

WARSAW

# State-of-the-art

*Poland's sophisticated capital is full of culture and history and a place where even strangers feel right at home*



*By Kirsten Rodenhizer*

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

**W**ARSAW — It's a bright July morning, and we're picking out a crate of plump raspberries at Hale Mirowskie market when one of the vendors, a wiry woman with a grey-blond ponytail, leans over and abruptly asks, "What are you doing here?"

"It's amazing," we reply.

Our interrogator smiles, but raises her eyebrows skeptically. "Honestly!" I insist.

All summer, we find ourselves repeating this exchange, convincing oddly reticent locals their city is worth visiting. It's so green and so pretty, we tell them. We can't get enough of the chilled-out lifestyle. The city bikes. The amazing restaurants. The tiny alfresco cafés on every sliver of grass. Łazienki Park, with its baroque palace and open-air Chopin concerts.

The truth is, when the opportunity to go to Warsaw presented itself via my partner's job, we had little notion of what to expect. But hey, we thought, at least we'll be close to the rest of Europe. And if all else fails, there'd be pierogis, right?

Happily, we discover much more. On one of our first days in the city — a sunny June afternoon — we're strolling along the Vistula River with Maja, our hip, perfectly manicured property agent. She has just shown us a few condos nearby. Cyclists and rollerbladers blitz

*A bronze mermaid brandishes a sword near the banks of the Vistula River. The mermaid has been the symbolic protector of Warsaw since medieval days, and there are similar likenesses throughout the city.*

PHOTOS BY KIRSTEN RODENHIZER







past as we wander south toward a grassy area, where couples and young families are kicking back in canvas folding chairs and hammocks.

We pause to photograph a bronze statue of a mermaid brandishing a sword. She faces north, along the bank of the lazy flowing river. The mermaid, Maja tells us, has been the symbolic protector of Warsaw since medieval days. There are similar likenesses throughout the city.

Farther along, popup bars built out of brightly painted shipping containers line the path. We decide to make a stop at one where the bartenders are pouring Żywiec, a local lager, for a clutch of local twentysomethings in sunglasses and fashionably slouchy tops. Beer is ridiculously cheap here – usually just a few złoty — a couple of bucks — for a pint. We ask Maja what to order and she suggests Polish apple cider. It's lightly fizzy and pleasantly tart.

As we climb a rickety staircase to the balcony, she tells us that in 2014, Russia banned fruit imports from the European Union because of the West's Ukraine-related sanctions. A local social media campaign quickly took off, entreating Poles to eat apples and drink cider “to annoy Putin,” and help consume a nationwide surplus. As we're only too happy to help the cause, we clink bottles and sip away the afternoon.

A few weeks later, we're walking down

*Łazienki Palace, located in a park of the same name, dates back to 1674, and its baroque style makes it one of Warsaw's most beautiful buildings. Some of the original decorations and architectural details are still preserved from that period.*

Lipowa Street, in the Powiśle neighbourhood, not far from the river. Until 10 years ago, this was a no-go zone, populated by rundown, Soviet-era tenement houses and empty factories. Today it's packed with chic restaurants, wine bars, bike shops, mod furniture studios and shops selling locally made clothing and leather goods. The University of Warsaw library – with

its patina-green facade and rooftop botanical garden – draws visitors and students alike.

We duck into Sam, a restaurant/bakery where academics and young Varsovians hang out sipping smoothies, tapping away on laptops and scarfing back Israeli-influenced fare. We order omelets with Americanos and settle in as our server, wearing



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# GONE to GHANA



PHOTOS BY MAUREEN LITTLEJOHN

Off the beaten track eco lodges and sparsely populated beaches offer respite from urban chaos

*By Maureen Littlejohn*

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

**A**CCRA, GHANA — Last year, I found myself living in dusty, dirty Accra. I was volunteering with Crossroads International and working with a local partner called Pro-Link, doing communications for their projects in maternal health and HIV/AIDS education. Our office was in a bleak industrial zone and I was ready for a break.

Ghana, a country of 26 million, is rich in cocoa, gold and oil. What most people don't know about the country — formerly known as the Gold Coast — is that its 500-kilometre Atlantic shoreline is filled with beautiful and almost empty beaches.

First, I had to see the slave castles in Cape Coast and Elmina, a three-hour drive west of Accra. Ghana's coast is dotted with dozens of these sad fortresses that dealt in human cargo for more than 300 years. Governed by the Portuguese, then the Dutch and British, they saw millions of captured West Africans shipped to lives of slavery in North America and elsewhere. It was heartbreaking to enter the dungeons of hopelessness and be brought back to this heinous time in history. Afterwards, I needed a quiet place to process what I had seen.

Further west, past the city of Takoradi, I joined some friends at Escape 3 Points Ecolodge. Facing the beach, the compound was dotted with funky bamboo huts and hammocks were slung between the waving palms. The vibe was Gilligan's Island meets Castaway. An open dining area and



*Fishermen prepare their nets, top photo, on Kokrobite Beach before setting out to catch the tilapia that swim off Ghana. The women of Kokrobite Beach pose with our writer, above, while on the tranquil beach at Escape 3 Points, not a soul can be seen. Below, Stephen Plunkett gets to know some of the residents at Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary.*



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small bar — lined with shelves of books left by previous guests — felt so welcoming. It was heavenly and my spirits lifted.

John Griffin, from Vancouver and standing in as general manager while the lodge owners were away, gave us the rundown on the sea turtle preservation program.

“We have around 100 Kemp’s ridley sea turtle eggs right now in a shelter on the beach. When the mothers come to lay their eggs in the sand, we move them into the shelter to protect them from predators, including humans. They usually hatch after midnight.”

When Griffin asked who wanted to be woken up if the eggs hatched, my hand immediately shot up.

The sun had not yet set when the call went out. I rushed to the shelter. Griffin sat overlooking a portion of screened-off sand. Beneath the screen, two turtles the size of a loonie were clumsily trying to find their way out. Griffin gently placed them in a bowl and then put them on the beach, pointing towards the sea. We watched the tiny creatures make their way to the surf, cheering as the waves took them away.

My days at Escape 3 Points were spent swimming, hiking to the nearby lighthouse, reading and snoozing in a hammock. At night, we had campfires, with some guests drumming and singing. There was no Wi-Fi or TV and I hadn’t brought my computer. Funny, I didn’t miss my electronic gadgets at all.

A few months later, my husband, Stephen Plunkett, came for a visit and we headed for another spot I had heard about — Meet Me There. It is a small lodge in the Volta Region near the town of Keta. Nestled on a lagoon, it had two separate chalets and a row of rooms with ensuite bathrooms. Those in the dorms, which slept four, got to use the separate compost toilets. Meet Me There was run as part of a community support project by Dougal Croudace, a young expat from Bath, England.

“We asked the community what they would like to do with funds we raised and they said they wanted toilets,” he told me.

So far, Dream Big Ghana — Meet Me There’s sister NGO — has built 20 compost toilets throughout the area and more are due this year.

Food in Ghana can be rather limited. After months of chicken, rice, cassava and yam, I was delighted to see one item on the Meet Me There menu — pizza.

At breakfast we had a choice of pancakes or eggs and lovely French press coffee. What a treat! Ghanaians are big tea drinkers so good coffee was hard to come by.

We swam in the lagoon, visited a local market and explored the nearby Keta nature preserve by boat. We also took a trip north up to the Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary, near the town of Ho. Started as a sustainable tourism project, the sanctuary was home to five groups of Mona monkeys. I was instructed by our taxi driver to come equipped with a big bunch of bananas. Standing with our arms outstretched, a banana in each hand, my



*Kokrobrite Beach, above, is a beehive of activity most days as the fishermern gather before heading out to sea. The tranquil beach is one of many in Ghana that offers swimmers a great escape from the hustle and bustle of the real world. At left is one of the magical chalets at Kokrobrite Gardens.*

husband and I looked at each other. Were we crazy?

Suddenly the air with filled with chirping noises and two small monkeys hopped on our arms, quickly grabbing the banana. The grandfather, a much larger fellow, appeared on the path and regally reached up (no jumping for him) for his share. I wished I had brought more bananas.

Back in the grinding heat and dust of Accra, it wasn’t long before I needed to hatch another getaway plan, but this time a little closer to home, Kokrobrite Beach, which was just a 45-minute drive outside of town. Known as a reggae enclave, I was told there were lively concerts every Saturday night. But that was not what I was looking for. I went mid-week instead and booked into Kokrobrite Gardens, owned by Italian chef Franco Savastano and his Spanish wife, Caye. It was a paradise of lush blooms surrounding a sparkling swimming pool. The restaurant had tasty, Mediterranean-style fare featuring bruschetta bursting with juicy tomatoes and delicious fresh fish kebabs. Breakfast featured zesty Italian coffee, served in a silver espresso pot with a tiny jug of milk and dish of sugar.

The beach had shallow water, great for body surfing, which I did endlessly. In the evenings, I enjoyed a Club beer at Big Millie’s, the reggae hub, or Savannah cider at Dizzy Lizzie’s. Chatting with the owner, Lindsay Williams, I learned she was a Welsh teacher who came to volunteer at a school in the area three years ago.

“I fell in love with the place and decided to open the restaurant,” she explained.

And the name?

“The locals can’t say Lindsay. They call me Lizzie. Some friends think I’m a bit dizzy to still be here,” she said with a shrug.

A country full of character and surprises. That’s Ghana. Especially off the beaten track. •

• For information on Ghana, go to Ghana Tourism Authority, <http://www.ghana.travel>

• Meet Me There: <http://www.ghanameetmethere.com>

• Escape 3 Points EcoLodge: <http://www.escape3points.com>

• Kokrobrite Garden: <http://www.kokrobritegarden.com>



LOUISIANA

NEW ORLEANS

PHOTO BY BIGSTOCK

## Covington a culinary Mecca thanks to an invasion by chefs

*By Marc Atchison*  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**C**OVINGTON, LA — We follow the arrow-straight causeway that crosses Lake Pontchartrain — the longest bridge of its kind in the world — until it drifts off into this sleepy bedroom community located about an hour north of New Orleans.

The neatly kept streets of this All-America town, dominated by large dollhouse homes with wraparound porches, are almost deserted when we arrive around noon. Residents have taken refuge from the scorching summer heat in Covington's acclaimed restaurants, most of which are gathered in its lovely Historic District.

We push open the door of one of them, the Ristorante Del Porto, at the corner of East Boston and New Hampshire streets, and are instantly overwhelmed by the wonderful aromas floating through the stylish room owned and operated by the husband and wife chef

PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON

*After crossing Lake Pontchartrain, which is cast in a golden glow at sunset, you reach lovely Covington where people like Roy Blaum, owner of Roy's Knife and Archery, make you feel at home.*

team of David and Torre Solazzo.

Known for its homemade pastas and the chefs' farm-to-table approach to cooking, Ristorante Del Porto is one of several posh restaurants that have opened in Covington over the past decade. Many, including this one, are governed by some of America's brightest young chefs; the Solazzos, for example, are three-time James Beard Award nominees.

Covington's new chefs have certainly injected a youthful vibe into this historic town, which was established in 1813 under the name Wharton.

Renee Kientz and Christina Cooper, two delightful tourist representatives of St. Tammany Parish — the Northshore county where Covington is located — invite us to join them for lunch and fill us up with lots of facts about this tiny hamlet that has become an important weekend escape for many New Orleanians.

They tell us Covington started out as a commercial hub where farmers and their ox-drawn carts once ruled the roads. The ox lots, where the farmers would park their beasts and carts, created the town's unique "squares-within-squares" design — in 1981 that earned Covington a place on the country's National Register of Historic Places.

Interestingly, Kientz tells me the migration of chefs into Covington can be directly traced back to 2005 and Hurricane Katrina, the devastating natural disaster that had such dire consequences for New Orleans and its neighbouring communities.

"Many of the chefs who now own restaurants here were once employed at some of New Orleans' top restaurants (including the famed Brennan's) and they were hoping to get rehired. But because the cleanup after Katrina took so long, and their previous restaurants stayed closed longer than expected, the chefs took a chance and opened up their own dining rooms here," Kientz tells me.

It's a gamble that paid off handsomely for both the chefs and Covington — the town's upscale dining establishments are now attracting lots of tourists who are treated to exceptional regional dishes presented with some innovative local twists.

Over plates of perfectly prepared veal meatballs and artisan spaghetti, featuring lots of farm fresh ingredients — the summer tomatoes are the sweetest we've ever tasted — the tourism pair encourage us to explore Covington's Historic District and meet some of its residents before we check into the Southern Hotel, located directly across the street from Ristorante Del Porto.

The charming Southern Hotel — a dis-



LOUISIANA TOURISM PHOTOS

*There's a rich culinary tradition on Louisiana's Northshore, which has produced some of America's greatest chefs, like John Besh, above. David and Torre Solazzo, owners of Ristorante Del Porto in Covington, are now very much a part of that elite group.*

tinctive red brick Mission-style building which dates back to 1907 — recently underwent an \$8 million (U.S.) renovation, the results of which are stunning. It's also home to another of Covington's most talked about restaurants, Oxlot 9.

"I'll make a reservation at Oxlot 9 for you this evening," says Cooper.

Who am I to argue?

Covington exudes lots of character, and, as we quickly discover during our walk around town, it has lots of characters, too. The top of that list is occupied by Roy Blaum, owner of Roy's Knife and Archery shop on North Columbia St., where many of the town's oldest retail shops are located.

The delightful Blaum, who was born in New Orleans, opened his shop 38 years ago and has seen Covington go through many changes over the years. He especially likes this phase.

"The restaurants have certainly improved," he tells me in a southern draw as sweet as Ristorante Del Porto's tomatoes.

His dusty old shop — the shelves are filled with guns, knives and lovely wood carvings made by Roy's aging hands — looks like a cyclone just passed through, but the stoic Blaum appears unfazed by my (humorous) comment about the shop's disheveled appearance.

"I order them (merchandise), I pay for them and I know where everything is at," he tells me from behind the counter in the 100-year-old building — the second-oldest on the block — in which his store resides.

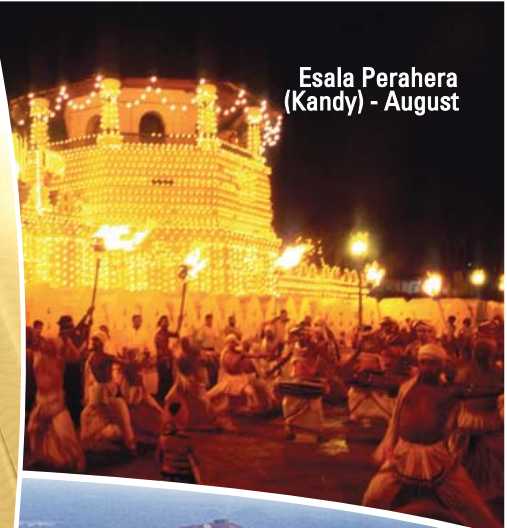
Even though Roy is a fountain of Covington information, he encourages me to "go across the street to the H.J. Smith & Sons General Store to get a real feel for Covington.

H.J. Smith's, which has been around

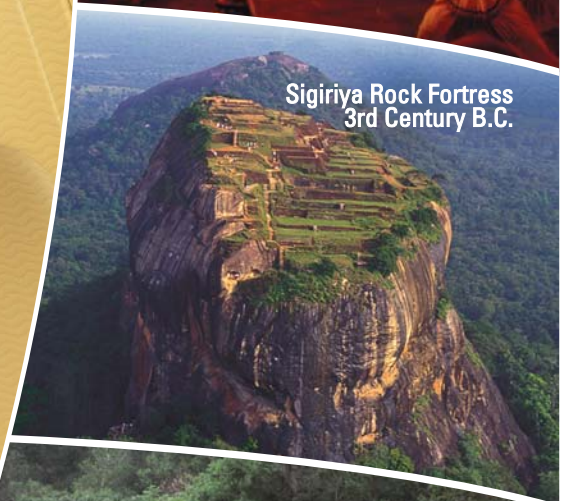


*H.J. Smith's General Store is a fixture in Covington but is more museum than retail outlet. Much of the town's history is showcased here.*

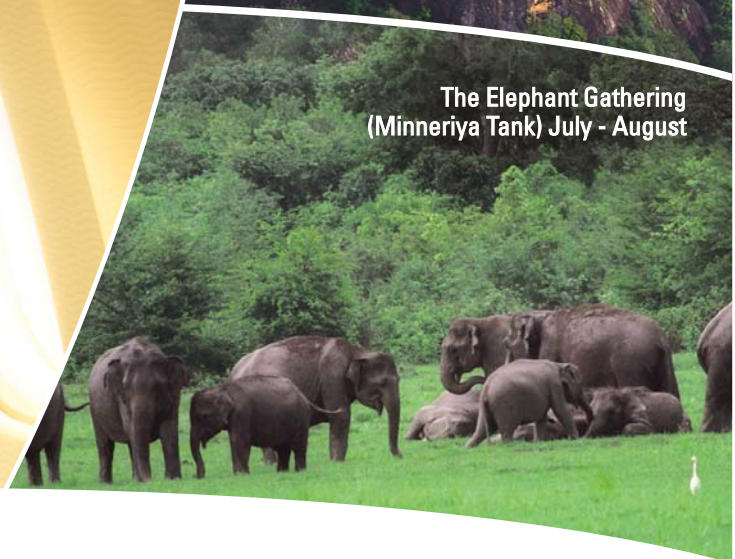
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PHOTOS BY DICK LOEK

*Days on a yacht off Croatia's lovely Dalmatian Coast are spent island hopping and swimming in the crystal-clear surf. A yacht vacation is a great way for a family to bond and introduce its youngest members to the treasures of Croatia.*

### **By Kay Loek**

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

**S**PLIT, CROATIA — It was mid-May when we boarded a yacht in this lovely ancient city — the second largest in Croatia — so we could explore the enchanting islands off the Dalmatian Coast. A Croatian friend named Denko, who put himself through university running yacht tours like this, agreed to be our captain.

No one knows the Dalmatian Coast better than Denko.

Before setting off, though, we had just enough time to explore picturesque Split, where ancient remnants of Roman emperor Diocletian's summer palace make up most of its inner core, creating a wonderfully quaint town to tour. In fact, most of the town's streets were once hallways of that palace.

As we made our way to the palace entrance, we were greeted on the city's main boulevard, Riva, by a parade of Roman soldiers in full battle dress. It left us wondering if Diocletian was still in residence.

Charming Split is a perfect spot to unwind before a cruise. The countless outdoor cafés and charming bistros surrounding the delightful harbour put us in a relaxed mood instantly.

With the help of Denko's brother, Milos, our crew — three couples and two school-age children — stocked up on supplies and stored them away safely on our Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 43, which was equipped with

*The harbour at Split is one of the loveliest in all Europe. Split is a great place to explore — its compact size makes it easy to navigate and the narrow streets and colourful markets are just a few of the other pleasures this Croatian beauty can offer visitors.*



four cabins and 2 heads (restrooms).

It was time to cast off, which came later than expected and meant sailing to our first anchorage in darkness — not advisable for novice sailors but with Denko at the helm, we had few worries.

Next morning, off the town Bobovišća on the island of Brač, we awoke to a pastoral scene of a man and his donkey patiently scaling a narrow mountain path, the beast laden down with heavy building supplies destined for the dream home being built on a cliff overlooking the sea. The island landscape was dotted with orange-roofed homes and we sat admiring the tranquil scene for a long time before moving on to Vinogradisce Bay on St. Klement Island.

After dropping anchor, we headed to the island's famous Toto's Restaurant, where, surrounded by palm trees and grape arbours, we were treated to a breathtaking view of the anchored yachts along with some excellent local grub.

Next stop, Hvar, known as the heather island, where we entered port under a full sail. This area is known for its brisk winds and Denko's experience of the area served us well. Colourful fishing boats and yachts make Hvar's harbour a lovely sight. Here we visited the main town, a.k.a. Hvar, and Vrboska, where we restocked our supplies.

At sea, the tiny oven on our yacht produced some miracle meals and we blamed the fabulous Adriatic air for our ravenous appetites.

Our favourite swimming spot was on Dobri Otočić, where the water is a glorious turquoise with a sandy white bottom. Although it was mid-May, it was still warm enough to swim.

On Biševo Island, we discovered the Blue Cave and squeezed through the narrow opening at its entrance to enjoy the shocking beam of blue light inside, which is created by the sun poking through openings in the cave.

Our voices echoed off the cave's interior and the kids tried to scare us with eerie pirate tales, but ended up scaring themselves.

In picturesque Komiza, on Vis Island, we stretched our sea legs while walking to a unique restaurant called Jastožera, where the boat that brings in the catch of the day is moored in the centre of the room. Fish that was swimming offshore just a few hours earlier is grilled atop huge stone stoves that are fed with wood hewed from grapevines. The result is divine.

After our sail around the islands, we arrived back in Split and took a day trip by bus to beautiful Dubrovnik — the four



*A day trip to splendid Dubrovnik is well worth the effort. The ancient city and its orange skyline are postcard pretty. But on a yacht cruise off the Dalmatian Coast, you'll find lots of other tranquil ports to drop anchor and enjoy the local lifestyle.*

hour trip along mountainous roads was well worth the effort.

Dubrovnik is a traveller's dream. Its famous walled Old Town is one of the most beautiful in Europe and the centre of the city is a myriad of beauty; the streets are paved with limestone or marble and are lined with small boutique shops and restaurants. It suffered greatly in the 1991 war that consumed this country, but the proud Croatians painstakingly rebuilt Dubrovnik and the results must be seen to be appreciated.

Croatia is a treasure chest of natural riches that every traveller should see, especially from the water. •

### **Just The Facts**

- A sailing vacation is pricey, but splitting the cost with a few couples makes it possible and definitely worth it. We chose Orvas Yachting in Split for our one week sail. Prices vary — between \$1,600 U.S. and \$3,300 U.S. weekly. For info go to <http://www.orvas-yachting.com/>

- Many of the islands are serviced by ferry and there's ferry service between Split and Dubrovnik. However, the bus service between the two cities is still faster — ours was about \$50 per person, round trip.

- The fastest way to get to Split or Dubrovnik from Canada is with KLM via Amsterdam and Rome.

# Shedding *NEW LIGHT* On Halifax



## Pier 21 exhibits showcase city's importance as the starting point for many new Canadians

*By Nancy Wigston*

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

**H**ALIFAX — Dusk lingers, picture-perfect, over Halifax Harbour; a silver moon on the rise, a lighthouse blinking in the distance, skies glowing purple and pink. All along Harbourwalk, a 10-city-block-long path stretching from Casino Nova Scotia in the north to Pier 21 in the south, buskers perform their final shows before dark descends. Fiddle and horn players, accordionists, creators of giant balloons — they all attract holiday crowds.

As for me, the taste of rum lingers on my tongue, the result, I confess, of oversampling the wares at the Rum Runner Rum Cake Factory. This quayside spot on Bishop's Landing is operated by proud descendants of prohibition-era bootleggers. The cakes (rum or whisky-spiked) were delicious — I've bought some to take home — but their

PHOTOS BY NANCY WIGSTON







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Natural wonders, like the magnificent double waterfall, Gullfoss, right, and the famed basalt columns known as Reynisdrangar, seen from the beach at Vik, far right, are what you'll see on a drive around Iceland — but the sheep near Pingvellir may slow you down a bit.



# Gearing Up *For* Iceland

Car trip introduces *Lauren Parsons* to the country's natural wonders

**A**KUREYRI, ICELAND — The scene opens with a beautiful landscape: hills, valleys and a lone car racing along a winding road above steep cliffs. This is something we've all seen in high-end car commercials, but if you visit Iceland, it is something you can experience for yourself.

"If we had been going any faster we would have fallen off the edge," I said to my partner after a series of sharp turns on the Víkurskarð road, just east of here. The speed limit lowers to 70 km/h around the sharpest bends, which sit atop a very steep drop to the valley. And there isn't even a guardrail.

The country's Iceland Airwaves music festival is what brought us to the island, famous for intrinsically designed wool sweaters, skyr and an awe-inducing landscape of mountains, volcanoes, waterfalls, ocean and

PHOTOS BY JOHN GAUDES



greenery. We had four days to explore as much of the country as possible and knew the best way to do it was by road.

Iceland's rental car agencies offer you an option of SUVs that can be driven on their most rugged roads, known as F-roads. I like to pretend the 'F' stands for forbidden but it's actually for fjallvegir, the Icelandic word for mountain.

Advanced adventure seekers are encouraged to take on that option, as it gives you the opportunity to drive through the island's highlands, see unbelievable views and get as close to the volcano and mountains as safely possible. For moderate adventurers, like myself, don't worry. Everywhere you look in Iceland is an incredible, and Instagram-worthy, view — and there are plenty heart-pounding, steering wheel-gripping sections on the main road.

If you want the full experience of seeing the island, it's best to look into the cozy accommodations offered along the way. There are many different hotels, cabins and B&Bs available in most towns. We opted to stay planted in Reykjavik and set out southeast, north and southwest each day.

### ***Southeast: Iceland's scenic route***

Iceland's Ring Road, Highway 1, highlights the country's most famous attractions while circling the island. We set out early in the morning towards the sunrise, which beautifully crept up over the mountaintops in the distance — even through the on-again, off-again rain.

First stop, Geysir. The smell of sulphur, distinctly similar to boiled eggs, overwhelms you while visiting Iceland's thermal areas, but becomes oddly comforting by the time you're set to go home. The area surrounding Geysir is clouded in that smell. This 10,000-year-old monster has the power to spout boiling water up to 70 metres in the air. However, its activity has been very infrequent for the past 80 years. This might have you wondering why you're there in the first place, but it won't be long before an eruption of water 15 metres high reminds you. That's Strokkur. And although it's not as powerful as the great Geysir once was, it's incredible to see Mother Nature put on a show. Strokkur erupts once every 10 minutes, so if you stick around you'll see a couple great spurts.

Not far from Geysir is Gullfoss, Icelandic for Golden Falls. This 32-metre-high waterfall is separated into two drops, creating double the echo of water crashing into water. You have the opportunity to view the falls from the picturesque top and from ground level, where you can almost touch the water as it gushes past you at 140-square-metres per second.

The next leg of our drive was a flat one, but the furthest thing from boring. The meadows are very colourful and filled with animals.

And, as we discovered, sometimes those animals will join you on the road.

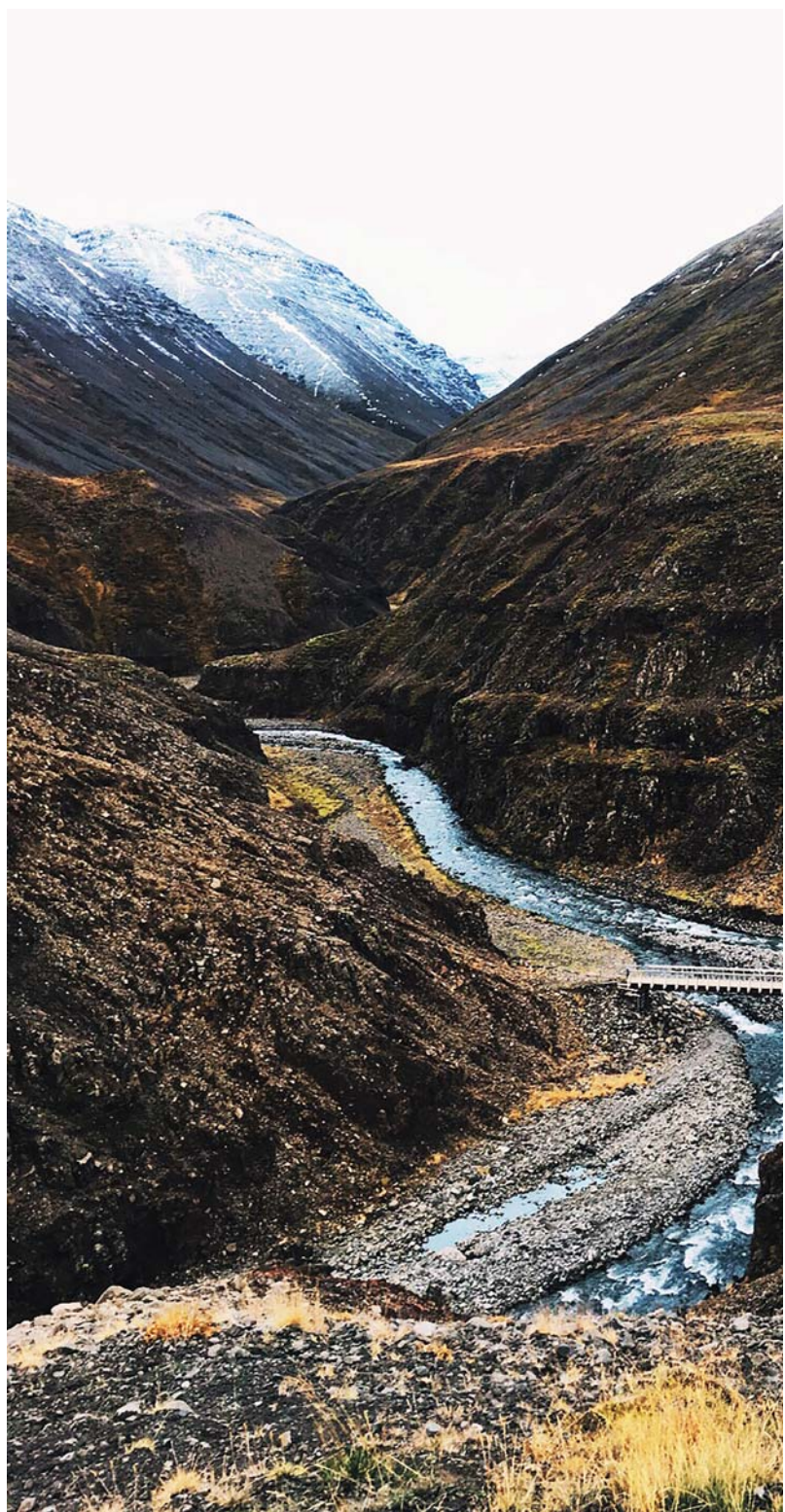
"What do I do?" my partner asks, as we found ourselves riding through a flock of sheep on a small two-lane highway.

"Drive around them, I guess. Slowly."

There was no way around the animals and each time we inched forward they would become scared and run ahead. Their thin legs carried their fluffy bouncing bodies in a sprint for about a kilometre before we were able to break free. Our apologies to the farmer who had to fetch them later.

Everything East of Selfoss is a series of small and large rolling hills. On one side, the Atlantic Ocean, vast and shimmering; on the other, towering black mountains and hills sprinkled with a series of waterfalls.

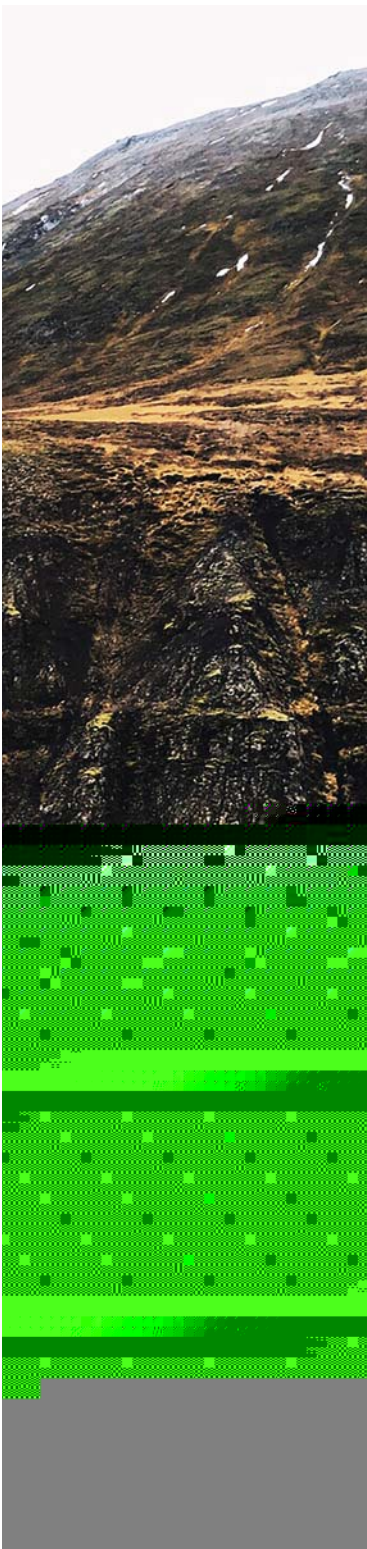
We took a stop in Vík, known to be the rainiest spot in Iceland, to stare in awe at the famous black sand beach. White-capped



waves roll in and crash against the black ashy beach every few seconds, and with the rainy grey sky in the background, what looks like a gorgeous black and white photograph is created.

The farthest east we drove was Skaftafell, known as the Southern entrance to Vatnajökull National Park, home of the Vatnajökull glacier, which covers 8 per cent of the country. It is massive. At sunset, this enormous giant, covered in snow and ice, blocks all light hours before the sun passes below the horizon.

This made driving back to Reykjavik interesting, as we were



### **The nitty gritty of driving in Iceland**

• If no signs are in view, the general speed limit is 50 km/h while driving through a town, 80 km/h on gravel and 90 km/h on the main paved roads.

• You'll often come across single-lane bridges, with traffic flowing from both directions. The general rule is for the car that was closer to the bridge to cross while the opposite car yields.

• To rent a car in Iceland you must be 25 or older

• Always check weather and road conditions before you travel, otherwise you may hit a dead end at a closed road.

### **Getting There**

• Icelandair offers direct flights from Toronto, Halifax, Vancouver and Edmonton to Reykjavik. The flight from Toronto is five hours.

*Around every corner in Iceland there's another gorgeous view, like this one at left from Oxnadalshidi, in the north. A driving vacation here will leave with many lasting memories.*

literally chasing the sunset, catching it in flashes as the glaciers, mountains and hills decreased in size.

### **North: Adventure seekers apply here**

North Iceland is where the real adventurous driving takes place.

After heading through the 5,770-metre Hvalfjörður Tunnel, it was straight north to Akureyri — though the road is anything but straight. The entire trip requires you to truly trust the grip of your tires, especially if there is snow, as you climb straight up

one side of a gigantic hill and roll right down the other.

With the rollercoaster-like roads come incredible views, the kind that make you say “wow” out loud after every hurdle. These are the kinds of views that make you feel like you're wandering through Middle Earth. Snow-covered mountaintops. Mossy cliffs. Green valleys. Bright blue skies. And nobody else in sight.

Take time to pull over, admire the view and breathe in some of the freshest clean air you've ever breathed.

Turning east past Akureyri, the road gets smaller and the hills get steeper. Each turn is sharp and overlooks a rigid long way down. The speed limit around most of Iceland is 90 km/h, but around here it lowers to 70. Once your heart settles you'll reach your reward destination, that magnificent and grand Goðafoss, waterfall of the gods. The 12-metre drop stretches across 30 metres of land, surrounded by shiny brown rocks and green grass. It's relaxing atmosphere and position makes it the perfect place to watch the sun set.

Our drive back to Reykjavik was heightened in intensity with a combination of darkness and snow lining the roads, neither of which had been there on the way up. We took it slow, avoiding any possible ice, and took in a few moments to stop on the side of the road, get out of the car, and appreciate the Northern Lights dancing above us.

### **Southwest: The road less travelled**

Most people travelling west from Reykjavik are heading to the Keflavik International Airport or the gorgeous Blue Lagoon. While it's important to take a dip in Iceland's famous thermal bath, named one of the 25 wonders of the world, and experience the relaxing salty water, there are other attractions just beyond the road.

A coastal road brought us to the bird cliffs, where we hiked through sand and rocks for an hour to reach the Atlantic Ocean, crashing against the walls of rock and bringing in strange items from passing ships.

Rounding past the lighthouse at the most southwestern part of the Reykjanes peninsula, you begin to drive through the 100 Craters Park, a series of brown winding roads. What you're driving through is volcanic zones and hundreds of open fissures, with varying levels of activity.

We stopped in Grindavik for lunch at a hidden gem, buried between warehouses on Miðgarði street. Bryggjan offers the best homemade lobster soup, or lamb soup if you'd prefer, with a generous portion and includes warm bread and butter and a beverage. The buttery soup and phenomenal harbour view makes the perfect stop for a weary traveller.

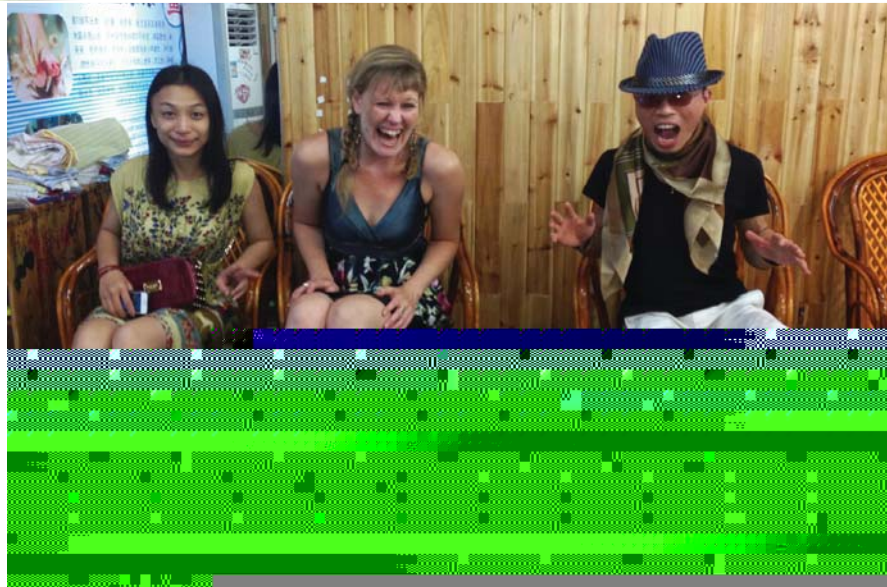
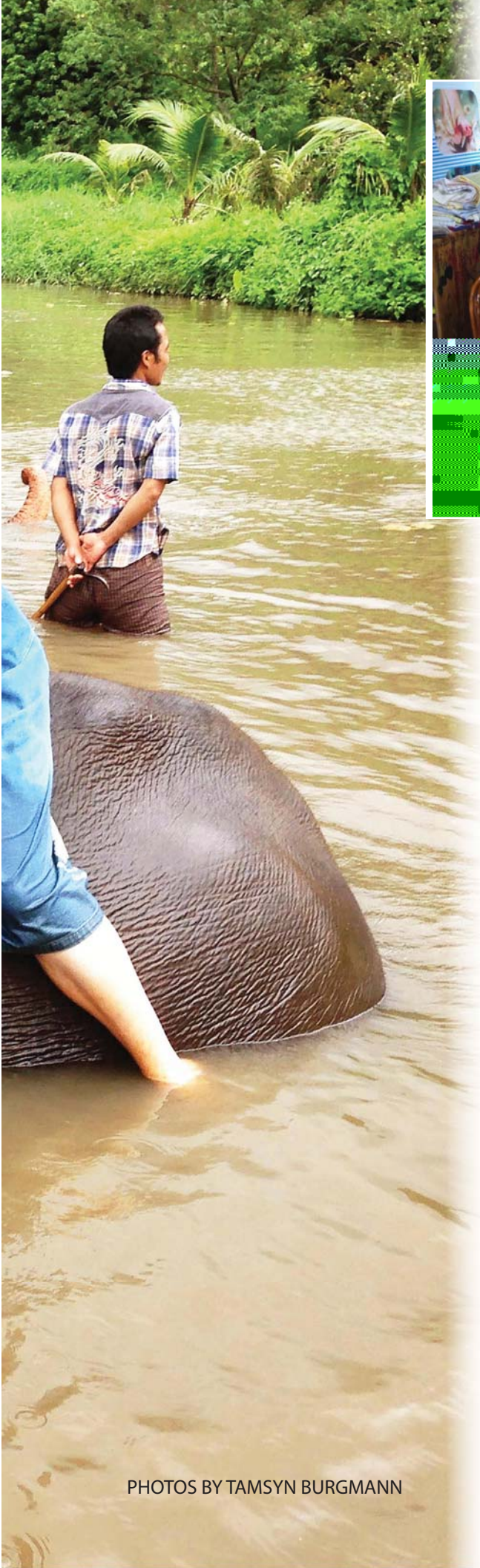
Heading back north, chasing a rainbow through volatile, sulphur-laden land, not only could we see the entire arch, but the end of the rainbow was visible — as in, the part of the rainbow where there should be a pot of gold. There was no pot of gold, but our beautiful drive took us to our final adventure stop — Seltún.

The boiling geothermal area of mud pots and hot springs has created a colourful palette in the surrounding soil. You can hike through the area and climb to the top of the hill, where you can look out as far as the ocean.

While Iceland does attract many tourists, my partner and I were often either the only people, or two of a handful of people, at each attraction.

Even driving on the main highway there was rarely anybody else on the road. It made us feel like we were truly free to explore and feel welcome. We will definitely visit again — maybe next time renting an SUV and tackling the centre of the island. •





During her solo journey through Asia, Burgmann tested out a “kissing fish spa” in China, above, and scrubbed down an elephant at a rehabilitation centre during a stop in Thailand, left. Strangers often asked her for selfies.

### By Tamsyn Burgmann

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

**B**ANGKOK — When I arrive in Asia, the contents of my luggage includes six pairs of high-heels, two kilograms of jewelry and hundreds of dollars in hair products.

When I depart 10 months earlier than planned, I’m hoisting five tightly rolled T-shirts and a personal safety alarm in one sturdy red backpack.

I have never slept in a hostel, never tried “couch surfing,” and I speak an impressive zero Asian languages. But I refuse to stay living in the same country as the boifurendo who’s just dumped me.

So I scrape together my savings, load up on vaccinations, dub myself the “Lone She Wolf” and make a commitment to my one and only, me: Be open to adventure.

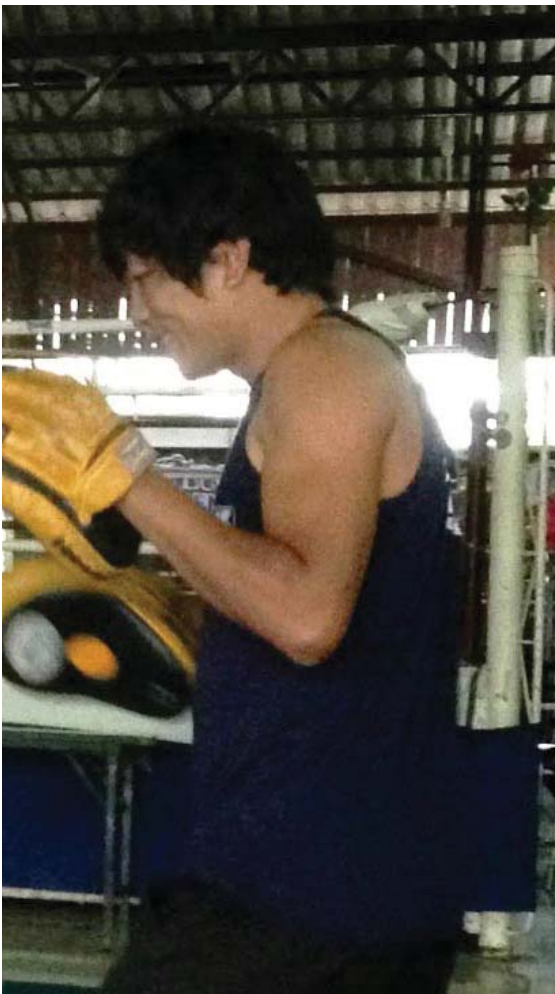
I launch my recovery mission from China, where I’m lavished with attention as an Amazonian six-foot-tall blond woman. Young ladies in saucer-sized sunglasses order me into poses and drape across me for pictures to post on social media.

I distract myself from heartache exploring the fastest developing country in the world. I ride bullet trains, planes, tin-can taxis, riverboats and bicycles through a dizzying 12 cities over the course of one month.

I scramble up the cliffs of the Baoshi Mountain in Hangzhou, a terminus city on the east coast,







*Burgmann was delighted to observe gaggles of Chinese brides posing along the promenade of Tianjin's river, above. She visited the greatest concentration of endangered giant pandas she may ever see at a state-funded research laboratory in Chengdu, left.*

herd them into a pre-arranged taxi and usher the young ladies to dreamland at my lodging. It's the inaugural episode of Lessons in Successful Backpacking; the tagline is Pay It Forward.

No rest for me. I fly next to Chengdu's research base of giant panda breeding, in southwestern Sichuan province. I get my lifetime fill of the undeniably adorable but useless creatures as they feast up to 16 hours daily on anyone else's lifetime fill of bamboo. As the teddies tussle in orgiastic messes aboard wooden tree houses, I'm drawn into an evolutionary debate with another visitor. We weigh the merits of the state pouring vast funding into its artificial insemination program. In the 1980s, the base generated 172 newborns from just six rescued, starving pandas.

But for all the outdoors, it dawns that I've not seen blue sky in weeks when I enter an open-air shopping mall where the ceiling is plastered with an enormous HD flat screen. Jet planes and colourful hot-air balloons whiz by, until disrupted by pixelated corporate advertising.

I still crave more, and find it cruising by boat down the Li River to Yangshuo. I do-that-thing-you-do and pose against the

majestic backdrop of the Guilin region's sublime karst landscape flourishing an RMB 20 yuan banknote. The same scene adorns the bill and it's like we're floating through a classical Chinese ink painting. I meet a fashion designer on arrival in this storybook town and he invites me to a "kissing fish spa," wedged between hopping nightclubs. Slipping bare feet into tanks, we shriek with repulsed laughter as dozens of tiny *Garra rufa* swarm and gulp away our dead flesh. Dance music pounds next door.

When I touch down in Thailand, nicknamed the land of 1,000 smiles, my feelings instead are a cacophony of blahs. China was an exercise in satisfying problem solving. But the Thais' breezy sabai, sabai mantra draws more foreigners here than any other Southeast Asian destination. I cringe at their ubiquitous elephant-print pants. So I challenge myself to go greater lengths to make my unplanned "gap year" truly meaningful. Solution? Be open to adventure.

I start off easy, scrubbing rescued elephants clean at the Baan Chang rehabilitation center in the heaving heat near Chiang Mai. Then I zip south to the island

of Koh Tao, where I learn to scuba dive directly in the open ocean. We navigate thriving coral forests inhabited by fish with pretty names like butterfly, trigger and angel.

But I'm still going through the motions until I meet Suwan "Phu" Chansri, a 500-fight Pan-Asian Thai boxing champion. He whisks me on his motorbike into the verdant jungles of Koh Pha Gnan to cavort with his band of Muay Thai fighters. For the first time in months, I feel a sense of belonging. I bounce my new friends' tots on my lap as we play cards at their shacks, slinging shots of Sang Som whiskey and plucking fresh-roasted chicken off the carcass. Phu tosses me boxing gloves and teaches me how to punch and kick.

I discover that openness to adventure means actively creating and embracing opportunities. It's about plotting a course, crafting intentions and then going for it, but rearranging the map pins when unfathomably epic options begin to materialize. No sooner do I adopt this attitude when it's put to the test. •

**NEXT STOP: MYANMAR**



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fortable accommodations for all budgets to recharge in nightly along the way; and gracious Irish hospitality that's as prevalent as the myriad green pastures dotting the terra firma of this magical land. It's tough to beat.

The courses that I most liked:

### **Enniscrone Golf Club**

(<http://www.enniscronegolf.com>)

On several previous visits to Ireland, I'd somehow overlooked playing Enniscrone Golf Club in County Sligo.

What a mistake!

I could happily tee it up there on the Dunes Course for rest of my golfing life and be as happy as a leprechaun finding the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

It well deserves to be put in the same conversation with Royal County Down, Ballybunion and Royal Portrush as a "must play" when visiting Ireland.

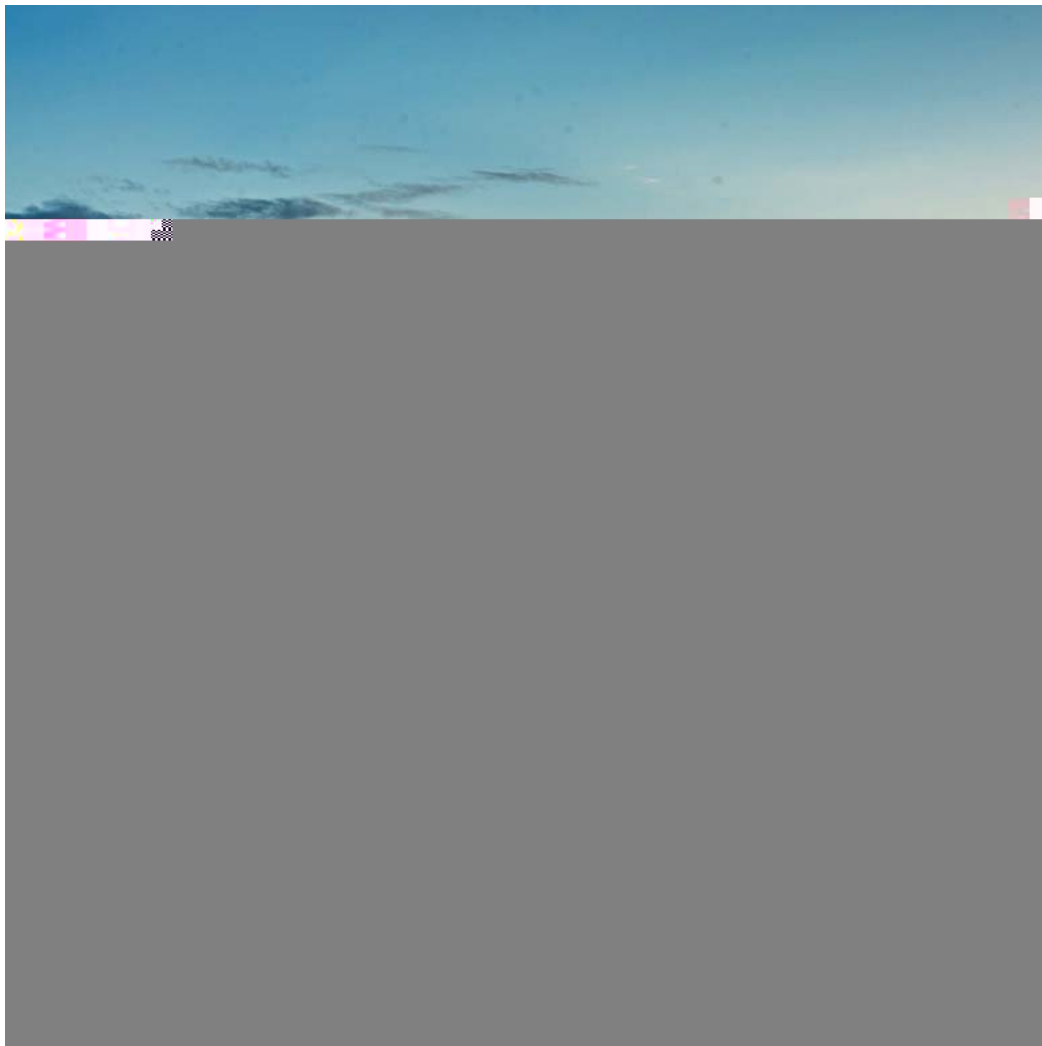
Why so good? Well, the seaside layout is routed through as fine an example of dune land as you'll find. The original layout first took shape in 1918, but it took several decades before the expertise of famed (and ubiquitous) Irish course designer Eddie Hackett fashioned this marvellous swath of turbulent topography along the beaches of Killala Bay into an absolute gem. The holes are never less than first rate, several are extraordinary.

Case in point, at perhaps the farthest point from the welcoming clubhouse, the 9th hole is all the par 4 you'll ever want. At 395 yards from the back tees, the hole parallels Scurmores Beach and is accented with a mesmerizing view out to sea as the ever-changing sky and cobalt ocean form a tranquil tapestry. Flat lies are rare on the rippling fairway. Three unforgiving front bunkers must be negotiated successfully on the approach. The tricky elevated green is enticingly perched into a craggy sand hill. The whole endeavour is natural and perfect and really, really good.

My scorecard notes are redundant with superlatives. "Marvellous" is the accolade for No. 10 as the par 4 also plays alongside the eye-catching beach.

The inland turning par-4 12th earns "joyous." The 542-yard par-5 14th wends through towering dunes that may be the biggest and most perfectly shaped I've seen.

I could go on and on, but my plea is clear. Play Enniscrone when in Ireland.



### **Just The Facts**

#### **Where to Stay:**

• **Mount Falcon Estate:** Within easy driving distance from Enniscrone Golf Club and Carne Golf Links, County Sligo's Mount Falcon Estate is about as good as it gets accommodations wise. The elegant Victorian manor house features 32 guest rooms and resides peacefully amid 100 wooded acres along the banks of the River Moy – one of the great salmon fishing waterways. Tiger Woods has stayed at Mount Falcon and plied his fly fishing skills there. [www.mountfalcon.com](http://www.mountfalcon.com)

• **Harvey's Point:** Set of the shores of tranquil Lough Eske 10 minutes out of town from cheerful Donegal, Harvey's Point is the place to stay when playing nearby Donegal Golf Club and Narin & Portnoo Golf Club just up the road a spell. Harvey's Point offers that in spades with its splendid seclusion and incredible views of the lake, surrounding forests and stately mountains. [www.harveyspoint.com](http://www.harveyspoint.com)

• **Rosapenna Hotel:** Set alongside the resort's 36 holes, the Rosapenna Hotel is charming and ideal to rejuvenate in especially with the soothing room views of Downings Beach and Sheephaven Bay. The staff there is welcoming, attentive, and as friendly as could be, but I guess that's just how things roll in this neck of the woods up at the top of County Donegal. [www.rosapenna.ie](http://www.rosapenna.ie)

• **Ballyliffin TownHouse:** Quaint and charming, the Ballyliffin TownHouse is an ideal spot for accommodations when up at the top of Ireland to play the Ballyliffin courses. Situated not far from the famed Wild Atlantic Way and its world-class fishing, guests can now enjoy the results of a recent extensive renovation. [www.ballyliffintownhouse.ie](http://www.ballyliffintownhouse.ie)

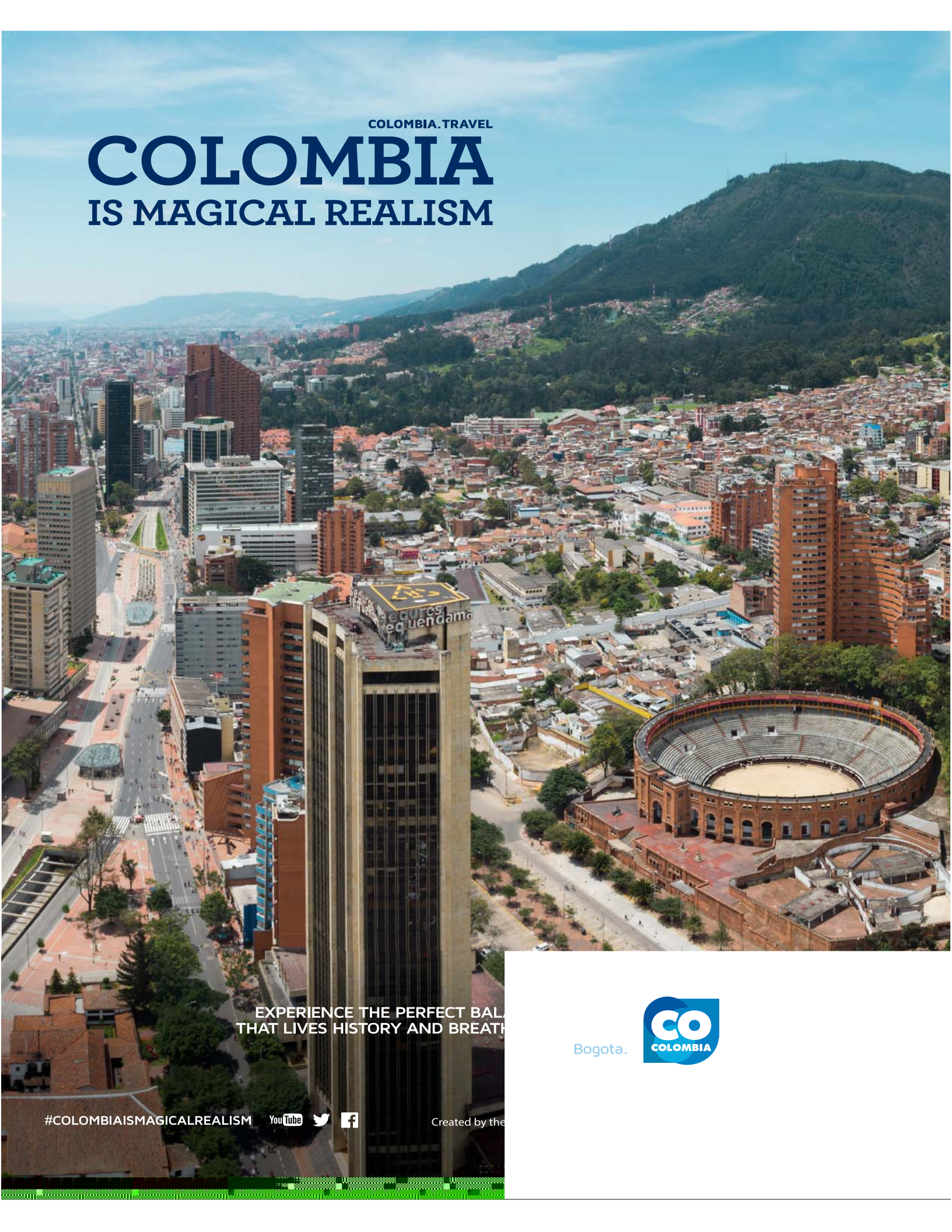
#### **How to Book:**

While travellers can certainly book an incredible golf adventure of the courses and accommodations above on their own, the good folks at Galway-based North & West Coast Links Golf Ireland ([www.northandwestcoastlinks.com](http://www.northandwestcoastlinks.com)) are experts on the subject and can make booking an Ireland golf excursion as easy as pie. They offer a plethora of stay-and-play packages that include transportation. The incredible golf of Northwest Ireland waits with open arms.



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A silhouette of a rock climber is shown on the right side of the image, reaching up to a ledge. The climber is wearing a tank top, shorts, and climbing shoes. The background features a dramatic sunset with a bright sun low on the horizon, casting a warm orange glow. In the distance, there are misty, jagged mountain peaks. A river or valley is visible in the lower left corner, reflecting the light from the sun.

# *Climbing China*

PHOTO BY BIGSTOCK







making them look even more imposing and magical from my watery vantage point.

Fung tells me the limestone mountains are slowly dissolving and in “100 million years they will be as flat as a field — so you better tell people to come and see them soon,” he laughs.

The decaying mountains have honeycomb interiors and feature many sinkholes and caves that visitors can explore. In fact, this area attracts a lot of foreign adventures, many of who have stayed on in Yangshuo, where they’ve opened restaurants and bars.

“There are more than 3,000 caves in Guilin (Yangshuo is one of the many districts that make up Guilin) and seven caves in Yangshuo are open to explore,” says Fung.

The stalagmite-filled caves have been bathed in artificial light to enhance the experience and the tallest of the area’s karst formations — at 870 metres — is Yao Mountain.

“No, we did not name the mountain after our great basketball star Yao Ming,” smiles Fung, referring to China’s former NBA legend.

Life has changed little in Yangshuo over the ages; women still pound their dirty laundry on rocks along the shores of the Little Li River, and fishermen wade into the shallow water to set their nets, much



*Fung, above, is one of the veteran bamboo raft operators on the Little Li River, which has become a popular spot for domestic tourists in recent years. However, Yangshuo is populated by many westerners who have decided to put down roots here.*

like their ancestors.

I’m so busy acknowledging the waves of the Chinese tourists on other rafts that I don’t notice the rapids that are directly in our path.

“Lift your feet,” commands Fung as the raft violently dips into foamy surf.

“There are seven more rapids ahead,” says Fung, “but none are very big.”

This area reminds me of Vietnam’s iconic Halong Bay, the UNESCO World Heritage Site where thousands of karst islands stick out of the water like giant, stubby fingers, creating a dramatic landscape that’s one of the most beautiful scenes in the world.

“We are very close to Halong Bay,” says Fung. “Hanoi (Halong Bay is just an hour outside Vietnam’s capital) is just 300 kilometres from here. You can take a train to Hanoi from Yangshuo.”

Because Yangshuo is so close to the border, the people here tend to share the same lifestyle as their Vietnamese neighbours, like eating Pho (broad rice noodle soup) for breakfast. And just like Vietnam, the motor scooter rules the roads around Yangshuo and field workers wear conical hats just like their Vietnamese counterparts.

The Zhung people, the largest of China’s 55 minority groups, work the fertile land around Yangshuo, which has become known as the country’s Fruit Basket. I

see lots of trees flush with tangerines, oranges and other fruits gathered along the shore, as well as clusters of bamboo trees. “That’s where I get my poles,” says Fung, as he warns me that more rapids are quickly approaching.

Fung says the 35 million Zhungs who inhabit this area are a curious lot who like to dine on monkey brains, dog and snake, all of which are readily available at their weekly markets.

The diminutive Zhungs are 2 to 3 centimetres shorter than the average Chinese, but what they lack in height, they more than make up for in strength — they still rely on primitive, back-breaking methods and an odd-looking vehicle called an Iron Buffalo (a cross between a tractor and a truck) to tend their fields.

As we exit the last of the eight rapids, Fung heads for shore. Our 8.2-kilometre journey along the Little Li ends with our skipper pointing us in the direction of downtown Yangshuo.

“Make sure you go to West Street — the food is very good there,” says Fung, as he gets set to welcome more customers.

West Street, which dates back 1,400 years, is Ground Zero in Yangshuo, a city of 600,000, which is relatively small by China standards.

The street is dominated by Western-style bars and restaurants and many of the servers hail from Canada, the U.S. and Australia.

“I came here to climb the mountains and explore the caves and found this place so charming and the people so welcoming that I decided to stay for a while,” says the young Canadian server sporting the Maple Leaf T-shirt in the pizza parlour where we eat lunch.

Signs along West Street are posted in both Chinese and English and many locals speak English, which is uncommon in China.

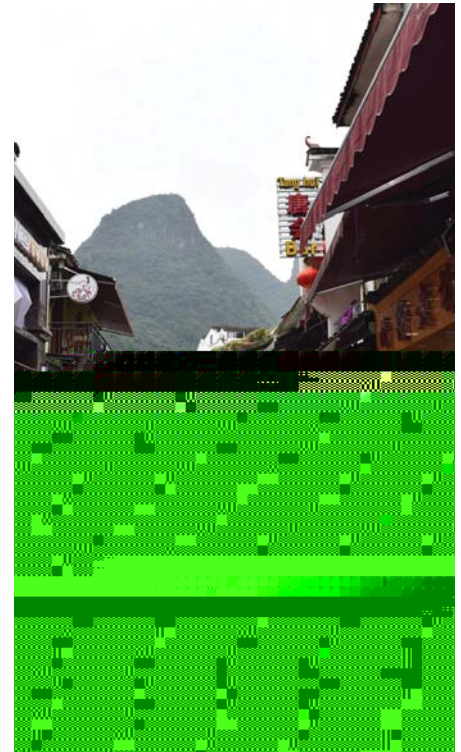
There are lots of great climbing spots in Yangshuo, and most are easily accessible by bicycle or public transportation. However, the roads around the city, thanks to the large trucks that haul huge rocks from the karst mountains, and the heavy farm equipment used by local farmers, are among the worst this well-seasoned traveller has encountered.

The most famous of the rock climbing mountains is Moon Hill with several 5.13-graded lines. Other crags of note include Low Mountain, Twin Gates, Baby Frog, The Egg, Bamboo Grove and Wine Bottle Cliff.

As we watch the setting sun highlight the karst mountains from a West Street patio, we realize why Yangshuo is such a hard place for foreigners to leave. ●



*The tranquil Little Li River, because of the karst mountains that line its shores, is one of the loveliest waterways in China. Tourists from big cities like to come and dress in the area’s traditional costumes and then go shopping on one of Yangshuo’s pedestrian streets, right.*



### Just The Facts

- There are many hotel options in Yangshuo, from hostels to the 5-Star Banyan Tree Resort. For information on the area, go to <http://www.tourismchina.org>
- Guilin is accessible from Shenzhen, Hong Kong or Guangzhou by high-speed train.
- The best way to get to Yangshuo is via Hong Kong with either Air Canada.
- Tour East Holidays ([www.toureast.com](http://www.toureast.com)) offers tours with stops in Guilin and Yangshuo included.



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ming laps in a chlorine tank with the ocean just 50 metres away.

Mbudya Island is the perfect trip for locals and visitors alike.

My first trip to Mbudya was a few weeks after I arrived in Dar es Salaam. I was still adjusting to the heat and humidity, sweating through three shirts a day and napping incessantly. I was desperate to get in the water, and the constant coastline provided more tease than relief.

That weekend, a few friends and I piled into a taxi in the city centre, where I live. I had suggested we spend the day on Mbudya Island, and I was anxious and nervous for my recommended destination to be a hit.

The trip to Mbudya starts in a narrow 15-seater motorboat that departs from Water World, a slightly dilapidated water park next to the stretch of pristine tourist hotels.

I'd be lying if I said I liked boats. Ever one to get seasick, I focused on the horizon: an abandoned shipwreck rotting on the shores of Dar's Kunduchi region, the distant outline of the Twiga Cement factory that inspired Roald Dahl to write *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Our boat slammed along the waves, leaving speckles of salty seawater on my lips and face.

It took about 20 minutes for the boat to reach Mbudya Island. My first view was an exercise in hyperboles: the most turquoise of water, the whitest of sand, the most spectacular of screensaver views. Just stepping off the boat made me giddy with excitement. Unlike in mainland Dar, the water off Mbudya was cold and refreshing. Sinking my toes into the soft sand, I ran to arrange my belongings under a beach banda, a small hut made of coconut wood and palm leaves.

Within minutes I was bobbing happily in the water, floating on my back like a starfish. The saltwater content was so high that no effort was required to stay afloat. I consciously had to remind myself not to fall asleep. With my ears under the water I could no longer hear the chattering from the beach or the occasional rumble of a motorboat engine. The sea gurgled like a hypnotizing rain stick.

Midway through the day we decided to explore. We had spotted a small path earlier, and now we allowed the sharp coral trail to twist us around the island. We weren't sure where we were going or how long we'd be gone. Stupidly none of us thought to bring water. But we trusted our instincts: why would there be a hiking



*Remote Mbudya Island offers visitors a very special day of warm sand and endless sunshine. The island's rare seashells make a day here rewarding the treasure hunters.*



path on a tropical island unless it led somewhere good?

About 30 minutes in we began to hear the ocean lapping the shore. My friend and I picked up the pace, darting up one last rocky patch and down a dune onto a pristine strip of isolated beach.

There was nothing as far as the eye could see, and the ocean met the sky in an undisturbed aquamarine line. We had no other choice: it was time to skinny dip.

Draping our swimsuits haphazardly along the beach, three of us ran in, pasty butts and farmer's tans glowing in the midday sun. Swimsuits back on, we lay in the surf of the shore, feeling the cool water rush in, over us, around us. It was an unforgettable moment.

We returned to the main beach famished and incredibly dehydrated. Luckily Mbudya Island had us covered.

At a bar banda you can find ample bottles of Kilimanjaro beer and Savanna cider baridi (cold). In the hut next door, fish are grilled in their entirety and assembled on a plate with fries, a wedge of green lemon, and a tiny pile of salt. Settling back under our banda, I knew it was probably the freshest fish and chips I'd ever eat.

The last boat back to the mainland leaves just as the day is turning to dusk. It sputtered back through the ocean, stopping about 400 metres out from the shore. I was certain we had broken down and was Zen in the concept of swimming back to the beach. The man operating the rudder jumped out, and I held my breath waiting for him to submerge. The water reached his waist.

Even the most precise of boat schedules are no match for the ebb and flow of the tide. In that moment, it was out, and we walked back to the main road, which would carry us south to our homes in the city. The sunset reflected in the pools left by the receding ocean. The water was hot in my sandals. Mbudya Island sat in the distance, so close, but seemingly a world away.

I was there for just a day, but it felt as though I spent a lot longer, recharging from the buzz of the city. •

## LOOK WHO'S GOING TO COLOMBIA!



Put your hands together and applaud Catherine Burke, of Toronto, who was chosen the Grand Prize winner of TravelLife's Copa Colombia Contest. Catherine's prize is two round trip air tickets to exciting Colombia on Copa Airlines. Catherine is seen here with TravelLife Editor-in-Chief Marc Atchison, left, along with Annie Tsu, President of Tour East Holidays, far right, and Clara Rangel, Copa Airlines Sales Executive (Canada).



# Key



PHOTOS COURTESY THE RESORT AT LONGCROFT KEY CLUB







*Families feel right at home at The Resort at Longboat Key Club — there's lots to keep kids busy and video games are left behind as they head to the shore for a day of sun and fun on some of the best sand in all of Florida.*

tions and Tampa is just an hour away, so our location is really perfect for anyone.”

But even with those nearby options, Longboat Key is the draw and you won't want to stray too far, too often. Many vacationers end up at The Resort at Longboat Key, located less than five kilometres from the famed St. Armands Circle on the southern tip of the key. The resort spans across five buildings on 440 acres of oceanfront property, offering an endless stream of 24/7 staggering views. There are 223 units that include two-bedroom, 1,750-square-foot suites with private balconies, perfect for families.

Ocean Properties, one of the largest privately held hotel management and development companies in North America, bought the resort in 2012 and has since made millions of dollars of tangible upgrades, including the spa, pools, locker rooms, its six restaurants and, most notably, on the golf course.

In 2015, the resort completed an extensive renovation of its two courses that combine for 45 holes, replacing the Bermuda grass on the tees, greens and fairways with the more saltwater tolerable and environmentally sensitive Platinum paspalum.

The Links on Longboat, located steps away from the main resort, was formerly named the Islandside Course and features 5,000 palm trees, pink and white oleander and water hazards on all 18 holes. The layout here is dramatically different than the 27 holes at the Harbourside Golf Course, seven kilometre down the road and accessible via a complimentary shuttle service provided by the resort.

**Just The Facts**

- For more information on The Resort at Longboat Key Club, go to <http://www.longboatkeyclub.com>
- The fastest way for Canadians to get to Longboat Key is via Tampa or Orlando. Air Canada and WestJet both offer service to Tampa and Orlando from various Canadian cities.

The Blue and Red Courses at Harbourside, which offer numerous ocean-side holes, have already received the paspalum treatment while the White Course, as well as the driving ranges at both courses, will have the new turf installed this year. In addition to the turf, new carts with GPS were purchased, the cart paths were replaced and the courses were slightly re-designed by architect Ron Garl, creating more of an “island feel” to the golf experience.

“The feedback from our guests and members has been outstanding,” said General Manager Jeff Mayers. “The golf courses now provide more of a resort look and feel.

“We have 45 holes of golf and each

course provide a different challenge.

That's what our golfers love most. You'll use every club in the bag and never have the same kind of round twice.”

The resort also has a first-rate tennis facility called the Tennis Gardens, offering 20 Har-Tru (green clay) courts with an underground watering system that provides consistent conditions all day, no matter what the weather may be. Mayers also mentions the resort's 291-slip Sarasota Marina as an amenity that really sets it apart.

“People can sail in and stay in their boats or stay at the resort and either way they have full access of all of our resort amenities,” he says.

Later this year, Longboat Key will see another resort option unveiled when Zota Beach Resort opens 16 kilometres north of The Resort at Longboat Key. Owned and operated by the Opal Collection, the resort will have 87 guest rooms and suites in a “secluded ambiance” while offering 2,500 square feet of flexible meeting space, something Loeffgren said is the area is currently lacking.

Zota Beach Resort, like The Resort at Longboat Key Club, sits directly on the Gulf of Mexico and — like the rest of the key — will most certainly draw a crowd toward the end of each day.

“The sunset here is stunning,” adds Loeffgren. “Every day as I leave my office I see people gathering in different spots. It's a daily tradition and it's worth stopping what you're doing to watch. It makes you realize how special this place is. I certainly will never get sick of seeing it.” •



QUICK  
GETAWAYS



# Viamede

*A diamond in the rough*

Historic Kawartha resort the perfect escape — summer or winter

*By Marc Atchison*  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**W**OODVIEW, ON — Sometimes, the best vacation destinations are the ones closest to home. Take this sleepy little hamlet, located just two hours north of Toronto in Ontario's pristine Kawartha Lakes District, for example. Besides featuring one of Canada's loveliest landscapes — a Group of Seven-worthy backdrop thick with pine and maples that's reflected on the shimmering glass surfaces of crystal-clear lakes — Woodview is also home to a remarkable resort that may be the best weekend escape in the province.

"Welcome to Viamede," says Charlotte, the lovely young woman manning the reception desk when I arrive at this historic resort that



PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON & COURTESY VIAMEDE RESORT

*The Viamede Resort is one of the loveliest properties in Ontario. Tucked among the tall pines and reflected in Stoney Lake, Viamede is a great escape in either winter or summer. Many couples elect to hold their wedding in the resort's historic chapel, which dates back to the late 1800s.*

sits perched on the shores of tranquil Stoney Lake.

Viamede has been a fixture in the Kawarthas since the mid 1800s, but in 2010 it went through a renaissance when Ben Sämänn purchased the property and transformed it into a state-of-the-art resort.

However, Sämänn went to great lengths to make sure the charm, character and history of Viamede were not compromised during the upgrades, and while the resort now offers all the comforts modern-day travellers demand, it remains true to its rustic roots — low beam ceilings and lots of homey pine fixtures still dominate.

“What would you like to do first? Go snowshoeing, ice fish, skate, cross-country ski, or just relax in your room before dinner?” asks the charming Charlotte as she outlines just a few of the winter activities Viamede staff can arrange for guests during a stay in this wilderness wonderland. This place makes you like winter again.

That said, looking out across frozen Stoney Lake, where a teepee has been erected to shelter those brave enough to go ice fishing on this -14C winter’s day, I elect to retreat to my spacious room in the Hilltop Lodge where a roaring fireplace and a bottle of wine are waiting.

Mine is one of 50 well-appointed guest rooms at the resort, which also features some charming pet-friendly lakeside cottages that look like giant dollhouses. The latter is especially popular in the summer months with families, many of who make a trip Viamede Resort an annual event.

“We have a very high repeat rate,” Charlotte tells me.

The rooms are bright and airy and feature private balconies with gorgeous views of the surrounding brilliance. My room even came with a whirlpool tub in the master bedroom.

Viamede is beautiful any time of the year, but when Stoney Lake warms up in the summer months, it quickly fills with vacationers trying to escape Toronto’s sweltering heat and humidity.

Summer vacationers are treated to lots of fun activities, as well — canoes, pools, disc golf, paddleboats, tennis, stand-up paddleboards, a water trampoline, six kilometres of wilderness trails and bicycles are available — and it’s all complimentary. And several of the province’s best golf courses are an easy drive away from the resort.

And if you don’t want to bring along the four-legged member of the family, then Toby and Daisy, the resort’s resident dogs, are available for walks. In fact, the resort, which does a lot of fundraising for



*Stoney Lake is transformed into a giant skating rink in the winter, but in the summer families, including their four-legged friends, arrive to enjoy its warm water.*

rescue organizations, will donate \$10 to Golden Rescue in your dog’s name if you bring Fido along.

One of the things that defines Viamede as a great resort is its rich culinary tradition, which is now being safeguarded by Executive Chef Kevin McKenna.

McKenna, who honed his culinary skills in England and Canada, joined Viamede after being featured as a Guest Chef at the famed James Beard House in New York.

Now McKenna rules the kitchen at Viamede’s main dining room, Mount Julian, which is located in an historic building across from the resort’s main lodge.

Ryan, my server and the room’s sommelier, tells me he and McKenna worked together at another of Ontario’s excellent resorts — Taboo — and he quickly jumped at the opportunity to rejoin the chef at Viamede.

“It’s a decision I don’t regret because working with Kevin and his staff is a real honour — and just look around at this wonderful room and setting,” exudes Ryan, who tells me the creaky floorboards and sagging walls date back to 1865.

McKenna’s tasting menu is revered in Ontario’s culinary circles and Ryan pairs each selection with perky young Ontario wines.



### **Just The Facts**

• *Viamede Resort is a 165-acre lakefront resort that’s open all year round.*

• *Address: 595 Mount Julian-Viamede Road, Woodview, ON, K0L 3E0. T: 1-705-654-3344*

• *For rates and specials, go to <http://viamede.com/>*

There’s no better example of farm-to-table dining than Mount Julian, where most of the ingredients used in McKenna’s menu selections are grown locally or on the resort’s farm.

“We have pigs, chickens, ducks and turkeys and what we don’t raise or grow here, we purchase from local producers,” says Ryan as he delivers canapés of butter poached Traynor beef, marinated garden radish and yellow perch, followed by a Kawartha split pea soup featuring some of Viamede’s own pork. The sommelier pairs the first courses with a Southbrook Semillion from Four Mile Creek winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake — the perfect complement to the first courses.

What follows is an organic delight for my taste buds: Manitoulin organic trout served with rye berries, crisp brussel sprouts, radish and lard (wine pairing is Long Dog Chardonnay from Prince Edward County), and Jarrod’s heritage pig, a slow-roasted loin served with sprout sauerkraut, radish, homemade church key mustard (excellent) and juniper (wine pairing is Tawse Gewürztraminer from Beamsville Bench).

I get a taste of Pastry Chef Dylan’s black artisan bread while I wait for the next course, which was Greenly Farms duck accompanied by apple smoked squash, fried Cannon Farms carrots, maple bacon powder and whiskey glaze (wine pairing Half Moon Bay Pinot Noir from Prince Edward County).

To top everything off I enjoy “C,W,F” wild blueberry panna cotta: sumac curd, sugar plum Florentine drizzled with a blueberry foam — I wash it down with Chambord.

Wow, what a finish!

As the evening comes to a close, Ryan tells me that late at night, after all the customers have left, “I sometimes hear noises and windows and doors suddenly close. So I guess we have ghosts.”

Or maybe it’s the spirits of Viamede guests who just never want to leave this remarkable, romantic resort. ●

# BEAR FACTS

## Of Wildlife Photography



PHOTOS BY MICHELLE VALBERG

*Michelle Valberg recalls: "We sat still and didn't make a sound when Sophie, an eight-year-old grizzly bear, came within mere feet of us." Michelle took these incredible photos on a trip to the Yukon.*



**Michelle Valberg**  
encounters Sophie the Ice Bear  
on a thrilling trip to the Yukon  
and captures the mighty beast  
at work and play with her camera

**By Michelle Valberg**

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

& NIKON CANADA AMBASSADOR

**D**AWSON CITY, YUKON — Sophie hauled her massive head out of the water and shook it. Twice. Even from a distance, I could hear the sound of her icicle-coated fur, which rang out like a glass chandelier shaking in an earthquake.

She stopped, sniffed the air briefly, and shook vigorously again — Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle!

Sophie the ice-bear — more on her later — peered once more into the water to inspect for lingering chum salmon. Finding none, she lumbered off.

I put my camera down and looked at the world through my own eyes. I was in the Bear Cave Mountain region of the northern Yukon, possibly one of the wildest and most remote spots in a country known for its wilderness.

As far as my eyes could see, spruce forests butted up against a halo of craggy mountains. The ecologically untouched river that runs through it, Fishing Branch, is home to a mas-

sive annual salmon spawning. Making the area even more special are the honeycomb of caves, used by bears and created by the river that, at one point, runs under the mountains and emerges on the other side.

Our journey had begun in another mythical place, Dawson City. Now just a tidy hamlet of 1,319 souls, it was founded in 1887 by Joseph Ladue and named after Canadian geologist, George M. Dawson. Once home to more than 40,000 gold-seekers in 1889, its history goes back millennia to when the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people held sway.

As remote as Dawson City is, it is just a stepping off point to the Yukon's vast interior, home to just 350 humans — mostly the indigenous Vuntut Gwitchin people — who view Ni'iinlii Njik, as they call "Bear Cave Mountain," as a sacred place. For an hour and a half, we flew by helicopter over the Dempster Highway and saw the porcupine caribou migration and what seemed like the rooftop of our country in endless mountains, rivers and trees.

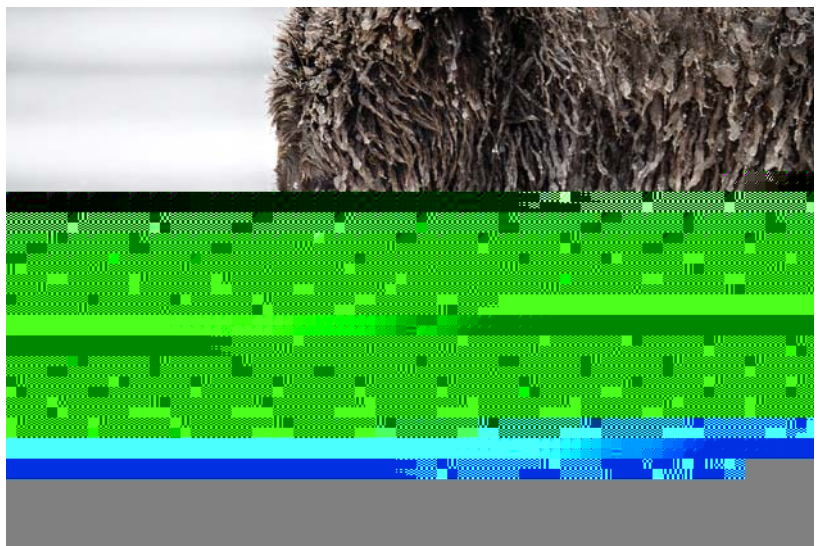
Before we began our flight, I tried to explain the allure of this wild, untamed land to Julie, my friend from Ottawa.

Bear Cave Mountain, I explained, is unique in Canada, mostly because the thermal springs and porous karst rock formations of the region ensure that, despite the frigid temperatures, there is a constant flow of warm, oxygenated water through the river systems. This attracts fat chum salmon, which come from the distant Bering Strait to the region to lay eggs and die. The salmon are what attract the ice bears.

Ice bears are actually grizzlies, massive 90- to 270-kilogram creatures better known for their distinctive humped shoulder and shaggy cream, silver or black fur. In this region, however, the combination of the cold air and the warm water coat them in frost and icicles, giving them an ethereal and otherworldly air. Like Sophie, their festive decorations jingle when they move.

Charming as that sounds, they are nevertheless at the top of the food chain and fear no man. Sometimes bold, sometimes shy, they were all around us. Some days it would take minutes, others it would take hours to see any action. The habituated bears would emerge in proximity to feed on their meal. They would dive into the water and bring out their catch to eat it all within minutes.

When they did approach, it was intimidating. Our guide Phil Timpany would hold up his gun, whisper a few words and the bear would turn away. One day, So-



*Watson, another bear Michelle encountered on her trip to the Yukon, approached her, top photo, with his long claws exposed while he hunted for salmon along the river's edge. Before Michelle knew it, Sophie, above, quietly appeared and jumped in the water, locking the shocked salmon in her mighty jaws. Watching Stanley walk intently along Fishing Branch River in search of his next meal, left, and seeing Sophie covered in ice that made a 'tinkle, tinkle, tinkle' sound like a chandelier when she walked, bottom left, are memories that will last a lifetime. Nothing can top the rush Michelle felt when the bears locked eyes on her and the camera, below.*



ophie stood just five feet away from us, no doubt wondering why I stood between her and the river. It was exhilarating, terrifying and completely unforgettable.

Phil, the only tour operator allowed in the area, has named the bears to help identify them and to determine which of them would tolerate human presence and which ones should be avoided. In order to protect the region's sanctity, only four guests are allowed at a time.

The wildlife and terrain were only part of the challenge.

The rustic, simple cabins were just that — clean and comfortable, but with no running water or power. Fortunately, Phil's bush lore extended to creating three delicious meals daily.

Keeping warm in a rugged outdoor environment required some creative thinking and packing due to weight limits for this trip. Thanks to my Canada Goose parka, I was able to withstand long, motionless hours sitting next to a river (amidst frozen fish guts).

As many photographers know, weight restrictions are our worst nightmare. Advances in technology mean our equipment is certainly lighter than in the past, but we still require lenses, camera bodies and tripods. In this instance, I chose two cameras: a Nikon D4S and a Nikon D810. For lenses, I packed the NIKKOR 14-24mm, 80-400mm and the extraordinary 800mm lens.

The value of the 800mm lens was brought home one day when Sophie, by then a familiar face, leapt into the water directly in front of me to grab a fat salmon. For such a massive beast, she was quick and agile. In seconds, she was gone.

Still, I managed to take a photo that defined our trip: Sophie, mid-charge with a flailing salmon firmly in her jaws.

Moments later, I sat back on my heels and turned my face to the watery northern sun. I thought about Sophie and her life. About the other ice bears we'd met and how their fate is in the hands of the human guardians of this marvellous place. I thought about other environments, where animals are trapped and killed — sadly to end up as stuffed trophies in some distant hunter's man cave.

True, I had my trophies. But I had something else, too. I had captured — in photos — the living, breathing heart of Bear Cave Mountain. •



*Sometimes Michelle would wait for hours for a bear to show up, but she had incredible scenery to keep her eyes busy.*



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# NAPLES

By *Marc Atchison*  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

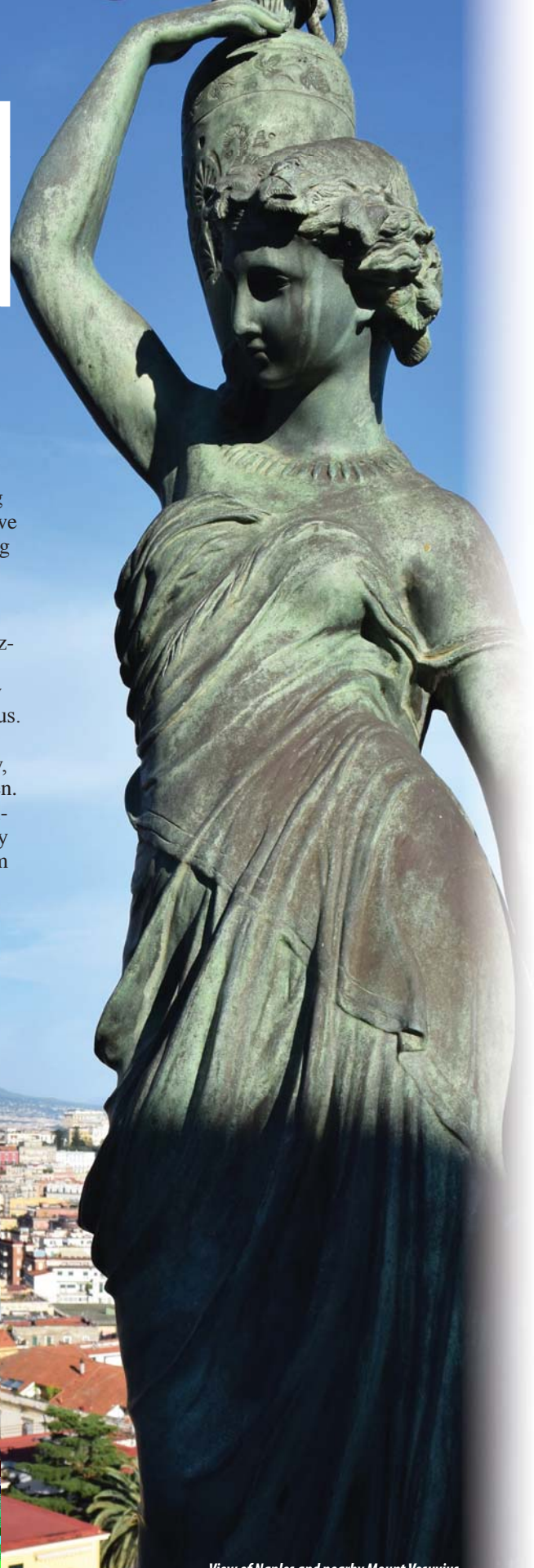
**N**APLES — It appears all eyes in Antonio & Antonio are watching us as our “authentic” Neapolitan pizza arrives straight from the wood-burning oven of the popular seaside restaurant. The locals are no doubt wondering if the visitors will commit the mortal sin of picking up the pizza with their hands, as North Americans are known to do, or eat it with a knife and fork, as is the custom in this ancient city that’s the gateway to southern Italy.

We’ve studied up on Neapolitan

pizza etiquette and get an approving nod from our fellow patrons when we pick up our utensils and start carving up our pizza marinara, which melts like soft cheese in our mouths.

The pizza is a masterpiece — cheesy disks of bufala campana mozzarella blister atop a thin coating of San Marzano tomatoes, which grow at the base of nearby Mount Vesuvius. The edges of the tender, ultra-thin wheat flour crust are charred perfectly, thanks to the intense heat of the oven.

Pizza making is an honoured tradition in this lovely city first settled by the Greeks in the second millennium BC. In fact, it was the Greeks who first covered their bread with oil,



View of Naples and nearby Mount Vesuvius





## The Perfect Pizza

The perfect Neapolitan pizza should be:

- No more than 3 millimetres thick
- Must be baked for 60–90 seconds in a 485 °C (905 °F) stone oven with an oak-wood fire
- When cooked, it should be soft, elastic, tender and fragrant
- There are three official variants:

- 1- *Pizza Marinara, which is made with tomato, garlic, oregano and extra virgin olive oil*
- 2- *Pizza Margherita, made with tomato, sliced mozzarella, basil and extra-virgin olive oil*
- 3- *Pizza Margherita Extra made with tomato, mozzarella from Campania in fillets, basil and extra virgin olive oil.*

PHOTO BY BIGSTOCK

herbs and cheese, they just didn't call it pizza.

In 2009, Naples got the European Union to pass a law protecting Neapolitan pizza from imitations. Now all pizzerias around the world are supposed to conform to this city's strict pizza-making standards (see accompanying chart above) if they use the term "authentic Neapolitan pizza" on their menu.

Naples, however, is so much more than pizza.

It's a sophisticated city filled with grand piazzas, regal castles, ancient history, colourful villas that cling to volcanic cliffs overlooking a spectacular coastline, fabulous restaurants and lovely neighbourhoods that have changed little over the centuries.

From our base, the Grand Hotel Parker's Napoli, perched high above the city, we get a stunning view of the harbour dotted with multi-million dollar yachts, the romantic Isle of Capri off in the distance and Mount Vesuvius, the giant volcano that rumbles to life every 100 years or so — the last one was 1944. Vesuvius' most famous eruption, of course, was in 79 AD when it buried the nearby cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum with fiery ash, killing over 16,000 people. The ruins of those cities lie just a short train ride from downtown Naples and are the area's most visited tourist site.

To get to Antonio & Antonio, we make our way down a set of steep public stairs from the hotel and follow a labyrinth of narrow streets filled with quaint shops and local restaurants until we reach the port area, where we stumble upon a giant park known as the Villa Comunale. Here, tourists and locals wander the statue-filled grounds that eventually drift off onto the Via Partenope, the seaside street that hugs the Gulf of Naples. It's in this area where most of the city's major historic sites and traditional pizza restaurants are gathered.

After devouring our pizza and a plate of local fried vegetables,

we explore the harbour area dominated by the Castel dell'Ovo, the oldest standing fortification in Naples. It's the place where the last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus was exiled in 474 AD — he lost a kingdom but was rewarded with a great view. It's also on this spot that the Greeks first settled when they arrived. The area surrounding the castle is now lined with trendy tourist restaurants and chic hotels.

Around the corner, on the Via Nazario Sauro, we get our first uninterrupted view of mighty Mount Vesuvius, whose crater is shrouded in white puffy clouds most of the time. The waters separating the volcano from the city are filled with boats, ranging from ocean-going cruise ships to tiny vessels. Closer to shore, dozens of locals are sunning themselves on the huge volcanic rocks before jumping into the gentle surf.

Not far from this splendid scene we stumble upon the Via Console Cesario, the grand boulevard that leads us to the Piazza del Plebiscito, a handsome square dominated by the former Royal Palace and the semi-circular church of San Francisco di Paolo. Nearby stands some other imposing structures — the Palazzo Salemo and the Prefecture Palace, a former guest house that was in full use when the Royal Palace was occupied in the 17th century.

The Royal Palace was home to the Bourbon kings who once ruled this part of Italy and its facade is graced with a number of their likenesses, including Vittorio Emanuele. The palace's main staircase is one of the most opulent in the country and the throne room remains its most beautiful chamber.

The church of San Francisco di Paolo is filled with lots of impressive statues made by the hands of some of Italy's most famous artists, Cali and Finelli among them.

A short distance away is the Castel Nuovo, or Maschio Angio-



*Naples gets a bad wrap because of its connection with Italy's underworld. One visit here, though, tells you what a beauty this city is. While it may be most famous for its traditional pizzas, Naples' piazzas rival anything Rome or Venice might offer and the islands that lay off its shores are some of the most tranquil hideaways for the rich and famous in the world. The waters around Naples are clean and warm and locals like to jump in the gentle surf at the base of Mount Vesuvius.*

ino, a medieval castle that is the symbol of Naples. The imposing 15th-century structure overlooks the town hall square (Piazza Municipio) and offers great views of the harbour.

Naples is a city of squares — some large but mostly small neighbourhood versions that are surrounded by lively cafés where locals stop for their morning espresso, a mid-day meal or an evening glass of wine. It's in one of these cafés off the Piazza Amedeo where a server suggests we visit the city's park-like Petraio area, where the Castel Sant'Elmo and the Certosa di San Martino sit perched overlooking Naples.

We hike up the slanted streets — bring good walking shoes when you visit Naples — until we reach the entrance of Castel Sant'Elmo, a fortified residence from the 13th century that now serves as a museum and exhibition hall. Next door sits the Certosa di San Martino, a former monastery that opened in 1368. It's been converted into a museum featuring displays of Spanish- and Bourbon-era artifacts. Its Christmas Nativity scene is reputed to be the best in the world.

From here we get an amazing panoramic view of the city while enjoying another treat Naples is noted for, gelato. Officina Gelati on Via Toledo is the best in the city, by the way.

You can take day tours that combine visits to Mount Vesuvius and Pompeii from your hotel, but with so much to see and do in Naples, you'd better budget lots of time if you want to see everything.

The wonders of the Amalfi Coast (Sorrento is truly gorgeous) are also just a short drive from Naples and a quick ferry ride will take you to lovely Capri, where designer shops and overpriced restaurants rule —

they usually leave most visitors with a bad impression of one of Italy's most cherished destinations.

Other Naples landmarks that excite us include:

- The National Archaeological Museum: This is truly a marvellous place full of things from Pompeii and Herculaneum, as well as a great collection of Roman art.
- Capella Sansevero: This is home to the life-like Veiled Christ sculpture carved in 1753 by Giuseppe Sanmartino. The visual effect of this stature is truly amazing and some people swear it moves when they look at it. You be the judge.
- Underground Naples: Just like Rome, Naples has an underground world just below its streets which you can tour. Lots of Roman and Greek ruins, including a fabulous market from Roman times under the lovely Lorenzo Maggiore church. This is one tour you MUST take!
- Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina: If you get tired of looking at ancient art, take a break at this lovely museum known locally as Museo MADRE. The displays of some of Italy's best-known modern artists are very nice to look at. •

## **Just The Facts**

• **The best way to get to Naples from Toronto is with Alitalia via Rome.**

• **The Grand Hotel Parkers is an historic property located in a prestigious area of Naples. U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer was sitting at the next table at breakfast one morning. Despite the high-end clientele, rates are very affordable and start around 160 euros a night. The hotel's terrace offers guests amazing views of the city and the surrounding brilliance. For information, go to [http://www.grandhotelparkers.it/index\\_eng.htm](http://www.grandhotelparkers.it/index_eng.htm)**



# AGES

*Mark Dimitroff* introduces his Scottish inlaws to 'New Scotland'

*Nova Scotia's breathtaking Cabot Trail is a picture postcard where beauty abounds around every corner. That's why it is considered one of the world's most scenic destinations — as a matter of fact Cape Breton Island was rated the No. 1 Island to visit in continental North America by Travel & Leisure magazine.*

PHOTO BY MARK DIMITROFF

ACTIVE LIFE

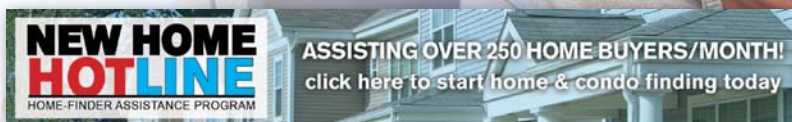
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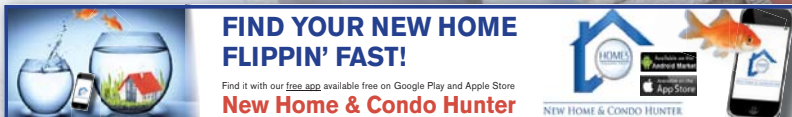
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trip to the Atlantic coast with a fresh local lobster dinner.

Off to the races, we were, first thing next morning. But beware — the weather can change very quickly here, and from location to location. What started as a beautiful sunny day in Halifax turned into London fog 45 minutes later when we neared Peggy’s Cove.

The quaint fishing village is everything you’d expect it to be; charming, rustic, just slightly touristy – but true to its roots – fishing boats come and go on their own relaxed schedule. The iconic lighthouse is postcard perfect, even shrouded in fog, but the quickly changing weather lifted the fog prior to our departure. While it was busy, it never seemed overcrowded.

### Day III — Halifax

The next day we explored Halifax on foot and by car. My father-in-law Maurice is a history buff and as such was thrilled to tour the HMCS Sackville — a WWII Corvette convoy escort ship that’s been an official Naval Memorial since 1985 — and we were all delighted to tour the Halifax Citadel and witness the cannon going off at noon. Scottish kilts and tartans were abundant and the sweet mournful sound of bagpipes called to us from time to time, making the day entirely for my in-laws.

### Day’s IV & V — Brier’s Island

This was the longest day of the trip, five hours to Brier’s Island – a remote speck off the northwest coast of Nova Scotia guarding the entrance to the Bay of Fundy. Admittedly a bit of a trek for Lorraine’s parents (and initially a concern for us), they soldiered through with nary a complaint (a few strategically placed bio-breaks helped to ease the drive and stretch the knees). After two ferries to get to the island, we checked in at the Brier’s Island Lodge.

The next day we checked off one bucket-list goal: We spent the morning on the ocean where we were awestruck to see two magnificent humpbacks both doing the familiar tail-up dive and swimming close alongside our boat, blowing their misty streams in the air. Outstanding!

### Day VI — Pictou

En route to Cape Breton Island we stopped in beautiful quaint Pictou and stayed at a lovely B&B. Famous primarily because the first 200 highland Scots landed here in 1773, with waves of Scots following suit. Along the waterfront, on Water Street, one can see the many coats



*Nan, Lorraine and Maurice stand on the Ocean floor at low tide at Hopewell Rocks, left, and were left speechless while witnessing the graceful beauty of some Humpback whales off Briar’s Island, in the Bay of Fundy, above. Bilingual Gaelic-English signs adorn the coast in Cape Breton Island and made the visiting Scots feel right at home. The beach boardwalk at peaceful Inverness Beach, below left, and the sculpted flowerpot formations at Hopewell Rocks were all memorable parts of the journey to Nova Scotia.*





*The rugged beauty of Nova Scotia's coastline is hard to match. The province is one of the most scenic in all of Canada and a place that's hard to leave. One visit is never enough.*

of arms and the tartans belonging to various clans alighting each signpost along the way.

### **Day VII — Glenora**

None of us are Scotch drinkers. Nan has the odd white wine, and Maurice non-alcoholic beer. Why is this relevant? Because the next stop was at the Glenora Distillery and Inn, famous as the only Scotch whisky distillery outside of Scotland. Ranked in the top 50 spirits in the world by Wine Enthusiast magazine a few years ago, this is quality stuff. Did we try the Scotch? Yes indeed. After touring the facility and seeing firsthand the inner workings of the distillery itself, we were given a taste of a few of their better spirits. While I can't say that any of us really appreciated the silky elixir, we did all try something we never had previously — another first on this trip.

### **Days VIII & IX — Spectacular Cabot Trail & Baddeck**

With smiles on our faces, we headed onto the pride of Cape Breton Island, the spectacular Cabot Trail, via Highway 19. We did this in two days, but one could easily spend three to four days on this amazing route, stopping at the many small villages, visiting the craft and specialty shops and drinking in the natural splendour that is this great place.

Buy a real lobster trap, have high tea in the afternoon, or hike the famous Skyline Trail. Picture postcard beauty abounds everywhere here, and is why it is considered one of the world's most scenic destinations. As a matter of fact, Cape Breton Island was rated the No. 1 Island to visit in continental North America by Travel & Leisure magazine.

All along the way, signs in both Gaelic and English dot the

landscape to announce the coming towns and villages. We ended our most amazing visual day of the vacation so far at the town of Baddeck, home of Alexander Graham Bell and sporting a museum in his name. After visiting here you'll be astounded at his many inventions beyond the telephone.

### **Day X — Alma and Hopewell Rocks**

Nan was looking forward to our last stop the whole trip, what she called the Red Rocks. Hopewell Rocks is famous for having the highest tide differential in the world – 16 metres between high and low tide.

Visitors from all over the world come here to walk on the ocean floor at low tide. And so did we. Arriving just before noon (check the tide tables online before you go ([thehopewellrocks.ca/learning-centre/tide-tables](http://thehopewellrocks.ca/learning-centre/tide-tables))) we made it down the 99 steps to the dry seabed. It's amazing how the idea of being in a place such as this can drive people to walk or climb more than they normally would just to be able to participate in this once-in-a-lifetime treat.

Neither Nan nor Maurice disappointed us, and in fact rejoiced at being able to walk on the bone-dry sea floor amongst the giant flowerpot rocks and seaweed. Awesome!

Another item checked off the bucket list.

I wrote in the picture book we gave them to commemorate this trip: "This week, we laughed a lot, and were constantly amazed by the beauty of this area of the world. Wonderful food was had, we all tried Scotch (even though none of us liked it) and we had a great time all in all. We are so happy we had the chance to do this with you."

As the MasterCard ads say: Priceless! •

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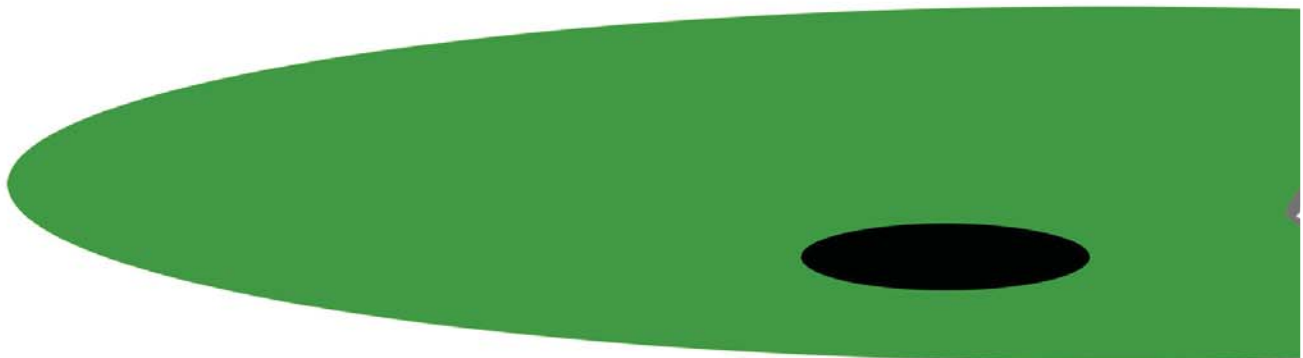
All aboard amazing



PHOTOS BY DAVE FINN

*Many golf courses in India are equal to anything you'll find in North America. The conditions and facilities are top notch. There's no better example of that than the Gary Player-designed DFL Golf and Country Club, top photos, and the ITC Grand Bharat, above, whose Taj Mahal-like clubhouse is a sight to behold.*

# 'Fore' Days In Delhi





## *Our correspondent finds playing golf in India is an exciting experience*

*By Dave Finn*

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

**N**EW DELHI — From the moment I arrive, the sights, the sounds and the diversity of this city surround me. Within minutes, I know that without a doubt I have arrived in one of the most exotic destinations in the world — for golfers.

Okay, granted, New Delhi may not be foremost on golfers' minds but for me, playing my favourite sport in India was the opportunity to combine two of my passions — travel and golf.

When you travel this far, though, you simply have to take in the numerous historical sites of Old Delhi, including the Red Fort, Qutub Minar, Humayun's Tomb, the Lotus Temple and the diplomatic enclave that includes Parliament House, India Gate and the President's Estate.

"With a thousand years of history, it is a city of contrasts that combines a unique ambience of ancient and the modern," my host Bharat Bedi so eloquently stated. It was a theme that resonated with me for the rest of my brief stay.

My advice to golfers is that between rounds, take the time to explore the area and experience the culture.

As a golf aficionado, first and foremost, you will want to add India to the list of countries you have played. That's because this country has a long history with the game.

Did you know that in 1829, Royal Calcutta was the first golf club opened outside Great Britain — a full 44 years before the game reached the shores of North America with the opening of Royal Montreal. Now there are over 230 golf courses spread across India.

And in case you're wondering, golf in India is very advanced. The courses I played here would not look out of place in any golf destination in North America and that's because the newest courses were designed by renowned architects. The caddies are all young males who are very knowledgeable and passionate about the game, and all the pro shops were stocked with state-of-the-art equipment. I elected to bring my clubs but the rentals here are all brand names and very new.

The course conditions, mainly because of the severe heat they endure — the temperature never dropped below a humid 35C when I was there in September — are not quite up to North American standards, with the exception of DLF course, which was in immaculate condition.

The best part of playing golf in India is the price — greens fees range

between \$40 to \$60 (U.S.) a round. That's great value for what you get.

I had the good fortune of testing some distinctly different courses in the National Capital Region (NCR) surrounding New Delhi during my tour and some of the courses stood out from the rest. So here are a few I would highly recommend you put on your golf bucket list when you go to India:

### **Jaypee Greens Golf & Spa Resort**

This 170-room luxury hotel is located near the suburb of Greater Noida, about 50 minutes southeast of downtown New Delhi. Surrounded by 450 acres of lush green space, villas, townhouses and towering condominiums, it felt like I was in an "oasis in the city."

The Greg Norman Signature course, built in 2000, holds the title of "India's first-ever 18-hole golf course." Norman's team transformed a flat, featureless piece of property into a gently rolling terrain and then excavated 24 acres to create 14 man-made ponds and 88 bunkers. At 7,347 yards, Jaypee Greens remains one of the longest golf courses in Asia.

I found the fairways wide and receptive, but beware: there are a number of risk/reward decisions to be made, and water is evident on almost every hole. As Norman said, "sooner or later, the course will test you and push you to the edge." My only negative is that the Tifdwarf greens are small and very inconsistent.

### **ITC Grand Bharat**

This golf resort is located about 40 kilometres southeast of Indra Gandhi International Airport but light years away from the hustle and bustle of Delhi. This luxury retreat is built on 3,000 acres of secluded property and possibly the most opulent resort you will find anywhere in India. The hotel complex was created using local sandstone and resembles a Taj Castle. It's a real "oasis of tranquility."

Grand Bharat's Classic Course is the first Jack Nicklaus signature course ever built in South Asia. The 27-hole layout offers three distinct nines. I found The Ridge to have gentle rolling fairways with substantial bunkering, The Valley has plenty of water, and The Canyon serves up craggy views of the picturesque Aravali foothills.

You may not need your driver on most par fours here because positioning off the tee is more important than distance. However, you will find that your approach shots are critical navigating the very narrow greens, firmly protected by ominous bunkers.

### **DLF Golf & Country Club**

The original 18-hole Arnold Palmer designed course has consistently ranked as the best course in India. In the past, DLF has hosted many European and Asian sanctioned tour events, including the 2008 Johnnie Walker Classic. In the last two years, there have been some very dramatic upgrades to this already spectacular property.

DLF kept nine holes of the original rotation so you can still get experience night golf under the lights. In 2013, the new Gary Player Signature nine opened and offers very uneven fairways with dramatic deep-faced bunkers. My biggest thrill was to tour his newest nine just days before it opened for play. The greens keepers were just completing the final touches in preparation for the 2015 Hero Women's Indian Open, part of the European tour.

The Player team reportedly moved over 200 million cubic tons of earth and brought in 27,000 tons of indigenous dholpur stone to form rock quarries and stone pillars while still taking full advantage of the rugged Aravali Range as a stunning backdrop.

Golf in India has certainly come a long way. "The Indian heritage and cultural experience, modern India, now coupled with



*The Greg Norman Signature course at Jaysee Greens Golf & Spa Resort is located 50 minutes from downtown New Delhi in Noida and holds the title of "India's first ever 18-hole golf course." The growth in golf over the past 15 years in India can be directly attributed to the country's new-found wealth.*

## **Just The Facts**

- **When to Visit:** New Delhi has four distinct seasons. Summer averages 40C and September is typically their monsoon season. January and February are the coldest when the temperature can dip as low as 4 or 5 degrees C at night with daytime highs in the upper teens. October, November, February or March is the best time to visit.

- **According to the Guinness Book of World Records, Yak Golf Course in Kupup, India is the highest altitude course at 3,970m.**

- **Tour East Holidays offers many exciting tours to India and can arrange golf while you are there. For more information, go to [www.toureast.com](http://www.toureast.com)**

a choice of golfing destinations, make for an irresistible travel package," sums up Aakarsh Choubey, the Senior Manager of Sales and Marketing for DLF Golf and Country Club.

So take the road less travelled, follow your passion and seek out the unknown. I guarantee you'll come back with memories that will last a lifetime. •

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# Cycling

*In the Land  
of the Rising Sun*

PHOTO BY BIGSTOCK



# Gillian Young discovers a very different Japan while cycling in Hiroshima



*By Gillian Young*  
TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

**O**NOMICHI, JAPAN — When you think of Japan you probably don't think about cycling. But far from the busy streets of Tokyo is a small port town that is a haven for cyclists.

Onomichi is in the eastern Hiroshima Prefecture and is home to the Shimanami Kaido. Kaido literally means “sea road” and this route passes across the bridges and islands of the Seto Inland Sea, making it the only land connection — for cyclists and pedestrians — between Japan's main island of Honshu and Shikoku.

The Shimanami Kaido is a cyclist's dream. The route was first opened in 1999, so the bridges are modern and a breeze to ride across, and the views of the Seto Inland Sea and the islands' small towns are breathtaking. The bicycle route is well marked and maintained, and even the ramps leading up to the bridges were built on small inclines with cyclists in mind. The route spans about 70 km between Onomichi City, in Hiroshima Prefecture, and Imabari City, in Ehime Prefecture.

Thousands of people come every year to experience the Shimanami Kaido. Some cyclists complete the trek in a day, but it is more comfortably enjoyed in two days with time for breaks and sightseeing. While some make the return trip by bicycle, many opt to make the return trip by bus or ferry.

In the fall, I had the pleasure of spending a day cycling the first half of the route with a group of 16 people. Our ride began with a short ferry ride over to Mukaishima Island, where we began, single file, breezing by houses, fields and farms. The sun shone brightly, lighting up the water and the gold and red painted trees. It was just warm enough to wear a T-shirt and there was a perfect crispness in the air that kept us cool.

While I'm normally more of a walker, the cycling made it possible to see more while still taking in all the sights, smells and sounds. I couldn't stop smiling, shouting out konnichiwa as we passed locals.

The first bridge took us over the sparkling sea to Innoshi-






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ma Island, where we paused to indulge more of our senses at a small sweet shop, Hatsusaku-daifuku. Our guide introduced us to wagashi, a Japanese confectionary made from pillowy soft glutinous rice, stuffed with a local citrus fruit that tasted like a freshly-picked orange.

With this extra fuel on board, we continued our ride until we reached a sweet little roadside ramen restaurant called Mitsubachi, where plates of oranges and watermelons and sweet tea were waiting for us. The rest of the group enjoyed big bowls of ramen while the kitchen whipped up a special gluten-free meal of fried rice with eggs and ham for me.

Once again energized, we continued our ride by the sea. I breathed in heavily. The air in Japan is like nothing I've ever experienced. There is something so pure about it that I found myself feeling better than I ever had.

As I am not a seasoned cyclist, the many stops along the way eased the ride and made it more of an adventure. One such stop was at the Oyamazumi Shrine Treasury that was barely accessible until the Shimanami Kaido highway was built. We were greeted with a special purification ceremony that included tea and cold towels and then shown the treasury, which contains the largest collection of samurai armour in the country.

Despite the frequent stops, near the end of the ride everything started to hurt. Perhaps it was the jet leg or the challenging final hills, but, at one point, when I went to scratch my nose, head in the clouds, I tumbled off my bicycle. The young man behind me, a well-known actor from Thailand, helped me adjust my seat and made sure I was okay. I thanked him and, ignoring the aches and pains, kept going.

As the sun was beginning to set, we rode over another bridge to Ikuchijima Island and, just when I thought that I could go no further, the perfect antidote appeared — Setoda Dolce ice cream. Some people come here just to sample this treat made with Hakata salt, defined by its mildly salty taste with a slight hint of sweetness. The flavour results from traces of bittern, a component of the seawater used in the production process. Fun fact: Japanese dairy is also amazing! I dug into a small cup of milk and sea salt and chestnut ice cream and nearly swooned.

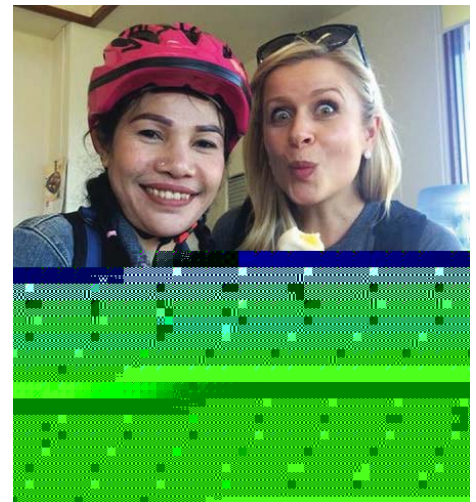
Our food journey didn't stop with ice cream. We continued our ride down small shopping streets, where we paused at Okatetsushouten for another treat — hot fish croquettes. The owner — a small elderly woman with a beautiful smile — requested a photo alone with me and made my day. In fact, everything we ate



PHOTOS BY GILLIAN YOUNG



*Our writer, with her blond hair and stature, was a star of sorts with the Japanese, but she herself especially loved making new friends and seeing a different off-the-beaten-track side of Japan. As she noted, cycle routes in Japan are not too difficult for novices.*



tasted heavenly and felt like added fuel. For the first time, I realized that sustained physical activity enhances the appetite and the palate. (I need to do more active vacations.)

At the end of the day, a small ferry arrived and, like a cradle, rocked us, under a beautiful sunset, all the way back to Onomichi and our hotel for a tempura dinner. With tired legs and a full belly, I fell into bed, feeling a well of gratitude for my most extraordinary day and the new friends I made along the way. •

## Just The Facts

### Where to Stay:

**Green Hill Hotel Onomichi.** A great waterfront hotel with varied breakfast, small comfortable rooms, and very easy access to cycle routes.

**Hotel Cycle.** A beautiful modern hotel in a refurbished warehouse along the Onomichi channel overlooking cargo ships in the harbor and the islands of Setouchi. The hotel has its own cycle shop, bakery, restaurant, bar and store.







commerce catches its groove.

So, despite arriving at my Mumbai hotel at 2 a.m. after a long international flight, I was on the already chaotic streets jostling with people and cars by 5:30 a.m. I was not alone. The koli fisher folk, fruit and vegetable market stallholders, newspaper sorters, office workers — and even a few cricketers — had already begun their day.

In many ways, Mumbai remains the small fishing village it started out as centuries ago. So, a stop at the Sassoon Docks, where, for as long as people can remember, the daily catch has been brought in aboard tattered wooden boats and then auctioned off and distributed across the city, is the natural place to begin my early morning tour.

The dock area is dark, wet, slippery and very busy by the time I arrive. I walk up from a side road lined with ice-crushing factories — an industry that thrives in a city so reliant on the daily catch — and a collection of people who make this very manual process run so efficiently. In a world full of clichés about “stepping back in time to see the way it was centuries ago,” here it seems this is the real deal.

In India, men do the fishing and women take over from there, so the grounds of the market are a colourful sight — women wait in their decorated saris while others sit peculiarly on their plastic bins that soon will hold their purchase. While men move the catch from boat to dock, the women laugh amongst themselves like gossiping schoolgirls.

I watch as the relay of fishermen load up their thatch baskets and then casually throw them from the boats to the men waiting on the dock — a notable distance away. Not a single



PHOTOS BY STEVE HOPE  
& BIGSTOCK

*The day begins early at the docks and markets of Mumbai, India's most populous and exciting city. Food is an important part of everyday life in the big city and Mumbai's restaurants serve up some of the best dishes.*

fish is dropped. I'm told "this is how we (Indians) got so good at cricket."

Bombay Duck, an odd looking, almost transparent fish (not a duck), seems to be in great demand at the market. The fish, whose bones are so soft they can be eaten, was favoured by the British when they ruled India. But because it's a fragile fish, it can't be transported very far. Maybe I'll order it for dinner.

By the time the rising sun casts a glow over Mumbai, the market is in full swing. Mini auctions are being held and women are aggressively haggling with the vendors.

When they finally agree on a price, the women load their baskets, put the overflowing bins on their heads and disappear into the throng. The noise is deafening but the atmosphere is electric.

"If any menu in Mumbai tells you that they have the best and freshest fish of the day," I'm told by a Mumbai expert, "the truth is the best and freshest catch of the day always goes to the Koli women's children."

The Koli fisher folk are a very distinct group — among the original inhabitants of the seven islands of "Bombay" — who prayed to the Goddess Mumba Devi, from whence Mumbai gets its name.

Koli women are known to be somewhat, can we say, excitable and boisterous. They make their presence known throughout the market but are respected for their hard work and economic independence. Sadly, no photographs are allowed to be taken in the market. This was one of the locations where terrorists arrived before holding hostages for three days after they launched their attacks on Mumbai on November 26, 2008, so security remains tight.

From the Sassoon Docks, I head to Crawford Market, another of the city's massive bazaars, where trucks laden with chickens are being unloaded. After being weighed, men carry up to 80 chickens on a modified back harness into the market. It's an amazing sight.

I wander aimlessly through the fruit and vegetable market, where the air is perfumed with the spices of India. Flower vendors try to get me to buy colourful garlands and lotus flowers — here the fragrances are much more pleasant.

The roads leading to Crawford Market are a beehive of activity; herbs and vegetables are sold out of burlap sacks while a few metres down the road, men sharpen knives on bicycle-powered turning stones, taxis and rickshaws call for attention, and uniformed school children head off to class.

The day has clearly begun in Mumbai



## Mumbai is a city of unique people, sights



*A wander about Mumbai wouldn't be complete without a look at the famed outdoor laundromat Dhobi Ghat, above, and the Dabbawala, right, piecing together their orders at Churchgate Station.*

*Renowned for their accuracy and organization, the Dabbawala deliver tiffin lunch boxes (dabba) to offices, residential buildings. It seems to be a makeshift operation that's full of holes and inefficiencies, but they've snagged themselves a 'Six Sigma' certified error rate — one mistake per 6 million deliveries. Quite remarkable, considering about 5,000 wala deliver upwards of 200,000 meals each day.*

*The outdoor laundry has about 700 washing platforms where about 200 washer-men families have been washing clothes for decades.*

— STEVE HOPE

and I haven't even had breakfast yet.

Bustling is a word that is thrown around a lot in the travellers' lexicon, but Mumbai defines this.

People, cows, carts, motorbikes, bicycles, goats, dogs, trucks, cars — they all share space on the city's increasingly modern streets.

Mumbai has its attractions, the ingenuity and hard-working nature of its people being one of them. And the best time to see it is in the morning light. •

## Just The Facts

- **The best way to tour Mumbai is with an organized tour group. Tour East Holidays offers many packages which include stops and tours of Mumbai. Tour East can also arrange the lowest airfare to India. Go to <https://www.toureast.com> for details.**







# As the Persian beauty slowly opens its doors to Western tourists again, we invite *Nasim Salamati* to remind us of this amazing country's history, traditions and customs

PHOTOS BY BIGSTOCK

**By Nasim Salamath**

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

**W**HENEVER I THINK of taking a vacation, my thoughts drift back to Zavareh, a charming place located in Iran's northeast Isfahan Province bordering the central desert area.

An important trade centre during the Seljuk period, Zavareh is a unique place where the customs and traditions of Iran remain a part of everyday life. You can spend hours exploring its dusty narrow streets, as I have, and come away with memories that will last a lifetime. There seems to be a surprise

around every corner in this neatly kept town, whose character has evolved over 5,000 years.

Because of its trading history, Zavareh is accustomed to welcoming visitors. Maybe that's why the residents here — about 7,800 at last count — seem to be so friendly to strangers. Don't be surprised if they invite you inside their traditional desert home — made of mud and brick — for tea and cake.

Before you enter, though, take notice of the knockers on the home's heavy wooden doors. They're there for a reason and there are usually two, one for males to use and the other for females.

These specialized knockers, which make distinctly different sounds, help the residents inside know the gender of the person at the door. If it's a man,

then the home's females will cover themselves in the proper attire according to Iranian traditions, and a male will know to answer the door. If the woman knocker is employed, then a female can open the door. Some homes even come equipped with a third knocker, which is reserved for total strangers.

Make sure you remove your shoes before you enter one of Zavareh's handsome homes, which seem to glisten like jewels under the relentless desert sun.

Once inside, you will pass through a long hallway featuring a vaulted arched ceiling. The city's grander homes also have beautiful blue mosaic pools and fountains in their backyard garden, which is always flush with pomegranate trees.

The pomegranate is a staple in Zavareh and provides lots of colour to the city's drab desert surroundings. The trees grow to about 2.5 metres in height and sprout lovely orange flowers during the summer months. The fruit is harvested in the fall and some residents keep the pomegranates fresh for spring by burring them in soil.

Domes dominate Zavareh's skyline — domed roofs are part of a desert building's ventilation system and help keep residents cool during the hottest summer months.

The architecture here is unique, so unique that every year Iran's architectural students come to learn about the city's stunning buildings, like its historic mosque made of ceramic and the grand fountain standing in front of it.

Homes here usually consist of four rooms laid out in a cross formation, known as a charsofehs, and are joined in the middle by the high domed roof. Most of these houses have a special basement, known as a sardab, that's located three or four metres underground. The sardab is a cold dark place that's perfect for storing meats and fruits.

In the cooler winter months, residents usually move into rooms located off the backyard garden, which get lots of direct sunlight and keeps them warmer. The home's communal bathrooms are also located off the backyard garden.

It's a much different story in summer, when homes become furnaces during the day and take a long time to cool. To get a good night's sleep, many families climb onto their roofs, snuggle under a quilt to protect them from the chill of a desert night, and drift off under a canopy of stars. While they sleep, the night air circulates through the home — open doors and wind catchers draw the heat of the day from the mud walls of the house and by the time morning comes, the conditions in the house are far more comfortable.

The people of Zavareh are perfect hosts and the woman of the house will make sure strangers never leave hungry. Treats like ajeel, a delicious mixture of nuts and seeds that have been simmered in lime juice before being salted and roasted, and meeveh, an arrangement of fresh fruits, are normally served to guests. Expect homemade bread, local yogurt and a cup of tea to be offered.

If you're lucky enough to get an invitation to dinner, make sure you arrive hungry because nightly meals in Iran are usually an elaborate feast. Dishes are set out on a large white cloth called a sofreh, which is spread over many beautifully decorated carpets. Guests sit on soft cushions and enjoy a variety of regional dishes that are perfectly prepared by people who are proud of their culinary culture. If the desert winds are not too severe,



families will serve guests in their lovely backyards.

Carpet weaving is an essential part of Persian culture and the women of Zavareh are recognized as some of the best at the craft. Weaving is usually done in the home by women on a giant frame, called a dare-ghali.

Some of those carpets eventually make their way to the city's bazaar, located next to the Zavareh Grand Mosque, the country's first four-portico mosque in the post-Islamic era.

The bazaar has a special charm and features a Roman ceil-



ing with holes that provide lots of natural light. Open every day except Friday, the compact bazaar is a lively place with lots of small shops and some of the vendors can trace their roots back to the days when Zavareh was a stop on the Silk Road.

Once people arrived at the bazaar with herds of camels in tow to trade, but now tourists are offered joy rides on these ships of the desert, and — take it from me — the opportunity of riding one of the gentle giants over the sand dunes while the sun dips behind the desert mountains is an experi-

*Door knockers have a special place in Iranian society. The knockers even make different sounds. One lets occupants of a home know if a man is at the door while another signals a female is visiting. Some doors even have knockers for strangers.*







# Inside Ecuador

Contributor *Necee Regis*  
leaves the tourist routes  
to see country's inner beauty



PHOTOS BY NECÉE REGIS

**O**TAVALO, ECUADOR — This Latin America beauty is so much more than the Galapagos and Quito. Though both these destinations are bucket list-worthy, I chose instead to explore a region two hours north of the capital city in the Andean province of Imbabura. My decision was not based on my radical sense of adventure — I’m a city gal at heart — but on the recommendation of a friend who built a house on an inactive volcanic mountain above the town of Otavalo and wouldn’t stop singing its praises. I had to see for myself, and was happy I did. It’s not a luxury destination — for sure — but the overall experience is both rugged and sublime.

Otavalo is described as a land of perpetual spring. With an elevation of just over 3,000 metres, and located between three volcanoes —Imbabura (4,630 metres), Cotacachi (4,995 metres) and Mojanda (4,263 metres) —the weather is never too hot or too cold.

For centuries, Otavalo’s market has played an important role in the region due to its location as a crossroads in the Andes, making it the cultural and trading heart of Ecuador’s vibrant Quechua community, famed for skills in weaving, woodworking, leatherwork and embroidery.

Travellers today might be familiar with what is known as the Saturday Market, said to be the largest indigenous market in all of Latin America. Artisans from surrounding villages journey to the Plaza de los Ponchos and set



*Ecuador is far more than Quito and the Galapagos. It’s lovely Peguche waterfall, opposite page, the Cotacachi volcano, top, talented people like master weaver Jose Cotacachi, good food and a busy market in Otavalo.*



*Ecuador is noted for its leather goods, and this leather shop in Cotacachi has lots on offer. The Saturday Market in Otavalo's Plaza de los Ponchos has lots of bargains.*



up stalls with all manner of goods such as hand-woven textiles, spools of wool, embroidered traditional clothing, leather goods, hammocks, tablecloths, tapestries, jewellery, carved gourds and musical instruments, including traditional Andean panpipes. (Tour buses from Quito arrive on Saturdays, though the market is also open, and less crowded, on weekdays.)

It's worth getting up extra-early to visit the animal market, *Feria de las Animales* (6-10 a.m., Saturday only), a boisterous event on the outskirts of town where vendors hawk animals large and small. From a distance, the event looks like a free for all. In fact, the setup is quite logical with large animals such as cows, horses and sheep at one end, and smaller animals such as rabbits, chickens and guinea pigs at the other.

It's also worth a visit to the centrally-located food market — selling fruits, vegetables, seafood and meat — for an inexpensive and delicious lunch. Take a seat at one of the many small *fondas* and enjoy a heaping plate of succulent roasted pork accompanied by a heaping pile of hominy, beans and potato dumplings, all for \$3.75 or less.

After visiting the markets in Otavalo, I was eager to explore some of the towns where crafts are produced. Located about 12 kilometres north, Cotacachi is celebrated as a centre for fine leather. It's also a popular destination for North American expats, meaning the town is more spiffed up and pretty than Otavalo.

The sweet smell of leather permeates every shop clustered along the main streets, each offering a specialty hand-crafted line of boots, jackets, belts, purses, wallets and even saddles for equestrian enthusiasts. English is spoken

### **Just The Facts**

- *Having a car is a plus but not necessary. A bus runs from Quito to Otavalo and, once there, taxis are inexpensive.*
- *It's best to travel with U.S. Currency.*
- *Where to stay: Casa Mojanda Apartado 160, Otavalo. Rates \$140-\$420 - <http://www.casamojanda.com/> The hotel will arrange transportation from Quito.*
- *For more information: <http://ecuador.travel/>*

in most establishments so don't be afraid to barter. (Bargaining in the markets is also permitted, if not expected.)

After shopping, there are quite a few spots where one can find a tasty lunch. I wandered into the courtyard of D'Anita Restaurant, a small family-run establishment, and enjoyed perfectly prepared grilled corvina accompanied by hand-cut fries and a broccoli salad (\$14).

The small village of Peguche is home to many weavers and several shops act as co-ops for local families' work.

In *Artesania El Gran Condor*, you'll find everything from rugs and wall hangings to ponchos, scarves, sweaters, shawls, children's clothing and finger puppets. In the lower level, Luzmilla Arias de Ruiz demonstrated working on treadle and backstrap looms, and how thread is made on a spinning wheel.

Its slightly more difficult, though not impossible, to find the studio of master weaver Jose Cotacachi. (Hint: It's hidden on a side street behind the church.) Inside, a small cheerful man weaves a variety of items on his treadle loom, including tapestries and sweaters. On my visit, Cotacachi explained that his father was a

weaver and that he and his sister started leaning the craft at age 9. By 25, he was creating his own colourful and complex geometric patterns and designs based on symbols from pre-Hispanic civilizations, as well as abstract images of birds, fish, volcanoes and indigenous people in Ecuador. On a windowsill in the workroom, he keeps a piece of cactus to demonstrate how red dye is made from small insects that live on the plant.

After visiting the master weavers in Peguche, it's an easy 15-minute hike through a eucalyptus forest to the *Cascadas de Peguche*, a site considered sacred and run by the local indigenous community. Follow the path to a sturdy bridge at the top of the 18-metre-high falls, where water rushes down from the foothills of the Imbabura volcano.

For another spectacular hike, drive to the extinct Mojanda volcano above Otavalo, where the Fuya Fuya peak looms over three mountain lakes surrounded by high-altitude grasslands called *paramo*. Paths around the lakes and up to the summit offer stunning views and a chance to observe more than 100 species of birds.

Eco-tourism is popular throughout the region.

One of the better-known places to stay is Casa Mojanda, an Andean organic farm and hotel above Otavalo. Small cabins and family houses, all with private baths, gardens and terraces, offer views of the Imbabura and Cotacachi volcanoes and the verdant valley between. Breakfast is served daily, and *prix fixe* dinner is served nightly featuring produce from their gardens.

After two weeks of exploring, I was ready for sea level pursuits. Next stop, Galapagos! •



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## *Carmen Chai* digs into the city's fabled dishes

**V**IENNA — This is the third time in three days that I'm devouring a schnitzel bigger than my face. The pork cutlet pours over my giant plate, it's pounded paper thin with a crispy golden exterior. I cut a triangle-sized bite, squeeze fresh lemon, dousing the morsel in its juices, and then smear it through the remnants of my potato salad. I wash the perfect bite down with a gulp of blond beer. This is so good! I'm already negotiating how I can fit in a fourth stop on my travels.

The server at Figlmüller – my dealer of choice for my schnitzel addiction – gets it. Herr Christian works 12-hour shifts, four days a week, at the Viennese institution, from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. at night. More



TRAVELIFE FILE PHOTO

*The plate-sized schnitzel at Figlmüller is served golden brown and paper thin. The original restaurant opened in 1905 and has been a landmark in Vienna ever since.*

than 95 per cent of the time, patrons order the famous schnitzel.

“I could eat schnitzel every day for the rest of my life,” Christian says when our neighbours ask him if he’s sick of the Austrian staple.

“When I start my day, I think they won’t be appetizing, but once I smell them, I want to take a bite,” he explains. We joke that he should take a mouthful. For quality control’s sake, of course.

With our joint love for schnitzel declared, he warms up. Christian says that three men in the restaurant’s basement pound out 1,500 pork cutlets daily – 500 portions each. They’re broad-shouldered men, headphones in their ears, techno music blaring, meat tenderizers in hand as they hack at the palm-sized flesh until it’s the size of a wafer-thin pizza.

From my rudimentary understanding of schnitzel making (I’m much more well-versed in the art of schnitzel eating), the cutlet is seasoned and coated in flour, eggs and breadcrumbs and it’s fried until golden brown. By the time it arrives in front of you, you’re too busy eating to bother to ask questions.

Christian – and the other servers we come across during our multiple visits – won’t divulge the trade secrets, though. Especially the ingredients for the restaurant’s famous potato salad.

This isn’t your grandma’s picnic potato salad. It’s creamy and luxurious – you taste acidity, salt, something sweet, something tart. It’s garnished with lamb lettuce dressed in balsamic vinegar. This is the potato salad that brings other restaurants to its knees – even they concede their own recipes aren’t as good. I start off sharing the side dish with my friend, but midway through our meal, we decide it’s time for a second serving.

Once Christian leaves the dining area, we swap guesses with the tables in the vicinity. There has to be a pinch of sugar, I suggest. Our Dutch neighbours are sure there’s white wine vinegar and the French are certain there’s Dijon mustard. This detective work ends with only one conclusion: its absolutely delicious.

Now that I know I can eat my weight in fried meat, it’s time to walk off the damage. We wade through the throngs of tourists in the city’s historic centre, explore the State Opera House and wander about the Austrian National Library.

While in the stillness of the room filled with centuries-old books, I hear it: my rumbling tummy. It’s dinnertime and I already know what I’ll be grazing on.

Tafelspitz doesn’t sound appetizing in the slightest and its translated description — boiled beef — doesn’t help its situation either. But I’ve heard enough about this storied dish, served in most Austrian homes – and in this case, a restaurant called Plachutta — to know that it’s a must-try.

Our server, Jakub, brings a steaming pot to the table. It’s filled with beef broth, hefty slices of beef shoulder and carrots, leeks and green onions. There’s strips of pancake that are soaked in the broth he ladles into my bowl. After a blustery cold winter’s day, this is hitting the spot.

He returns 10 minutes later. “Are you done with the soup?”

I most certainly am not — I want to nurse this soup all night but Jakub explains it’s only half of the fun of tafelspitz. He expertly scoops the two slices of tender beef out of the pot and onto my plate. The vegetables are adorned on top and to their left is a heaping pile of roasted potatoes. The bone marrow from the pot sits on top of a piece of brown bread ready to absorb the juices. And to top it off, the beef is paired with an apple and horseradish sauce, while the potatoes are dressed with a chive mayonnaise.

Turns out I can eat my weight in tafelspitz, too. Every speck of food on my plate is polished off. I’m ready to find and adopt an Austrian grandma so I can eat this dish again.

But the night is young, so we return to the cold to trek over to



*The apfelstrudel, top, and the traditional beef dish known as tafelspitz, right, are treats that you can't leave Vienna without trying. Thank goodness tourists are required to do a lot of walking to take in all the sites the city has to offer, like amazing Belvedere Castle, left.*

Café Central for some live music and to take in the Viennese café culture.

The thing is, you can’t have coffee on its own when you’re surrounded by pastries. Travelling to Vienna without a helping of apfelstrudel and chocolate torte would be obscene, so we order desserts for the table.

The apfelstrudel is warm, flaky on top, with sweet cinnamon in the centre and drenched in crème anglaise, which I liberally drown the pastry in. Even the garnishes are devoured: whipped cream sitting on a bed of chopped nuts and sun-dried apple chips.

I vow to never eat a bite again and wonder how I’ll fit into my dress the next day. But I get dressed in the morning, and well, I eat again.

It’s veal goulash this time and, with just a few bites in, I already know I’ll be sopping up the leftover gravy with bread. It’s served with spätzle — a soft egg noodle — that’s buttery and cuts into the spice of the goulash. My friend’s beef goulash comes with semmelknoedel, bread dumplings held together with onions, parsley and butter. We sit in silence, heads over our plates, eating until not a spot is left.

The server returns to our table with a second round of beer. He’s amazed at our insatiable hunger.

“Where does it all go?” he quips.

Once we settle the bill, we don our parkas, toques and scarves. It’s time for more exercise to work off the calories and work up our appetites again. ●



A close-up photograph of a dreamcatcher's web, featuring intricate knotting in blue, red, green, and white threads. The background is a solid, vibrant red. The dreamcatcher's web is the central focus, with its threads radiating from the center towards the edges of the frame.

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