

JANUARY / MARCH 2016

travelife

MAGAZINE

REFLECTIONS OF AN ITALIAN HOLIDAY

IN THIS
ISSUE
WE GOT TO

COLOMBIA, GREECE, LOUISIANA, P.E.I.,
NICARAGUA, GERMANY, HOLLAND,
FRANCE, CHINA, GUATEMALA, JAPAN,
COLORADO, MEXICO & CAMBODIA

&

- WE OFFER TIPS WHEN TRAVELLING WITH KIDS
- WE CHECK OUT SOME GREAT HOTELS
- GIVE YOU SOME PHOTO LESSONS FROM AN IKON EXPERT
- SHOW YOU HOW TRAVELLERS STAY PLUGGED IN



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Cover

Marc Atchison spent three nights in one of the most romantic and isolated areas of Italy and his stay at the legendary Hotel Santavenere was the highlight of his trip.

See Marc's story on page 40



PACKING FOR VACATIONS SHOULD BE

Child's Play

Writer *Jenna King* offers up 10 tips she employs when travelling with her kids

EVERY YEAR SINCE they were babies, I've been taking my kids on beach vacations — from Barbados, to Turks & Caicos, to a Caribbean cruise and all over Mexico — sometimes with family and a couple of times on my own.

It stressed me out in the beginning, figuring out what to pack and what to leave, and trying to anticipate all the things that could come up during the holiday so that I could be as prepared as possible.

The part that made me the most nervous was getting from A to B. The travel part can be testing for adults, never mind for little ones — the long lines, the waiting, the being confined to a small space for hours. Whenever I see tired moms trying to calm a screaming baby on a plane or dads on their last nerve chasing a toddler, mid-tantrum, around a packed waiting area, I think, please don't let that be me.

I've read articles on the subject and asked other parents for suggestions, and after over a dozen trips with the kids, I no longer feel nervous about the travel part.

For instance, on our last trip back from Puerto Escondido, Mexico, I travelled solo with my 4-year-old daughter, 6-year-old son, two big suitcases, two kid suitcases and a stroller.

The trip involved a two-hour bumpy, windy taxi ride, followed by a five hour flight that arrived in Toronto at 2 a.m. Plus, just to keep things interesting, my son caught a bug on the last day — he had a fever and, there's no nice way to say this, it was coming out of both ends.

Even so, the 10-hour trip went smoothly.

Despite pulling over to vomit and emergency runs to the washroom, the kids were laughing in the terminal, enjoying a movie on the plane and chatting happily while in the long line for customs.

Having travelled with a nursing baby, a toddler and an infant, one newly potty-trained child and one on my lap in diapers, I can tell you each stage comes with its own set of considerations and challenges and the key is always good planning.

So here's 10 tips I'd like to share with you to help travelling with children a little easier:

1 — Streamline your packing

The first couple of trips, I made the mistake of packing everything I could ever possibly need, which of course meant that I ended up lugging around a lot of things I never used. Be strategic in what you pack. Are there items (like sand toys) that can easily be purchased when you get to your destination? Also, check what baby gear they have at the destination — cribs, high chairs, car seats — so you can minimize the amount of things you have to bring with you.

2 — Pack a surprise bag

Bring a bag with toys, books and activities your kids haven't seen before (or haven't seen in awhile) and pull something out whenever they start to get bored or antsy. Choose small and light items that don't make noise (no one wants to be stuck on a flight next to a child with a whistle) and steer clear from anything messy or with small parts that are bound to get lost. I always make a trip to the dollar store and pick up some crayons, notebooks





The inventor of personal viewing devices must travel with kids a lot because while many parents limit their use in the home, the small screens can keep kids entertained for a long time while they are cooped up in tight spaces like a car or an airplane.

and stickers. Matchbox cars, binoculars, colouring books and small games (like magnetic travel-size Snakes & Ladders) are other big wins with my kids.

3 — Bring snacks

When you're travelling, it's sometimes hard to predict when your next meal will be and if you're like me, you live in fear of a hungry child. Make sure to pack lots of snacks in your carryon — granola bars, crackers, apples and raisins are all good choices. I also consider the sugar content — I wouldn't drink a big cup of coffee before sitting in a tight space for five hours so I don't give my kids sugary treats before a flight; I like them nice and calm.

4 — Let them move

Whether travelling by land or air, your little ones have several hours of sitting still ahead of them, so encourage them to move around and burn off some energy before boarding. Some airports have a little play area for kids — how brilliant — but you can also just walk around or find someplace where they can run and jump a little. I rarely use the advance boarding option that's offered for those travelling with young children as it just means extending the amount of time they need to be confined.

5 — Keep them comfortable

For some kids, travel can cause physical discomfort, be it pain from air pressure changes to motion sickness. During takeoff and landing, nurse or bottle feed your baby, give a candy or sippy cup to toddlers and some chewing gum to older kids. Keeping them sucking, chewing and/or swallowing will help their ears to equalize. To help relieve motion sickness encourage your child to look out the window.

6 — Technology is your friend

While I'm fairly stingy about how much screen time I allow at home, all bets are off when we travel. (Thank you to whoever invented personal viewing devices on airplanes!) Where one isn't available, bring a tablet or portable DVD player — and don't forget the kiddie headphones. If, like me, you have a child prone to motion sickness, listening to music and looking out the window

is a great way to pass the time.

7 — Bring a change of clothes

Whether or not your child is in diapers, newly potty trained or a messy eater, you'll be so happy you packed an extra set of clothes. Also consider if you're travelling to a different climate. I'm usually leaving -10C weather and arriving in the full 30C heat and humidity at my destination. It can take a good hour or two getting through customs, waiting for luggage and getting a ride to the hotel, so I always pack summer clothes in my carryon so the kids won't have to sweat it out.

8 — Ask for help

An extra set of hands or a jump of the line can be a lifesaver, particularly when you're travelling with kids on your own. Don't be shy to ask the flight attendant to keep an eye on your sleeping child so you can take your other child to the washroom. If there's a really long line at customs and your little one is hungry, tired, fussy or all three, ask staff if there's a quicker way. You might be pleasantly surprised by the special accommodation made for those travelling with small children.

9 — Teach them to be good little travellers

The more your kids learn to be considerate travellers, the easier they will be to travel with, which is good for everybody. On planes, I'm perpetually reminding my kids to use an inside voice and to be mindful not to kick the seat in front of them. More than once, co-travellers have thanked us. It's not an entirely selfless effort; being considerate makes the people around us more understanding when we have to use the washroom four times an hour or if a tantrum starts brewing.

10 — Breathe and have fun

So your daughter's cute travel dress is covered in grape juice and your son didn't nap and is teetering on the brink of a full meltdown. Maybe you never realized how loud your kids are and have been the target of about a thousand dirty looks since you left home. Take a breath and let it go. It's all going to be okay. After all, you're on vacation. •



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The Hazelton's state-of-the-art screening room gets a good workout every September when Hollywood types invade Toronto for the annual TIFF event.

Toronto's Hazelton Hotel Where Stars Come Out



The posh Hazelton Hotel is a true boutique property located in Toronto's trendy urban village called Yorkville. Surrounded by high-end designer shops and the city's best restaurants, it's no wonder this hotel is a favourite of Hollywood A-listers.

Posh property favoured by the Hollywood elite makes every guest feel like an A-lister

By Marc Atchison
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

TORONTO — There's not an autograph seeker in sight when I reach the entrance of the chic Hazelton Hotel, where there's usually an army of them camped out, pen at the ready, hoping to capture a celebrity signer as they leave, or enter, the posh property located in this city's tony "urban village" called Yorkville. The Hazelton, you see, is the hotel of choice for most of the big name Hollywood stars who come to Canada's largest city each September to see, or be seen, at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), now regarded as one of the most influential of its kind on the planet.

This being a cool November day, though, most of the Hollywood heavyweights are back in warmer climes and the autograph seekers have left their post.

It's just the doorman and me standing at the entrance and he's treating me like I'm Bradley Cooper. Well, there is a slight resemblance. Okay, very slight.

I shuffle past the smiling young man holding the door and enter the "boutique" property that's also home to one of Canada's most revered restaurants, One, owned and operated by superstar Chef Mark McEwan.

Once inside, staff snaps to attention and make me feel like I've just arrived from Hollywood; General Manager Nancy Munzar-Kelly wouldn't



Hollywood stars like Brad Pitt, Julia Roberts and Clive Owen are just a few of the A-listers that have been seen walking around the Hazelton, Toronto's hottest hotel which treats everyone like they are film stars.

have it any other way.

While the hotel specializes in welcoming the likes of Cooper, Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts — to name just a few of the Hollywood stars who have been seen wandering the Hazelton's glittering halls — staff here are equally attentive to every guest, even one who drops by for a quick afternoon cocktail at the hotel's trendy lounge, where I meet the enchanting general manager.

Munzar-Kelly's youthful appearance belies the fact she's a veteran of the hospitality industry; she started her career at Toronto's legendary Four Seasons' Inn on the Park Hotel. After years of working her way through the ranks, Munzar-Kelly now finds herself in one of the most enviable, yet demanding, positions in the Canadian hotel business, thanks mainly to the Hazelton's star-studded clientele.

However, Munzar-Kelly relishes the challenges that come with such a high-profile position.

There are many reasons why stars of the big screen like to stay at this Leading Hotels of the World member. Near the top of that list is the Hazelton's amazing screening room, designed by Christopher Hansen and his Beverly Hills' Simply Home Entertainment company. The 25-seat theatre is perfect for hotel guests to host some private screenings during TIFF. It affords stars lots of privacy and features a 16-foot-high ceiling and mohair-wrapped walls for extra soundproofing. The theatre comes with lots of other high-tech toys, like a cutting-edge digital projection system and super sound devices that make the stars think they're sitting in the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles, where the Oscars are handed out.

The Hazelton also boasts a world-class Valmont Spa, featuring out of this world treatments and therapists — something pampered Hollywood stars cannot live without — and palatial guest rooms that offer all the comforts demanded by high-profile film stars.

While obviously guarded about the movie stars who stay at the luxurious 77-room property, Munzar-Kelly does share some "inside" stories about the demands placed on the hotel by Hollywood's elite.

"We've had some unusual requests, that's for sure," says Munzar-Kelly. "Like the time a star demanded we buy a \$128,000 (U.S.) Hästens bed for their use during their stay.

"Of course, we acquired the bed and still have it, thanks to an agreement we came to with the manufacturer."

Some guests arrive with an entourage in tow and book an entire floor — 25 rooms at about \$1,000 a night during TIFF week. Others bring along their own chef because they're on strict organic diets and others have been known to arrive with oxygen tanks.

No request seems to phase Munzar-Kelly, however. In fact, the Hazelton GM seems to relish the challenges and says regular travellers can learn from the stars in regards to how best use a hotel's services. Munzar-Kelly offers up these six tips on how to travel like a Hollywood star:

1. BOOK DIRECT: You wouldn't expect a Golden Globe winner to book on Trivago, so why should you? Hotels have dedicated sales people to ensure VIPs get exactly what they ask for when travelling. You can take advantage of this, too. Call the hotel and let them know what kind of room you're looking for (balcony, view of city, espresso maker, his and her sinks, etc.) and your budget.

2. PLAN AHEAD: While you may not have a personal assistant or publicist on the payroll à la Kim Kardashian, a simple call the front desk before you arrive can get you a list of the city hot spots — restaurants, clubs, shopping, etc. Once you know where you'd like to go, let the concierge work their magic. With a pre-call from a recognized Les Clefs D'Or Concierge, the restaurant will



Hazelton GM Nancy Munzar-Kelly and head concierge Ronaldo Breton are never fazed by the requests they get from Hollywood stars and seem to relish the challenges film stars pose. However, thanks to the posh rooms at the Hazelton, there's very little to complain about.

know to give you the star treatment.

3. WRITE A HOSPITALITY RIDER: Stars always travel with a rider — a personal request list sent to the hotel before arrival. Would you like a bottle of champagne chilled and waiting for you with two glasses upon check-in? What about lavender-scented candles surrounding your soaker tub? By sending a rider to the hotel prior to check-in, everything you want (champagne, candles, etc., etc.) will be waiting just the way you like it. Best of all, many requests are free.

4. TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF THE CONCIERGE: The concierge (The Hazelton, by the way, has one of the best in the business in the person of Ronaldo Breton) is there to assist guests (celebrity or not) with their needs and can plan every detail with the highest degree of service. They have insider information on the best shows, dining, shopping and more. The concierge services at The Hazelton can even help with errands like pet-walking and grooming, vehicle detailing, floral pickups and dry cleaning.

5. PRIM AND PREP BEFORE A NIGHT OUT: Ever wonder why the stars look so great on the red carpet? Let the hotel spa know your concerns and needs and they will suggest treatments to mend both body and soul. If you're planning on going to a film screening where the cameras will be flashing and your favourite celebrity may make an appearance, The Spa at The Hazelton suggests their Body Glow Treatment, a 60-minute revitalizing exfoliation followed by a self-tan treatment for that South Beach glow.

6. RECHARGE WITH THE PERFECT PILLOW: The Hazelton offers an extensive pillow menu to best suit your sleep needs. Whether you're looking for memory foam, anti-snore or hypoallergenic, a pillow menu is definitely something VIPs and A-listers take full advantage of to get the most revitalizing rest."

Lastly, Munzar-Kelly says never assume you can't get a reservation at the hotel eatery. Just because the patio at One Restaurant looks full doesn't mean you can't get a table.

"If George Clooney doesn't need a reso, neither do you," says the GM.

In all probability, the person sitting next to you at One will be a Hollywood A-lister. Try not to stare. •

• The Hazelton Hotel is located at 118 Yorkville Ave. Rates start around \$400 a night. For information, go to <http://www.thehazeltonhotel.com/> To book a table at Mark McEwen's One restaurant, go to <http://one.mcewangroup.ca/>

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Inside *The Real* Greece



Dina Maniatis takes us far from the tourist areas of Greece and gives us a look inside every day life for the people of one village

PHOTOS BY GEORGE PAPADATOS

KANDILA, GREECE — This may look and feel like the majority of the villages found in Greece, but it possesses an emblematic history that defines its existence. Kandila's homes are half built and its roads aren't paved or even defined. The villagers are sheltered and modest and farming is the main livelihood.

Welcome to the real Greece, which can only be found when one wanders past the beach bars, aqua blue waters and promiscuous ambiance most tourists seek out when they venture to this ancient land.

I am not a stranger in Kandila. Both my parents were born and raised in this small village of 800 inhabitants, nestled in the province of Arkadia, south of Athens.

I've returned to my ancestral village for another notorious summer escapade. This time around, though, I've decided that, although island hopping is vital and necessary to master a perfect tan, short-term dating and geographic awareness, a village-cation is just as purposeful.

I didn't always echo these sentiments. As a child, our family would spend 10 painstaking days here in what back then seemed to be eternal

isolation from the real world.

As I've matured, though, so has my appreciation for simplicity and authenticity. And Kandila is just that — an oasis of seclusion and relaxation.

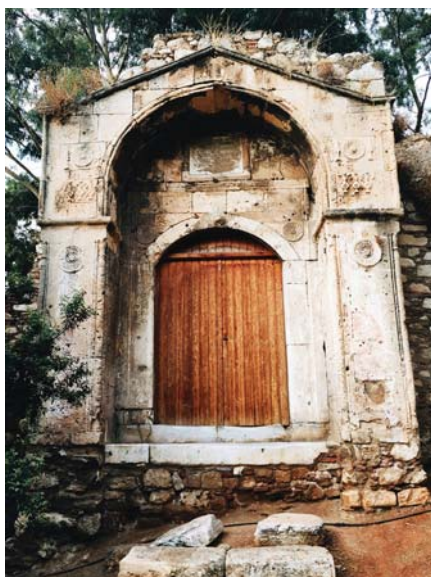
However, life is tough for the proud people of Kandila and they take nothing for granted.

To fully appreciate and identify with Kandila, you have to understand its history, which dates as far back as the 6th century BC.

Kandila's geographical location was very strategic during ancient times. A junction point to southern Greece, it's amazing to think people mas-



Greece is a country that offers visitors many different looks, from glorious seascape views and tranquil rural scenes of shepherds tending their flock, opposite page, to quiet fishing ports where boats bob in the gentle surf, glorious sun-drenched beaches and ancient landmarks frozen in time. But in small villages, like Kandila, they get to experience the real Greece, where people work hard in the fields and where life has not changed much over the centuries.



Old buildings, some dating back to the earliest days of Greece, and well-worn streets, where townsfolk sit enjoying the relentless beauty of this glorious country while sipping a beverage and sharing local gossip, is what you'll find when you explore Greece's small towns.

terminated a lifestyle that still exists, pioneering cultivation, masonry and architecture that still survives here today.

Crucial to the Spartans, Kings of the Mycenaean Era, the Ottoman Empire, the Olympic races, the military and the Orthodox religion, Kandila is a victorious refuge for its people.

The village's Panagia Monastery (Mother of God), built in the mid 1600s along the side of the mountain, became known as the hidden, high-ranking military hospital run by a monk in the crusade against the Turks. Today, it serves as a Christian sanctuary for nuns. Hundreds of people make the ascent by foot to the top of the mountain where the view is remarkable.

As you can imagine, activity is limited in Kandila and its people drive to the main city Tripoli to get whatever they may need. There is no waste and there is no excessive consumerism. People do not live beyond their means here. That's probably because their means only stretch so far. The people who live here work hard by doing physically demanding and labour-intensive farming.

You want organic? You get organic in Kandila. In fact, that's your only option. For lunch I enjoy farm-to-table fries, tomato salad, a hunk of feta drizzled with olive oil, sun dried oregano and keftedakia (mini lamb burgers). Yes Virginia, the Greeks conceptualized mini sliders long before Gordon Ramsay.

There is no definitive start or finish to the work day here. No one calls in sick or complains about their working conditions. In Greek we say "to sweat blood," which means that when you work, you work until you can't work any more. Somehow, the villagers keep going and do it with incredible passion and drive. Maybe that's because Kandila's farmers are pivotal to the food supply for the entire region.

Each morning during my stay, I'm awoken by intense heat, blinding sunlight, rooster calls and church bells. Sleeping in is not an option in here, it appears. But that's okay. Regardless, I'll take a nap after lunch for a couple of hours.

In between naps though, we eat — a lot! We also drink and visit neighbours, who live in unlocked homes, and gossip and philosophize for hours. Hey, we're Greek.

My extended family allows me to think critically and to challenge my own intellectual capacity. I hear their stories and learn that by removing myself from all my modern social influences and obligations, I can be inspired and recognize what life means outside of my bubble.

I'm amazed and humbled when I talk to the locals — they are fascinated with my modern existence, but I am more impressed with their strong will and simple life.

In the afternoon, we congregate at Klimataria taverna and café bar (one of only a few in the village), which is surrounded by grapevines, as indicated by its Greek name. Again, we eat the food grown by my grandmother's sister's son, who lives down the street. We are one big happy family again. That's love. That's the village.

My grandfather's stone house was built in the early 1900s and is emblematic of his military and spiritual relations to his country, despite its frail composition. Embraced by fig trees and grapevines, the house includes a wine cellar and a wood-burning oven; the house is very simple, raw and minimally functional.

What this humble home represents, however, is a rich family unity. As such, Kandila is an escape and many people who left once upon a time (such as my parents) for a better life, find themselves returning for what the heart longs — simplicity.

Living in Athens, or even Toronto for that matter, you can't help but want and need to detach yourself from the stresses of modern life. Consequently, our house in Kandila doesn't have a TV, it doesn't have Internet, there is but one bathroom, a small kitchen table and limited hot water. Yet, we make it work.

Here we spend quality time — family time done right.

For six days this time around, I wasn't bored senseless or itching to check Facebook. I was serene, calm and relaxed. I reflected on life and watched my niece and nephews play in the front yard as I picked a few figs from the tree. My father intends on passing his home to my sisters and I. We plan to make it stronger physically with new brick and mortar and stronger emotionally with more family vacations. •

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Chain Reaction

Visitors to Louisiana get very different views of the notorious and brutal slave trade at two distinct plantation sites

By Marc Atchison
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

VACHERIE, LA — The grand Antebellum home I see standing at the end of a narrow red brick path looks like something out of *Gone With The Wind*. I'm awestruck by the sheer size of the 28 oak trees that line the path, a natural honour guard for the regal white house with the giant Doric columns, which correspond to the number of oaks.

The trees' massive limbs shade me as I walk towards the front door of the Big House, the centrepiece of this lovely historic plantation known as Oak Alley.

Standing on the portico while admiring the Garden of Eden setting surrounding me, it's hard to fathom that this beautiful house has such an ugly past.

Oak Alley, you see, is a reminder of the slave trade and one of America's darkest periods.

The majestic entrance, which is one of the most photographed landmarks in the U.S. South, masks the plantation's repulsive past, when its owners made their fortune on the backs of those they kept in chains.

There were once hundreds of these plantations standing along River Road in this farming community that straddles the mighty Mississippi River just outside New Orleans. One man tells me the plantations once stretched from New Orleans



We didn't leave the place often. When [the] day's work was over, we was too tired to do anythin' but go to sleep. And besides, we didn't know any outsiders. But if we did go, we had to have a pass or we'd be taken up. They was strick in those days.

Hunton Love
Louisiana Slave

to Baton Rouge — a distance of 129 kilometres — “and there was little room between them.”

Only about 30 now remain and none have been as well maintained as Oak Alley.

Thousands come each year to see what life was like for the plantation owners

in the early 1800s when Oak Alley was built for Jacques Telesphore Roman, whose brother, André, was twice governor of Louisiana. They are greeted at the Big House by actors in elegant period costumes who guide them through lavish rooms decorated with exquisite original furnishings imported from Europe.

The privileged lifestyle showcased in the Big House was obviously much different from what the slaves were forced to endure at the back of the property. There, the Oak Alley Foundation, established by another of the home's owners, the Stewart family, has reconstructed six slave cabins to give visitors a small glimpse into what life was like for those held captive here.

As intriguing as Oak Alley is, I discover a far more compelling example of the

on



Visitors to Whitney plantation are greeted by the “Children of Whitney” — wooden carvings of the youngest who were housed and died there during the slave trade era. A black granite memorial to all those who were held captive in Louisiana during that horrible period bares the names and stories of the slaves in their own words.

PHOTOS BY
MARC ATCHISON





The glorious oak-lined entrance to Oak Alley is one of the most striking you'll ever see and it's one of the most photographed landmarks in the U.S. South. Once inside the palatial Big House, guides in period costumes introduce you to the lavish lifestyle once enjoyed by those who earned their fortunes on the backs of those they kept in chains.

horrors of slavery at the Whitney plantation, a 1752 relic that's located just a few kilometres away from Oak Alley.

Here, I am literally moved to tears by the story of slavery told through the eyes of the "Children of Whitney" who, like their parents, were kept in chains.

Christine, our guide, welcomes us to the Antioch Baptist Church, where we are introduced to the life-size wooden figures of "slave" children wearing tattered clothes.

"The bigger plantations all had schools and churches like this on the property and, of course, they were reserved for the land owners and their families," says the youthful Christine, who was baptized in this modest white church that was moved to Whitney from another location.

Christine tells us Whitney started out as an indigo plantation but later was switched to sugar. At its peak, 354 people were enslaved at Whitney, which has now been turned into a memorial of sorts by its present owner, New Orleans lawyer John Cummings, to honour all those held in slavery throughout Louisiana.

Black granite monuments, known as the "Walls of Honor," are scattered about the property and bear the names of the over 107,000 who were enslaved in this state alone — eventually, over 400,000 names will be carved into the black rock, accord-

Just the facts

- *According to records — between 1525 and 1866 — in the recorded history of the slave trade, 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World — 10.7 million disembarked in North America, the Caribbean and South America. A small percentage, about 388,000, were shipped directly to North America.*
- *Felicity Plantation is where 12 Years A Slave was filmed. Oak Alley, St. Joseph's Plantation and Laura Plantation have also been used as film backdrops.*
- *Oak Alley welcomed its 5 millionth visitor in 2015.*
- *The Stewart Gardens are especially nice to visit during your self-guided tour.*
- *Oak Alley welcomes overnight guests in one of its well-appointed cottages not far from the slave quarters. New accommodation is also being added. An overnight stay in a cottage starts around \$165 U.S. Oak Alley's gift shop restaurant offers some amazing local cuisine — do not forget to try the alligator appetizer.*
- *To find out more about Oak Alley, go to <http://www.oakalleyplantation.com/>*
- *For information on Whitney Plantation, go to <http://www.whitneyplantation.com/>*
- *Air Canada and a number of U.S. airlines flies to New Orleans from most major Canadian cities.*

ing to our informative guide.

Thanks to a project started by unemployed writers in the 1930s during the Great Depression, many of those born into slavery were interviewed about their lives on the plantations and their comments are now etched into the granite monuments.

The chilling words "Peace only came in death," jump off one of the monuments and makes me take a step back. Other comments recall the brutality of the plantation owners and their foremen and the sexual abuse many enslaved women had to endure.

We all gasp when we reach Whitney's "Field of Angels," a monument that was erected to honour the 2,200 known children who died while in slavery in St. John the Baptist Parish, where Whitney plantation is located.

Cummings, a white man, was once quoted as saying: "When you leave here, you're not going to be the same person who came in." I see a few people wiping tears from their eyes as we stand before the Field of Angels — we are all truly moved by this experience.

Our guide says one of the early owners of Whitney was forced to sell some of his slaves to pay off debts and the sale resulted in him collecting about \$60,000, an astonishing amount for the times. Through ex-



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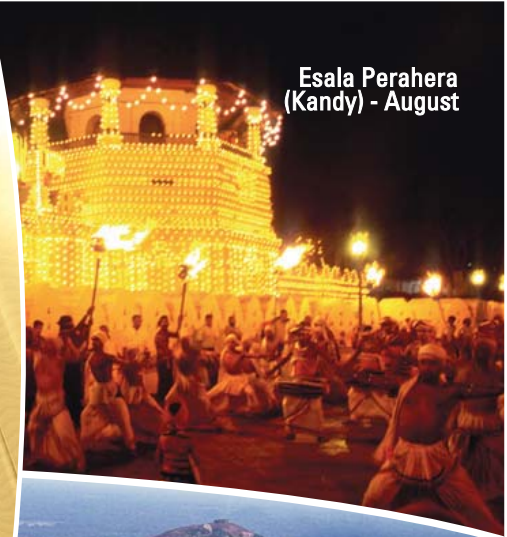
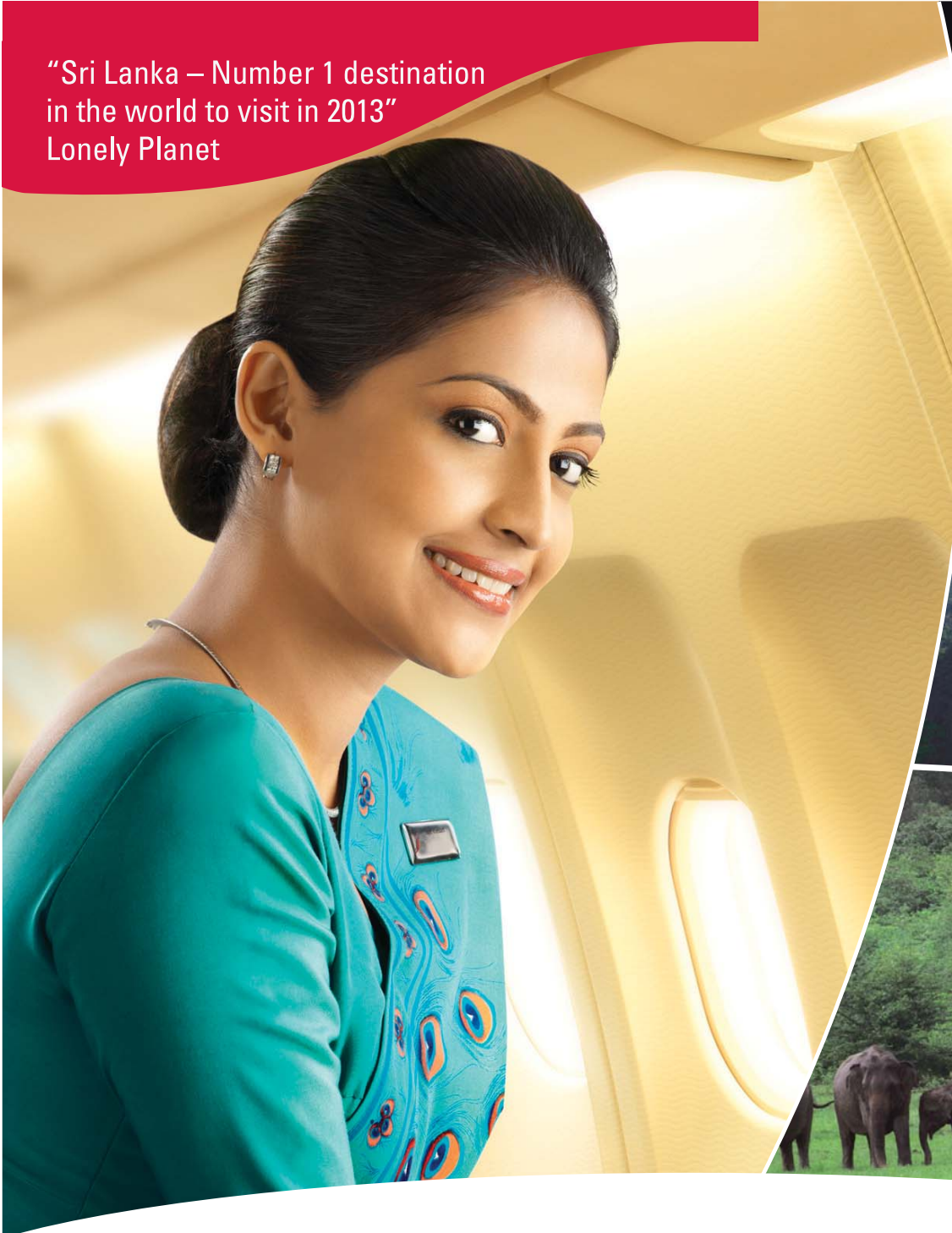
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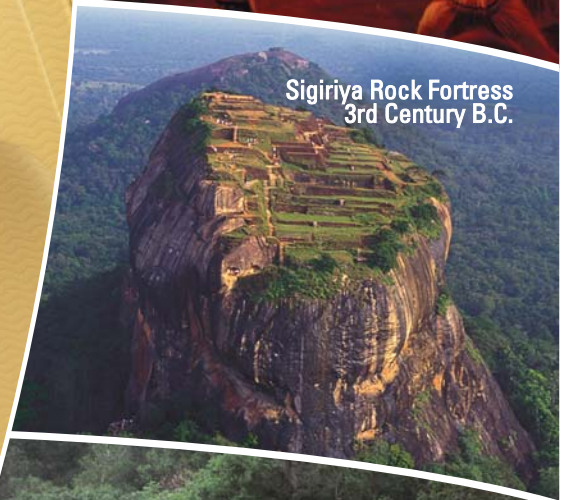
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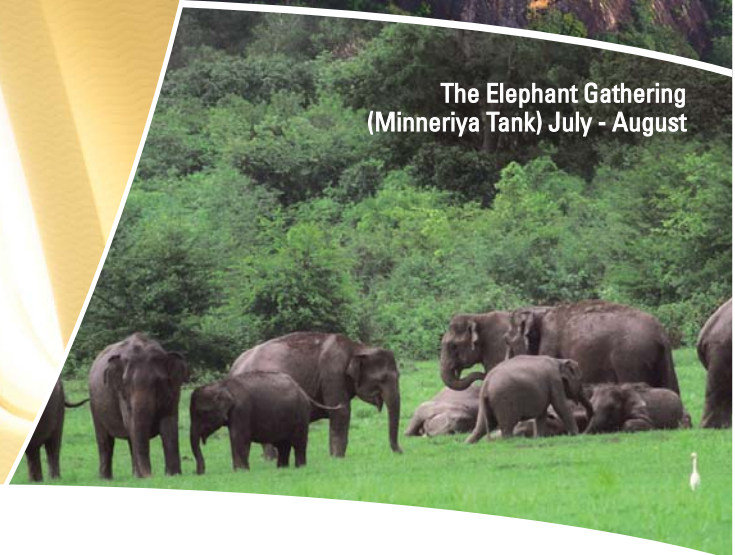
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tensive research, the names of those sold, their skill sets and the amount each fetched in that mass auction is now inscribed on a marble plaque near the Walls of Honor,

“As you can see, some of the slaves fetched as much as \$500 because they had a particular skill,” says Christine. “Tool makers, for instance, were very much in demand back then.”

The lowest price paid at the auction was \$105 for a 25-year-old woman named Sery. We are shocked to see the word “idiot” where her skill set should appear.

“The term ‘idiot’ probably means Sery was mentally challenged and that is why she would have fetched so little,” says Christine, who tells us many families were split up in these large auctions and very few were ever reunited.

The slaves were stripped of their identities when the plantation owners, many of whom were French, bought them. Most were given French names like Félicien, Françoise and Antoine.

“One of the main reasons many slaves stayed in Louisiana after the Emancipation — the 1863 proclamation set down by Abraham Lincoln that set the slaves free — is that most of them only spoke French and they feared they would not be understood had they relocated in the northern states,” says our guide.

While wandering around Whitney, we visit the cramped, one-room wooden shacks where two slave families were forced to live. A large steel box just outside the slaves’ living quarters was reserved for those who dared disobey the landowner or his henchmen. The boxes turned into furnaces during Louisiana’s stifling summer months and Christine says many slaves died in them.

While not as grand as the Oak Alley Big House, Whitney’s main lodging is still very impressive, but we are surprised to see there’s no kitchen in the main house.

“Fire was the plantation owners’ greatest fear, so just about every one of them had an outdoor kitchen,” says Christine.

Thanks to Hollywood spotlighting the horrors of the slave trade in recent years with the making of movies like *12 Years A Slave* and *Jango Unchained*, plantation tours have become very popular.

And despite a growing movement throughout the South to tear down the monuments and symbols that honour those who supported the slave trade and the Civil War, in which freeing the slaves became the main cause, historic plantations like Whitney and Oak Alley will survive because, as Cummings points out, “We (Americans) have to own our history.” •



The contrast in living conditions during the slave trade era is stark. While the plantation owners enjoyed the best trappings money could buy, left, the slaves were forced to endure minimal living conditions, above. Two slave families were expected to share cramped wooden shacks that came with only the bare necessities.



Many visitors to Whitney plantation are brought to tears when they come upon the “Field of Angels” where over 2,200 children who died in slavery are remembered. Above, a rusting steel “hot box” where defiant slaves were detained under a scorching Louisiana sun, remind us of how cruel the plantation owners could be.

Surf's Up In Nicaragua

Latin American 'gem' attracting a lot of attention as a new surfing paradise

By Lindsay MacNevin
TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

PLAYA GIGANTE, NICARAGUA — On a hot, sticky Sunday afternoon, a jolt pushes me back to reality as the plane touches down in this lovely country's capital city Managua. I have been mesmerized for the past hour watching as we soared over endless lines of volcanoes and lush green jungle.

I came here to learn how to surf, speak Spanish, tackle a few volcanoes and immerse myself in the local culture. I also wanted to avoid the throngs of tourists who are slowly taking over the rest of Central America, and Nicaragua fit the bill — it has remained a hidden gem, sadly due in part to its corrupt governments, wars and poverty.

"Forget all your plans and expectations," my host and surf legend Dale Dagger cheerfully told me when I arrived in the tiny fishing village about 2.5 hours from Managua. Many people come here only expecting to stay a few days and end up never leaving.

That's a story I hear over and over from the ex-pats I meet during my two-week visit. Dagger, for instance, first visited Nicaragua in 1972, searching out the best surf breaks by boat



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PHOTOS BY BRYAN WILKAT

The powerful waves that come ashore in places like Playa Gigante are what has surfers from all over the world heading to Nicaragua. However, the area has a lot more to offer visitors.

from San Francisco to Colombia before settling here. Surfer, swimmer and sailor, Dagger has built some “cool places to stay” with his collection of surf shacks and yoga casitas in Playa Gigante.

As I looked down to the beach from one of Dagger’s accommodations, I see bright hammocks swaying in the cool breeze and a handful of colourful travellers patrolling the pristine shoreline. It’s not hard to imagine why people never want to leave here.

Staring out at the endless Pacific Ocean, waves crashing onto the beach one after another, sounding more like thunder than water, it became quickly apparent that surfing is the real draw in this area of the country. It’s hard to travel more than five minutes down the dirt roads that make up this town without seeing someone as young as 8 riding their bike while holding a surf board.

“You picked a good time to learn how to surf,” Dagger joked with me on Day One. “We haven’t seen waves this big all year.”

Playa Gigante is loaded with surfing hot spots, including Amarillo and Colorado beaches, where only a few surfers dot the water.

Here I looked out on long stretches of white sand, speckled with wild horses, where soft winds kissed my cheeks. It seemed like I had found paradise.



While heading to Amarillo Beach, I prepared myself for the notion that I may not be good at this sport, I might not even be able to stand up on the board.

My misgivings turned out to be entirely correct as I spent the entire day getting

sucked under crashing waves and gasping for breath. The local professionals made it look so easy as they paddled effortlessly past the break and dove under the waves. At one point, I found myself gasping in disbelief as I watched two surfers catch the same wave and ride it in opposite directions.

Unfortunately for me, I took my eyes off the incoming break and got pounded back under the water.

Four hours later, I emerged onto the deserted beach, broken surfboard in hand, battered and bruised. I conceded that surfing was not for the weak, but I was determined to stick with it.

It was time to take a break from surfing and enjoy some of the local seafood this area of the country is so famous. After negotiating the rental of a panga boat — it came with a captain and a fisherman — I ventured out to catch my own dinner.

I quickly learned that an authentic Nicaragua panga boat experience involves a large quantity of rum and a couple of trolling fishing lines, along with plenty of laughs and a lot of broken Spanish and English. Cruising past towering jagged cliffs, lush green mountain peaks and swimming sea turtles, it soon became clear why so many people spend their lives on the water here.

In a relatively short period of time I heard the fisherman yelling “pescado,



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Hanging out on one of Nicaragua's pristine beaches with some friends is a great way to pass the time on a visit.

pescado” — I needed to reel in my fish.

As I struggled with the black tuna at the end of my line, I caught a glimpse of the crew snickering at my feeble effort to haul in the catch.

When I finally managed to get the fish into the boat, I had no clue what to do as it lay flopping around the deck. The fisherman handed me a large rock, held the fish down and motioned to me to hit the fish in the head. I closed my eyes, whispered “I’m sorry” to the tuna, and then took aim.

Nothing happened — the fish was rill flapping.

The crew told me to hit it again — harder!

As I slammed the rock onto the fish, blood spewed all over me. “Bueno, bueno, bueno,” the crew shouted as the fish lay motionless.

Partly fascinated, and mostly traumatized, I picked the tuna up and quickly tossed it into a cooler thankful I didn’t have to look at its little eyes the entire way back to the beach house.

Now that I had checked surfing and fishing off my Nicaragua bucket list, it was time to tackle a few more local experiences before heading home. The baseball games I attended in the surrounding towns offered enough excitement and homemade food to get me cheering for the local team.

As I sat chatting in broken Spanish to the locals while munching on fresh fried plantains that I had bought for a mere 25 cents from a nearby neighbour, it became abundantly clear to me why this country has such an appeal to foreigners.

In the end, I didn’t tackle any volcanoes, nor did I make it to

Just the facts

- *The best surfing sites in Nicaragua are: Playa Maderas, Popoyo, Playa Colorado, Panga Drops, Lance’s Left and The Boom. Research your surfing holiday in Nicaragua at <http://www.matadornetwork.com/trips/6-best-surf-spots-in-nicaragua/>*
- *Canadian do not need a visa to visit Nicaragua.*
- *Petty crime is always an issue in Nicaragua so caution is urged.*
- *The best way to get to Nicaragua from Toronto is with Copa Airlines via Panama or Avianca Airlines via El Salvador.*

the colonial city of Grenada, or the tourist surf town of San Juan del Surf, which all on my list. And, I didn’t perfect my Spanish and I definitely didn’t get good at surfing, although it wasn’t from a lack of trying.

Instead, I spent hours swaying in beach hammocks and chatting with locals about the colourful history and culture of their amazing country. I enjoyed dinners in local restaurants while listening to Spanish music and enjoyed glasses of the local dark rum. And when it came time to bid farewell to the local store owners and fishermen I got to know during my stay, I made myself a solemn promise to return because one visit to Nicaragua is not enough. ●



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Aw, Shucks!



PHOTOS BY NECÉE REGIS

Competitors at the Prince Edward Island oyster shucking competition take their work seriously and when it was all said and done, Eamon Clark, bottom, was the winner.

Oyster shuckers roll up their sleeves in P.E.I. for a chance to call themselves champions

By Necée Regis

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

TYNE VALLEY, P.E.I. — I posed a simple question to professional oyster shuckers at a competition in Miami Beach in 2006: “Tell me about your knife.” It was my first exposure to the wild and colourful world of shucking competitions — outside of my summer hometown’s fledgling oyster festival — and I was unprepared for their impassioned answers involving blade length and thickness, flexibility, handle shape and size and how finely to sharpen the point.

Since that day, I’ve become an unabashed fan of the sport. I’ve travelled to the U.S. Nationals in Maryland, the Canadian Nationals in Prince Edward Island, the World Oyster Opening Championship in Galway, Ireland, and many smaller venues. Along the way I’ve made friends with people from Virginia to Vancouver, Florida to Finland, and learned more than any ordinary person should know about oyster species, farming methods, the ecology of oysters, how to craft oyster beer, why tasting oysters is like tasting wine, and how best to open a recalcitrant bivalve.

And, of course, I love eating all those tasty oysters.

The Canadian National Competition — the event that qualifies one shucker to represent Canada at Galway’s international event — is hosted every summer in a community sports centre in the verdant P.E.I. countryside. The “Shuck-Off” is a signature element of the Tyne Valley Oyster Festival, a weeklong, small-time celebration that also includes a music festival, soapbox derby, trivia championship, kids entertainment, homemade suppers, Miss Oyster Pearl pageant and a parade.

“It’s a little piece of Canadiana,” said Eamon Clark, a shucking competitor from Toronto who hoped to defend his title for a record seventh year at the 2015 event. “It’s not a big production, but it’s THE production.”

On a hot and steamy Friday night, after the fried oyster and scallop supper had wrapped up across the street, inside the dimly-lit cavernous space of the sports centre, the air was crackling with anticipation. Up on the illuminated stage, a preliminary event — an oyster grading competition — was in full swing. Some of the 2,000 attendees sat in rows of folding chairs cheering on the folks on stage while others quaffed beer from plastic cups near the bar. The rest of the crowd, myself included, surrounded the 25 competitors warming up in the far corner of the room.

In shucking competition parlance, warming up means opening as many oysters as possible before the event. The male and female competitors shucked elbow to elbow within a triangular, rowboat-shaped counter, possibly designed to shield them from the hungry hoards circling like sharks. At this venue, the \$15 entry fee allows visitors to suck down all the oysters they can snag.



Most competitors are involved in the food industry as bartenders, chefs, restaurateurs, farmers and distributors. One is Daniel Notkin, who opened an eponymous oyster bar in Montreal last spring and is founder of Montreal's Oysterfest. He spoke with me about — what else — his knives.

"My dilemma is which knife to use. My competition shucking knife or the prototype?"

Notkin, who has won a number of competitions in 2015 — including the Niagara Oysterfest, Ottawa-Bytowne Oysterfest and the Boston Seafood Expo — was aiming for his first national win.

"The competitive knife is fragile — it's honed so fine. The prototype is a stronger steel with a broader blade. Great torsion. It finds the hinge a little easier," he explained.

Toronto's Landy Cannon also chatted about knives. "I looked at videos online (of previous competitions) and I realized my knife blade should be shorter. And I'm taking too long to place them on the tray."

At my side, local volunteer Carrie MacLellan watched the practice session with a seasoned eye.

"Just because someone is fast doesn't mean they'll win. It's pretty intense," she said.



Indeed, the competition involves not just speed but also skill. Oysters must be opened as quickly as possible without sacrificing presentation, meaning each finished tray should look as if it were being served at an elegant oyster bar. Penalties are added by a panel of judges, who evaluate each oyster for cut or damaged meat (3 seconds), oys-

ters out of the shell (30 seconds), grit or shell in the oyster (3 seconds) and other variables, including blood.

As is the tradition in Tyne Valley, competitors marched to the stage to the sound of bagpipes and took their seats in the sweaty limelight. Their names would be called in heats of three with interludes of music to allow the judges to inspect the trays. The atmosphere was both tense and congenial as the first competitors approached the tables, each receiving a box of 20 oysters from which they choose 18 to open. And then it was time to begin.

"THREE, TWO, ONE . . . SHUCK!"

Sounding much like a carnival barker, emcee Jeff Noyes called the play-by-play action — visible on a large screen — and roused the crowd into noisy participation. As the shells flew, the audience hooted for their hometown favourites, including many who travelled from Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and beyond. After signalling they were finished shucking by tapping the table with their knife, the shuckers' individual timekeepers recorded preliminary scores before carefully moving trays to the judges' table.

The previous year's champion is always the last to shuck — he or she takes the stage solo. When six-time winner Eamon Clark approached the table, the cheers intensified. Could he do it again?

While the final score was being tabulated — and the shuckers had scattered for beers and backslaps — traditional music by Richard Wood on fiddle and Gordon Belsher on guitar kept the atmosphere lively. I meandered past the snack bar (selling hot dogs, burgers, nachos and such) and T-shirt vendors before stopping at



While the competition might be intense, a festive mood always prevails at the oyster championship, thanks to the contributions of island musicians and their down-home entertainment.

Just the facts

- The two largest oyster shucking events in P.E.I. happen in mid-summer (Tyne Valley Oyster Festival) and late September (Shellfish Festival). Tyne Valley Oyster Festival <http://www.peioysterfest.com/>; Shellfish Festival, Charlottetown <http://peishellfish.com/>

Places to stay:

- Hilltop Acres B & B and Guest House — Simple and friendly accommodations in renovated 1930s home. Located a short drive from Tyne Valley. Includes country breakfast. Call 902-831-2817 or go to <http://www.bbcanada.com/hilltopacres>
- The Holman Grand Hotel — Contemporary luxury in the heart of Charlottetown. Call 877-455-4726 or go to <http://www.theholmangrand.com/>

Where to slurp oysters on the island:

- Claddagh Oyster House — 131 Sidney St., Charlottetown / 1-902-892-9661 / Stylish downtown restaurant serving a changing selection of premium oysters and locally sourced seafood.
- Malpeque Oyster Bar — 10 King St, Malpeque Harbour / 1-902-836-3999 / Rustic, family-run, seasonal oyster bar and restaurant overlooking scenic Malpeque Bay.
- The Lobster Shack - 8 Main St., Souris / 1-902-743-3347 / In addition to lobsters, this beachside shack specializes in distinctive Colville Bay oysters.

- For more information on P.E.I.'s oyster festivals, go to <http://www.tourismpei.com/>

- Go to <http://www.peioystersociety.ca/> to learn more about the P.E.I. Oyster Society

the P.E.I. Aquaculture Alliance booth. Freshly shucked oyster in hand, I recited the oath that swore me in as a member:

"Cradled on the waves,

I swear to honour

On this borrowed day,

The P.E.I. Oyster Society

By the grace of this

Salty Kiss."

Finally, close to midnight, all the shuckers were summoned back to the stage. Noyes held his head in disbelief while shouting the winning results: "With a preliminary time of 1 minute, 16 seconds, with an adjusted score for penalties of 1 minute, 37 seconds, Eamon Clark is the winner — in Canadian record time."

The crowd roared its approval as Eamon hopped on the shucking table, shaking a celebratory bottle of champagne before facing his audience and popping the cork. •

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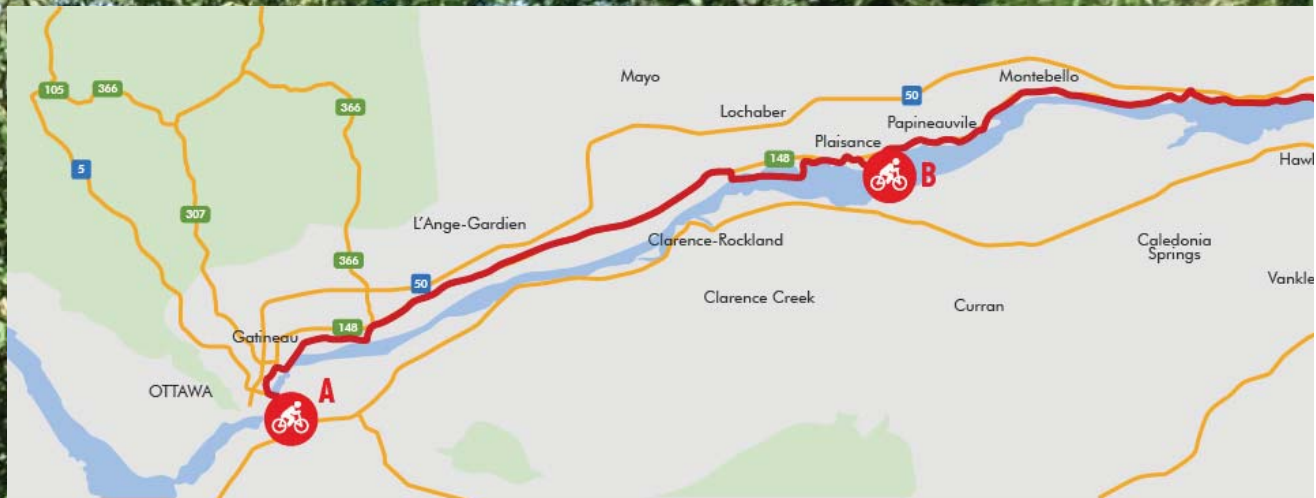


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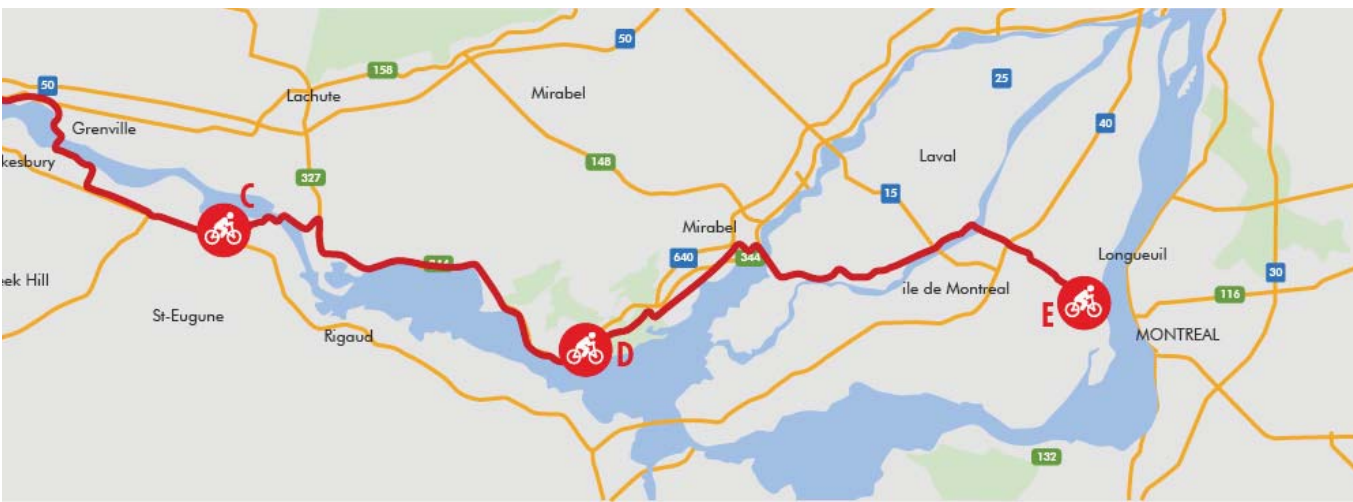


Following **Cycle Paths** *To Montreal*

Two friends head out from
Ottawa along the Route verte
and complete a special journey



PHOTOS BY HILARY DUFF



By Hilary Duff

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

OKA, QUEBEC — We didn't really blend in with the festive Canada Day crowds because our bikes were laden with heavy saddlebags. It was mid-afternoon and the sky was heavy with rain but it didn't matter — the energy at the intersection of Rideau and Sussex streets in Ottawa was electric. We dismounted our bikes and pushed past the throngs dressed in red and white and waving their Canadian flags, our bulging saddlebags jostling the ankles of adults and the strollers of toddlers.

My roommate, Carol, and I were setting off on a trip we had been fantasizing about for months — a multi-day cycling adventure from Ottawa to Montreal along the Route verte.

The Route verte is one of Quebec's hidden gems — 5,000 kilometres of sign-posted trail leading perseverant peddlers along secondary highways, backcountry roads, residential side streets and provincial park paths. Twenty years in, the system provides an alternative — and as the name suggests, more green — way to explore La Belle Province.

Route One, from Ottawa to Montreal, follows the twists of the Ottawa River along Route 148 — a road less travelled following the 2012 completion of Quebec Autoroute 50.

Understandably, a 300-kilometre bike ride is not everyone's cup of tea. But to those dismissing this as an undertaking appropriate only for the spandex-clad, I beg you to reconsider.

We had a view of Parliament Hill as we crossed the Ottawa River and rolled onto a National Capital Commission pathway. The Canadian Museum of History had chosen a particularly epic soundtrack to accompany the day's festivities, and we biked on amidst a heroic pounding of percussion and horns.

That's when we saw it: our first green and blue Route verte sign.

We yipped excitedly and the sky called back: deep rumbles of thunder and the clamour of rain. The first trial of our trip was here, and we raced to a shelter at the edge of the park. It was confirmation of what I already knew to be true: this tour was going to test both physical and mental fortitude.

Thank goodness for quick-drying shorts and waterproof pan-



Map shows the Route verte that Hilary Duff took from Ottawa to Montreal. Along the way, Hilary and her cycling companion camped out in lovely parks, ate rehydrated cappelletti pasta and packed all their gear in just four panniers. The five-day trip took them through some comprehensive bike infrastructure like the one on the opposite page outside Saint-André-d'Argenteuil, Que.



Hilary's cycling companion, Carol, poses along a path in Parc national de Plaisance. The serene countryside is a perfect place to cycle and get lost in your thoughts. Below, Montreal awaits ahead.

niers. After three hours of riding through residential Gatineau, we cruised into Thurso, Que., a small city known more for its distinctive paper mill smell than its location along the Ottawa River. Blood sugar levels were low and grumpiness was setting in.

In preparing for the five-day trip we had packed food for breakfast and dinner, with the intent of stopping for lunch along the way.

So we did as one must do when they find themselves cycling long distances on Canada Day; we parked our bikes at a casse-croûte (French fry hut) and bought poutine. We gleefully sipped the pint of beer I had kept chilled in my thermos, the alcohol turning our dehydrated minds fuzzy.

Thurso was not the last small town we'd stop in over the next four days. In fact, the Route verte passes through veritable picnic heaven.

Montebello is a fine example. Home to more than just the world-class Fairmont Château Montebello, the village exudes Québécois charm, and is a prime lunch stop for bikes and cars alike. At the Fromagerie Montebello we happily sampled squeaky cheese curds and at ChocoMotive, the local artisanal chocolate company, the woman behind the display case slipped us each a free truffle upon discovering we were cycling.

The unconventional always seems to attract kindness, be it extra cheese curds and chocolate, to accommodations for cyclists along the Route verte.

Just one benefit of cross-provincial cycling infrastructure is that campgrounds,



hostels, hotels and B&Bs are involved. A "Bienvenue Cyclistes" rate exists at most places along the way, meaning your bicycle becomes an instant discount card for Route verte accommodation.

As budget-minded cyclists, that made all the difference. We chose to camp, having packed and bungeed the essentials into and onto our saddlebags.

It was deeply satisfying riding onto the campsite with nothing but a bike. Campsite neighbours were surprised as we unloaded our gear — tent, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, dehydrated meals, stove, extra water. The next morning, we would pack up and repeat. There is comfort to be found in a routine involving limited stuff and active bodies.

But to say it was all easy would be a lie.

My roommate and I are recreational cyclists who use our hybrid bikes to scoot around the city. Cycling 75 kilometres a day while hauling 20 pounds of gear

wasn't in our regular repertoire. Over the course of the trip there was a showdown with a raccoon, an onslaught of anger induced by hunger, and a tizzy of tears and swearwords that I had to swallow after we got lost near nightfall on the way to a campsite. But we did it — two young women of average fitness, pounding the pavement for hours everyday. And we're still friends after five days on the road.

On our final night at Parc National d'Oka, we cooked spider dogs and marshmallows over a celebratory campfire. Staring into the flame, I felt as though I had fit a month's worth of experiences into a few short days.

That's the thing about biking. The pace disrupts the apathy that can come from speeding along an open freeway. Over the course of 300 kilometres, I saw western Quebec in a new light. Passing through small towns, stopping at charming lookout spots, and practicing French with the locals was something I would have missed had I driven the same distance in an afternoon. It's amazing what you can find in your own backyard if you slow down long enough to see it.

This feeling of gratitude was no truer than on the day the Route verte ran parallel to Autoroute 50. I looked up at the cars and trucks barrelling along the highway. My throat was dry and my butt was sore from sitting on my seat for hours. But thinking of the open road my bike would cover that day and the sense of accomplishment I would feel at the end, I couldn't help but think, "those poor suckers." •



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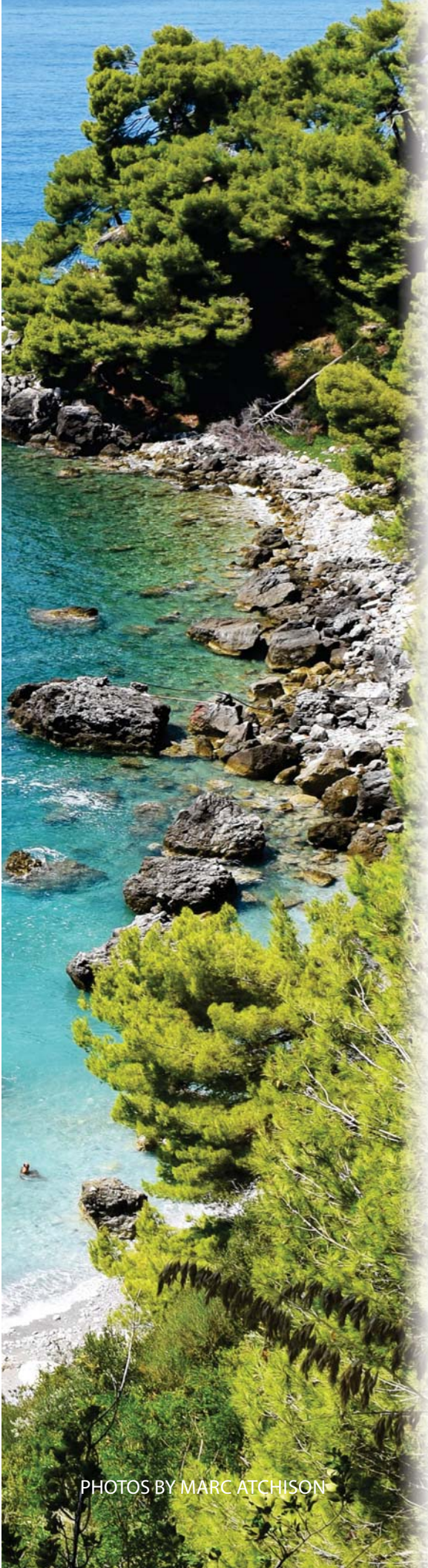
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COVER
STORY

Hotel Santavenere A Real
ITALIAN
MASTERPIECE



The stately Hotel Santavenere sits atop the jagged cliffs that run along the Tyrrhenian Sea south of Naples and looks out on a breathtaking coastal vista that stretches all the way to Calabria.

Chic property along Italy's romantic coast provides people with the perfect getaway

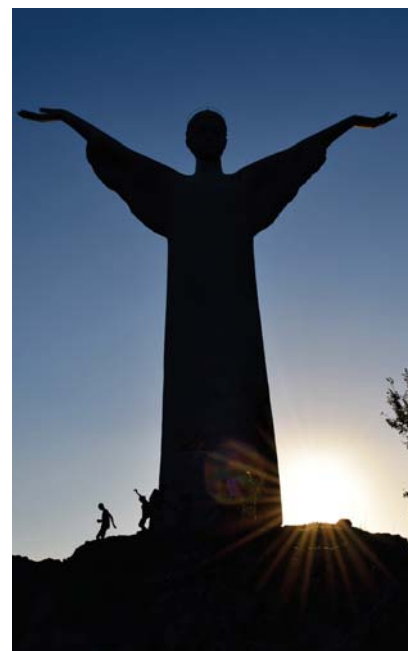
By Marc Atchison
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

MARATEA, ITALY — As our waiter pours the last of the evening's wine, we look out on the black Tyrrhenian Sea from our el fresco dining perch and wonder what the lights twinkling like diamonds on the water are.

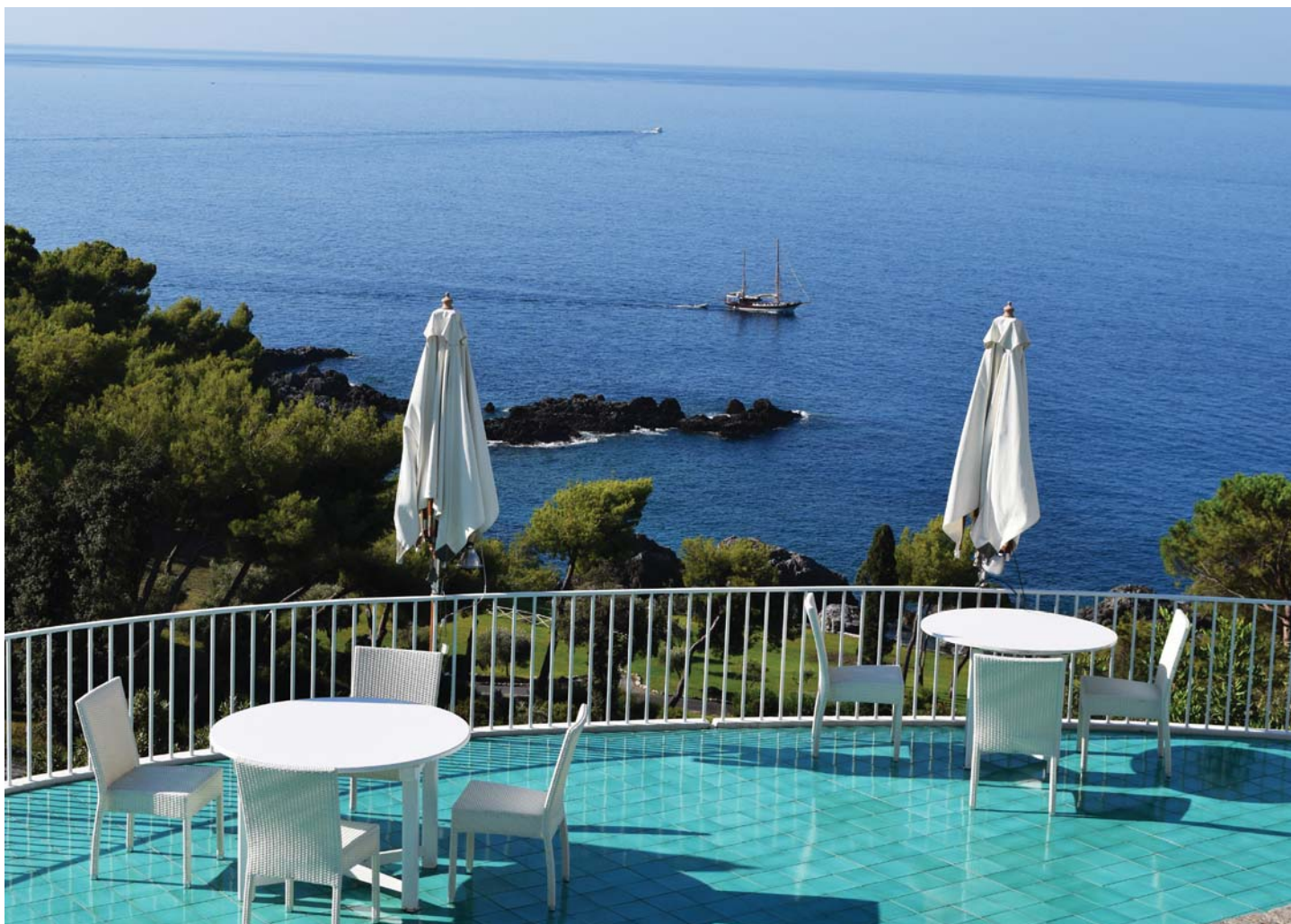
"That is the octopus fishermen, señor," says the dapper Fortunato. "They use the lights to attract the fish. Tomorrow, we will make you a nice octopus dish from what they catch tonight, okay?"

Our first evening at romantic Hotel Santavenere ends with a stroll along the property's flower-lined paths under a canopy of stars. We pause to admire the lights of charming Calabria in the distance and are awed by Maratea's illuminated statue of Christ The Redeemer — it's just a few metres shorter than the original in Rio de Janeiro — standing boldly atop a volcanic peak behind the hotel, his outstretched arms seemingly protecting the residents of this ancient southern Italian town.

For the next three days, the legendary Hotel Santavenere serves as our front-row seat to one of the most beautiful and unspoiled parts of Italy, where volcanic mountains sweep down to the Gulf of Policastro, terracotta homes cling to a jagged coastline, turquoise water laps the rocky shore and tourists are treated to real Italian hospitality.



The Christ The Redeemer statue that guards the hotel and the pretty town of Maratea, is just a few metres shorter than the one in Brazil and provides hotel guests with a great side trip.



El fresco dining comes in several forms at Hotel Santavenere. The hotel's main terrace offers diners the best views of the breathtaking Italian coastline and is the perfect place for romantic dinners.

Each morning we draw back the shutters of our well-appointed room and are treated to a glorious scene — the dramatic cliffs stand silhouetted against the rising sun and in the early-morning light we see boats taking tourists out to explore the area's many watery caves.

The air here is always perfumed with the scent of lemons — lots of citrus and olive trees dot the hotel's sprawling property, which sits atop a majestic cliff like a crown.

Staff treats us like family and before long we know each by their first names — Daniella, Carmen, Fortunato, Roberta and, of course, the lovely Juana, the Romanian girl who escorts us to our terrace table overlooking the jaw-dropping splendour each day.

Denise, head of guest services, joins us for a cup of coffee one morning and tells us a famous Italian, Count Stefano Rivetti, is the man responsible for the hotel's existence.

The count apparently wanted to create a hotel where guests felt they were at home, Denise, a transplanted Brazilian whose family has deep roots in this part of Italy, tells me. "He wanted them to feel like this was their home."

There are plenty of homey touches at the sophisticated Hotel Santavenere, like quaint parlours with large picture windows that look out on what can only be described as a breathtaking scene.

The main dining hall — mostly used in the winter months — looks like grandma's house but with lots of elegant touches.

Antiques fill the 34 charming rooms and public spaces and most were picked out by the count himself. Each room is different — this is not your cookie-cutter hotel folks — and each is tastefully decorated and distinct. Some of the rooms have been upgraded in recent years — the bathrooms especially have been brought up to modern-day expectations — but the original charm of each room was not compromised.

"The count also had the Cristo Redentore di Maratea (Christ The Redeemer) statue built," Denise informs.

The statue, which stands 21.23-metres high — the Rio version is 38 metres — was erected 50 years ago and portrays Christ as a younger man with very little facial hair. It's stunning and stands next to a revered local basilica, where the bones of a local saint — Saint Blaise — are kept in the altar. The small basilica, by the way, sits atop the ruins of a Greek temple.

Dining at Hotel Santavenere is an orgasmic experience for the senses. The taste and smell of the food prepared in the hotel's kitchen is divine, and the freshness of the locally grown vegetables and fruits enhances every dish with colour and flavour.

In summer, most guests dine on the hotel's outdoor terraces, which are usually bathed in sunlight or canopied by stars. For lunch, we favour the small lookout terrace opposite the pool that offers uninterrupted views of the coastline that stretches all the way to Calabria.

Brides and grooms fall in love with hotel's wedding planners

MARATEA, ITALY - Hotel Santavenere is one of the most romantic places in the world, so it comes as no surprise that many couples select it for their wedding location. Talk about a fairytale wedding.

The breathtaking coastal views you get from just about everywhere at Hotel Santavenere makes this a Garden of Eden setting to take wedding photos.

The hotel's staff caters to wedding parties of all sizes and is able to accommodate most requests — big and small. And the catering services offered here are nothing short of amazing.

Prior to the ceremony, members of the wedding party can lounge around the hotel pool or its stunning beach or pamper themselves in the property's world renowned spa, Le Grotte. The outdoor treatments offered by Le Grotte are truly memorable.

The hotel's event staff are also well trained in planning corporate and private functions on property. The intimate setting and the well-appointed romantic rooms with the jaw-dropping coastal view make Hotel Santavenere the perfect setting for a wedding.

It's love at first sight for anyone who visits Hotel Santavenere. •

Juana suggests we order a local favourite, pomodoro core di buca, a unique tomato that's green on the outside and bright red on the inside. A splash of local olive oil enhances the taste of the tomato, which is sinfully sweet.

The hotel also features a seaside restaurant that is every bit as good as the main dining room. The coastal breeze and the sea vista offered here, though, make this a dining experience of a lifetime.

Our days are spent soaking up the sun on the hotel's private beach. The water is crystal clear and bathtub warm in the summer and the staff offer us beach shoes to deal with the rocky shore. The cove in which the beach is located is usually full of boats — locals like to dive into the gentle surf.

The pool is constantly being monitored by lifeguards so parents can relax while their children enjoy themselves in the shallow water.

Hotel Santavenere is actually a perfect place for families and the luxury cottages opposite the pool are large enough to welcome a family of four. The walkout play area in front of the cottages means kids have plenty of space to work off their boundless energy.

This is a place guests come to totally immerse themselves in relaxation and the Hotel Santavenere helps them achieve that goal with one of Italy's best spas, Le Grotte, which comes complete with innovative treatment rooms — the salt room was our favourite.

The grotto-style spa's therapists are well



The owner of Hotel Santavenere wanted guests to feel at home during their stay and has created a number of quiet places where you can curl up with a good book while never being too far away from the jaw-dropping beauty that borders this Italian masterpiece.



The dramatic coastline in this part of Italy is dominated by volcanic mountains that sweep down into the ice blue sea. The lovely pastel-coloured villas that cling to the cliffs just add to the beauty.

trained and well versed in all the latest treatments. Many guests elect to have their massage in one of the outdoor treatment rooms set on a cliff overlooking the natural splendour. You feel better even before the spa begins, thanks to the view.

There's a heavy emphasis placed on service at the Hotel Santavenere and in summer the resort employs 60 people to make sure your every whim is catered to quickly. The peak months are June, July and August, but winter comes late to this lovely region of Italy, so guests who come in spring or fall are usually treated to lots of sunshine and warm weather. By the way, the coldest it gets here in winter is around 10C.

Maratea's quaint town centre is within walking distance of the Hotel Santavenere, but staff is only too happy to drive you to the main square, where you can enjoy a glass of wine at one of the many outdoor cafés, or wander the narrow streets filled with artisan shops.

When it comes time to go, it will be hard to leave Hotel Santavenere — because it's really your home away from home. •



The hotel's botanical garden setting is enhanced by the fruit and olive trees that dot the landscape. Some of the fruits find their way into the hotel's award-winning dining room.

Just the facts

- Off-season rates at the Hotel Santavenere start at 160 euros (about \$300 Cdn) a night. High season rates can reach 700 euros a night. Because the temperatures in this part of Italy rarely dip below 15C at any time of the year, off season is a great time to visit.

- The best way to get to Hotel Santavenere is through Naples, a two-hour train ride away. Alitalia offers direct flights from Toronto to Naples via Rome.

- There's lots to do and see in this area of Italy and Hotel Santavenere is a great place to base yourself. Day trips to the historic town of Maratea is one option but you can also rent a car and drive south towards Calabria where you will be rewarded with stunning coastal views along the way.

- The hotel's Le Grotte Spa is one of the best in Europe and offers a full range of treatments administered by some of the world's best therapists. The spa's intimate treatment rooms are truly state of the art. For something really special, though, we recommend you book an outdoor treatment — your session will take place overlooking the hotel's azure beach and will provide you with an experience you can't imagine.

- To find out what's the best time of the year to visit this remarkable property with the friendliest hotel staff in all of Italy, visit the their website <http://www.hotelsantavenere.com>

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WRITING'S ON THE WALLS

FOR COLOMBIA'S EXCITING CAPITAL

Bogotá is awash in colour thanks to its public art

By **Bruce Sach**
TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

BOGOTÁ — In Colombia, you soon learn that things aren't always as they appear. Yes, in the land of magic realism you quickly discover that your perception of things differs significantly from reality.

The capital city, Bogotá, is located at high altitude in the Andean mountains so I thought it might resemble Quito, Ecuador, another Andean capital city I had visited. But I was wrong.

Bogotá is full of highly motivated inhabitants, continually on some purposeful errand. And be it by rapid transit, bus, foot, car or bicycle, people are always on the move. This city is also known worldwide for closing down its main thoroughfares on Sundays so that cyclists can take over.

Keeping an eye on the residents of this bustling capital is the omnipresent Policía Nacional.

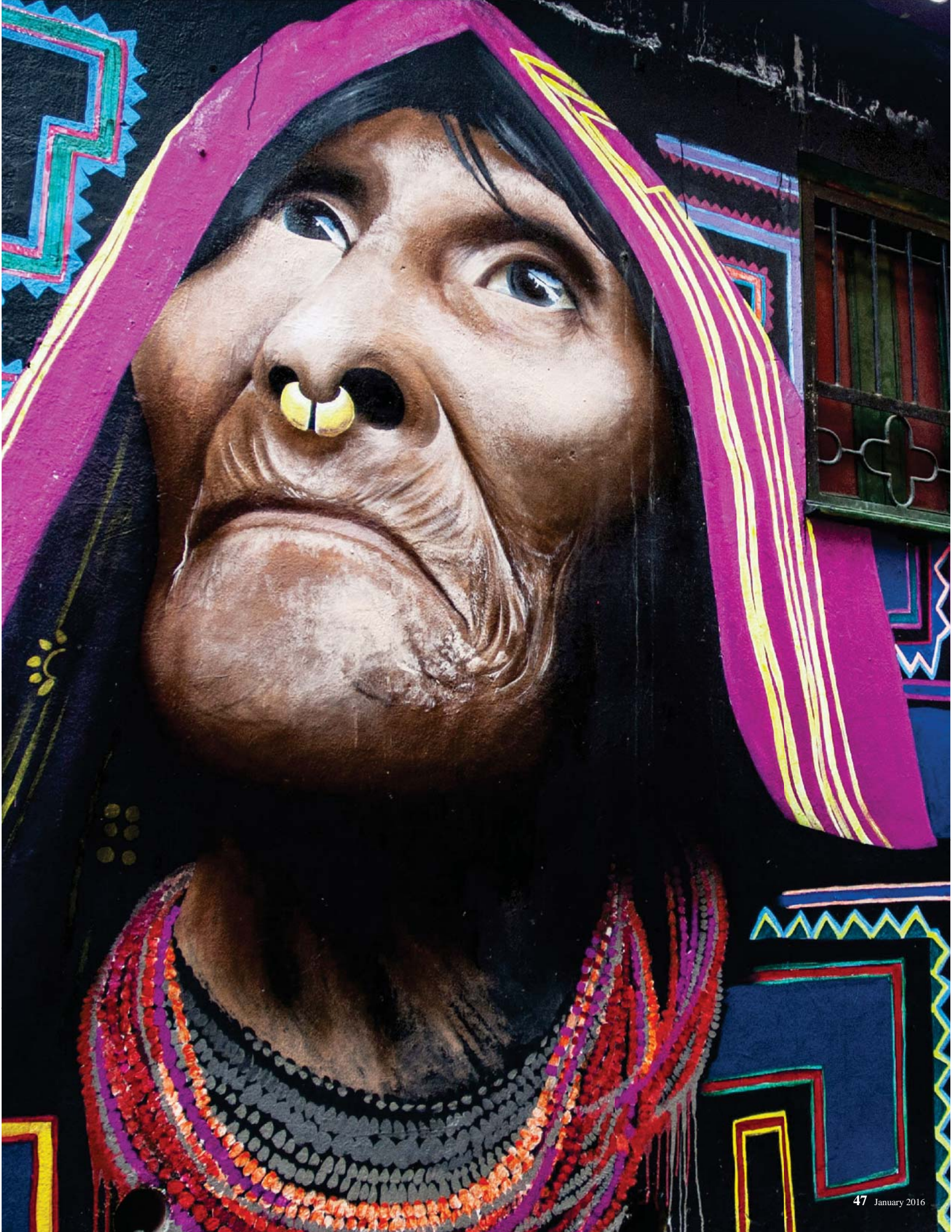
To gain some perspective on the ever-present police, I visited their National Police Museum, just a hop, skip and jump from the main square, the Plaza Bolívar.

The armed, Colombian-wide police force appear unapproachable from a distance. However, just as playfulness often lurks under the macho exterior of Latin America, at the National Police Museum the mostly young agents (both male and female) were more than willing to talk freely about Colombia's past problems. One police guide was dressed for undercover work in a monk's white cassock,



PHOTOS BY CAROLE JOBIN

Bogotá has been turned into an outdoor art gallery thanks to its amazing collection of murals. Some, like the striking Callejón del Embudo mural by Carlos Tileros, right, are truly remarkable. Street artists, like the one in the top photo, are always adding to the collection and unlike other cities where graffiti spoils neighbourhoods, Bogotá has been made more attractive thanks to its murals.



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although he assured us he wore his police uniform underneath.

No topic is taboo, including the notorious Pablo Escobar. Once on the list of the richest men in the world, Escobar controlled one of Colombia's drug cartels with an iron fist. At the museum you can view his peach-coloured Harley-Davidson and some of his possessions, including cassette tapes, a VCR, a watch and a pair of eyeglasses. His operations ended in 1993 when he died in a shootout with police.

Another subtle, yet at the same time striking, example of things not being quite as they appear, are the wall paintings and graffiti of Bogotá. The casual observer might mistake the city's street art for visual pollution. But a closer look reveals a landscape of artwork by local and foreign grafiteros (graffiti artists) who have made Bogotá their cultural centre. So much so, that local art tours explain the styles and backgrounds of over 10 artists whose work becomes easily identifiable.

Want to see where some of the planet's top graffiti artists are doing their thing? Head for Bogotá's Le Candelaria neighbourhood, which is within walking distance of the Plaza Bolívar and the Police Museum. If you take the guided tour, you'll see the difference between graffiti art and mere tagging.

No one seems to like the taggers, whose unfortunate work makes up 80 per cent of the street art here. But the other 20 per cent creates what is now being hailed as cutting-edge contemporary art.

In Le Candelaria district — Bogotá's oldest area — artists and their work can be viewed. Some have been at it for 30 years, such as Rodez, who is also an illustrator, and his sons Nomada and Malaguia. Rodez' bold work is characterized by ferocious eyes, or, sometimes, no eyes at all.

Businesses here can find themselves in a tricky situation; they can wait to be tagged against their will, or submit to graffiti art; neither is illegal in Colombia. Some businesses will resign themselves to the will of grafiteros while others, like the Café Rosas, will actively seek out artists.

Some grafiteros, like Guache (a photographer and anthropologist), end up being commissioned and sponsored by Montana 24, one of the world's high-end spray paint companies.

Grafiteros like Ronzo prefer subtle styles but some, like Pez (originally from Barcelona), is known for his happy style. He



Bogotá's main square, La Plaza Bolívar, is a great place to hang out when visiting this colourful city enhanced by its murals.

Just the facts

- Although the graffiti tour's admission is by donation, your presence should be booked beforehand at: <http://www.bogotagraffiti.com>
- The National Police Museum's hours are 8 am to 5 pm, every day except Monday. No admission charge.
- From Eastern Canada, both Copa Airlines and Air Canada fly to Bogotá.



In the heart of Le Candelaria, music and art make up the street scene.

has designed shoes, T-shirts, even shower curtains.

Graffiti is taken so seriously here that at the Plaza de Mercado La Concordia there is a school program to teach the art to schoolchildren. The huge walls that surround the plaza provide canvases for practice and are painted over and over again. We saw a partial quotation from Canadian Douglas Cardinal (an indigenous architect) on one wall and two walls on either side of the nearby market featured copies of work by Mexican artist Diego Rivera.

The artwork in the area is strikingly original.

Some of the oldest streets and plazas in Bogotá are decorated by grafiteros. Historically, the Casa Locombia, the local circus school, started the trend by having their exterior walls and their transport van painted by a grafiteros. The Casa Bella Vista Hostel, located in the ancient street of Callejón del Embudo, invited well-known Australian graffiti artist Crisp to illustrate the walls of the many hostels in the area.

It's an odd, narrow street, blarin' with music, with vendors of all kinds and tattoo artists plying their trade. You can sample coca tea here — great for those suffering from the city's high altitude, cool temperatures and endlessly threatening rain. Or just try it for the sake of trying it. You will see almost as many foreigners as Colombians here with backpackers of all ages crammed into the hundreds of small hostels, almost like the gringo trail of the 1970s.

It's the kind of place where on weekends (which begin on Thursdays, by the way), live music and bars start early and operate into the wee hours.

Depending on the time of day you go, you might easily run into a graphic artist starting or finishing up a job.

Soon after our tour, we sampled the coca tea. No reaction, I'm sorry to report. Then, in spite of being warned, I chomped into a tiny green lime-like fruit whose interior was a bright orange. It was another example of things not being exactly as they appear. Boy was that lime ever sour! •

FRANKFURT

ISN'T ALL BUSINESS



Germany's capital of commerce has a fun side, too

By Tiffany Thornton

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

FRANKFURT — I love this city! But each time I make that profession, I am met with the same bewildered expression followed by, “But isn’t it just a business hub?”

Many of us hold on to the preconceived notion that Frankfurt is all business, a city you don’t linger in for days exploring the sights and sounds. It’s a great transfer point to catch a connecting flight or an express train bound for a popular destination. Yet, beneath the business veneer is a dynamic city filled with top-notch museums, early Roman settlements and an array of culinary delights.

Saturday morning is a magical time in Frankfurt’s old part of town Sachsenhausen. Locals crowd the car-free street that runs along the Main River on the hunt for a good bargain at the expansive Saturday flea market. It’s one of my favourite things to do while here. Passing by antiques, old memorabilia and German literature, I seem to always take a little trinket back home with me.

Building up an appetite is inevitable as you weave your way through the flea market. One of the best places to indulge your sweet tooth is just a short saunter away at the Liebieghaus Museum’s courtyard café. The fabulous museum of ancient sculpture is located in what was once a grandiose 19th century villa, and the café is a local “secret spot.” Its romantic courtyard



PHOTOS BY TIFFANY THORNTON & FRANKFURT TOURIST OFFICE



Frankfurt's dynamic glass and steel skyline reflects its status as one of the great business hubs in all of Europe. However, the city also boasts a rich history and visitors who are willing to explore come away thrilled at the treasures they find, like the 14th century alabaster tower, left, and the city's famed outdoor market, above.

and trellised walls invite you to linger over a scrumptious homemade German cake and apple cider.

Many of Frankfurt's museums are situated on what is called the museum embankment, and the Städel is one of the must-dos while there. It houses European works of art from seven centuries, making it one of the greatest collections of art in all of Germany. Masterpieces by Rembrandt, Botticelli, and Vermeer line the walls of the historic building, which is infused with modern flare. Be sure to pop around back to check out the whimsical green roof dotted with dozens of polka-dot skylights.

Walking across the Eiserner Steg footbridge that connects historic Sachsenhausen with Frankfurt is a great way to take in a fabulous view of the skyline (sometimes referred to as Mainhattan due to its towering skyscrapers).

The bridge leads you into the city centre towards Frankfurt's bustling shopping street, Zeil. It's just up from Konstablerwache station, where the best outdoor market is held on Thursdays and Saturdays. Locals mingle over a smorgasbord of yummy goodness, indulging in bratwurst on a bun, schnitzel with kraut salad and a good pint or two of German beer or wine from the famous Rhine region.

You won't believe you are in Frankfurt when you stumble across the Palmengarten. Built in 1868, the botanical gardens are an idyllic spot to spend a few hours strolling through the 50 acres of lush tropical trees, rolling verdant lawns and waterfalls. The gardens are comprised of several greenhouses, which grow palms, orchids and a plethora of exotic flora from around the globe. During the warmer months a little train putters around the gardens, perfect for families to enjoy.

Minutes away from the gardens is the Senckenberg Museum of Natural History. Don't be surprised to see a statue of a colossal dinosaur playing football across the road from the entrance. The Senckenberg is home to the largest exhibition of dinosaurs in Europe and the world's most extensive collection of stuffed birds.

After several trips to Frankfurt I thought I had explored most of the hidden treasures that surround the city's modernity. And then, almost by accident, I came across Höchst, an early Roman settlement that did not become part of the city until 1928. Fairy-tale inspired half-timbered homes lead you to Schlossplatz, the Castle Square that features traditional German restaurants. Höchst Castle was once the home of the archbishop of Mainz and the castle's fortifications date back to the 13th century. In the distance, the 14th-century alabaster tower juts towards the sky and was once used to keep watch over the old town.

Don't miss Frankfurt's oldest building, Justuskirche, or St. Justin's Church, consecrated in 850. It's a splendid display of architecture from the Carolingian era.

Meandering along the medieval streets of Höchst evokes an air of mystery and a sense of wonderment as to why Frankfurt, after all these years, is still so very much undiscovered by travellers. •



CAPTAIN
P. D. DOUGLAS
PARACHUTE REGIMENT
1ST AIRBORNE DIVISION
24TH SEPTEMBER 1944 AGE 21

4912477 SERJEANT
A. BIRD
THE SOUTH STAFFORDSHIRE
REGIMENT
AIRBORNE
25TH SEPTEMBER 1944 AGE 23

LIEUTENANT
C. S. LEITCH
ROYAL ARTILLERY
AIRBORNE
24TH SEPTEMBER 1944 AGE 21



PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON

The Liberation Route Europe tour takes you to places where World War II heroes are remembered in many forms, like Arnhem where its thankful citizens still show their gratitude daily.

A Tour *de* Force



Louis DiMarco, a 90-year-old survivor of Operation Market Garden, the battle that cost so many British and Polish soldiers their lives, recalls details of the World War II fight to an attentive visitor at the Airborne Museum in the lovely Dutch city of Arnhem. DiMarco comes to the museum every year to honour his comrades. Opposite page, a member of the British Airborne regiment, walks among the tombstones of those who died during Operation Market Garden.

Marc Atchison joins a march through Europe that honours the memory of fallen heroes

A RNHEM, THE NETHERLANDS — The old soldier, aided by his proud family, shuffles toward the granite monument and with trembling hands salutes his fallen comrades for whom the monolith honours. As the survivor of war slowly returns to his seat, the crowd breaks into thunderous applause. Most are left to wonder, though, if the old man will be back again next year.

Time, you see, is thinning the ranks of those who fought in World War II. Less and less veterans appear at commemorations held across Europe each year. Death will soon silence them all.

Who then will tell their stories?

That's a question a 19-year-old Dutchman named Sarel Tempelman asked while working as an intern at the Airborne Museum in Oosterbeek, near Arnhem, a handsome city of grand homes and shaded streets whose citizens know only too well the pain and agony of war.

Tempelman wondered: Why not make a marked route showcasing the path taken by the Allies

from southern England, through France, Holland and Belgium and finally into Germany, where they put an end to Adolph Hitler's reign of terror?

His answer: Liberation Route Europe (LRE).

While originally a Dutch initiative, Liberation Route Europe has quickly grown into a cooperative effort between some of Europe's biggest war museums and veterans' organizations and offers modern-day travellers a unique opportunity to follow the Allied march across Europe and into Nazi Germany. Even two German-based war museums — the Alliierten Museum in Berlin and the German-Russian Museum in Berlin — asked to be part of the Liberation Route. And more are coming on board each year.

Many are calling LRE a form of "remembrance tourism" because it connects the dots between battlefields, cemeteries, monuments and places that played important roles in the Allied victory. Arnhem, for instance, is a key stop on the LRE because it was the scene of one of the fiercest battles of World War II, the ill-conceived 1944 Operation Market Garden, in which over 3,000 British and Polish troops were slaughtered in a failed attempt to capture the city's all-important Rhine River bridge. The battle was later immortalized in the epic Hollywood film *A Bridge Too Far*.

"I wish we had time to follow the entire route from start (Portsmouth, England) to finish (Berlin), but for the next few days we'll concentrate on the route the Allies took through Holland," Jeroen van Wieringen, the well-versed press and communications officer for LRE, says while driving a small army of media to a fascinating little war museum in Coudorp, a sleepy village on an island in the province of Zeeland.

As we near the Bevrijdingsmuseum Zeeland (Liberation Museum Zeeland) — it remembers the Battle of the Scheldt — Van Wieringen points to an "audio spots" on the side of the road and tells us the LRE uses the juke-box-like devices to inform passersby of important facts relating to battles fought in that particular area.

"We currently have 160 audio spots along the route but eventually there will be 300," says our guide as he turns into the entrance of the compact Zeeland museum where a steel-jawed man with snow-white hair is waiting.

Kees Traas, a local collector of memorabilia from the 85-day Battle of the Scheldt, greets us like liberators and ushers the



The small Dutch village of Bergen op Zoom honours Canada's contribution to the town's liberation by renaming one of its loveliest streets "Canada Lane." Kees Traas, left, one of the major contributors to the lovely Bevrijdingsmuseum Zeeland, holds a cross that marked a Canadian soldiers' grave after the Battle of the Scheldt. In Arnhem's Airborne Museum, a member of the famed British unit walks past a World War II display, while modest headstones mark the resting places of German soldiers.

group inside where he has hot coffee and local treats waiting.

Traas has contributed many of the 40,000 objects now on display in the museum, including his prized "Canadian helmet," which his father "found on the battlefield and I played with it as a little boy." Traas later found out the helmet belonged to a member of the Calgary Highlanders, a Canadian unit that fought so valiantly here.

The museum honours those who died trying to capture the Scheldt estuary, which had to be secured before the Allies could use the all-important port of Antwerp to supply their advancing troops.

Often called the "Forgotten Battle" because it did not receive the same recogni-

tion as the flawed British-led Operation Market Garden, the Battle of the Scheldt cost Canada dearly — 5,000 of the 7,600 Canadians killed trying to liberate Holland died at the Scheldt.

"The people of Zeeland owe our freedom to the Canadians and this museum shows how much we appreciate their sacrifice," says Traas, who says the Canadian Ambassador to the Netherlands is traditionally the museum's patron.

Over 25,000 Canadians have visited the Zeeland museum and a 30,000-square-foot outdoor addition, which will showcase the battle in miniature, is under construction and is sure to draw many more tourists when it opens in 2018.

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One of the wonderful things about the LRE is that it allows you to learn some fascinating facts about the war, the people who fought in it and the civilians who suffered so greatly because of it.

Each stop we make along the Dutch portion of the route is more interesting than the last:

- In nearby Woensdrecht, for instance, we eat at a restaurant that was a former abbey. Apparently German and civilians hid in the sprawling complex unbeknownst to each other.

- In neighbouring Bergen op Zoom we visit a street that was renamed “Canada Lane” after the war because it marks the spot where Canadian troops entered the town on Oct. 27, 1944, and liberated it from the Germans. A local resident invites us into his lovely home and over coffee proudly tells us “we celebrate our freedom each year on that date by flying Canadian flags” and the street has a giant party. We also visit the Canadian war cemetery here and are moved to see how lovingly the Dutch take care of the graves of our fallen heroes.

- Den Bosch, in Brabant province, is where we learn the Nazis set up a concentration camp, known as Camp Vught, which later served as a prisoner of war camp for captured Germans and Dutch traitors. Brabant is also the area where the Overloon War Museum, which remembers one of the largest American battles of the war, is located.

- Arnhem’s Airborne Museum, located in the former Hotel Hartenstein, which served as British headquarters during Operation Market Garden, is hallowed ground for the Brits and Poles. Over 100,000 people visit the site each year and the lovely Allied graveyard nearby. It appears to be a right of passage for active members of Britain’s famed Airborne Regiment to come here and pay homage to their fallen comrades, because we see many in uniform mulling about the wonderful museum. We also meet one of the last survivors of the bat-



At Ginkel Heath, top photo, modern-day warriors gather to honour their fallen comrades of World War II, while above, young Polish performers come each year to Driel to pay homage to their lost countrymen. Small towns throughout Holland keep the Allies’ story alive with reenactments and modern soldiers, like the American paratroopers left, have a little fun when they gather at the Groesbeek museum. Those who take the LRE tour rely on guideposts, top left, to find out on-the-spot information.

Just The Facts

- *Liberation Route Europe is one of the most fascinating and worthwhile projects ever undertaken and should be recognized and supported by all the governments who made up the Allied resistance to Hitler’s Nazis. For more information on Liberation Route Europe go to <http://www.liberationroute.com>*

- *KLM (Royal Dutch Airlines) and Air Canada offer direct daily flights to Holland from most Canadian cities.*

- *To find out more about the Dutch towns and cities highlighted on the fabulous Liberation Route Europe tour, go to <http://www.holland.com>*



tle, the 90-year-old wheelchair bound Louis DiMarco, who served as a signalman during the fight. He regales today's soldiers with stories of the battle and there's not a dry eye in sight. The last two years, Arnhem has held a giant multimedia event called the "Bridge to Liberation Experience" on the shores of the Rhine, which we attend, and it appears to whole town comes out for the moving tribute.

- At a Dutch military installation in nearby Ginkel Heath, we join thousands to watch 1,100 paratroopers from various Allied countries reenact the WWII drop very near where the actual Market Garden operation took place. The thick forest surrounding the drop zone, which provided the Nazis with perfect cover, gives us an idea why so many of the young paratroopers were killed before they even reached the ground.

- In the lovely little town of Driel, where Polish paratroopers entered the Market Garden battle, we join the last few remaining survivors and their grateful compatriots to salute the fallen Poles at a moving ceremony in the town square. What's so uplifting is that at each of the commemorative events we attended along the way, including this one, we see many young faces in the crowd. The LRE also extends into Poland (Gdansk to Berlin

- In the small farming community of Ysselsteyn, located near the German border, we're reminded of the cost that country paid for Hitler's madness. The sombre German war cemetery located here contains the bodies of over 35,000 German soldiers and civilians — the slate grey stone crosses that mark the graves stretch for as far as the eye can see. Thankfully, Liberation Route Europe does not dwell on the defeat of the Nazis but rather it celebrates the Allied liberation of Germany.

- Our LRE tour also includes stops in handsome Nijmegen, which was totally demolished by "friendly fire" during WWII as it was mistaken for a German city by Allied pilots.

- The nearby town of Groesbeek is home to the National Liberation Museum and the residents here keep memories of the war alive by dressing up as Allied soldiers and ride around in vintage jeeps, most of which are holdovers from WWII.

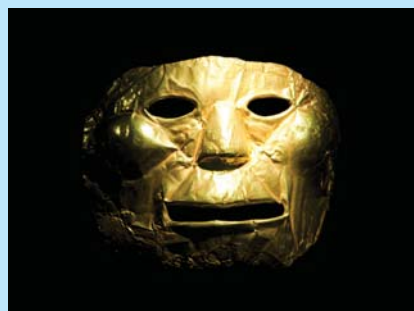
Our final LRC stop is, fittingly, at the Canadian War Cemetery just outside Groesbeek. It's the largest of the three Canadian war cemeteries in Holland and the 2,610 granite headstones there are arranged so they are looking into Germany, which is just over a hill.

Sadly, this place reminds us that those who are now the living history of World War II will soon join their comrades in eternity. Thankfully, Liberation Route Europe will keep their stories alive. •



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Happy New You!

Stop monkeying around and get serious about your 2016 resolutions by working off stress and pounds at one of these posh resorts

By Annie Tsu
TRAVELIFE PUBLISHER

TORONTO — We're just a few days into the New Year but already, like me, you've probably broken all the resolutions made to get healthier and spend more time away from the office in 2016.

The good news is that you still have time to get back on track. With a little help from our friends at booking.com, I've compiled a list of places where you can get fit and still have fun in 2016. Here they are:



Corinthia Hotel



The Village Lodge



Los Angeles Athletic Club



Hotel Le Germain Charlevoix



Hotel Papendal

Skiers take note

There's nothing like a lungful of fresh mountain air to give you a boost and get your New Year off to a healthy start. What's more, skiing is probably the only holiday where you'll exercise without even thinking about it, the adrenaline of flying down the slopes enough to distract you from your burning thighs.

Rimrock Resort Hotel, Banff: Situated on Sulphur Mountain in the heart of the Canadian Rocky Mountains, expect comfort, luxury and the most breathtaking mountain views at this resort. Ski enthusiasts can take their sport to the next level with daily heli-skiing tours being offered to areas of untouched snow. For those seeking other activities why not try a snowmobile tour in Kicking Horse Valley or soak in the view on the Banff gondola.

The Village Lodge, California: Though California might not be the first place most people head to for good snow, the Mammoth Mountain Ski Area has a diverse selection of slopes to choose from. Village Lodge in Mammoth Lakes, close to the ski area itself, offers stylish condos surrounded by mountains complete with their own fireplaces and balconies. The property also has a heated outdoor pool, five hot tubs and three gyms.

Schlosshotel, Switzerland: Zermatt is definitely up there in the world's best ski resorts and right in the middle of the action sits the Schlosshotel, an elegant alpine retreat with easy access to the slopes. Combining a cosy, traditional Swiss chalet vibe with modern, sleek design, the hotel is a real haven after an exhausting day on your skis. Additional perks include stunning pool area, sauna, steam bath, fitness room and a reading corner with an open fireplace.

Sports enthusiasts flex their muscles

For those who want a real fitness holiday with all the trimmings, these three sport retreats have world-class facilities, from tennis, basketball and 18-hole golf courses, to Olympic worthy pools and personal trainers.

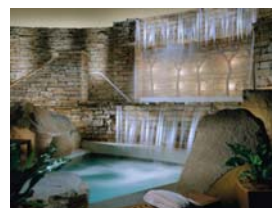
Hotel Grand Pacific, Victoria: You might be lucky enough to run into an Olympic athlete at this accommodation. Hotel Grand Pacific is home to Victoria Athletic Club, a full-service fitness facility offering everything you need to kick-start those New Year resolutions. The club has a full weight room, top-of-the-line cardio equipment, 25-metre pool and even a squash court. If you're looking for that extra motivation,



Rimrock Resort



Schlosshotel, Switzerland



Lodge at Woodloch



Hotel Grand Pacific

try a session with one of the personal trainers on site or one of the group classes including yoga, Pilates, zumba, aquafit and more!

The Los Angeles Athletic Club: Stay here and you'll have access to 88,000 square feet of fitness heaven. Try your hand at basketball, squash, racquetball or even handball at this chic hotel. Learn to swim, run and cycle like a professional athlete at the indoor pool, track and cycling theatre. If that wasn't enough, the hotel also offers an extensive list of classes including yoga, Latin fusion dance, cardio hip-hop, cardio Muay Thai and kickboxing.

Hotel Papendal, Holland: Everything about Hotel Papendal will inspire you to get 2016 off to a healthy start – even the restaurant is decorated around the theme of The Olympics. On-site sport and wellness facilities include a fitness room, sauna with steam cabins and an 18-hole golf course. Plus, every Sunday morning guests can make use of a free personal trainer, and the woods of national park Hoge Veluwe are nearby.

Spa Lovers

A soothing spa retreat is just what the doctor ordered at the start of a year. Sweat out toxins in a sauna or be massaged into a state of deep relaxation at one of these top three hotels to recover from the hangovers of the festive season.

Hotel Le Germain Charlevoix, Quebec: Nestled on top of one of the most beautiful mountains sits this luxurious spa. Le Massif is home to Spa du Verger which helps guests truly relax and escape. Thermal experiences in hot and cold outdoor pools are a must-try. Expect professional massages and unique treatments helping you relax and feel revitalized.

The Lodge at Woodloch, Pennsylvania: Set on 150 acres of woodland gardens in the Pennsylvania lake region, this award-winning spa offers the perfect escape for the mind, body and spirit. After relaxing at the spa enjoy on-site Zen activities like yoga and tai chi.

Corinthia Hotel Budapest: Just as stupefyingly grand as Wes Anderson's fictional equivalent, the five-star Corinthia Hotel Budapest offers a sublime hotel experience. And Corinthia spas are famously good, so this is a perfect option for that New Year detox. The newly opened Royal Spa in the Budapest Hotel offers an impressive menu of treatments alongside its saunas, steam baths and hot tubs.

*Renowned photographer
Craig Minielly reminds us
that packing the right
equipment is essential*



Gearing Up For India



Nikon D750 48mm ISO 4000 f9 1/200s

Our camel trek was cut short by an evening thunderstorm, which provided an amazing light opportunity to work with in this portrait of one of the guides and his mount in the Great Thar Desert, Jaisalmer, India.



Nikon D750 250mm ISO 250 f8 1/3200s

Sunrise over the Ganges River, looking across the sandbar to the opposite shore as a man walks with his container of holy water drawn from the river.

By Craig Minielly

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR
& NIKON CANADA AMBASSADOR

WITH THE WEIGHT and size restrictions for carry-ons and checked luggage, travelling with camera gear has become increasingly challenging. The good news: there is a variety of high-quality yet inexpensive gear that ease the burden of packing while providing amazing versatility in the images you can capture.

On a recent trip to India with Bestway Tours & Safaris, I restricted myself to a minimum gear setup that I could easily pack in a light shoulder pack, along with my usual carry-on items of laptop, backup drive, headphones, iPad and other travel accessories. I planned to be on the road for almost four weeks, with numerous flights, both internationally and domestically, so carry-on weight was at a premium.

I chose to use my Nikon D750 with an AF-S NIKKOR 28-300mm f/3.5-5.6G ED VR, the Nikon Df with a NIKKOR 50mm f/1.8, and the mirrorless Nikon 1 V3 with its 10-30mm, 10-100mm and 10mm f/2.8. This provided me with a complete range of lens choices, low-light flexibility and also backup bodies — just in case. Two SB910 flashes provided remote TTL flash options and a backup if needed. I also packed a travel transformer and power bar to make charging everything easy to do, in minimal time.

Lenses: Keeping It Simple

Over the four weeks, I never changed the lenses on the DSLRs. The 28-300 range was fabulous on the D750, and the Df/50mm combo became my low-light setup for nighttime extreme image creations. I packed a tripod, but only used it twice as the high ISO capability (which I used up to 12,800 ISO) overcame the shutter speed requirements, and the tripod was impractical to carry most of the time.

I discovered that the D750 with 28-300 appeared impressive to passersby; when people saw it, they were happily willing to pose for me, or to let me through to the front of a crowded location. The Nikon 1V3 setup was wonderful when I wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible. In the lowest light conditions, the Df with the 50mm never failed to provide instant autofocus and amazing image quality.

Aside from never missing a shot, another benefit of not changing lenses was that despite the dusty and harsh conditions I was shooting in, the chance of sensor dust and general cleaning needs were kept to a minimum. Going from 18°C in an air-conditioned interior to 40°C outside can be hugely problematic with condensation, so changing lenses would have needed to be done with extreme care — not to mention the time I would have wasted waiting to do it.

Taking the Shot

My general shoot style is to use Aperture Priority



Nikon D750 100mm ISO 2500 f8 1/1000s

One of the vendors of the Mullik Ghat, the Kolkata wholesale flower market, with some of the flower garlands that are so popular for their presentation to the gods and temple ceremonies.



Nikon Df 50mm ISO 10000 f5 1/100s

Orange robed nomadic priests, ahead of the incoming night train from Agra to Varanasi. They were happy to present their portrait pose for me, lit from the dark of the night with the overhead fluorescents.



Nikon D750 28mm ISO 400 f8 25s

Staying barely ahead of the rain, we pulled over at an abandoned roadside building to create a 25-second time exposure of the dramatic night sky and lightning storm in Jaisalmer, India.



Nikon D750 300mm ISO 12800 f5.6 1/160s

A worker, covered from the heat, tends to one of the many cremation pyres that burn 24/7, year round at the Manikarnika Ghat in Varanasi, India. Each of the approx 150 daily cremations, lasts about three hours, and uses 360kg of wood that is imported, measured, stacked and replenished constantly.

for exposure, with ISO typically set between 800-4000 and up to 12,800 as needed. The built-in VR on the 28-300 allowed me to hand hold comfortably at 1/125th without concern when zoomed in at 300mm, or even down to 1/8th if I was careful. I like to use apertures that are wide open, which allows my backgrounds to fade back in detail so as to be less distracting, but still provide context and storytelling elements.

While shooting travel imagery, the biggest tip I can offer is to always be ready, as you never know what is going to appear around the corner, or whom you may come across at any moment. Light conditions will change constantly from bright sunlit, to shade, to darker covered over areas, resulting in the need for various exposures. Using aperture preferred auto and a slightly higher ISO for comfortable handheld shutter speeds will go a long way to ensuring you never miss a shot by blowing the exposure, or fussing with your camera settings.



Nikon D750 300mm ISO 2500 f13 1/800s

Stacked architectural features of the Red Fort in Agra at sunset, making use of the compression created with the telephoto zoom at 300mm. Agra, India.



Nikon 1 V3 17.1mm ISO 800 f9 1/25s

The subtlety of the compact mirrorless camera is perfect for capturing natural moments of all kinds. Here a trio of women scrub the steps of the Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, India.

of a slower shutter speed while panning along the same plane of your subject's motion is a great technique to use while looking for the "peak action." That fraction of a moment when the subject has stopped his or her direction of movement is another.

When approaching a new area to photograph, light opportunities should always be your prime motivator. Look for pockets of light, interesting shadows and shapes, and try to position yourself to allow the light to come from the sides and "into your subject," rather than from behind you. This is a big part of how to be successful in adding interest and depth to your images.

Photographs that make use of strong graphic colour, silhouettes, inclement weather, unusual camera angles, and even signage that's humorous can add a powerful impact to your image collection and presentations.

Of prime importance is to tell the story within an image by composing it to include the background and with the subject, usually off centre and to the side. In a series, always try to capture a wide-angle perspective along with close-ups, something very easy to do with the zoom range of the 28-300.

Using motion within an image can be very powerful in telling the story, and with a bit of practice, can be a highly successful tool. Making use



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*Find Nikon Canada at www.nikon.ca
Craig Minielly: <http://www.AuraPhotographics.com>.*

Subjects: People, Places and More

Asking permission before photographing someone is respectful and always encouraged. It rarely meets refusal, is very easy to do once you get used to it, and also allows for a much more engaging interaction between you and your subject. As well, taking an extra moment and looking for a few additional frames after your "thank you" can often provide bonus images that appear more natural.

While photographing kids, especially with language barriers, taking the time to really smile, say hello, and to crouch down to their level, almost always results in rewarding expressions in return.

An important consideration when interacting with local people is that every culture has its own traditions. For example in India, a side-to-side nodding of the head is their typical way of saying "okay," which is very similar to the side-to-side turning of the head meaning "no" that we're more familiar with. (As it took me a couple of days to realize this, I'm sure there were a few confused people that wondered why I didn't take their picture after they had said I could.)

Buildings and architectural features provide amazing settings for people subjects, and often add an intriguing graphic element to the moment. Showing repetition in form with telephoto settings, using windows and walkways to frame subjects, and showing depth and perspective with wide-angle techniques are all composition opportunities to continually make use of.

Having a minimal camera outfit, and not having to think about lens swaps or changing exposure setups, really simplifies the overall photo process. The best part about these gear setups, camera settings and compositional suggestions are that they are all easy and don't detract from the travel experience.

I'm a firm believer that you should always first strive to enjoy the travel opportunities as they happen, without being gear loaded with tech distractions. That way you can truly savour the moment with the images that you do capture becoming that much more powerful as part of the storytelling memories you create and are able to share with others! •



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GUATEMALA KINDLES A

Fiery Passion

Country's culture and traditions, combined with its fabled beauty, inspire visitors to explore remote areas so they can experience the 'real' Guatemala

By Rosalind Cummings-Yeates

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

TECPÁN, GUATEMALA — Liria kneels before the fire, chanting and sprinkling small nuggets of copal resin incense into the blaze. Clutching the tree branch that serves as a connection to the spirit world, as well as a fire stirrer, her voice grows louder as she peers into the flames. Reading the fire messages as easily as if they were a child's book, she stares at me and offers me a handful of copal.

As a fifth-generation Ajq'ij, or Maya shaman, Liria has invited me to witness a fire ceremony in the sacred ruins of Iximche in Guatemala's highlands. I thought that I was here only to observe but it seems that my ancestors have other ideas.

I arrived in Guatemala wanting to explore the country's fabled beauty — the lakes, volcanoes and pastel-hued colonial architecture that dots most towns. I'm also interested in learning more about the country's complex culture; as home to 21 different Maya indigenous groups, tradition and heritage unfolds everywhere in Guatemala.

I want a personal introduction to it all!

So I start by exploring the sprawling sacred ruins of Iximche, located near the town of Tecpán, in the highlands of Western Guatemala. Perched on a high plateau and surrounded by deep ravines, Iximche was founded as the capital city of the Kak'chik'el Maya in 1470. Small and rarely visited by tourists, this archeological site still serves as a significant location for contemporary Maya spirituality.

Walking through several plazas, streaks of sun pour down on ancient temples, plazas and ball courts. I'm the only one visiting at the time and the stillness as I gaze at the crumbling ruins heightens the sacred presence.

Iximche was the last capital of the Maya — the end of Maya history is generally cited as 1524, when the first



Witnessing a Maya shaman named Liria perform an ancient fire ceremony or witnessing the raw power of the country's Pacaya volcano and its ancient ruins, are all part of the wonderment of a visit to Guatemala

PHOTOS BY ROSALIND CUMMINGS-YEATES, BIGSTOCK AND SHUTTERSTOCK

Spanish colonial city was founded on the site. The significance of this history is played out everyday as Mayans continue to practice their religion while sometimes combining it with the traditions of the Spaniard's Roman Catholicism.

Strolling deeper into the site, I spot locals participating in various ceremonies. The stones of an altar built into a hill is strewn with yellow and white flower offerings. Over to one side, a man is kneeling before a fire as a shaman chants prayers. After the man gets up to leave, my guide, José, introduces me to Liria, the shaman. Her face is encircled with a red ceremonial scarf and she wears the required red belt, symbolizing life energy, under her thick sweater to guard against the wind. She smiles at me and begins constructing the fire for the ceremony.

Thin black, white, yellow, blue and green candles are arranged in a circle to represent the directions and their corresponding colours. The circle is the q'anil glyph — the Circle of Life. Red candles are for the east, black for the west, white north and yellow south. The fire ceremony is fundamental to Maya spirituality and it represents the connections of life with spirit in all forms.

She starts chanting in a Maya dialect and I watch as the flames appear to weave and shift as she communes with the fire energy. I kneel by the fire and, as the gravel digs into my skin, the heat from the fire blows uncomfortably close to my face.

Liria has never stopped chanting but she's suddenly looking at me with intensity. She waves the tree branch over the fire before she hands me nuggets of copal. I take the resin and look at José, who quickly translates. An ancestor has apparently appeared to give me a message. I am to throw the copal on the fire and clear my mind of all negative thoughts. I struggle to clear my mind thoughts of the sharp stones gnawing into my knees.

Liria switches to Spanish, which I can loosely follow and I recognize words for prosperity and creativity. As a writer, those are both significant areas of focus for me but I'm wondering what ancestor is sending these messages and hanging out with an Ajq'ij in Guatemala.

José translates and explains that the ancestor is saying not to worry, that everything will turn out for the best. That's when I realize that it must be my grandmother.

Yes, my globetrotting granny, who traversed six continents and would often comfort me with similar words, is the only one who would be here in the midst of ancient temples and deep ravines.

I'm totally caught off guard by the personal connection during the fire ceremony but I quickly learn that Maya beliefs don't separate contemporary life from the spirit world.

From Iximche, I journey to the cobblestone streets of Antigua, where I again witness how closely the mundane and the spiritual mix.

Just a few blocks down from the iconic Santa Catalina Arch, the Jade Museum displays artifacts and sculptures from Aztec, Olmec, Mokaya and Maya cultures. The ancient Maya called jade Ya'ax'chik and it symbolized power, life and fertility. Jade was considered more valuable than gold and bright green jade jewelry, statues and bowls fill the museum's displays.

Today, jade in colours ranging from white, black and lavender, are popular with Guatemalans, especially pendants carved into the shape of their nahual.

Noticing these symbols scattered all around the museum and shop, I ask José about their meaning. Before he can answer, the store's manager and clerk eagerly break down the Maya system. Nahual refers to the spirits that represent the day signs that make



The ancient ruins of Iximche, located in Guatemala's lovely highlands, is a place that draws many visitors each year and remains one of the country's sacred treasures.

up the sacred 260-day cycle of the Mayan calendar. The nahuales are named for cosmic forces — animals, plants and tools that influence the energy of a particular day on the material plane. Sort of like Western astrology; each day is supposed to bestow specific traits and tendencies and locals consult their individual nahuales for guidance.

The manager hauls out a massive book decorated with Mayan characters. Before I can decline, he insists on knowing the year and date of my birth. Thumbing through the worn book, he raises his eyebrows and pronounces that my nahual is Aj. The characteristics are abundance and divine power, especially related to the home and children.

I stifle a frown when I see that my spirit animal is the armadillo, a creature that I've always thought creepy. I'm not inspired to buy any nahual charms and I don't consider what I have learned about the system until days later, when I scale Pacaya Volcano.

Just 40 kilometres outside of Antigua, Pacaya is one of the world's most active volcanoes. I'm excited about seeing the lava up close but my enthusiasm wanes when I see the uneven terrain and kilometres of twisty paths that lie ahead.

I struggle up steep and winding trails that seem to go on forever, questioning if I'll ever make it to the top. But after 90 minutes of hiking, with my clothes soaked in sweat and my legs burning, I stand at the top. Clouds of fog and molten rock give the volcano an otherworldly appearance. Peering through the mist, I make out a sign that points the way to a lava store.

A store on top of a volcano? Of course, I have to see this.

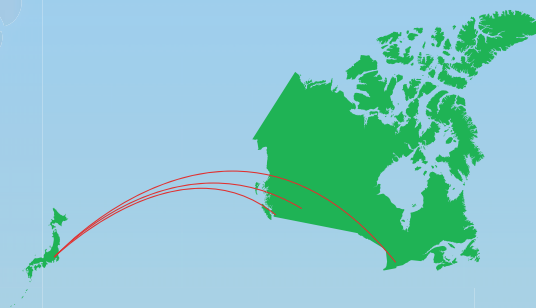
Arranged in a wooden shack, the shop displays bracelets and pendants carved from lava stone. Necklaces with various symbols dangle from branches on all sides of the store. That's when I remember my nahual. When I ask the owner if he has any pendants with nahuales, he slowly shakes his head. All of them "sold out" but he checks to make sure.

He returns with only one. He hands me a bracelet etched with a tiny armadillo. Smiling, he explains that along with abundance, the Aj nahual also represents perseverance. The fact that I have made it to the top, with only one bracelet for my nahual left, means that I have blessings from Aj.

I decide that armadillos aren't so bad after all. •



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Hotel***

A GOLDEN TREASURE



PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON & COURTESY WALDORF ASTORIA

Property now a landmark in China's capital

By Marc Atchison

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

BEIJING — My taxi reaches a junction in this ancient capital's commercial district, Wangfujing, and comes to a stop where two historic hutongs (alleys) — Xiaoweu Hutong and Jinyu Hutong — intersect. The driver points to a striking new building off to the side and struggles with his English to tell me we've arrived at the "Way-dof Hah-tel."

I'm instantly awed by the Waldorf Astoria Beijing Hotel's bronze facade, which glitters like a giant Christmas tree ornament when the midday sun strikes it. In a city that's an architectural wonderland of glass and steel towers that come in every geometric shape imaginable, the Waldorf Astoria Beijing's simple, clean design and dramatic colour make it stand out from the rest. No wonder this building earned so many accolades and "landmark status" after opening in February 2014.

As impressive as the hotel's exterior is, though, nothing can prepare me for what awaits behind the giant bronze doors at its entrance. My pulse quickens and my heart beats a little faster when I enter a place that transcends time — where modern and ancient China are brought together under one glorious roof.

The Waldorf Astoria Beijing's lobby is a masterpiece of contemporary elegance, a stunning tribute to its designers. It's a real eye opener but just the first of many "wow factors" this 171-room hotel offers its guests.

While waiting to check in, my eyes are drawn down a long corridor — Peacock Alley — to a stunning portrait by renowned Chinese artist Ling Jian. The painting, entitled "The Palace Servant,"



The striking painting dubbed "The Palace Servant" by renowned Chinese artist Ling Jian is just one of the many priceless works that make up the Waldorf Astoria's art collection. The hotel's bronze exterior and clean design make it stand out from Beijing's glass and steel towers but the most fascinating part of this hotel is the stunning courtyard home, top photo, that reminds us of the capital's remarkable past.

portrays a feminine looking man with piercing eyes and ruby red lips and is just one of many priceless art pieces showcased in the hotel's public spaces.

Just beside it hangs another contemporary masterpiece — a portrait of the Forbidden City entitled “Postcard”, which was created by Luo Xiaodong. The most awe-inspiring piece in the hotel's collection, in my opinion, though, is a priceless sculpture — Shao Fan's “Wood and Acrylic Chair” — which emboldens the Waldorf Astoria's attempt to unite China's past with its future. Fan's sculpture encases pieces of a Ming Dynasty chair in acrylic and the affect is mind-boggling.

Later, Karen Chu, the hotel's Director of Marketing Communications, tells me the Forbidden City was actually the inspiration behind the interior design of the Waldorf Astoria Beijing. Just as rooms in the Forbidden City flow seamlessly into each other, so do public rooms here — the lobby drifts off into the trendy Peacock Alley bar area and then into the property's fashionable Brasserie 1893 restaurant, where China's affluent now gather to sip the world's finest wines and dine on gourmet dishes prepared on a handmade stove from France made specifically for the Waldorf Astoria Beijing.

Chu says every new Waldorf Astoria — there are now 25 worldwide — features a Peacock Alley in tribute to the original at the historic New York Waldorf Astoria.

“The original Peacock Alley is where New York socialites in the 1920s and '30s would parade in their finest gowns,” she tells me, “and it was actually the forerunner to the fashion industry's catwalk.”

Then Chu invites me to follow her to the back of the hotel, where she opens a door and we find ourselves standing in a street looking at what appears to be one of Beijing historic courtyard homes, which date back thousands of years.

“This is actually a replica of a courtyard home and it belongs to our hotel,” says Chu, as she pushes open a steel door and we enter a palatial space that looks more like a mini Forbidden City than a simple courtyard home. No detail was overlooked in the construction of this beauty, right down to the unique sloped roof, where massive wooden beams are secured by an interlocking technique rather than nails, which were not yet invented when the original courtyard homes were first built.

The Ming Dynasty-inspired courtyard home is divided into two sections — East and West. The East features three well-appointed Studio rooms measuring 70 to 100 square metres, while a larger upper floor Terrace Studio comes in at 121 square metres.

As impressive as the East wing is, the courtyard home's West wing leaves me absolutely speechless — a place literally fit for an emperor and his family.

Spread over three floors, the West villa takes up 566 square metres of space. On the upper floor, Chu introduces me to an oversized master bedroom with a large terrace that is jaw-dropping gorgeous. The courtyard home's ground floor features a large guest room and a dining room that seats 12, and drifts off into a well-designed entertainment area.

Chu then leads me to the home's basement where I'm shocked to find a large indoor pool, a party room that's been recognized for the genius of its interior design, a small conference room and a steam room.

“This courtyard home is perfect for family getaways or it can be used for corporate functions,” says Chu, who tells me the courtyard home experience at the Waldorf Astoria Beijing comes with a hefty price tag — the larger West courtyard home costs about



The hotel's 1893 restaurant is a bistro-style room that offers some excellent cuisine.

Just The Facts

The Waldorf Astoria Beijing Hotel is ideally located – just a short walk from the Forbidden City, Tiannamen Square, historic hutongs and some of the city's best shopping streets.

Rooms at the Waldorf Astoria Beijing start at \$300 Cdn a night but the hotel has many special offers. To find out rates, go to <http://www.hilton.com/Beijing>

Air Canada offers direct daily service to Beijing from a number of Canadian cities.

Tour East Holidays offers many air-inclusive tours to Beijing that can be tailored to include a stay at the Waldorf Astoria Beijing Hotel. Go to <http://www.toureast.com> for more information about Beijing holidays.

\$15,000 U.S. a night, while a stay in one of the East wing Studio rooms is more affordable at \$1,000 a night.

The experience, however, must be priceless.

I feel privileged to spend a few nights in one of the hotel's specious modern rooms that are, without a doubt, now the best in Beijing. The Waldorf Astoria Beijing also features 38 remarkable suites and every room comes with plush bathrooms filled with designer toiletries.

The property's spa is a pleasure palace manned by some of the best therapists in China, and all are well versed in the latest treatments, as well as some ancient Chinese techniques that are sure to relieve your aches and pains after a long day of touring Beijing's many historic highlights. The hotel's large indoor pool and fitness centre are also designed with relaxation in mind.

While we are impressed with the three onsite restaurants (we also enjoyed a meal at the hotel's stylish Chinese room, Zijin Mansion), we were most impressed with the service provided us by one of the most courteous staff in the hotel industry. While holding true to the high standards set down by the Waldorf Astoria, General Manager Alan Stocker's Beijing staff go above and beyond to make you feel like an honoured guest. In no time, you'll be addressing staff on a first-name basis and Peacock Bar servers like Sherry and April will impress with their mixologist prowess — make sure you try April's famed green tea cocktail.

From the street, the Waldorf Astoria Beijing looks like a giant gift box and the treasures you'll find inside add up to a priceless experience. •



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Ready! Set! SNOW!

Our ski correspondents in France and Colorado reveal the hottest places to be seen on and off the slopes this winter season

France's tiny Samoëns offers skiers some 'Grand' opportunities

By Neil McKay
TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

SAMOËNS, FRANCE — A snowy Tuesday night and, as usual, it's standing room only inside Covey's, a small Irish pub deep in the heart of the French Alps. It's quiz night. But this isn't your typical après-ski crowd. Tradesmen in old jeans and work boots jockey for position at the bar with tourists in chic ski attire, all eager to get their orders in before the quiz kicks off. The outfits may differ but the thirsty customers have a couple of things in common — they all love to ski and they all speak English.

You wouldn't see a crowd like this in tony Chamonix or Zermatt, but that's what makes the ancient village of Samoëns special and the reason so many English-speaking people have decided to move here permanently.

Samoëns is not one of those purpose-built resorts France is known for. This is a real place, with a real history. Hannibal



France's tiny hamlet of Samoëns has an ancient past and not one of those purpose-built ski resorts, which makes it very appealing to "real" skiers.

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Snowmass steps out from shadows of Aspen to claim more ski enthusiasts

By Karen Asp

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

SNOWMASS, CO — The menu reads like one of Manhattan's five-star finest: elk stroganoff, butternut squash soup, and wild salmon salad. Here's the catch, though. I'm not only hundreds of kilometres from New York City, I'm also clad in ski duds sporting what I can only guess is some glamorous helmet hair.

It's been a rough day, sarcastically speaking, on the slopes in Snowmass, and because it's noon, I've slipped inside the Lynn Britt Cabin — its name another misnomer with its linen tablecloths and china plates — for a lunch that redefines on-slope eating.

For years, Snowmass has sat in the shadow of its more well-known, swanky sister, Aspen, located just 15 kilometres away. Yet slowly but surely, Snowmass has built itself into a world-class resort of its own, so much so, in fact, that I never even give

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Aspen more than a nod during my stay. I'm determined to be Snowmass or bust, but as it turns out, there's no bust about this trip.

Let's start with the skiing. I'm not one to get caught up in numbers, but they are impressive: 3,362 acres of skiable terrain; the second largest vertical drop in the country, 1,343 metres to be exact; 21 lifts; 94 trails.

Among those trails, I find a favourite, Sheer Bliss. It's appropriately named, for it's among the most scenic runs I've skied and I appreciate its generous width.

Truth is, though, there's so much more to Snowmass than just snow, which is why I have no qualms about exiting the slopes early.

My first mission? Wandering Snowmass' village, or actually, pair of villages. There's the typical base village you expect to see at any mountain, complete with rental shops, restaurants and even the only ski-in-ski-out bowling alley (and yes, it's well worth testing your high-altitude bowling skills). Yet just a quick ride from the base on what locals affectionately call the Skittles Gondola – each of its cars is painted a different colour – is the bigger village, featuring a pedestrian-only street lined with chic boutiques, souvenir shops and cafés.

It's also the home of the Snowmass Ice Age Discovery Cen-



The mountains that make Snowmass so enjoyable for skiers are also a treasure chest of archaeological wonders thanks to the prehistoric creatures that once roamed this land.

ter, where I meet a wooden Columbian Mammoth skeleton. It's no coincidence because in 2010 an archaeological treasure of epic proportions was unearthed at Snowmass — the tusk of a young female mammoth. That led to a massive excavation during which archaeologists found more than 5,000 bones of 41 different kinds of Ice Age animals, including mammoths, mastodons, giant bison, ground sloths and camels, many of which are on display at the centre. They also unearthed about 60 species of plants.

My mammoth fix satisfied, I go in search of another character, this time a Norse god named Ullr. In case you've forgotten your Norse mythology, he's the god of snow and winter, and to reach him I hop a gondola to Elk Camp where I'm met by a bonfire, fire jugglers, ice skaters, snow bikers, snow tubers and bands. It's all part of Ullr Nights, a regular Friday night event during peak ski season to honor Ullr.

Before I join the festivities, though, I dash into the lodge for a dinner served cafeteria style, although it's far from normal cafeteria grub — lobster even factors into this menu. And then it's out to play in the snow. Had I been clad in my winter

wear, I'd have joined the hour-long snowshoe tour that's part of the event. Instead, I flop belly side down on a tube and fly over the snow.

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The Grand Massif ski area put Samoëns on the map and the Grand Massif Express gondola lured many people to the area. Ski lovers have settled in the Giffre Valley and seem right at home.

crossed the Alps with his elephants not far from here; the Italians and the Germans occupied the area during World War II; and farming and stonemasonry were the main livelihoods long before anyone dreamed of making money from skiing.

The arrival in 2003 of a high-speed gondola connecting the village to the sprawling Grand Massif ski area put Samoëns on the ski map. The Grand Massif Express also sparked a building boom and led to a small avalanche of mostly English builders and entrepreneurs — ski lovers all — settling here in the Giffre Valley, an hour southeast of Geneva. Hang around a bit and you'll also hear the Irish lilt and Scottish brogue, as well as the odd Canadian and Australian accent.

If you've ever been on vacation and been reluctant to leave a place, that's Samoëns. A lovely old square with a church, a pretty town hall, cozy cafés and shops on narrow streets, diet-destroying bakeries and, of course, superb skiing. You could shoot a Bond movie here.

With two girls in French Immersion in Ontario, both avid skiers, it seemed like a good spot for your correspondent and his family to spend a semester. A once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing so the girls could attend a local school and really polish their French, n'est-ce pas? That was in 2008. Eight years later Samo-

ëns has become a second home.

"I think that's pretty typical," says Wendy Hedditch, who gave up a banking career in Australia and moved here in 2005 with her husband, Don, who taught hospitality at a college Down Under. "We used to ski in Morzine on vacations and we kept hearing about Samoëns. One year we came here and just loved it."

The Hedditches now operate a self-catering farmhouse, Ferme Downena, and look after a number of apartments and chalets for U.K.-based clients.

The two of them also run the raucous weekly quiz at Covey's, which usually consists of 20 to 25 teams of four. The banter is lively. If England has suffered a particularly agonizing defeat in rugby or cricket, you can be sure Don will have a question reminding them of the fact.

The Poms counter by needling Don about his French accent. (Imagine the big shark in Finding Nemo speaking French and you get the idea.)

During the Christmas holidays the village is especially festive with streets and shops beautifully decorated, church bells ringing, vin chaud stands everywhere and nightly entertainment in the square. A couple of years ago, Père Noël fell out of his sleigh drunk in front of scores of kids during the procession through the



Just The Facts

GETTING THERE

Geneva is the nearest airport, a 75-minute drive from Samoëns. Private airport transfers to ski stations are expensive, about 100 euros per person return; renting a car is the better way to go, especially if you plan on skiing elsewhere or need to shop for groceries.

SKI PASS (Grand Massif): 1 day: 45.50 euros; 6 days: 237 euros

SKI PASS (Massif, excluding Flaine): 1 day: 39.50 euros; 6 days: 205 euros

GRAND MASSIF INFO: <http://www.grand-massif.com>

LODGING INFO: <http://www.samoens.com>

BEST SKI DAY TRIP

Les Gets, a 25-minute drive from Samoëns. Park at Les Perrières chairlift, first lot on the right as you enter town. Part of the massive Portes du Soleil ski area (12 connected resorts, four in Switzerland). Ski into Switzerland for lunch but be sure to allow for two hours to get back to Les Gets.

BEST NON-SKI DAY TRIP

Anney, 60-minute drive. Beautiful old town with great shopping and pretty canals surrounded by mountains. The IOC passed on Anney for the 2018 Olympics, what dopes.

square on Christmas Eve. (Père Noël has since been banned from adjudicating at the vin chaud competition.) Ahhh, what a night. Not that you can expect that kind of entertainment every year, mind you.

Yes, the village is charming, but it's what awaits skiers after the nine-minute ascent to the Samoëns 1600 ski station that is the real reason to visit. The Grand Massif ski area, the fourth largest in France, consists of five connected resorts – Samoëns, Flaine, Morillon, Les Carroz and Sixt-Fer-à-Cheval – and 148 groomed runs, as well as vast off-piste possibilities. Flaine boasts the highest elevation at 2,500 metres and the corduroy extends down to the village of Morillon at 700 metres.

Flaine offers the most challenging tracks, and the best view of Mont Blanc, but there are runs for all levels in each resort. Here are a few favourites:

Marvel (green, Morillon): Ski snobs tend to shun green runs but this six-kilometre beauty shouldn't be missed. Marvel snakes through an ancient forest and is perhaps the prettiest run in the entire Grand Massif. (You shouldn't really be bombing down a green run but this tree-lined piste does feel like a downhill course and first trackers occasionally get Marvel to themselves. Just sayin'.) Note: This is the home resort of Turin Olympic downhill champion Antoine Deneriaz.

Cascades (blue, Flaine): The most famous run in the Grand Massif. Starting from the top of Flaine, in the shadow of Mont Blanc, this remote 14-kilometre blue winds its way to Sixt-Fer-à-Cheval at the eastern end of the Giffre Valley. Take your time on this one, bask in the scenery and savour the deafening quiet. At the halfway point you can stop for lunch or coffee at the Lac de Gers. Look for the phone and a snowmobile will soon arrive to tow you up to the restaurant. From Sixt a free ski bus returns you to Samoëns.

Serpentine (blue, Flaine): A long, fast blue that features a steep start and huge rollers. If you enjoy watching unsuspecting tourists windmilling through the air – and who doesn't? – this spot rocks. Near the bottom, stop and check out the wall on the right, which is frequently covered in chamois (mountain goats). Le Bissac at the bottom of the run serves the best hot chocolate in the Grand Massif.

Aigle Noir and Chamois (blacks, Samoëns): Two thigh-burning black runs that start at the top of the Chariande Express chairlift. For strong skiers, Aigle Noir and Chamois are about as good as it gets after a big dump. Aigle Noir, however, features large moguls most of the time and can be a bit scary in bad conditions.

Gers Bowl (off-piste, Flaine): Gers is the destination of choice for all the top skiers in the area. This massive bowl is located in a remote area of Flaine and serviced by an old thigh-busting button lift. Do not ski Gers on your own. Fall and get hurt here and you may not be found until the spring. That said, powder days here are a spiritual experience.

Bon ski! •



Snowmass is the perfect place for skiers to get lost amidst the natural splendour surrounding this Colorado beauty. The après ski scene equals that of Vail and Aspen.

No surprise, of course, that Snowmass delivers big when it comes to pleasing snow fans. It is Colorado, after all. But it's the culinary scene that also impresses, essentially taking my taste buds on a culinary adventure of their own.

One afternoon, for instance, I ski to the base and head into Bai Hoi, noshing south-east Asian street food in a trendy urban atmosphere. Think Chiang Mai noodles (red curry with roasted peanuts) and traditional rib eye and chicken pho.

Another night, I dine on French fare at Ricard, where I find a craft beer menu with eight drafts on tap. If that's not enough diversity, I spend my last night enjoying Southern-style grub at Eight K at the Viceroy Snowmass, so named because the hotel sits at 2,000 metres. It's an unusual

intersection of cuisine where New Orleans meets Colorado; you'll find Low Country grits and andouille gumbo as well as Colorado wagyu beef and striped bass here – but it works well.

Honestly, though, I'm an après ski girl at heart and love nothing more than cozying up with a good brew, which may be why one of my favorite finds is the Bar at Wildwood, a beer hall created in collaboration with Colorado's esteemed New Belgium Brewery. Although not an extensive beer menu, I still have a tough time deciding among the nine drafts. Finally, I choose New Belgium's 1554, and as I sink into one of the many inviting couches, I raise my glass to my new friend Ullr.

If this is how he delivers winter to Snowmass, you can bet I'll be back. •

Just The Facts

• After a full day in the snow, you'll be ready to hunker down at night in a comfy setting. Stay slopeside and get ski-in-ski-out access at the Westin Snowmass (<http://www.westinsnowmass.com>). Here, you'll find a buzzy lounge with live music several nights a week and several restaurants.

• If it's pampering you crave, veer toward the chic Snowmass Viceroy (<http://www.viceroyhotelsandresorts.com/en/snowmass>) where you'll be greeted in the lobby by vats of hot chocolate and bowls filled with marshmallows. You can even soothe sore muscles at the small but cozy spa with its water-themed waiting area.

• For more information about Snowmass in general, visit <http://www.gosnowmass.com>.

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LEARN TO BE STREET WISE IN MEXICO



PHOTOS BY MAUREEN LITTLEJOHN

Walking the streets of small towns and interacting with the local vendors brings visitors closer to Mexico's food, culture and wonderful people. The woman making tacos, above, and the mother, who pauses making tamales long enough to give her daughter some loving, are just a few samples of what you'll find in Mexico when you venture off the normal tourist routes.

Being adventurous will help open new avenues to food and people

By Maureen Littlejohn

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

PITILLAL, MEXICO — As we traipsed along the narrow streets of this little community just east of Puerto Vallarta, our small group kept chanting the mantra, “Delicious! Delicious!”

We were out with Vallarta Food Tours, owned by American ex-pat Paul Mayer and his wife, Lindsay Prime, and our three-hour itinerary included stops at street stands, taquerias (taco stands), a paletteria (ice cream parlour) and hole-in-the-wall restaurants.

“We like to go off the beaten track and eat where Mexicans eat,” Mayer told me as we strolled behind our guide Alex. Mayer said he and Prime like to join the tours every so often to make sure their product stays up to scratch. The couple is keenly aware of cleanliness and choose dining spots ac-





The hard working people of Pitillal take great pride in the dishes they serve up to customers. The freshness of the ingredients and the centuries-old techniques make the food in this lovely Mexican outpost very appealing.

cordingly so there's little chance of an upset tummy.

Our first stop was Birrieria Robles, an open-air patio with outdoor cooking station, where we sat down for a tantalizing, Jalisco-style slow-cooked meat stew marinated in chilies and served in a soft taco. A cerveza (beer) supplied just the right amount of complimentary coolness.

Thankfully we were walking in between mouthfuls of some of the best Mexican food I've ever had. Wandering along the streets, we poked our heads into party-dress stores rigged with frothy, colourful creations for splashy occasions such as weddings and first communions. Nestled alongside the frock shops were numerous food stalls offering a myriad of dried chilies, spices and other accoutrements. Ladies sat curbside tending long tables filled with fresh cheeses and poultry and I spied many a working man stopping at a sidewalk counter for a large, frosty cerveza served up in a Slurpee-sized cup.

Next up for tasting was Neto's famous pork carnitas — so slow cooked the meat melted in our mouths. We opted for a soft taco and our plates came to the table brimming with the stewed meat and onion mixture. Neto, who does most of the cooking himself every morning, takes pride in serving ice-cold Coca-Cola in the bottle, but I wanted something I'd be hard-pressed to find at home so I opted for a glass of ruby-coloured Jamaica (pronounced heh-my-ka) juice made from dried hibiscus flowers, sugar and lime juice. So crisp and refreshing on a hot day.

Pitillal is a residential and business area where you'll see very few tourists.

"It's off the beaten path and it really showcases authentic traditions," explained Alex while leading us down a side alley to reach our next destination, La Tianita. We marched around to the back garden and patio area of a private home and came upon three generations of women who sat at tables or hovered over large pots, bantering back and forth as they scooped and tied small corn husk packages.

"They make some of the best tamales in the bay," confided Alex.

Sitting outside at white plastic tables, we tried the freshly made tamales with a variety of homemade hot and medium salsas. Did I say delicious? Alex explained that the restaurant was only open for dinner on the weekends, but during the day Vallarta Food

Tours has exclusive entry to the site.

As a palate cleanser, we stopped at a street cart where owner Ernesto expertly chopped up sweet mangos, papaya, apples and watermelon and scooped the resulting mixed salads into plastic take-away bags, complete with spoon.

Hard to believe, but I actually had room for more.

Next stop was a taqueria without a name, where we lined up for carne asada (grilled meat) tacos (beef) topped with chopped onions, queso fresca (fresh cheese) and a squeeze of lime juice. Sitting on little plastic chairs scattered around the stand, we smiled and nodded at townsfolk also enjoying a tasty meal.

But my favourite dish was the seafood taco at Marisco's Pichi. Piled high with succulent shrimp, octopus, chopped cucumber and tomato, and then topped with a rich dollop of guacamole, it was a challenge to get it up to my mouth without spilling. Oh, who cares, I thought as I forked up runaway bits of shrimp, relishing every bite.

We capped off our tour with a stop at Paleteria Villaseñor for authentic Mexican popsicles and frozen treats.

What to choose from the huge list posted on the wall above the counter?

Guayaba (guava), tamarind or zarzamora (blackberry)?

I opted for a zarzamora. Heavenly.

I can't think of a better way to spend a day. •

Just The Facts

- Pitillal tours run daily, starting at 11 a.m. and cost \$49 U.S. Evening and cocktail tours are also offered.

- For information, go to <http://www.vallartafoodtours>

- Air Canada and Copa Airlines (via Panama) offer flights to Mexico daily from Toronto.

- Safety is always a concern in Mexico but this area of the country has been deemed safe.

- For information on Puerto Vallarta, go to <http://www.visitpuertovallarta.com>

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Cambodia's WATER WORLD



PHOTOS BY ALLISON JANE SMITH

TravelLife contributor ***Allison Jane Smith***
joins in the fun of Phnom Penh's annual Water Festival



A festive atmosphere grips Phnom Penh during the annual Water Festival, where colourful floats, Dragon Boat competitors and vendors all add to the excitement of the event.

PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA — We arrive at the boulevard running along the Mekong before the boats have begun racing. The streets have been decreed pedestrian only and are empty of their notoriously chaotic traffic. The city is quiet without its usual din of motorbikes, tuk tuks, cars and Hummers, and I can't quite believe I don't have to triple-check for SUVs before crossing the street.

The sidewalks gleam with fresh paint, and there's no garbage anywhere. Phnom Penh has been shined and polished for Bon Om Touk, the three-day Water Festival.

Millions come to the city every November to celebrate the end of Cambodia's rainy season with boat races, river processions, fireworks and concerts — my ragtag group of Canadians, Brits and Australians among them.

Throngs of people walk in the sunshine, stopping to buy bamboo sticky rice, dried fruit or juice from the many vendors lining the street. Families gather for picnics on colourful woven mats. A motorbike drives by with a load of yellow and red duck and bear balloons.

Having been in Cambodia for over a year, I know it's special to see so many people enjoying the festival in the streets. Most Cambodian holidays take place in homes and at pagodas, but because the Water Festival is public anyone can take part in the fun.

Long dragon boats hug the riverbank, waiting to race. Qualifying races are held in each of Cambodia's 24 provinces and the winners are sent to compete here. Each boat is identified by a number on a yellow flag flying at its stern. I see a flag that says 205 and marvel at the hundreds of boats stretched out along the river nearly as far as the eye can see — bright red, yellow and orange gleam against the silver river.

Some boats hold as many as 60 paddlers dressed in identi-

cal colours, stroking more or less in time. Small offerings of fruit and incense sit at the bow of the boats.

Not all the boats are the same. In some, the paddlers are seated, and in others, they perch precariously and bend at the waist as they row.

Along the river is a conspicuous blue and red grandstand announcing "Free Admission for Foreign Visitors." The group I'm with immediately agrees to take advantage of the opportunity. We get front-row seats in the shade.

Pamphlets on each chair outlines the history of the festival and headsets translate the words of an unseen announcer into English. The translation is heavy on government propaganda and light on useful information about the races, however, so we cast the headsets aside to focus on what we see rather than what we hear.

The races are impressive. With each powerful stroke, the boats surge down the river as onlookers cheer. I wonder if people are betting on the races. Although it's illegal for Cambodians to gamble, they love to anyway and will bet on anything, including the rain.

Though I've looked for a program of events, I haven't been able to figure out when the fireworks start that night. When I ask one of the staff at the foreigners' tent, he gives me a vague answer, in the typically Cambodian manner.

The fireworks will happen when it's dark, and anything more specific is not necessary. In Cambodia, pinning down a straight answer is like swimming against the current; you quickly learn you're going to end up down river anyway, and it's much easier to go with the flow.

After the races we go to the Foreign Correspondents' Club to eat. Many bars and restaurants line the riverfront, but none are as elegant or as famous as the FCC. There's lots of history in its French colonial walls.



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JAPAN AIRLINES



Dozens of dragon boats and their competitors get set for another race as thousands of enthusiastic fans cheer them on from the banks of the mighty Mekong River — all part of the Water Festival.

The FCC was established in 1993 after a United Nations peace-keeping force arrived to conduct Cambodia's first-ever elections. It quickly became the hangout for U.N. officials, diplomats and journalists.

Nate Thayer, the last journalist to interview the elusive dictator Pol Pot, filed stories from the FCC back in the days when Phnom Penh was a wild frontier city.

While I wouldn't say the city has been tamed — indeed, its rough edges are what make it fascinating — it's certainly much calmer than it was then. This is clear during Bandaet Pratip, the illuminated water ceremony on the final night of the festival. Pressed shoulder-to-shoulder, the large crowds are excited but calm.

I stake out a spot at a bar with friends. The bar requires us to buy food, but the cost is worth the view. We overlook the river and have ready access to cheap cocktails.

Illuminated boats float down the river past hundreds of thousands of onlookers. Compared to the fury of the dragon boats, they are tranquil and serene, slowly gliding along the black river.

The lights on the boats form ornate icons commonly seen in Cambodia: king cobras and lions.

One boat shows a map of Cambodia with each of the provinces

Just the facts

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labelled, while another shows Wat Phnom, the hill and pagoda after which Phnom Penh was named.

Then the fireworks start. They cast a red glow on the crowds and river below, and they impress even me, though I'm used to lavish fireworks on Canada Day in Ottawa.

When the show is over, we have another drink and wait for the traffic to clear. A quiet Buddhist pagoda across the street from the bar serves as a stark contrast to the furor of motorbikes and cars outside its gates. Their red and white taillights are almost as bright as the lights from the boats. Just like that, Phnom Penh is back to normal, chaotic traffic and all.

The traffic may take a while to clear, but I'm enjoying a \$4 cocktail and sitting in 31C weather in November. I'm in no hurry to leave. •



'BRIDGING' THE GAP

IN CHINA'S
PLAYFUL YIBIN

*The children of Yibin offer
a stranger a playful welcome.*

PHOTOS BY HILARY DUFF

A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME



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Yangtze River outpost captivates visitors with its simple pleasures

By Hilary Duff
TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

YIBIN, CHINA — I find myself captivated by this city of 4.5 million people that's nestled in the heart of southern Sichuan province. Yibin is the first city along the mighty Yangtze River at the confluence of the Min River, which adds its flow to the longest river in Asia.

The city is also home to the Wuliangye Yibin Company, the government-owned producer of a fragrant (and potent) rice liquor.

Much of my half week in the city has been spent driving to nearby tourist destinations, an activity excellent for sightseeing, but not so good for those with a distaste for cramped spaces.

My legs are antsy and my eyes are scanning as we drive the spit of smooth highway winding alongside the Yangtze, some 60 kilometres outside Yibin.

That's when we pass a place that captures my imagination, a spot just outside Yibin proper, at a fork in the road where you can go left towards Lizhuang Ancient Town, or right to the Bamboo Sea, one of China's national scenic spots.

What's so fascinating to me is the view off Nunguang Bridge, a spectacular vista of Yangtze waterfront and the industrial skyline. Off the other side of the bridge I see an older part of Yibin — weathered stone homes stacked in blocks with stone gabled rooftops. It's not colourful, but it is compelling.

Every chance I get I press my face against the bus window for a fleeting view of the area.

Later, after disembarking the tour bus, I make my way back from downtown Yibin to explore this intriguing part of the city. I take photos of the street signs as I retrace the bus route, intending them to serve as my digital breadcrumbs.

However, I quickly sway off path.

I had mentally mapped my route while looking down at the city from my hotel window. I needed to head south and then west towards the lush green mountainside.

This isn't the first time I've done something like this. In my mind, scenic drives cannot compare to the not-always-scenic walkabout. Walkabouts are how I get to know a new city. I simply set off with the intent to stroll until I find something worth strolling to.

On this day, I pass first through a street south of the hotel. It's not a commercial area, and there aren't as many storefronts as there are street food vendors with cheap plastic furniture arranged beneath vinyl coverings.

Soon I'm on a major road with rush-hour traffic racing past me in both directions. It's not the prettiest place, but there are photo opportunities along the way: houses perched on terraces, artsy apartment blocks and old men walking along the train tracks that cuts through Yibin.

I check my watch — this is taking a bit longer than expected. It seems I may have overestimated the proximity of this scenic spot.

I've been walking for an hour, though, and I'm certainly not going to





From one side of the ancient Nunguang Bridge, top photo, a visitor is afforded a spectacular view of Yibin's Yangtze waterfront and industrial skyline. Off the other side of the bridge, Yibin's Old Town, dominated by stone homes stacked in blocks and featuring stone gabled roof tops, can be seen. Life has changed little over the centuries in Yibin, where fishermen still use primitive methods to haul in their catch and where the simple life includes walking along rail tracks in the late afternoon.

stop now. I'm going at my regular clip and the bend ahead looks familiar.

Yes, I recognize this place. It's the thicket of construction just before the road takes a turn down onto the dragon's back ridges of the Yangtze River. The route looks a little more treacherous now that I'm on foot.

I calculate the risks and march forward. With motorcycles, taxis and large bucket trucks charging to my left, I proceed with wary enthusiasm. There is a liberal amount of honking.

I round the corner and there it is: Nunguang Bridge.

I see the collection of stacked home — they're peeling and dark. Just past where they sit is a narrow stone bridge crossing the river. It reminds me of an old aqueduct I once saw in the United Kingdom, essential and ancient.

This is the China that is fading into the ultra-modern and urban.

I look down on the murky Yangtze — its water is chocolate brown and scattered with bobbing trash. There's a beauty about it, though, and I lean over the bridge to watch two fishing boats rendezvous below me.

With the passing of every large truck, the bridge rumbles and shakes. I twist my camera band tighter around my wrist.

I start taking photos, but there's one problem — the lighting isn't ideal and I'm having a hard time finding a focal point for my shots. I can't quite capture the ethereal nature of the bridge, and so I cross to the other side of the road, disappointed with what I've found — factory buildings dotting the river. The cables of the bridge gleam in the end-of-day light. A group of kids runs over and they beg me to take their photo as they show off their scooter skills and karate moves.

The photo set ends up being my favourite from my two-week trip. I feel as though I saw a glimpse of the real Yibin — one of traffic and playtime, less-travelled roads and Yangtze industry.

I head back to the hotel, this time by taxi. The afternoon leg stretch I so desired has been accomplished.

If there is any lesson I can hope to instill in travellers, it is this: when aiming to get a certain photo or memory, remember it's not just about the final destination, but about the journey getting there. What you find may not be what you were expecting, but take it in stride and often you'll find something just as beautiful. A metaphor for life, and an excuse for an afternoon stroll. •

Nikkō is Japan's Natural *SUNLIGHT*



PHOTOS BY AMANDA TAYLOR AND BIGSTOCK PHOTOS

Shinkyo Bridge, above, marks the entrance to Nikkō's famous complex of UNESCO World Heritage landmarks. Opposite page, the Kegon waterfall is another of Nikkō's breathtaking natural wonders.

Breathtaking scenery and lots of UNESCO sites await those who venture to this hidden treasure

By Amanda Taylor
TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

NIKKŌ, JAPAN — About two hours north of Tokyo, nestled among the mountains of Tochigi Prefecture, sits a wealth of Japanese culture. Nikkō, which means “sunlight,” is considered one of the most beautiful places in Japan, and as I ride the Shinkansen (bullet train) through Nikkō’s countryside, I instantly understand why. The train whizzes

by mountains swathed in a lush, green carpet of cedar trees, the first glance of Nikkō’s unique charm.

From Tobu Nikkō station, I set off on foot to explore central Nikkō, where the area’s most iconic cultural monuments are located. The first thing to catch my eye is a vermillion bridge stretching snake-like over a slow-moving river backed by beautifully forested peaks. Shinkyo Bridge marks the entrance to Nikkō’s famous complex of UNESCO World Heritage landmarks, including one temple (Rinnō-ji) and two

shrines (Futarasan and Tōshō-gū). The bridge itself belongs to Futarasan Shrine.

My first stop is Tōshō-gū — this shrine is a mausoleum for the celebrated Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founding father of the Edo Period and a highly respected figure, if the shrine's elaborate beauty and detailed carvings are any indication.

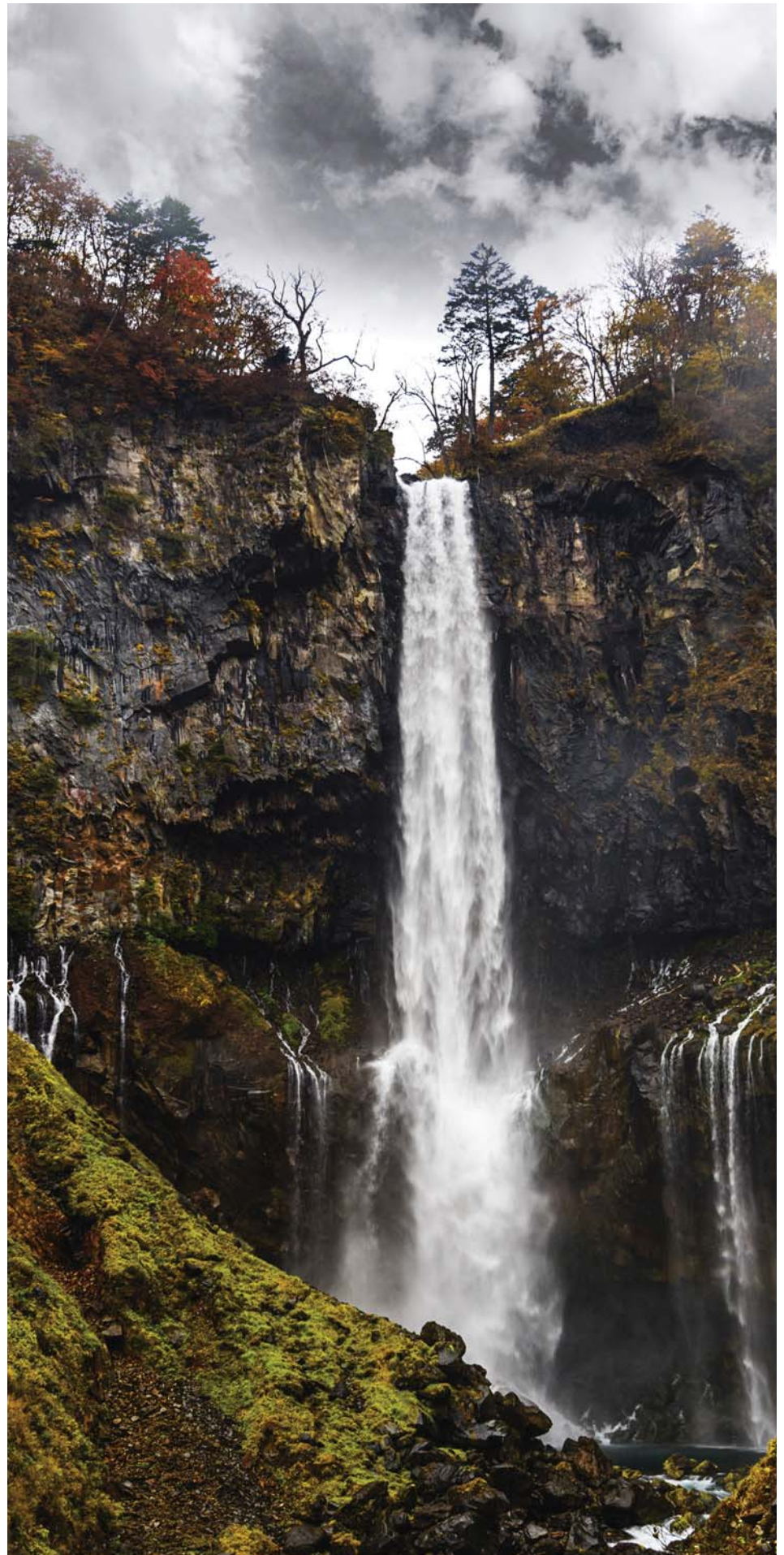
I have plenty of time to get close and personal with the decor as the crowds make moving very slow. I'm disappointed to learn Tōshō-gū's main feature, the lavish Yomeimon Gate, is being renovated. Just my luck. Still, the rest of the shrine is no slouch. A concert of red and gold, the buildings are painstakingly decorated with what have become national treasures.

The famous three wise monkeys (see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil) sit above the sacred stable, and the mysterious sleeping cat, attributed to a famous carver who may not even exist, dozes over the eastern corridor. Colourful and opulent, Tōshō-gū is an oddity among Japan's typically understated shrines.

A short walk along a peaceful cedar-lined path and I arrive at nearby Rinnō-ji Temple. This shrine was founded by Shodo Shonin, the monk who brought Buddhism to Nikkō, and houses manifestations of Nikkō's mountains represented by three beautiful gold-leaf Buddha statues.

At the Shōyō-en Garden, I pause for a moment at the small pond surrounded by trees and shrubs. I'm told by an attendant that it's a popular spot during *kouyou* — when the leaves change colour in autumn and Nikkō is at its finest — and I can easily picture the branches dipping into the still waters ablaze in red and orange leaves.

Next I take the path to the Futarasan Shrine, which is cloaked by a forest of cedar trees. As I navigate the shrine, moving with the crowds alongside mossy stone lanterns, I stumble across an unexpected sight: people playing ring toss. As I watch, a woman throws a ring at five wooden posts, but misses. I learn that this is a unique form of fortune telling. Landing just one is a sign of good luck. The woman sizes up the posts and tries again, and this time the ring flies true, looping around one of the posts and drawing cheers from those closest to her.





The red-capped Ghost Jizo statues are said to add up to a different total each time they are counted. Nikkō is full of wonders like this and has one of the largest groupings of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Japan.

Though Nikkō's UNESCO sights are impressive, the highlight of the day is the Kanmangafuchi Abyss, famous for the row of "Ghost Jizo" statues, known to add up a different number every time they're counted. After a walk through quaint back streets and some casual greetings to locals, I end up at a wide river gurgling through a gorge. Here, a line of red-capped statues stands guard.

Perhaps because of the distance, it's far less crowded here. I encounter perhaps 10 other people as I admire the statues (though I'm too lazy, or perhaps nervous, to count them). It's a welcome respite after the crush of tourists at the main complex.

For lunch I decide to sample Nikkō's local delicacy called yuba. Yuba is the skin that forms on soymilk when turning into tofu. On its own, it doesn't have much flavour, but it's spongy chewy texture is good for soaking up soy sauce or soup broth, and it's a welcome addition to my warm bowl of soba noodles.

The next day I take a bus out of central Nikkō up the Irohazaka, a winding mountain road that makes my stomach clench every time I look out the window. I get off at Lake Chūzenji, named for the temple that sits near its shores.

As I step onto the grounds, I'm surprised by how few people are here, even though it's a long weekend. Instantly, I like the energy. A bell echoes in the air and I smell smoky incense. A monk robed in blue gives a small group of us a tour and then leads us to an altar and invites us to pray.

He strikes a bowl-shaped gong, and its reverberating chime

seems tangible, almost breathable. It coaxes my mind to be still and I feel, of all the temples so far, Chūzenji has brought me closest to Zen.

After another quick bus ride, I hop off at the entrance to the hiking trail through the Senjōgahara plateau. The second I step through the gate I'm surrounded by greenery and there is no one else in sight. I hike a dirt path to the soundtrack of a bubbling river on my left, occasionally passing other hikers and saying hello, until the trail turns to a wooden boardwalk and the forest gives way to scenery worthy of a Group of Seven painting.

A sea of red-brown grass bumps up against a horizon marked by mist-shrouded peaks, and the clouds look like they've been rendered with a celestial paintbrush. Just like that, the Senjōgahara plains cement their spot as one of the most beautiful sights I've seen in all my travels.

After about a two-hour hike, I exit in the Yumoto Onsen area. As I walk the road, squinting through the light of the setting sun, I can see steam rising from vents in the ground. I stop at a tiny Japanese Inn that has a hot spring so close to the source it smells like sulfur. Despite the odour, I slip into the outdoor pool. It's twilight and the mountains are shadowy giants against a blue screen of sky. The water makes my skin tingle and I feel like I'm truly experiencing the rejuvenating powers of Japan's hot springs.

By the time I'm boarding the Shinkansen back to Tokyo the next day, I've already vowed to visit Nikkō again. •

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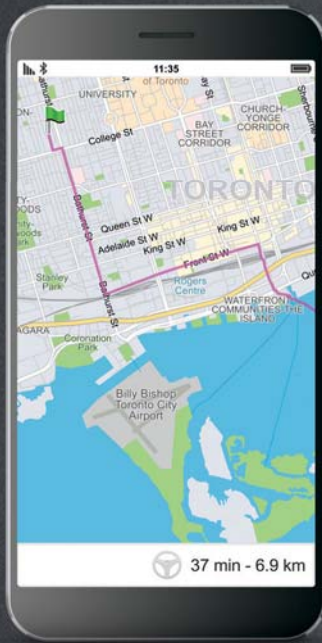
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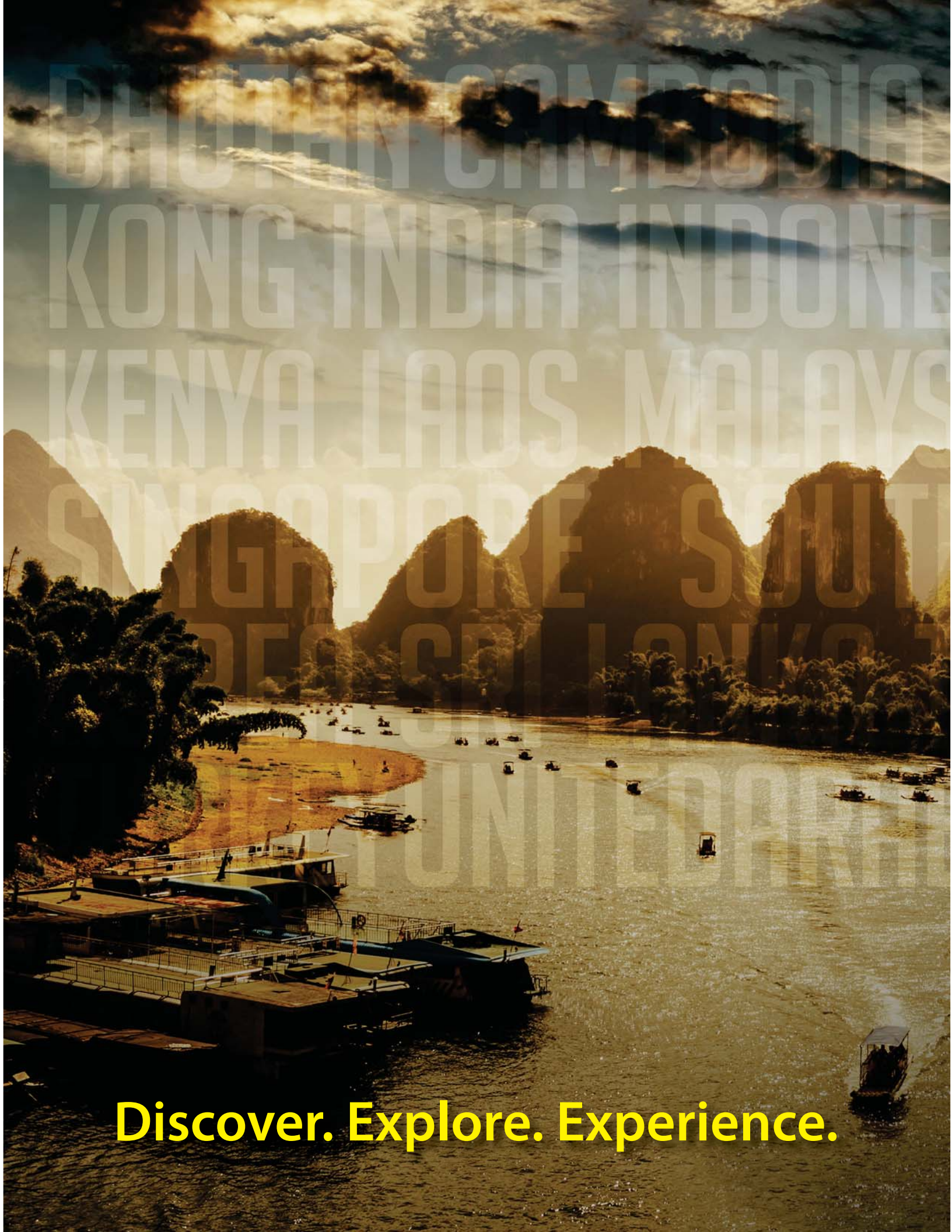
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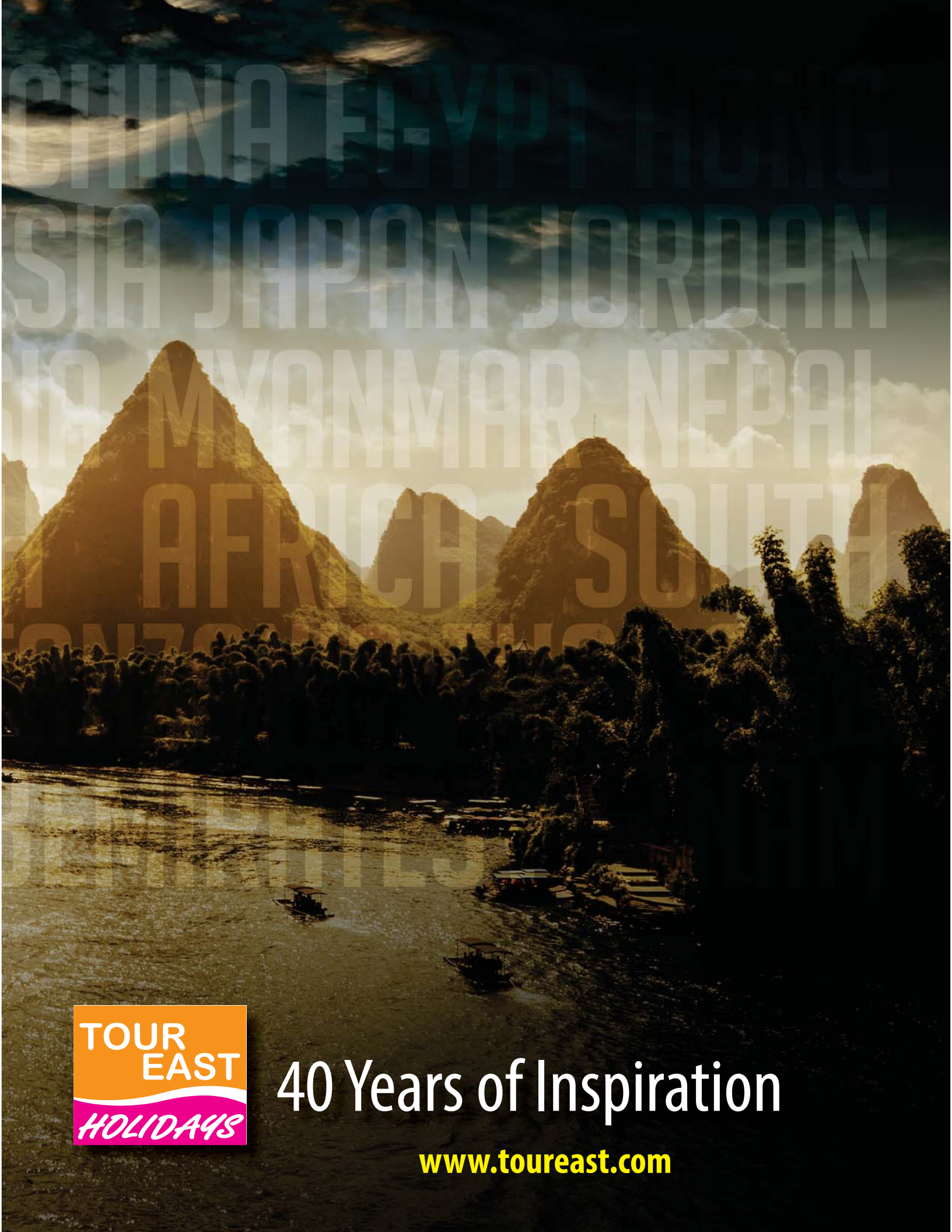
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