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CONTENT

APRIL - JUNE, 2017

CLICK & READ
Go to a story by clicking on a page number!

SPECIAL REPORTS

18 **Frequent Flyer**
Childhood sketches now a reality for Emirates crew

56 **Camera Corner**
Canada's a natural beauty when seen through a lens

60 **Seeing Is Believing**
Which observaiton wheel is the Ferris-ed?

65 **Baby Steps**
10 Tips on how to help your kids enjoy travel

DESTINATIONS

8 **Las Vegas**
MGM's T-Mobile Arena is the first star of city's new NHL team

38

102

12 **Austria**
The moveable feast

20 **Cambodia**
A lost city is found

26 **San Antonio**
On a mission in Texas

30 **Yukon**
Land of midnight 'fun'

34 **Cottage Country**
Go jump in the lake

38 **Vietnam**
Women are honoured

42 **United States**
On the 'Grand" tour

44 **South Pacific**
Flipping for Fiji

50 **Basque Country**
Having a 'vine' time

68 **Germany**
Meeting a robot dragon

72 **Japan**
Culture hits new heights

78 **Greece**
Gulf a tower of strength

82 **Canada at 150**
Kingston & country

86 **Easy Rider**
A motorcycle odyssey

92 **Colombia**
Transporting Medellin

98 **Equador**
Quito is Middle Earth

100 **Quebec**
Bear facts on Sagueney

104 **Cruise holiday**
St. Marteen on 'sail'

OUR COVER

Editor-in-Chief Marc Atchison visited Tokyo's newest hotel recently and was introduced to one of Japan's oldest travel traditions - the ryokan or traditional small inn. But the ryokan in Tokyo is located in one of the capital's modern office towers.

Read more: Page 72

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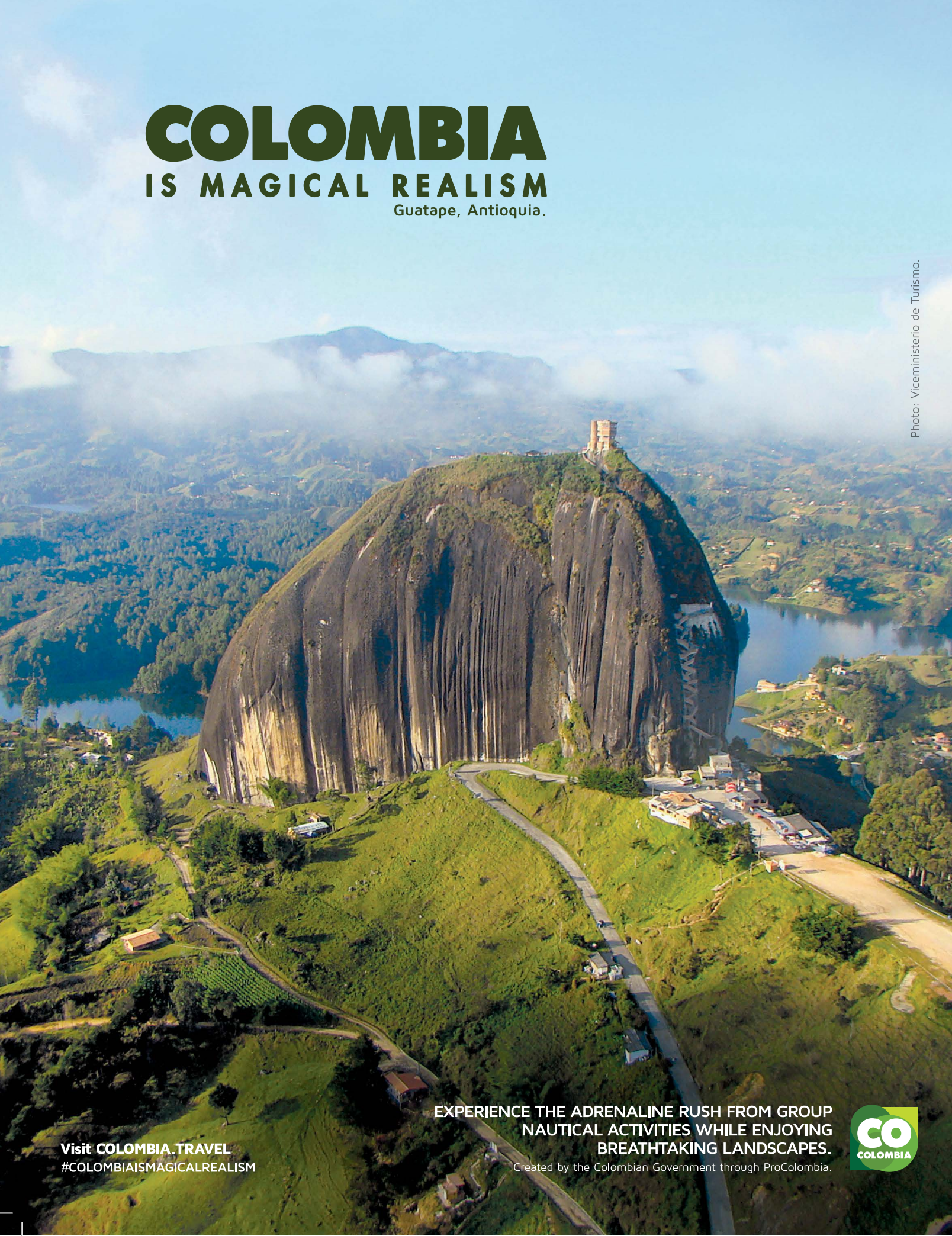
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PUCK STOPS HERE

NHL Rolls The Dice On Las Vegas And The Golden Knights

"We're all so excited about the NHL coming. Even people from other cities are excited."

STORY & PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON

The $500-million (U.S.) T-Mobile Arena, which is owned by MGM, will be the only 'star' the Las Vegas NHL frachise will have for some time to come.

High-tech arena 'first star' of this franchise

LAS VEGAS — Skeptics think the National Hockey League rolled the dice and took a big gamble by putting a franchise — the Golden Knights — in this town where betting was the only contact sport in the past. Locals, however, disagree. In fact, many say the NHL's success in Las Vegas is a sure bet.

"I can't wait for the NHL games to begin," says Darren, a security guard at the T-Mobile Arena where the Golden Knights will play their home games.

"We're all so excited about the NHL coming. Even people from other cities are excited. I had four couples from Canada come up to me today and tell me they'll plan their next visit to Vegas when their NHL teams come to town to play the Knights."

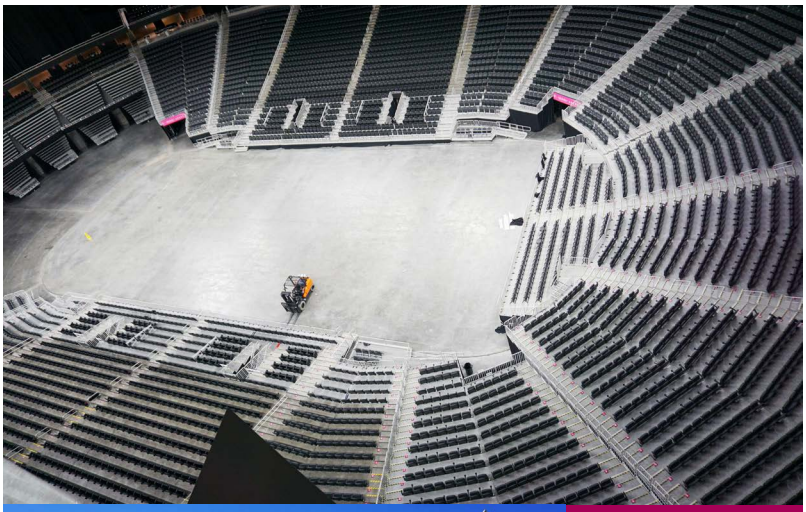
Golden Knights Logo

Another security guard I meet stationed at an open-air ice-skating rink in front of T-Mobile Arena agrees with Darren. "I'm originally from Chicago and can't wait until the Black Hawks come to town," says the man, who adds "over 14,000 people have committed to buying season tickets. That shows you how serious the people of Vegas are about the NHL."

Even though the Golden Knights are expected to field a competitive team thanks to a more equal expansion draft — that's what you get when you pay $500 million U.S. in franchise fees — the Knights are still won't do very well in their first few years of operation. Get ready for lots of "Last Vegas" headlines!

Suffice it to say, the only star of this franchise for the moment is T-Mobile Arena.

In fact, the glitzy state-of-the-art facility, located just a few steps off Las Vegas' iconic Strip, is already the "Most Valuable Arena" in the NHL.



T-Mobile Arena can sit 17,500 for hockey but it will also be used for some Vegas shows as well. Outside, in an area known as The Park, hockey fans can eat at one of five restaurants or just sit and admire Bliss Dance, a beautiful giant sculpture that anchors The Park.

Built by MGM Resorts International, which owns and operates 45 per cent of the hotels and casinos along the Vegas Strip, the 650,000-square-foot, $500 million T-Mobile Arena is the most technically advanced in the world and, since opening in April 2016, has become one of the most lucrative.

In the first few months of operation, for instance, the fabulous T-Mobile, which can seat 17,500 for hockey and 20,000 for concerts, turned over the highest revenue for a venue of its type in the world.

While MGM has no financial stake in the hockey team, the company has invested heavily in developing an area surrounding the arena known as The Park. A spillover casino parking lot was used to create the lovely six-acre

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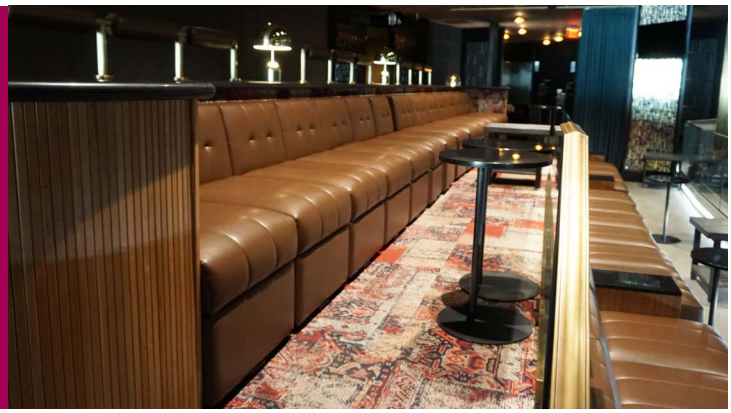
Hyde Park, located in the upper bowl of the T-Mobile Arena, is a place where high-rollers and high-profile fans can hide out during games. The venue can hold up to 800 people.



Park, which separates T-Mobile Arena from a 5,000-seat limited-engagement theatre — The Park Theatre — and a plaza featuring five upscale restaurants.

Known as "The Neighbourhood" by some locals, The Park has become a great place for people living in Vegas to chill out.

While primarily built for hockey and basketball, T-Mobile will also be used for large concerts and big shows like Cirque du Soleil.

One thing for sure, there will be no gambling in T-Mobile, according to officials.

However, there will be many other attractions to keep fans entertained.

For instance, do you know of any other arena in the world that has it's own mixologist? Well, T-Mobile does. And not just any mixologist. T-Mobile adult beverages will be designed by Tony Abou-Ganim, Mandalay Bay's top mixologist who's gained global fame for his creative cocktails.

Tony designed one special cocktail for T-Mobile Arena that he's called Atomic Fizz. The colour? Magenta, just like T-Mobile's corporate logo. You can bet this drink will be served over ice.

Locals seemed most thrilled that T-Mobile will also be the first arena in North America with a Shake Shack, the New York City burger bar that is one of the most talked about chains in the fast-food world.

While T-Mobile features 44 luxury and party suites and eight ice-level party suites, the most coveted seats will be the ones located high above ice level in an area known as Hyde Park, which will be open before and after games. However, if you want to sit there, you'll have to purchase a ticket, pending the event. The upper bowl club-style lounge can hold up to 800 people — mostly high rollers and celebrities.

There'll never be a dull moment during Knights' game — that's because fans will be treated to lots of Vegas-style bling thanks to the arena's state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems. There are giant LED screens inside and outside T-Mobile and there's lots of light shows being planned, as well.

With so many showgirls in Las Vegas, you can bet the Knights will have the best cheerleaders in the NHL. The Knights better hope they keep visiting teams distracted.

Because T-Mobile is sandwiched between New York, New York and Aria, two of the biggest casino hotels on the Strip, one might think that the hockey team is counting heavily on visitors to buy tickets. Think again.

"The arena will be a place for locals to get away from their casino jobs and escape to the normal world of sports," says Rupert King, a Vermont transplant and manager of the Beerhaus, one of the five restaurants in The Park.

"And besides, things have really changed in Las Vegas over the past five years," says King.

The manager is right. According to data released by the casinos, gambling now accounts for just 30 per cent of Vegas' revenues — down from 70 per cent five years ago.

"Trends have completely flipped and now 70 per cent of visitors to Vegas come for experiences like fine dining, shows or shopping while just 30 per cent come to gamble. Now they can add hockey to their Vegas experience," he says.

Toshiba Plaza, just outside T-Mobile, is where hockey fans will gather for tailgate-type parties before and after games. There will be food trucks to feed them and lots of entertainment on the big (LED) screen to keep them happy.

The centrepiece of The Park is a massive 15-metre-high sculpture known as Bliss Dance, which celebrates the strength of women. Over 200 natural trees were also planted in The Park, making it a true desert oasis.

"As soon as the Knights were named, I featured their logo on all the TVs in our restaurant," says King, who, despite being from the Northeast, admits he's not a big hockey fan. "But I'm really anxious for the Golden Knights to start playing because Las Vegas is overdue for a professional sports franchise."

Maybe, despite all the skeptics, the NHL really has hit the jackpot by coming to Las Vegas.

10

THINGS WE LIKE ABOUT VEGAS BEERHAUS

1 **The manager, Rupert King**: The Vermont transplant has been in Las Vegas for 13 years and has worked in others restaurants along the Strip. The relaxed tailgate atmosphere he's created at Beerhaus is perfect before and after hockey games.

2 **The chef, Nathan Frost:** A local boy and graduate of other MGM property restaurants, Frost has created a menu at Beerhaus that sets it apart – far apart – from other gastropubs. This is really fine dining disguised as pub grub.

3 **The beer:** Beerhaus, as its name suggests, is the beer oasis in Las Vegas and many of their craft beers are locally brewed. Tastings are offered – make sure the samples include Banger Morning Joe, Hop Nuts 18B Pale Ale, Lovelady Outback IPA and Sin City Say Hello to Amber – because they're all very good.

4 **The chicken:** Frost's free-range chicken dinner is only surpassed by his free-range chicken sandwich – a jaw breaker that is topped with crispy onions, arugula, herb mayo and a pickle. Yummy!

5 **French fries:** The hand cut fries are the best this side of Paris. They come with a beer cheese dip that many people pour over the golden potator fingers – instant poutine! French Canadians would be proud.

6 **The servers:** Manager King has assembled an all-star cast who engage diners with some lively talk and whose attentiveness is second to none. Most are qualified Cicerones – beer's equivalent to a sommelier – and they know everything about the brew they pour and what food goes best with the one you've chosen.

7 **Jenga:** There's a Jenga game on every table at Beerhaus and it's fun to watch people – especially those who have had a few beers – remove a block without the wooden tower falling. Patrons are so busy playing Jenga, no one is looking at the cellphones!

8 **The sandwiches:** While the free-range chicken tops the list at Beerhaus, the restaurant's split-roasted pork sandwich and the slow-roasted shaved beef have plenty of fans, too.

9 **Fried pickles:** Need we say more!

10 **Happy Hour:** Select draft beers and hot dogs – the City Dog with spicy mustard, kraut and relish makes them howl with joy – are just $4 (U.S.) between 2 and 6 p.m. daily, and from 10 p.m. to closing the dogs are just $4

Info on Beerhaus:
https://www.theparkvegas.com/en/restaurants/beerhaus.html

- Marc Atchison

BELLYING UP TO A MOVEABLE FEAST IN AUSTRIA

STORY & PHOTOS BY
AMY LAUGHINGHOUSE

Hills come alive with the sound of foodies

Foodie pilgrims trek through Alpine mountains on the Culinary St. Jacob's Way to sample some heavenly treats prepared by top chefs like Stephen Crane, above, and be entertained by locals like Jakob Wurm, right.

PUZNAUN, AUSTRIA — On a warm, sunny July morning, a parade of foodies were plodding dauntlessly — albeit a bit breathlessly — past a glacial stream and flower-strewn meadows towards a remote hut in the Austrian Alps. Straggling along at the back, I huff and puff my way up a formidable slope, kicking mud off my shoes and wiping beads of sweat from my sunburned brow.

But never mind the heat. We were pilgrims on the Culinary St. Jacob's Way, and we knew that somewhere up there in that cloudless blue sky, the stars were shining in all their glory — Michelin stars, that is.

Every summer, an elite cadre of award-winning European chefs gather here in the mountains for this annual event, which kicks off on July 9 this year. Each of these gastronomic prodigies creates a signature dish using fresh local ingredients, which are featured until the

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PLACES WE LIKE MOST IN AUSTRIA

1 **Schönbrunn Palace:** This grand "home" is compareble in grandeur to France's Versailles. The 1,441 room palace – plenty of room for the inlaws – was built between 1696 and 1712 at the request of Emperor Leopold I and turned into the imperial Summer Palace by Maria Theresa.

2 **Hofburg Imperial Palace:** It serves as the official residence of the President of Austria and was the Habsburg's principal winter residence – Schönbrunn was their summer "cottage." From 1438 to 1583 and from 1612 to 1806, Hofburg was the seat of the kings and emperors of the Holy Roman Empire.

3 **Vienna State Opera:** It's the greatest of its kind in the world and its orchestra is recognized as one of the top in the world. While there, take in one of history's most famous operas or ballets, offered in both classical and modern versions for viewers to choose from.

4 **Graz:** Recognized as the birthplace of arnold Schwarzenegger, Graz is the capital city of the southern Austrian province of Styria. At its heart is Hauptplatz, the medieval old town's main square. A funicular leads up Schlossberg, the town hill, to the Uhrturm, a centuries-old clock tower. Across the River Mur, futuristic Kunsthaus Graz exhibits contemporary art.

5 **Melk Abbey:** One of the most famous monasteries in the world, it's situated high up on a cliff overlooking the calming waters of the Danube River. It was previously the castle of Leopold II.

6 **Belvedere Palace:** It's one of the most important baroque buildings in Austria and consists of two seperate buildings: the Upper and Lower Belvedere, which are connected by a stunning baroque garden. Today it houses the world's largest Klimt collection, incldiung "The Kiss" and "Judith".

7 **Hohensalzburg Castle**: This Salzburg beauty is one of largest and most well-preserved medieval castles in Europe. It houses the "Salzburg Bull", an organ with more than 200 pipes.

8 **Innsbruck:** Surrounded by snowcapped mountains, Innsbruck makes you feel quite insignificant in the midst of nature's striking Alpine mountain range. Altstadt, the medieval town of Innsbruck, draws you in with its unique architecture and many shops.

9 **St Anton am Arlberg**: Located in Tyrol, this village offers serious, legendary ski terrain for those who are seeking a challenge.

10 **Grossglockner Alpine Road**: Panoramic road offers unobstructed views of Austria's highest mountain, the Grossglockner. The road is normally open from the beginning of May to the end of October.

– TraveLife Staff

Foodies are treated to the alpine splendour of the Paznaun Valley, which is dotted with spring flowers that perfume the air.

end of September on the menu of five Alpine Association huts perched above the Paznaun Valley.

Each hut serves only one of these specially designed repasts, but if you've got a hearty hunger — and a sturdy pair of boots — you can sample all five.

Alfons Parth, chairman of the Paznaun-Ischgl tourism board, founded this moveable feast not only to showcase regional food products, but to encourage folks to explore the beauty of the valley in the summertime.

Certainly, this Alpine playground — it includes the villages of Ischgl, Galtur, Kappl and See — is at its busiest in the winter. It's renowned for its lengthy ski season, which runs from November to the beginning of May, as well as an array of off-piste skiing opportunities and Ischgl's legendary après-ski scene, where snow bunnies dance 'til dawn.

"But Ischgl isn't only a party town," insists Maritta Jungmann, a native I met who works for the tourist office. In the summer, she says, the area attracts an older crowd, as well as families, who come for hiking, biking (including increasingly popular electric bikes, with a wee motor to help you up the hills), climbing and bouldering. Bouldering, for the uninitiated (like me) is defined as "climbing without ropes at jumping height." The village of Galtur has one of the largest boulder parks in Europe, with 160 of these behemoths. What little equipment you do need for bouldering — climbing shoes and the ominous-sounding "crash pads" — can be rented in Galtur.

The streets of Ischgl, which remain relatively quiet in the summer, are also lined with shops selling or renting all types of gear to help you work up a sweat, as well as restaurants and bars — usually fronted by a sunny terrace — where you can satiate an Alpine appetite. I was particularly surprised by the quality of food at the hotels, where I enjoyed artistically plated meals at the Hotel Tirol Alpin Spa, the Hotel Post, and the Hotel Trofana Royal, a five-star chalet-style property where blooming flowers festoon its expansive wooden balconies.

Still, the gourmet highlight of the summer remains the Culinary St. Jacob's Way, which is why I find myself hiking up the Jamtal Valley on a Sunday morning (last year) with Jungmann, a flock of fellow foodies, and the U.K.'s Stephen Crane, one of the featured Michelin-starred chefs of 2016. As it was the opening day of the event, Crane was making the trek to personally serve his dish at his assigned chalet, the Jamtalhutte, which lay at the end of a 10-kilometre-long ascent.

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You never know who you will meet along the Way. These cows constitute a traffic jam in this part of the world.

The chefs who participate in the annual Paznaun Valley culinary event are each assigned alpine huts where they create some mouthwatering treats like this.

JUST THE FACTS

- *Getting there: Innsbruck, Austria is the closest airport. Air Canada and Austrian Airlines offer direct flights to Vienna from several Canadian cities.*
- *Tourism info: http://www.paznaun-ischgl.com/en*
- *Culinary St. Jacob's Way details: http://www.ischgl.com/en/events/summer-highlights/culinary-st-jacobs-way/programme*
- *Getting around: The Silvrettacard, which is complimentary during the summer for guests staying in any of the four villages in the Paznaun Valley (Ischgl, Galtur, Kappl and See), includes the use of public transport, cable cars, chair lifts. http://www.ischgl.com/en/active/cycling-hiking/silvretta-card-all-inclusive.*

Participants are treated to idyllic scenes like the one above. The rare enzian flower, left, is used to produce a potent version of schnapps and locals also use it as a medicine.

As much as I was looking forward to the meal, I also savour every slow step of the journey. It isn't just the occasionally arduous incline which slackens my pace. It's the stunning scenery, too. Pink Alpen roses and rainbow-hued wildflowers accent the valley's lush green slopes, which tumble down to meet a clear, rushing stream that slices through its centre.

The rarest of these feral flowers is the enzian — also known as gentian — whose root is used to make an allegedly medicinal schnapps. Although we spot a few of these pale yellow blossoms along the path, Jungmann warns me not to pluck them, explaining that only 10 people, chosen by lottery from the village of Galtur are allowed to harvest them every year. Cheaper knock-off liqueurs made from a similar wildflower root abound, but one litre of genuine enzian schnapps sells for about 200 euros ($350 Cdn) — and that's only if you can find someone willing to sell it to you.

If that sounds pricey, Jungmann maintains that it's well worth the cost. "This schnapps, I tell you, it's magic. When you feel you're getting ill, you drink just a little bit," she says. "You smell the earth, the grass. For me, it's the essence of my home."

Jungmann admits, however, that the liqueur isn't to everyone's taste. When she cheerfully pronounces the cow patties we have been dodging to be "the scent of the mountains," I wonder if perhaps I'd prefer to sidestep the enzian, as well.

Following a brief, refreshing break at the Scheibenalm hut — a family-run summer restaurant in the foothills, where 9-year-old twins, Jakob and Lena Wurm perform an impromptu concert upon the accordion and the harp — we meet a trio of the cow patty culprits up close.

One of these bovine beauties seems to take a liking to me, offering a forceful nuzzle that triggers a cacophonous clanging from the bell tied around her neck. Alarmed, Jungmann cautions me to move along

"Maybe she just wants to play," she says warily, "but remember, the cows are much bigger than you."

Whatever the heifer's true intentions, when we finally reach the Jamtalhutte overlooking the icy splendour of the Jamtal Glacier, I'm glad that I'm sitting down to Chef Crane's beautifully braised pork cheeks, rather than a relative of the cow I just met.

We must have been lulled into a mellow haze by a full belly and a mug or three of Alpine beer, because when Jungmann suggests at the end of the meal that we give her beloved enzian (or at least the imitation version) a shot, so to speak, we warily acquiesced.

"Zom, zom, zom, zom proooost!" we cried in unison, clinking our glasses high overhead, as Jungmann leads us in a traditional toast.

Tilting the tipple past my lips, I'm flooded by a sudden warmth. Sure, it could have been sunstroke. But then again, perhaps there really was some magic in that fluid, genuine or not, that encapsulates the flora and fauna of the valley that charms me at every twist and turn. ■

DATE NIGHT

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STORY & PHOTOS BY ANDREI BILTAN

Emirates' crew member turns childhood sketches into reality

I grew up fascinated about aviation. Tangled in my innocence, I was dreaming about far-away places.

— Emirates flight attendant Andrei Biltan

RYE, ENGLAND — At two o'clock in the morning, everything is quiet. The dim light of the desk lamp is following the contour of the pencil, its shadows placed like stamps onto the coloured pages. The year is 2003. Sitting across from me, my cousin suddenly gives me a worried look. He whispers: "We really should be going to bed."

Most 11 year olds hide to play video games, or watch movies; we hid to draw. We would wait patiently until our parents fell asleep, then place sweaters at the bottom of the door to prevent any light from protruding through the cracks and into the hallway. We would tip toe to the desk, turn on the lamp and start drawing models of airplanes.

What makes this story rather comical is that we would not draw models of planes in the traditional sense. Looking back, we did not care much about their exterior design. What we would focus on instead is building a great airline, at least in our eyes, our designs having some cool features to entertain our target pre-teen passengers. I remember designing a rather neat children's play area at the back of the plane, equipped with slides, ball pits and everything an 11-year old would want for a comfortable journey. Looking back 15 years later, I wish I could book a ticket!

Oh, did I mention all our planes had two decks, way before the A380 was the cool kid in town?

I grew up fascinated about aviation. Tangled in my innocence, I was dreaming about far-away places, my ball pit filled jet taking me to countries that I only learnt about from school. The large world map pinned to the wall on the side of my bed acting like a gentle reminder that there is something much greater, waiting there outside, far away beyond my bedroom walls.

Going into university, I almost applied to be a pilot. I thought this was the right career for me. I was afraid. I did not know if I could handle the lifestyle. I backed out

and went into business instead. Dreams about a jet-setter life kept me in a state of paralyzed wonder for much of my post-graduate career. The four years were slowly coming to an end and I had to make a choice. I told myself, I would not settle for anything else unless I could travel and help people.

On a sunny day late June that same year of graduation, I found myself sitting in the conference room of a Toronto hotel, filled to the brim with a sea of red lips, buns and tailored suits, hoping for a shot at the Emirates Airline life.

Everyone was mostly quiet, the sounds of a hundredth whispers cutting through the tension in the room. The recruiter looked at me, her green eyes scanning my frightened face, and in a soft, direct voice asked me: "Why Emirates?"

I froze. It was definitely over. I thought I was going to be sent home right there. She waited patiently, for what felt at the time like the longest silence I've ever experienced, and then briefly called my name: "Andrei?"

"I want to join Emirates to travel and help people," I said quickly while stumbling on my words.

Her serious face lit up for a brief moment, and with a half-smile and a soft giggle, reassured all my fears: "I would love to find out more about that in an interview tomorrow, if you gave me a chance."

Over the last two years with Emirates, I got to do just that: travel and help people. The sound of the alarm ringing at odd times reminding me of yet another adventure waiting to be explored, yet another story to create.

Every morning, when I get to put on my uniform, it feels just like the first day of school; I keep thinking who I'll get to meet and the kind of difference I could make. There is nothing more rewarding than when a passenger comes up to you and shows their gratitude. "Thank you for helping me out with my toddler. I'm a single mom and have travelled for 18 hours, I'm exhausted."

A career with Emirates has allowed Andrei Biltan to see and enjoy the world. In Dubai, top photo, he gets a chance to relax between flights on a beach, catch up on some reading in Singapore and meet new friends in Chennai.

In those moments, you get to be grateful. Thankful for having the chance to do what you do.

I'm lucky, I think. I get to work for an airline that always promises the future. Just like in my childhood drawings, whenever I step onto the plane, I am met with a fresh air of innovation. You can't help but get amazed, at what is and what could be.

I've travelled to over 60 countries; Emirates flies to over 80. Every month, you get a ticket to new destinations. Regardless of how long you've been flying, there are always new places to visit. As the globe sitting next to my bed spins, so are my thoughts planning the next adventure. When I was young, I would look at the map of the world and ask when, now I just get to hop onto a plane, and answer with a simple now.

This is not a dream; I need to remind myself. It's the daily reality of many of us, who chose to call Dubai, and respectively, the world, our home. ■

• ***Read about Andrei's travels on his blog: www.thiscapturedlife.com***

5 TIPS ON HOW TO OVERCOME JET LAG

THE reality of jet lag is that it takes up time; you're sleeping when you could be exploring; you're awake, so you lose out on sleep. While jet lag is a normal part of any grand adventure, the Emirates cabin crew have fantastic tips for tempering it. As experts in the sky who are constantly on the move, no one knows better than a crew member how to combat and avoid jet lag when travelling across different time zones:

1 **Reset your clock:** If you know you'll be travelling to a country in a different time zone, start switching up your schedule a few days in advance. Change your bed time and eat your meals as if you're already abroad. Reset your watch to the local destination time; this will help you reset your internal clock as well.

2 **Opt for online:** Checking in online not only saves you time at the airport, but it also allows you to choose your meal onboard. On airlines like Emirates, you have a great selection of foods to choose from, so try to pick something light and healthy. This way, you'll still be able to sleep comfortably during your very long flight.

3 **Cozy up:** Getting comfortable while you fly is an important part of getting the rest you need to avoid jet lag when you land. Use slippers or fuzzy socks, an eye mask, ear plugs for total silence, a neck pillow and your coziest clothes, so you can catch some zees in the air and hit the ground running.

4 **Get energized:** A few hours before landing, walk around and stretch as much as you can. Eat fruits and a healthy meal to restore your energy levels and fuel your body with vitamins and minerals. Drink caffeine for a boost and use a cold towel on your face to refresh. This way, you will be ready to start exploring as soon as you land.

5 **Explore the outdoors:** When you arrive at your destination, try to spend as much of the day outside as possible. Exposure to sunlight helps regulate your circadian rhythm, so avoid dark, dim places when you can. Plus, if you stay out of the hotel room, it's not so tempting to lay down for a nap.

LOST & FOUND

Scooter trip to a Cambodian treasure forgotten in time

STORY & PHOTOS BY
NANCY WIGSTON

Tourists jump aboard scooters and head into the thick Cambodian jungle in search of a Lost City.

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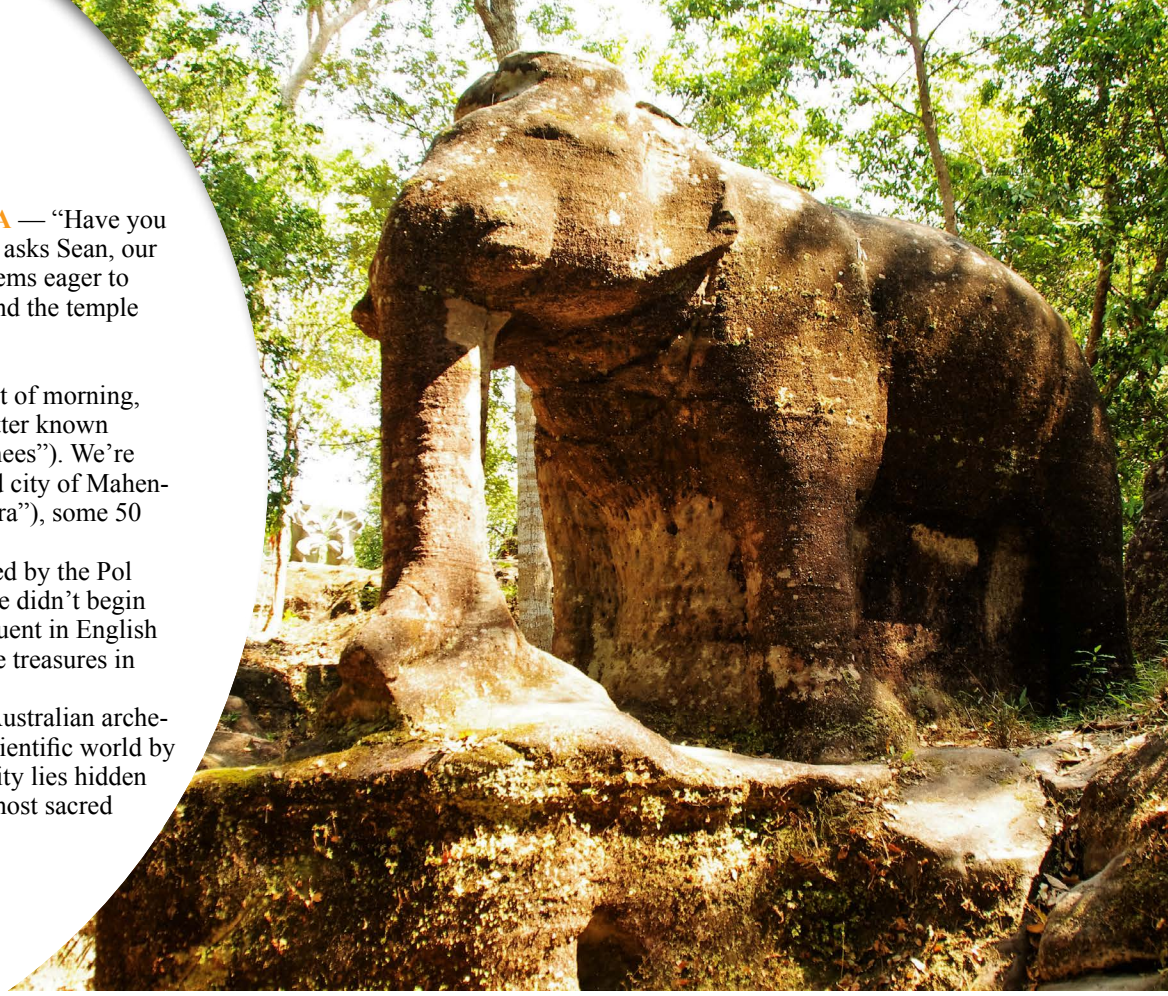


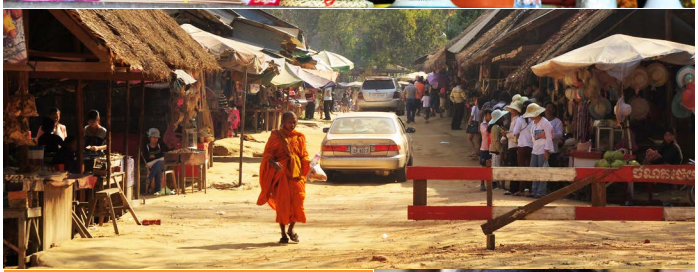
SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA — "Have you heard about the lost city?" asks Sean, our Cambodian guide, who seems eager to expand our horizons beyond the temple complex of Angkor Wat.

Lost city? We're intrigued.

So the next day, in the golden light of morning, the three of us head for the hills, better known as Phnom Kulen ("mountain of lychees"). We're searching for remnants of the buried city of Mahendraparvata ("Mountain of Great Indra"), some 50 km away.

Although Sean had his life upended by the Pol Pot regime — he candidly tells us he didn't begin school until age 13 — today he is fluent in English and deeply knowledgeable about the treasures in these mythic hills.

He tells me that three years ago, Australian archeologist Damian Evans rocked the scientific world by proving that a vast, well-designed city lies hidden beneath the jungle on Cambodia's most sacred mountain. Using Lidar technology (laser cameras mounted on planes), Evans discovered patterns of complex cities dating from 802 AD, more than three centuries before the earliest temples were built at Angkor. Cambodia was then a Hindu realm, ruled by the god-king King Jayavarman II. Later the kingdom moved to Angkor, probably due to deforestation and lack of water.



The Elephant Pond, top photo, is a relic from a bygone era in a country where traditions still live on. Monks chant in a cave while villagers bow their heads in respect as another monk walks among them. Local children happily chat with strangers from another land.

After more than 1500 years, 30-odd temples buried beneath the jungle floor were uncovered. One of the remnants of that period is the "Elephant Pond", a 9th century grouping of giant statues that includes elephants, lions and frogs.

Ninety minutes after leaving Siem Reap, we pull up at a nondescript village: a few eateries, a sundry shop or two. There are few foreigners. Turning around, I'm greeted by three smiling Cambodian men — our drivers, it appears.

Pardon me? Did someone mention motorbikes, I ask?

Everyone is so eager, so friendly that I willingly accept our mode of jungle transportation and climb aboard — digging my fingers into the driver's waist. We pass small villages where a Buddhist monk gets respect from the locals — heads bow as he passes through town — and fly pass tropical jungle filled with banyan trees whose roots wrap around the massive timber like snakes. The tiny scooter slips and slides through sand and shallow pools but Teng, my driver, knows these trails well and soon I feel secure in his charge.

Entering a tree-shaded glade, we slow, then stop. This is Srai Damrei (Elephant Pond), he informs me.

Under dappled sunlight, massive stone beasts from long ago stand guarding their turf. They were carved sometime in the 9th century in then Hindu Cambodia — Buddhism arrived here late in the 12th century.

We are the only visitors, but others have come before us, leaving sticks of incense and offerings of fruit at the carvings' base. Instinctively, we kneel, lighting sticks of incense handed to us

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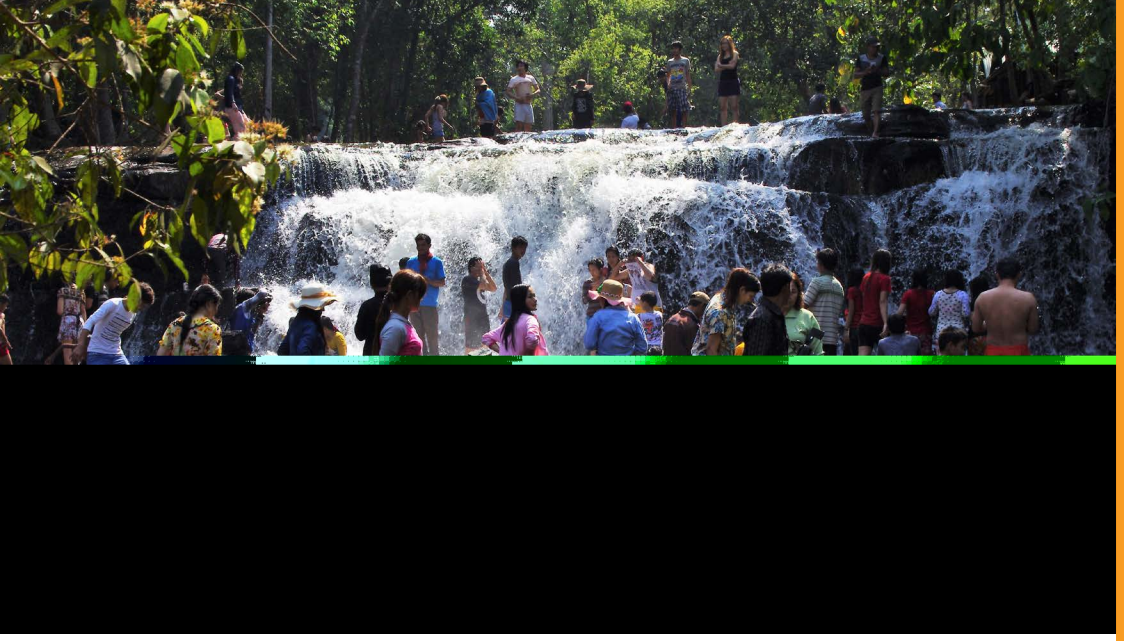


Locals frolic in the cooling spray of a waterfall in lovely Phnom Kulen National Park, home to some of Cambodia's greatest treasures.

by Sean, "for good luck."

A woodpecker knocks, a bald eagle passes overhead. Otherwise, silence.

After lingering in this "Holy Place for Worship," Sean suggests a side trip to caves that he guarantees will be cooler than the sweltering jungle.

A 10 minute ride deposits us at the mouth of some cool, dark caves, replete with Buddha images, flowers and candles. Did someone mention bats? The caves are filled with them.

Seasoned passengers by now, we hop aboard the bikes again and celebrate our arrival back in the village with a feast: catfish, grilled chicken, rice, sour fruit wrapped in banana-leaf, pickles — $10 for the six of us!

Sean smiles, explaining that when he was starving under the Khmer Rouge, he said to himself, "If I ever have money, I'll eat like a king."

After lunch we enter Phnom Kulen National Park, home to the temple of Wat Preas Ang Thom, famed for its 16th century Reclining Buddha, carved out of mountain sandstone.

After removing our shoes, we climb the temple steps, drawn forward by chanting sounds.

In the temple we come upon a pair of saffron-clad monks — one is heavily tattooed. Next we discover the eight-metre-high Buddha, lying peacefully on its side. More devotees gather here, lighting incense, leaving fruit, praying and basking in the great Buddha's presence.

Pure fun awaits nearby, at the park's waterfalls. It's the dry season, so the falls aren't terribly high, but families happily gather for picnics, swimming, frolicking. Ladies sell dishes brought from home.

These are local folk, not foreigners, all out for a day's enjoyment, seemingly carefree — with little thought of lost cities or vanished empires. ■

Sleeping Buddha.

JUST THE FACTS

• The easiest way to get to Cambodia from Canada is with either Air Canada or Cathay Pacific Airlines via Hong Kong.

• Nancy Wigston was put in touch with her guide Sean by the cruise director of her Avalon Mekong River Cruise. Other tour options are available, including hikes up the mountain, but guides are necessary for any excursion to Mount Kulen.

• Although this area of Cambodia has long been cleared of land mines, travelling alone in the jungle is not recommended.

• Tour East Holidays offers a number of value-added tours of Cambodia, which also include tours of Vetnam and Laos. For more details, go to http://www.toureast.com

Scooter drivers.

10

THINGS WE LIKED ABOUT CAMBODIA

1 **ANGKOR WAT:** I spent a day touring the ruins of Angkor Wat and I could have spent a month and not seen all it has to offer. But even a brief glimpse at this 12th century relic is better than no glimpse at all. This is one of the most fascinating places on Earth.

2 **BAYON TEMPLE:** The faces etched in the rock monuments are truly fascinating and give visitors a look inside this amazing culture. It's hard to imagine that these wonders were hidden by the jungle for so many years.

3 **ANGKOR THOM:** This was the last capital of the old empire and its 12-kilometre-long city wall still protects many of its ancient secrets. The city's five enormous gates are monuments in their own right.

4 **THE PEOPLE:** The Cambodians have survived much over their history – the brutality of the Khmer Rouge topping the list – but despite their troubles and proverty, they make visitors feel welcome and treat you like family.

5 **KILLING FIELDS OF CHOEUNG EK:** You may not want to see were over 9,000 Cambodians were killed by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979, but this is a sacred place and a visit here will make you appreciate the Cambodian people and culture a lot more.

6 **BAKONG:** One of the earliest temples in the region, Bakong was built in tiers within a strict geometric matrix, a style recognizable in the later Angkor Wat.

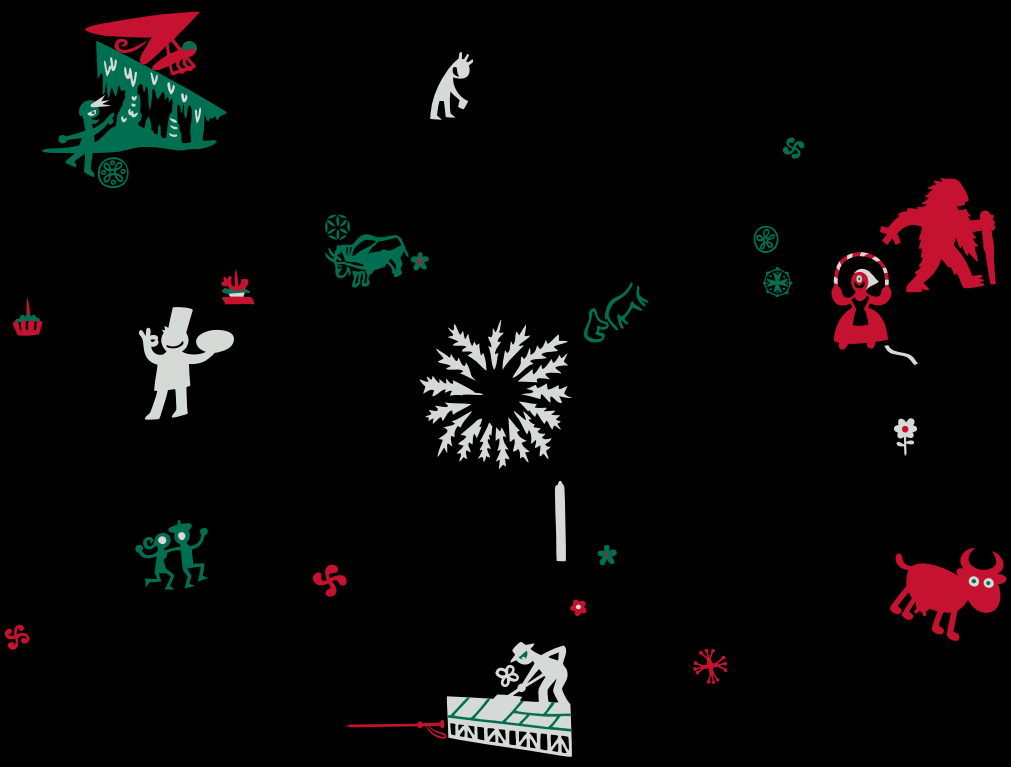
7 **ROLUOS GROUP:** The three main temples here stand apart from the main attractions around Siem Reap, but the 9th century relics are well worth a visit.

8 **ROYAL PALACE:** It's hard to comprehend that in a country where most of the residents live in abstract poverty, a few live in a golden palace like this. But sensibilities aside, the Royal Palace, which dates back to 1866, is a holy place, not just a residence.

9 **CENTRAL MARKET:** This giant yellow dome first opened in 1937, and today, more than 70 years later, the Central Market remains a destination for first-time visitors to Cambodia's capital city Phnom Penh.

10 **TUOL TOM POUNG MARKET:** Also known as the Russian Market, this is one of the capital's biggest tourist attractions. The market got its name from the Russian tourists who frequented it in the 1980s, but now people from around the world make this a must stop. Factories for brand names like Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren are located in Phnom Penh and garments deemed "seconds" are sold here for a fraction of their price.

- Marc Atchison



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THINGS WE LIKE IN SAN ANTONIO

1 RIVER WALK: It's what attracts most people to San Antonio and it never disappoints. We strongly recommend you take a night cruise and enjoy the festive atmosphere along the concrete shores.

2 PEARL DISTRICT: The former home of the Pearl Brewery is where you'll find some of the city's best new restaurants and cafes, like Cured, Botika, Nao Latin Gatro Bar and Bakery Lorraine, run by a creative husband and wife team.

3 UNIQUE HOTELS: Hotel Emma in the Pearl District, housed in an old brewhouse, is one of the world's most unique properties while Hotel Valencia in the downtown area next to River Walk is an excellent place to base yourself in this amazing city.

4 WITTE MUSEUM: This storehouse of history dates back to 1926 and is currently undergoing a multi-million dollar upgrade. When finished it will display lots of unique exhibits – we're espeically interested in the planned dinosaur exhibits.

5 THE ALAMO: This is where Davey Crockett met his demise and where the course of U.S. history was changed forever. Touring the historic landmark sends chills down your spine.

6 THE SMOKE SHACK: As the name implies, this San Antonio landmark is a shack but the BBQ offerings are to die for.

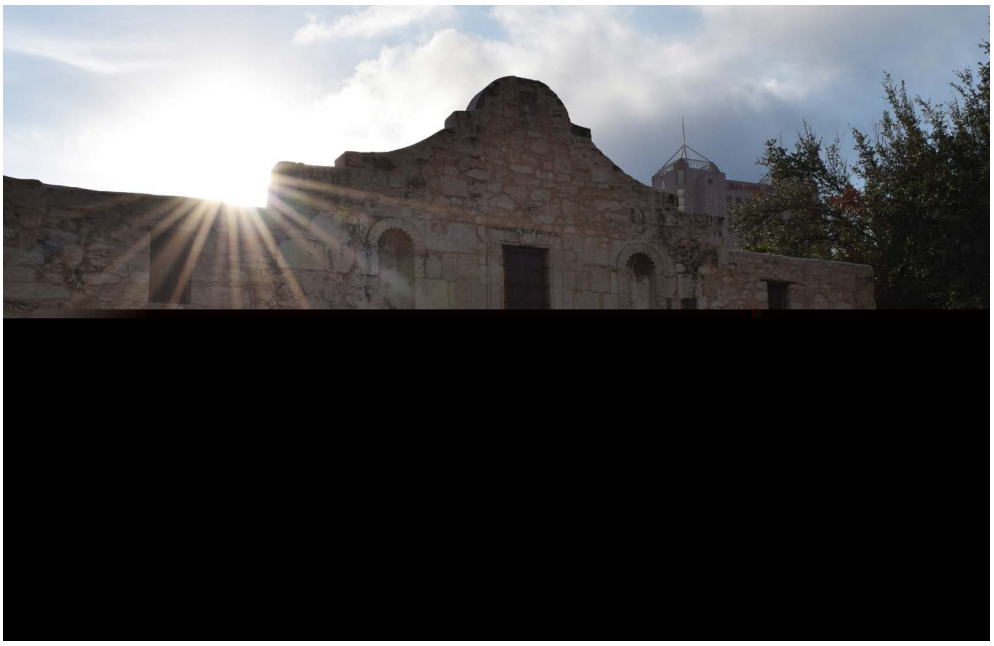
7 CIA: It's official name is the Culinary Institute of America and its weekend classes draw tourists from far and wide. It's one of the most popular attractions in San Antonio and amateur chefs should put it high on their to-do list while here.

8 MI TIERRA CAFE Y PANADERIA: This is one of the best restaurant experiences in the entire United States. The Tex-Mex breakfast is a tradition and many Hollywood types visiting San Antonio like to dine at the 24/7 eatery, which is located next to historic Market Square. The murals in this restaurant are remarkable.

9 NAO LATIN GASTRO BAR: Who knew San Antonio was such a hot bed of jazz. And this club in the Pearl District is one of the best. It's great to end an evening at Pearl in this electric basement venue.

10 MAIN PLAZA: Each evening San Antonio's fascinating history is projected on the facade of beautiful San Fernando Cathedral in a spectacular video presentation called The Saga. It's truly remarkable. If you didn't already love this city, you will after seeing this show.

- Marc Atchison



The rising sun spotlights the Alamo, the sacred temple that stands as a living monument to Texas tenacity and courage.

"You see that spot over there," says Misty pointing to a place opposite the main wooden doors of the tiny Alamo mission church, where the last stand took place. "That's where they found Davy Crockett's body.

"And over there (a small patch of manicured grass directly in front of the Alamo entrance) is where Santa Anna's troops piled the Texans' bodies and burnt them."

Her voice now filled with emotion, Misty tells us, "we may have lost the Battle of the Alamo, but we won the war."

Buoyed by what happened here, Texans and reinforcements from other parts of the United States regrouped and under the battle cry "*Remember the Alamo*" defeated Santa Anna's army a month later and declared Texas independent from Mexico — it became a U.S. state in 1845.

As if on cue, the sun pops up from behind the Alamo and casts a golden light on a striking stone monument honouring those who lost their lives here.

"The square you are sitting in is the actual battlefield," says Misty, as she leads the group across the street where the long barracks (Alamo living quarters) are located.

"They say at the height of the battle, the blood was six inches thick on the dirt floor of the long barracks," says the guide as we enter the buildings that now serve as the Alamo Museum — one of its prized processions is a sword used by Santa Anna.

American folk heros Davey Crockett and James Bowie are remembered for giving their lives so Texas could be free.

"Santa Anna actually was the one who introduced chewing gum to America," says Misty. "He even wanted to adopt some of the children whose fathers were killed in the battle."

Long before it became a symbol of American courage, the Alamo was a simple Franciscan mission — Mission San Antonio de Velero — one of five that the Spanish established in south Texas in the early 18th century during their colonization of the area, which included all of Mexico.

All five (Mission Concepción, Mission San José, Mission San Juan Capistrano, Mission Espada and Mission Valero) are now recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and form one of America's most fascinating frontier complexes.

"The Franciscans established Mission

> ***"Santa Anna actually was the one who introduced chewing gum to America. He even wanted to adopt some of the children whose fathers were killed in the battle."***

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Located at the tip of northwest Canada and filled with mountains, plateaus and glaciers, the Yukon is striking on many levels. Both the terrain and the people inspire constant double takes.

The Yukon developed a reputation as a rugged, unconquerable place most famously in the 1890s, when the Klondike gold rush lured thousands to the inhospitable land. But even though that was over a century ago, I found that the sense of wildness is still very much a part of the Yukon lifestyle. And there's just nothing wilder than sipping a drink with a human toe in it.

I had heard about the Sour Toe Cocktail Club well before I had arrived in Dawson City on a brisk June afternoon. But as I observed a line snake all the way out the door of the Downtown Hotel, I realized that I still wasn't quite prepared for the situation. A bearded and blonde bartender sat down at a table with a stack of certificates. The certificates are awarded to each guest who downs a Sour Toe Cocktail, declaring them official members of the Sour Toe Cocktail Club. A bartered log book records the names of the 100,000 members and counting. With a serious look, the bartender placed a silver platter covered with salt and topped with a shrivelled toe, in the middle of the table. Each guest clutched their cocktail of choice from the bar, the only rule is that it must contain hard liquor. As Marcus sat at the table with his vodka shot, the blonde chanted "You can drink it fast. You can drink it slow. But your lips must touch the toe."

He sunk the toe into the shot glass and after plopping down the $5 fee, Marcus quickly chugged the drink. Stone-faced and hailing from Berlin, Marcus seemed unfazed but I almost wretched when the bartender squeezed the "toe jam" from the toe for an extra few drops for Marcus to drink.

Flying over this majestic part of Canada is the only way to witness its true beauty. The ranges of Klaune National Park are especially impressive.

Dawson City's toe drinking practice started in 1973, when Captain Dick Stevenson unearthed an alcohol preserved toe dating back to the regions 1920s mining days, in an old cabin. He and his friends thought it was a clever idea to serve the toe in a cocktail. The Sour Toe name is a reference to the Sourdough nickname for Yukon residents who have survived at least one winter. Terry Lee, the official "Toe Captain," keeps track of the toes and knows the history and condition of each one. So far, there have been 11.

"I'm the toe captain, I make sure that the toe is in good shape. I look up the person's (toe owner) name and date," he said. "The toes have been stolen and swallowed and we've had anonymous donations. We get most of them through wills. The current toe is a female specimen that was severed while she was mowing the lawn in sandals." Outfitted in a chest length white beard and a mountaineer hat, Terry looks as if he could be a '20s era miner, which I soon discover is the preferred Yukon dress style.

Strolling the gravely streets of Dawson City, I spot quite a few men in long beards and 19th century accessories like suspenders and bowler hats. But after I'm invited to a local chef's event I was provided with my own selection of 19h century "Yukon wear" for the occasion. I learned that dressing in old school duds is really part of the local lifestyle. So I donned a petticoat and skirt with high-collared shirt and watched as a Yukon delicacy, elk heart, was grilled in butter for appreciative guests.

Later, the midnight sun blazed at 9 p.m. as I made my way back to Bombay Peggy's the former bordello and speakeasy transformed into a hotel. At Peggy's you're required to remove your shoes at the door before stepping on the crimson carpet and enjoying complimentary sherry in the drawing room. I preferred to sip on the sherry in crystal goblets rather than visit the hotel's pub, which serves martini's with names like "Bloomer Remover" and "Titillating Tart" — but, hey, that's just me.

The next day, I make my way to the Southwest corner of the Yukon to Kluane National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and home to Canada's highest peak, Mount Logan (5,959 metres). Although mountaineering and hiking are popular Yukon activities, a big portion of the park is inaccessible by foot or car so flight seeing in a small Cessna is the the only way to gain complete views of the world's largest non-polar ice fields.

I hop into the plane with Easton, my gregarious pilot, who supplies me with a breakdown of the landscape of Kluane National Park. Mount Logan is actually the largest ice sheet that's not part of an ice cap, in the world. Logan boasts about a dozen peaks and most of those peaks have their own sub-peaks. In other words, it's really, really massive. The surrounding glaciers are created from fallen snow that was packed into layers over time. The layers of snow freeze into ice, and the glaciers begin to flow like rivers because of their expansive size.

Swooping up over emerald valleys, I see mountains and glaciers begin to emerge. Easton swerves closer so that I glimpse the crystalline spectacle of frozen ribbons of glaciers. The panorama expands to include icebergs floating and a partial view of Mt. Logan, peeking through the clouds.

The image is like seeing another planet, the beauty of frozen blue crevices and perfectly formed glaciers looks other-worldly but then again, I had already figured out that the Yukon truly is another world. ■

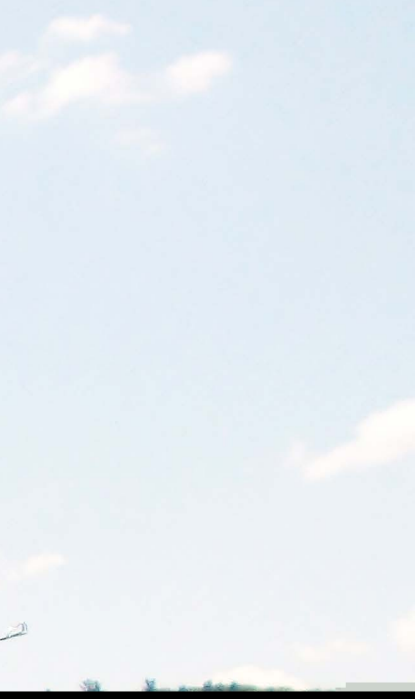
JUMP IN THE LAKE

STORY & PHOTOS BY GARTH WOOLSEY

The cabin.

Fun with grandpa.

The spelling issues.



Life at the lake is a special time in Canada. City dwellers fork over huge amounts of cash to rent a cottage for a week or two so they can spend some quality time with family and friends in the great outdoors.

As Canadians plan their annual cottage getaways, we look at one experience in the great outdoors

BARRY'S BAY, ON — Theirs had a sauna. Big bonus. Theirs had a wasps' nest. Big minus. (The spray stuff you buy in grocery stores to eliminate the kamikaze pests, by the way? Good luck with that.) Theirs had a swimming raft with a kid-friendly slide on it. Check. Theirs was well equipped for a family of four, two adults and two kids, ages 2 and 6.

Plus, theirs had a separate mini-cabin, a "bunkie" for visitors. Although, according to someone who stayed over in it, there was a permanent resident, a chipmunk. Who arose with the sun. Noisily.

Ours was bigger. We had, not four, not five, not six, not seven, but eight beds. In three bedrooms.

Ours had a big kitchen, a big dining table, a big covered deck, a dishwasher and a barbecue with not two, not three, not four, but five burners. As these devices go, this one was deluxe, *mucho macho*.

Residents of both Ontario cottages last July had equally fabulous times. This is what Canadian summers are made of — going to the cottage (aka, the cabin), even if you don't own one. It is a grand and honoured tradition. Go Up North (if you are not already there and the vast majority of Canadians live within a couple of hundred kilometres of the U.S. border), set up for a week or two of swimming, sun-burning, listening to local FM radio (The Moose, 106.5, Barry's Bay, The Valley's Greatest Hits. Love it!) and cursing the existence of mosquitoes, deer flies, the aforementioned wasps and especially, damn them, horse flies. (The latter love to skim the surface of the lake, zig-zagging, homing in on human blood, miniature drones, vampires. What they have to do with horses, who knows. They should be called hell flies.)

Downie the dog was the first one in the lake each day. The Michael Phelps of canines would eagerly fetch rocks and amuse onlookers with his aquatic skills.

Counter-balancing the bugs are the nightly campfires. There is something primal about gathering around and gazing into the glowing embers. Did you hear the loons? Have you ever skinny dipped? So that's why they call it the Milky Way.

We were connected, of course, the two cottages in question.

The "theirs" cottage was occupied by my eldest daughter, her husband and their two kids, visiting from their home in Hong Kong. She spent much of her childhood in the general area of the Madawaska Valley, east of Ontario's vast and celebrated Algonquin Park, but has lived in the Far East for some 15 years now. Her husband is British-born, but long ago made his own form of Brexit. Over the years they've become somewhat experienced cottage renters, but this is their first kick at the kayak (yes, one came with both the rentals) in a couple of years.

The "ours" was occupied by me, my other adult daughter, my adult son,

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At the heart of the image

Nikon

Summers in Canadian cottage country offer plenty of tranquil moments where you can recharge your jets and swat killer insects.

his (need I say, adult?) girlfriend and her dog, named Downie. I'd been forewarned, but was still stunned at this canine's love of the water. Equal parts Shepherd, Boxer, Labrador, Navy Seal, Jacques Cousteau and Michael Phelps, he swam laps of hundreds of metres and spent hours on end collecting rocks just big enough to fit in his generous jowls. He'd arrange them on the grass above the little beach, then set off in search of more (which we'd throw back in, he was tireless). His molars are a little ground down by this passion for rocks, but his spirits are grandly elevated. Rock on, Downie.

Theirs cost $1,100 a week. It was on Kamaniskeg Lake, south of Barry's Bay on Highway 60, a town with all the essentials, including two supermarkets, a bakery, a beer store and a liquor store. Yes, there is also a ubiquitous Tim Horton's outlet complete with Wi-Fi. Highly recommended is a side visit to Grumblin' Granny's, a gift shop loaded with weird and wonderful wares from all over the globe, in addition to the more expected local arts and crafts. The shop is especially popular on those rainy days.

Our cottage was east of the same town (a three to four hour drive from Toronto, a couple of hours from Ottawa to the east) on the somewhat smaller but also picturesque Trout Lake. The price for a week was $1,000. All things considered, I thought this was a bargain. The place was neither posh nor crude. Everything worked. There was a canoe and a beach with a bit of sand and a gradual entrance to the water, life jackets, a clothes line, a covered front porch and a dock and two fire pits, plus that honkin' big BBQ. We brought our own sheets and towels. There were helpful labels on this and that, which might not have been spelled correctly but were still helpful. One of them on a kitchen drawer, for example, read: "CULTLURTY/OPENERS."

The cost of cottaging, of course, ranges wildly. We were on a budget and found these two places on the lower end of the expense scale. To get anything cheaper in the prime summer months in this area would be difficult, perhaps only in cruder and much less accessible properties.

For those with higher expectations and larger wallets, of course, the summer skies are the limits.

There are all sorts of websites featuring the likes of a cottage/castle on the Lake of Bays in high-demand Muskoka that advertises itself as once being featured on the cover of *Canadian House and Homes*. It has "120 year old plank heart pine throughout" and is "Palladian inspired." With five bedrooms and three bathrooms, it typically rents for $5,000 week.

Not far away from that little Shangri-La as the crow flies, an island cottage that sleeps three in modest style is advertised for $895 per week, including two water taxi trips.

On the *Cottages In Canada* website, I found a spot in British Columbia's South Cariboos renting for $7,200 per month and featuring a "large lawn for Bocce Ball or Crochet" (sic).

On the flip-side, you could buy, outright, a very nice cottage in Nova Scotia, near the ferry to Prince Edward Island, for $68,000.

As always with internet deals, it is buyer beware. I've come across plenty of stories of folks arriving at the cottage of their dreams only to find little nightmares in progress, be it no running water or in rare cases, facilities double booked or, even, non-existent.

Commercially operated groups of cabins are a viable no-surprise option, especially for families with kids as they usually feature playgrounds and roped off, sometimes supervised, beaches. Shared ownership or leasing of properties, families taking a couple of weeks here and there, is becoming more popular, too.

The lifestyle is sufficiently established that there are TV channels, magazines and websites devoted to it. As a start, try:

- http:www.cottagesincanada.com or
- http://www.cottagerental.com ■

10

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RENTING A SUMMER COTTAGE

1 If you are renting, it's better to offer your cottage to couples without children – much less chance of damage. Renting to a family with just a couple of kids is always preferable. Avoid teenagers at all cost!

2 Many cottage owners wonder how much they should charge. It's best to consult a local real estate agent before putting your cottage on the market. You can also become a client of a company that specializes in renting summer units – there's plenty to choose on the Internet.

3 Make sure you account for utilities, insurance, agent fees, advertising costs and repairs before listing your cottage on the market. Even the best renters can have accidents or beak something in the cottage and repair costs can add up quickly.

4 Before the renters arrive, make sure you make a list of what's what and where everything can be located. This is especially important for utilities. BBQ units can frustrate some renters and they may break something if the instructions on how to use are not readily available.

5 If you are a renter, make sure you bring lots of bug repellent. This is especially important for first-time renters. A summer cottage vacation can turn ugly very quickly if you are not properly prepared to fend off the constant onslaught of mosquitos and black flies.

6 Make sure you are prepared for medical emergencies. The closest hospital may be quite a distance away, so make sure you pack all your prescribed medicines, lots of bandages and plenty of alergy and sinus pills. It's a jungle out there!

7 Same goes for food – especially snacks. The corner grocery store in cottage country may be a few kilometres away.

8 If you are renting a cottage with a boat, make sure you're well versed in how to use the equipment. Also, drinking and driving laws apply to motor crafts on the water as well and the fines are just as severe. Be Safe!

9 Before plunging into the Lake or river, make sure you know the depth and if there are any rocks or boulders close to shore.

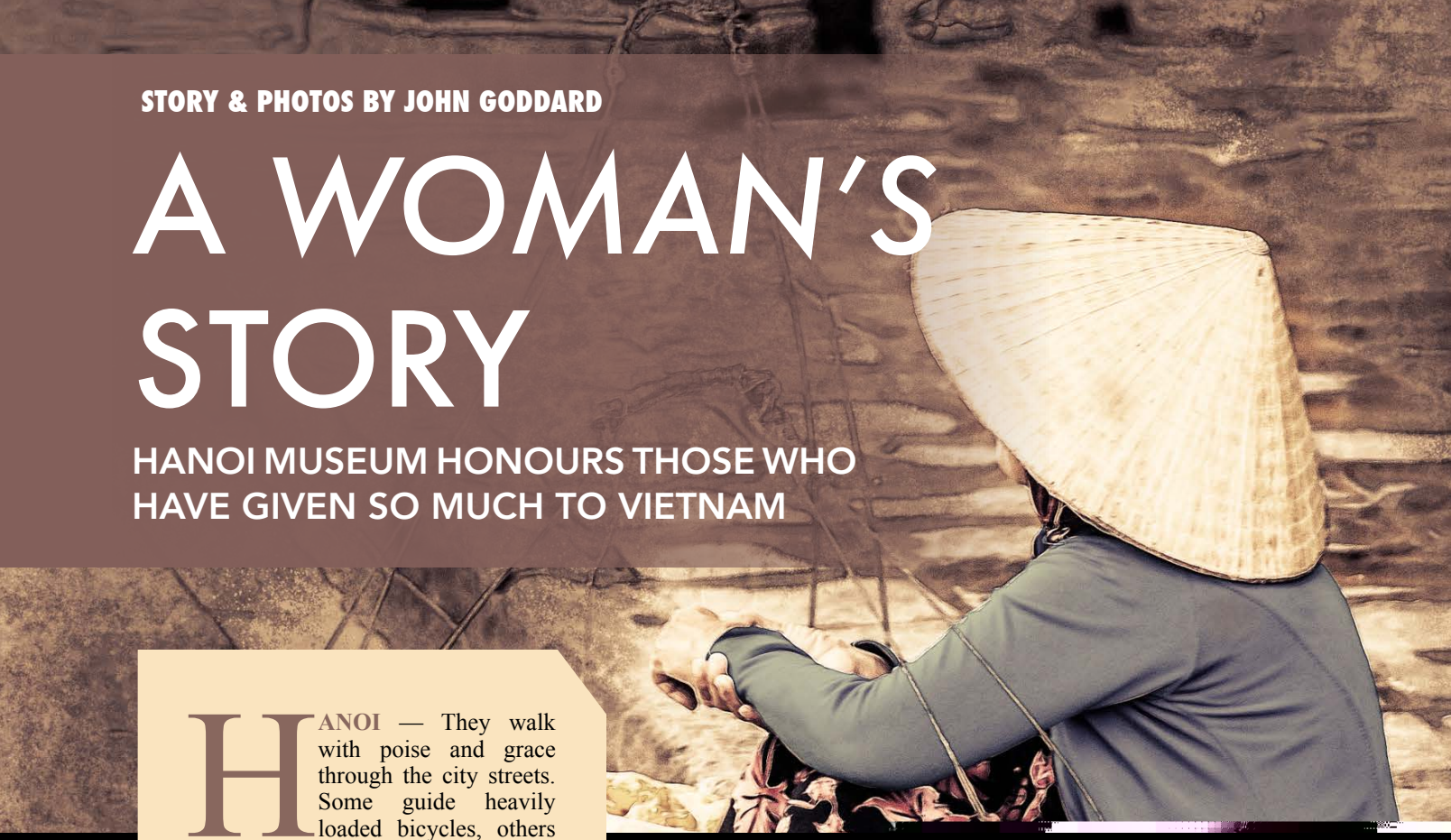
10 If your family is Internet dependent, make sure the cottage you rent is wired. You don't want your kids to go into meltdown when they discover they'll have no web access for a week or more – yikes!

– TraveLife Staff

STORY & PHOTOS BY JOHN GODDARD

A WOMAN'S STORY

HANOI MUSEUM HONOURS THOSE WHO HAVE GIVEN SO MUCH TO VIETNAM



HANOI — They walk with poise and grace through the city streets. Some guide heavily loaded bicycles, others balance wares at either end of a bamboo pole. They are the urban street vendors of Vietnam, mostly rural women who rarely see their families, selling everything from pineapple and bok choy, to teacups and plastic brooms. They tell their stories without self-pity.

"My husband had a job as a driver but he got sick and has to stay home now," says a woman with a smooth, bright face, selling flowers to passing motorists from a bicycle cart. "He looks after the children and raises pigs and chickens. He tells me, 'Just a few more years — until the children are grown up. Then you can stay at home with me. It won't matter if we are poor.' It's sad that we have to be apart like this when we are young. But we have to accept it."

The seller appears in a video with others as part of an exhibit at the Vietnamese Women's Museum, in the Old Quarter of Hanoi, the Vietnamese capital and northern metropolis. For privacy reasons no names are given, but they speak so openly and with such directness that few viewers can pass a Vietnamese vendor in the street again without a tingling of admiration and compassion.

The entire museum arouses emo-

One of Hanoi's famed street vendors.

ILLUSTRATION BY BIGSTOCK

The museum pays particular attention to the contributions women have made to the country's textile industry. Traditional handmade garments like the ones above, are displayed and techniques are shown on large screens, top photo.

tion. It is one of Hanoi's top tourist draws, for the stories it tells and for the beauty of its objects. After a sweeping renovation, the museum reopened in 2010 with fresh, modern displays that depict the lives of Vietnamese women under three general themes: family life, clothing and fashion, and resistance to wars of invasion. All Vietnamese cultures are included. The Viet people make up 88 per cent of the country's population, with 53 other cultural groups and hill tribes making up the balance. At the women's museum, the full diversity can be seen.

The "Women in Family" section includes the work of women who remain in their rural villages. A description of rice harvesting runs next to an arrangement of tightly woven harvesting baskets. A panel on rice cutting complements a display of hand-carved wooden cutting tools that could double as small art objects. Elaborate engagement and wedding rituals are illustrated, and a child-care exhibit includes an array of highly decorated children's hats, some adorned with amulets meant to keep the child safe from evil spirits.

"My favourite section is 'Women in Family,' because it shows Vietnamese women as keepers of the character of Vietnam," says the museum's deputy director, Nguyen Hai Van. "Foreign visitors seem to find the 'Women in History' section the most compelling."

Women in History includes a tribute to Ngoc Phuong, the first doctor to successfully apply the in vitro fertilization technique in Vietnam in 1997, and to diplomat Ton Nu Thi Ninh, who also established her own non-governmental organization, the Global Vietnamese Women's Network.

Mostly, however, the section honours many of the courageous women who helped defend the country in war. Ancient battles against the Han Chinese and Song Chinese are mentioned, but space is mainly given to struggles against the French colonialists (1946–1954) and the U.S.-backed Republic of South Vietnam regime (1954–1973).

JUST THE FACTS

• The Vietnamese Women's Museum is located at 36 Lý Thường Kiệt, Hang Bai ward

• 54 Traditions Gallery, 30 Hang Bun,

• Tour East Holidays offers many exciting tours to Vietnam. Go to http://www.toureast.com for more information.

One panel pays tribute to Võ Thi Sáu, who joined the Dat Do Volunteer Police at 14, was arrested in Saigon during the French time, and later executed. Another panel honours Huynh Thi Ngo, who at the age of 21, in 1971, led anti-American protests that destroyed 52 U.S. army vehicles. A third display shows Võ Thi Thang, a young woman sentenced in 1968 to 20 years in prison for attempting to assassinate a neighbourhood tyrant.

Her smile and her famous declaration — "I do not believe that you have the authority to impose this sentence," the caption says — became the symbol of heroism for Vietnamese women.

In 1994, the national government established the honorary title of "Heroic Mother of Vietnam," conferred on every mother who lost more than two children to war, or lost their husband and at least two children, or lost their only child.

One exhibit shows how Vietnamese artist Dang Ai Viet travelled throughout the country by motor scooter to paint portraits of 1,000 such recipients.

The museum's top floor celebrates clothing, costume, and fashion — from neck bangles, to head ornaments, to a vast array of hand-woven and hand-dyed fabrics.

Taken together, the museum showcases a stunning collection.

Help in creating it came from two exceptional independent curators — New York-born Mark Rapoport and his Vietnamese business partner Nguyen Thi Nhung. Rapoport owns, and both operate, the 54 Traditions Gallery, a retail outlet three kilometres north of the museum. Some of its holdings are of museum quality, creating a rare opportunity for visitors to Hanoi that the museum does not mention.

Museum-goers can look at and learn about prized cultural objects associated with Vietnamese women. Gallery-goers can touch such objects and purchase them. ■

"Foreign visitors seem to find the 'Women in History' section the most compelling," says deputy museum director Nguyen Hai Van, above. She is referring to an exhibit that includes courageous Vietnamese female combatants fighting French and U.S. military forces, shown in the photo at bottom of page. Street vendors also get special recognition on the walls of the museum, which features colourfully decorated conical hats hanging from the central skylight, left.

GRAND CANYON — Arriving at the end of a globe-spanning trip — travelling from New York to Milan, Amsterdam to Beijing, Kuala Lumpur to Los Angeles — my pal Mike and I landed mid-January in the city of sin, Las Vegas. Here we spent a couple days walking bug-eyed up and down the Strip, our necks swivelling like loose screws, taking in the head scratching re-creations of Paris, Venice, New York and the Pyramids. But, being notoriously unlucky gamblers, we decided to spend the last day of our trip making a dash out to a real world wonder, the Grand Canyon.

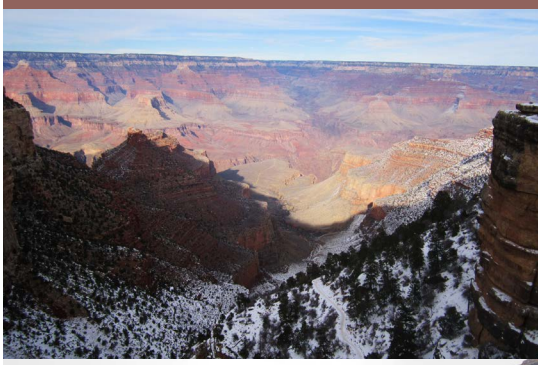
Our destination was Tonto Plateau, a lookout point a few kilometres down from the south rim and a four and a half hour drive from Vegas. So, early the next morning we made our way to a cramped Enterprise office carved into the back of the SLS Resort. We were greeted by an employee named Trent — bless his soul — who offered a bite from his tuna sandwich while simultaneously mopping his sniffling nose with the back of a sleeve and rambling needlessly about the reform of his ex-inmate girlfriend. Regardless, by mid-morning we were whipping across the Nevada flat lands in a shrunken, white Chevrolet.

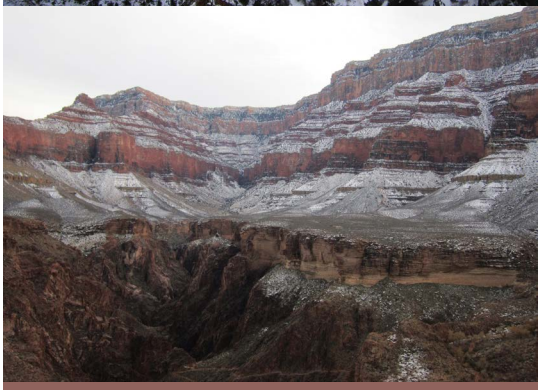
With our nose pointed east we passed into Arizona, the landscape transforming into undulating mountains, our little car straining over the surges in elevation. Around 2 we arrived at the national park. Uncorking ourselves from the car, we stumbled stiff legged to the rim of the world's most famous hole. It really is grand and ancient and we half expected dinosaurs to bound over the stratified ledge.

However, there was no time for contemplation. We were behind schedule and quickly caught a shuttle bus to Bright Angel Trail, a winding switchback that descends slowly to the base of the canyon. Not absorbing much history at the time, I later learned that the trail had been established as a toll route in 1891 by a group of enterprising miners, taxing tourists for the opportunity to witness the glory of the Grand Canyon. Legal battles, however, ensued, with railroad companies and the federal government contesting ownership. Eventually, in 1928, ownership of the trail was turned over to the National Park Service.

By the time we got our start it was 3 p.m. on a crisp afternoon, which meant we had only a few hours of sunlight left and Tonto Plateau was a 10 kilometre descent. We started at a brisk walk, passing busloads of tourists meandering back to the top.

The path was slick with downtrodden snow, making traction an issue and the sun was perched on the rim of the canyon threatening to sink into the abyss. Mike and I exchanged glances and in a silent consensus decided we needed to go faster, so we broke into a run. We tore down the slippery switchbacks as the canyon glowed a rusty orange and the clouds above were painted blood red. Soon the snow began to melt away and we emerged on flat terrain, formally referred to as Indian Garden. We hustled through a campsite and sprinted along a dirt path running through a field of low lying shrubs and cactus until we had to suddenly skid to a halt, the earth having fallen away in front of us.





No matter the season, the Grand Canyon is a majestic sight. But with a sprinkling of snow, it becomes much more magical to the eye.

Breathing heavily and stripped down to t-shirts, we looked over to see a group of wide eyed campers less interested in the Colorado River below and more interested in the two northern wild men who nearly ran off the edge of the cliff. They couldn't fathom anyone from outside the campsite coming down to the lookout so close to sunset. Did we know it was a 10 kilometre hike back up? We did, and we were to pay for it. After we soaked in as much of the view as we could, we nodded goodbye and began the ascent to the rim in the dark.

It took two lung busting hours to get back to the top but a bright moon shone down on the snow illuminating the canyon and guiding our way. When we reached the top, ours was the only car left in the parking lot. ■

Flipping FOR FIJI

ISLAND HOPPING PRODUCES SOME SPECIAL MOMENTS

A warm traditional welcome awaits those who venture to the magical islands of Fiji.

STORY BY CAROLE JACOBS / PHOTOS FROM VARIOUS SOURCES

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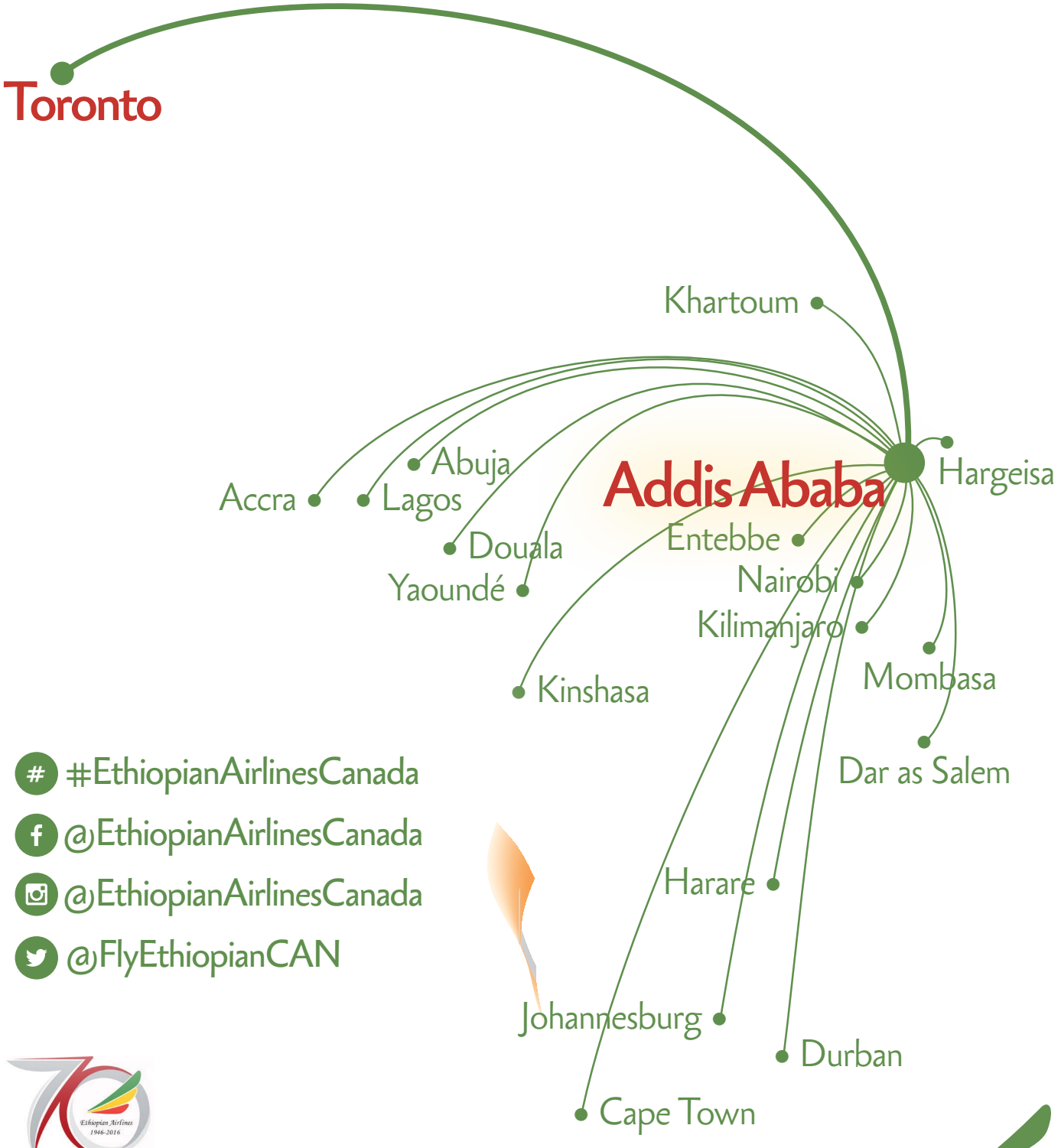

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SOUTH PACIFIC PARADISE IS LIKE HEAVEN ON EARTH

Lady on the beach at Fiji's Yasawa Island Resort & Spa.

Blue Lagoon caves, top photo, tranquil beaches like the one at Nanuku, centre, and romantic resorts like the Nanuku Auberge Resort, above, combine to make a visit to this South Pacific paradise very memorable.

OAMEA, FIJI — My Fijian wish list was simple: I wanted to skip the luxury resorts run by faceless international conglomerates and visit native villages where I could meet the chiefs, mingle with the kids, check out the schools and sit down with a family or two for a home-cooked dinner of chicken curry or fish stew.

We sketched out a game plan: To get my feet wet, I'd start with a visit to one of Fiji's most authentic resorts on Viti Levu''s "Adventure Coast" and from there wing across the sea in a small plane — I hate small planes — to distant isles floating in the vast reaches of the country's northeastern and northwestern archipelago.

So what do you want to hear about first — my thatched-roof bure with its ridiculously romantic poster bed with mosquito netting (and my darling hubby so far away, sigh), the private plunge pool and hot tub out front, the sugar-white beach just steps away with sapphire seas rippling to shore, or my personal "buddy" Pela, a member of the local village assigned to me to do anything my little heart desired?

Before I could protest, she had run me a coconut bubble bath with two frangipani blossoms floating in billowing suds and was ironing my hiking shorts, something none of my clothes had experienced in years.

That night, we attended a traditional "Kava Ceremony" during which the men of the village crushed kava kava roots into a large bowl, added water and passed around the murky-look-

5 THINGS TO DO WHEN VISITING FIJI

1 **Explore Fiji's underwater magic:** With 1,000 species of fish and two of the South Pacific's most stunning reefs, including Rainbow and Vanu, both off the coast of the island of Taveuni, scores of beach resorts and dedicated dive resorts, you'll have no problem finding wonderful places to snorkel and dive in Fiji's looking-glass seas. There's plenty to see right from the beach on the islands of Yasawa and Mamanuca, while hardcore divers flock to the Astrolabe reef near Kadavu Island, the world's fourth-largest barrier reef. Don't pass on swimming with the Manta Ray at Mantaray Island Resort, either.

2 **Mountains of the Sleeping Giant:** The family and kids will love The Nalesutale Highland Full-Day Eco-Tour in Nadi on the island of Vidu Levu. Trek through the rainforest, go for a waterfall swim, soak in mud pools and hot springs, horseback ride around the countryside, tour a native village and market and visit Nalesutale Village, home to Cannibal Villages, which were converted to Christianity.

3 **Meet the locals:** Fiji's greatest resource is its warm and friendly people, so save a day to visit the Nakavu Village and waterfall. You'll travel down the Navua River on long boats, enjoy a guided tour of village and school, and do lunch with the locals at the village community hall as villagers perform traditional Fijian song and dance.

4 **Check out the Mananucas:** Catch a ferry from Port Denarau and head for this set of 20 islands famous for their staggering beauty, crystal waters, beaches that were made for strolling and more. The setting for Tom Hank's flick, *Castaway.* This is also where the TV hit show, *Survivor: Fiji*, was filmed.

5 **Venture north:** Fiji's northern isles are frozen in time and offer a chance to experience the Old South Pacific. So don't miss the island Savusavu, crammed with gorgeous beach resorts and home to the J. Hunter Pearls in Savusavu Town, Waisali Rainforest Reserve and Savusavu Bay, which is so huge the U.S. Navy had plans to hide their boats there in the event of a hurricane.

GETTING THERE: The best way to get to Fiji from Canada is with Fiji Airlines, which operate out of Vancouver and Los Angeles. Tour East Holidays can arrange your visit to Fiji. Call a Tour East Holidays representative for more details at 1.877.578.8888.

VISAS: Canadian citizens using Canadian passports do not require a visa to enter Fiji for tourism or business purposes for a period not exceeding ninety (90) days. Health Canada issued an advisory in January 2017 regarding Zika in Fiji, but so far this year no cases have been reported there.

INFORMATION: To find out more about travelling to Fiji, go to http://www.fiji.travel.

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10

THINGS WE LIKE IN BASQUE COUNTRY

1 Basque wines: Some of Spain's most famous vintages are produced in the lush Rioja Alavesa valley. A trip along the Rioja Alavesa Wine Route takes you pass vines heavy with grapes and small wine villages where they celebrate the grape at harvest time with fun-filled festivals.

2 Laguardia: This Old Town sits atop a mountain in wine country and features lots of tunnels where wine barrels are stored. The tunnels were built at a time when the walled city was a defensive fortress. The town features quaint hotels and restaurants favoured by cyclists who like to explore this area on two wheels.

3 Bilbao: Once a gritty industrial city, Bilbao has been transformed into one of the loveliest cities in all of Europe. Its Old Town is especially interesting and many of its modern buildings have been designed by a Who's Who list of international architects.

4 Guggenheim Bilbao: The great architectural wonder in Bilbao – and probably all of Spain – is the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, the modern art masterpiece designed by Canadian Frank Gehry. The titanium outer skin of the museum and its sweeping design make it one of the most intriguing structures in the world.

5 Pasaia: This fascinating little seaport is one of the most intriguing places you'll ever visit, especially if you are a Canadian. Basque fishermen have been sailing out of here for centuries and even before Jacques Cartier discovered Canada, the Basque from here had set up whaling stations in Newfoundland.

6 Vitoria-Gasteiz: This regal city was once occupied by Napoleon's troops and its main square and 11th-century Santa María Cathedral are jammed packed with history. It's one of the greenest cities in Europe, as well, and proud of it.

7 Restaurants: This tiny area of Spain boasts the highest concentration of Michelin-star restaurants in the world – over 30 at last count. San Sebastián alone has seven.

8 Markets: The city markets in Bilbao and San Sebastián are the cleanest in all the world and the fish displays look more like art. The Basque people take a lot of pride in their food.

9 Pintxo: Pronounced "pincho", they are the Basque version of tapas, only better.

10 Getaria: The coastal town just outside San Sebastián is renowned for its restaurants – two are Michelin star rated – and its brilliant coastline. Lots of American expats live here and it's a great place to watch the sun set from a cafe while holding a glass of Basque wine.

in Álava province that produces the famed Rioja wine. Rioja Alavesa spreads out in all directions from the base of the majestic Cantabrian Mountains, which shelter this marvellous micro-climate region.

As a light drizzle begins to fall, Juan Manuel suggests I visit the famous tunnels under Laguardia's Old Town where "at least you will be dry."

Laguardia, now the capital of this region, is a former walled city that was built primarily for defensive purposes in the 14th century. It's nicknamed the "honeycomb" town because of the labyrinth of tunnels under it. Each of the homes had one because they served as escape routes when the town was attacked, which apparently was quite often. Later, in peaceful times when the wall came down, most of the tunnels — about 300 — were converted into storage rooms. Some, though, were turned into wine cellars.

I trudge up a steep hill leading to the Old Town, which sits 635 metres above sea level, and when I reach the top I'm rewarded with spectacular panoramic views of the lush valley, where vines are heavy with fruit on the eve of the harvest.

A sign hanging over one of the five entrances to the town reads: *"Peace to those who arrive here. Health to those who live here. Happiness for those who depart here."*

Lovely Laguardia is one of the most popular tourist towns in the Basque country and is a favoured spot for cyclists who journey along the romantic Rioja Alavesa Wine Route.

The compact Old Town features just a few narrow streets, all lined with handsome sandstone homes, quaint restaurants whose bar tops are always filled with plates of pintxo (pincho) — yummy Basque tapas — and a couple of chic hotels where cyclists like to spend the night before returning to the wine route.

One of the five cellars in the Old Town still used for aging the grape is owned by the Bodega Carlos San Pedro, a family-run boutique winery which offers tours of their tunnel and some samplings, of course.

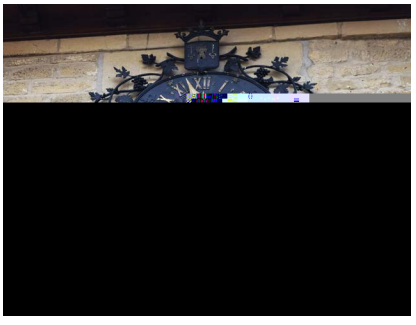
Carlos himself welcomes us to his "cueva" and cautions our small group not to "hit your head on the low hanging beams" as we make our way down some narrow stairs into the dark, musty cellar eight metres below the street.

"Our family has been storing wine in this cave for over 300 years," says the charming Carlos, who informs us there's still some bottles tucked away in the cave's vaults that are over 100 years old. "But they are no longer drinkable," he laments.

The family's main vineyard clings to the slopes surrounding Laguardia and "we

A festive atmosphere hangs over the annual wine festival, where people from far away come to enjoy the food and wine.

Bodega Carlos San Pedro is one of the cellars where the wine is aged in lovely Laguardia. Carlos, above, head of the family-owned winery, likes to share his products with strangers. The ancient town owes its existence to wine and people decorate their homes and doors with the grape. The town clock is one of the most famous in the Basque region and is a major tourist draw.



still pick the grape by hand each fall," says the informative vintner as he uncorks a bottle of one of his family's best vintages for us to sample.

"The caves offer perfect conditions for aging wine — the cellar is a constant 14C year round with a humidity level of between 80 and 85 per cent.

"There's no vibration or noise down here and the darkness helps the wine to age better in the bottle," he tells us.

The grape of choice is this area is the hearty tempranillo, which features a relatively neutral profile but produces some full bodied reds that the Basque country is noted for. Tempranilloit grapes actually ripen several weeks earlier than most so they can be harvested well before the cool winter winds blow into the valley off the Cantabrian Mountains.

Carlos tells us his cellar can hold up to 50 barrels and that his family produces about 50,000 bottles of wine each year — "a very small production compared to our neighbours like Bodega Villa Lucia; they produce over 500,000 bottles a year."

Up until 2004, the family used to extract the wine from the grape using primitive presses, but now they have turned to more modern methods — "the only thing that we keep traditional is the aging of the wines for about five years in these cellars," says Carlos as the tour ends.

Emerging into the daylight, I see a crowd gathered in Laguardia's small square waiting for its famous Pendulum Clock to chime. When it does, three figures appear dancing in traditional costume to a popular Basque song. On the Feast of St. John each year, the whole town — about 1,500 residents — rallies around the clock and local girls dressed in the costumes of their ancestors dance through the narrow streets.

The fashionable boutique Hotel Los Parajes just off the main square is one of the most popular places to stay in the wine region. Two homes have been joined together to make one amazing 18-room hotel, featuring cozy wine bars in their cellar and one of the best spas in Basque country.

As we leave Laguardia headed for the wine festival in Samaniego, a rainbow suddenly flashes across the valley and the sun begins to poke through the low hanging clouds. I know my friend Juan Manuel must be smiling somewhere.

There are over 580 wineries in Rioja Alavesa and 80 in tiny Laguardia alone, and the whole valley seems to have converged on Samaniego for the wine festival, which rotates from town-to-town each year in what Carlos describes as our "dreamland for wineries."

While Samaniego may not offer the same charm as Old Town Laguardia, it's known as one of the most hospitable places in the area and many foreigners have moved here to enjoy its ambiance and temperate climate.

As I enter the city, I'm handed a wine glass and told by a charming young woman that I can get it filled at wine stations set up throughout the town for the festival.

Showcasing regional foods is also a big part of the festival and the Basque sausages being grilled on open fires fills the air with a spicy aroma.

The streets of Samaniego are packed with revellers — many local politicians are in attendance because the harvest festival is where you must be seen. Everyone is having a good time singing and dancing and the wine is now flowing freely.

The variety of wines varies and one local man cautions me: "to understand good wines, you have to taste a lot of bad wine."

One of the best I sample is a young Vendimia from a local winery called Baigorri. I'm so impressed that later I visit the modern facility perched on a hill overlooking the valley and Matthias Lange, a manager at the winery, tells me his vintages are very much like a Beaujolais but "our wines age much better."

Wine festival brings out some interesting characters wearing traditional vintner outfits.

The narrow streets of Laguardia are lined with ancient homes and chic boutique hotels.

JUST THE FACTS

- *The easiest way to get to the Basque country from Canada is with Air Canada or British Airways via London. Bilbao is only an hour's flight from Heathrow.*
- *Hotel Los Parajas is a great place to base yourself in Leguardia. It has a charming wine cellar bar and some fascinating rooms looking out over the wine valley. http://www.hospederiadelosparajes.com*
- *For more information on the wine region, go to the Basque Tourism website: http://www.basquecountrytourism.eus*

Some of the wineries in the area are modern wonders, designed by the likes of legendary Canadian architect Frank Gehry. Gehry, who's revered in Basque country because of his design of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, also created the main building at the Bodge Marques de Riscal and the flowing titanium facade of the winery is every bit as impressive as the Guggenheim.

When I arrive back at the Villa Lucia winery — its hotel and spa complex draws people from as far away as England for weekend stays — Juan Manuel is there to greet me with a glass of his own excellent wine.

"Let us toast the wine festival and the good weather," says Juan Manuel.

There is much to celebrate in this Basque wine region. ■

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Nikon Ambassador Neil Ever Osborne captures our link with Canada's incredible protected spaces through the lens of his camera

STORY & PHOTOS BY NEIL EVER OSBORNE

'I aim to create visual narratives that express the relationship between people and planet.

PROTECTED SPACES SUCH as national parks, conservation areas, and heritage sites have always been dear to me. As a conservation photographer, protected spaces are not merely about the sanctifying and safeguarding of precious natural land, but the opportunity they present to escape life in the city and connect to the elemental power of nature. In these wild places, I feel alive in my surroundings and aware of myself as a physical being. True wilderness is a constant reminder of where we come from, who we are and that which is really important.

In my photographic work that focuses on protected spaces and habitats that need protecting — along with the wildlife and people that coexist in these places — I aim to create visual narratives that express the relationship between people and planet.

What is Conservation Photography?

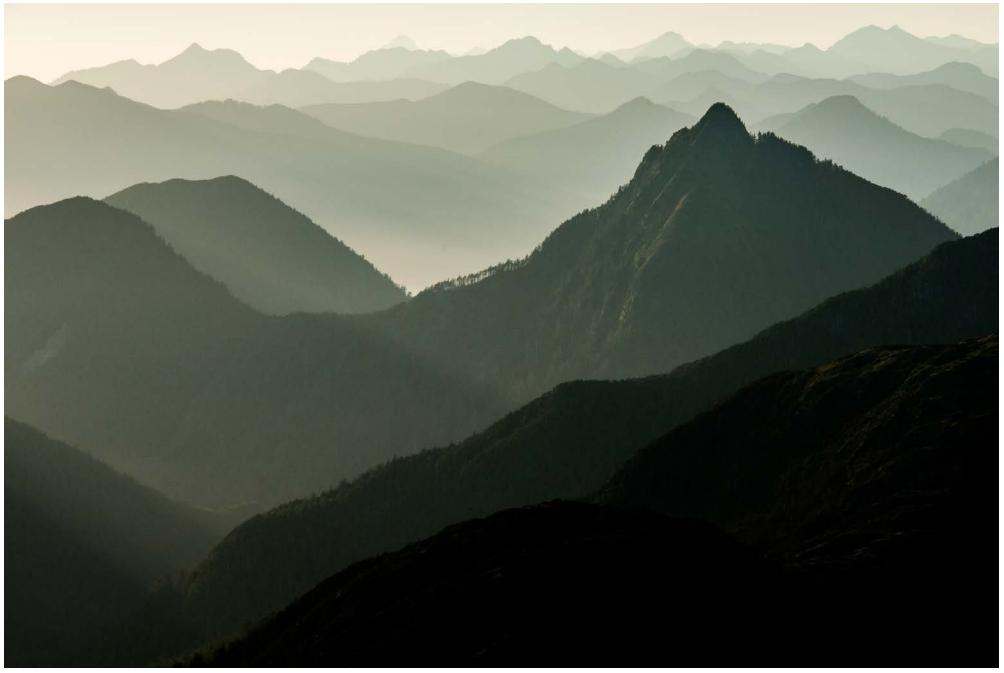
Conservation photography combines nature photography with the issue-oriented approach of documentary photography — and in doing so becomes a tool for change. Working in close collaboration with conservation partners, conservation photography helps to build alliances, raise funds and influence policy around protecting the natural environment.

The pursuits of many conservation photographers involve acting locally and travelling the world, creating images that address and bring attention to urgent social and environmental issues.

Wild horses roam free on Nova Scotia's windswept Sable Island.

Smoking salmon in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site.

Butterflies add colour to the natural beauty that surrounds Point Pelee National Park in Ontario.



Mount Yatza in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site.

A hungry bear looking for food in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site.

In my own conservation photography campaigns I use the photographic process to advocate for meaningful conservation outcomes. The process always begins with an image. I use my pictures to start the conversation about the intricate link between humans and nature.

The Natural Wonder of Protected Spaces in Canada

For example, the vista atop Mount Yatza demonstrates the importance of protected spaces. From the summit, entire ecosystems are visible: from the pristine Pacific Northwest mountaintops to the sea floor. Untouched, these places make us healthier and connect us with the wonder of the natural world. At 2,320m above sea level, Mount Yatza is one of the highest points in the San Christoval Range on Moresby Island in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site in British Columbia. This view is endlessly obstructed by fog, but the day-long hike is worthwhile for the chance to bring back an image people will truly connect with.

The protected spaces on Sable Island — a wild and windswept National Park Reserve off the coast of Nova Scotia in the North Atlantic — are also worth the travel. Isolated and remote, Sable Island is one of Canada's furthest offshore islands. Its shifting crescent shape is home to wild horses that roam freely and here the world's biggest breeding colony of grey seals come ashore. When viewed through the lens of a conservation photographer, the importance of keeping land such as Sable Island protected is immediately recognizable.

With a country so rich in diverse natural wonders, Canadians do not necessarily have to travel to the coasts to get an appreciation for nature. For example, Point Pelee National Park, which rests in the southwestern tip of Ontario, is a lush Carolinian forest oasis. The park resounds with migrating song birds in the spring, hums with cicadas in the summer, flutters with Monarch butterflies in the fall and is a peaceful place of reflection in the winter. For many visitors, Point Pelee is a site for recreation just as much as it is for wilderness contemplation. Here, it's the little critters that amuse and amaze, but they can only do so because they have a safe place to call home.

It's my hope that my photographs can remind us that we're not separate from nature, but very much a part of it, linked in an inseparable way. And that is truly worth protecting. ■

Nikon

NIKON AMBASSADOR
CANADA

Neil Ever Osborne is a Toronto-based conservation photographer, visual storyteller and film-maker. He is a Nikon Canada Ambassador, Photographer-in-Residence with Canadian Geographic, an Associate Fellow with the International League of Conservation Photographers and a Fellow with The Royal Canadian Geographical Society.

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THE HAGUE'S OBSERVATION WHEEL

FERRIS-ED OF THEM ALL?

STORY & PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON

Latest addition a big 'wheel' in Europe

THE HAGUE — I must confess, I have a love, hate relationship with observation (Ferris) wheels — I "love" the view they offer but "hate" how they disturb iconic skylines like London and Singapore. However, while I may find the massive urban wheels to be more eye sore than eye candy, millions of people disagree — they're the ones who stand in long lineups and pay for the slow motion "thrill" of riding in one of the wheels' futuristic observation pods.

The competition between cities to build bigger and better wheels is intense — New York is about to introduce its version and the world's biggest will soon debut (2018) in Dubai, of course.

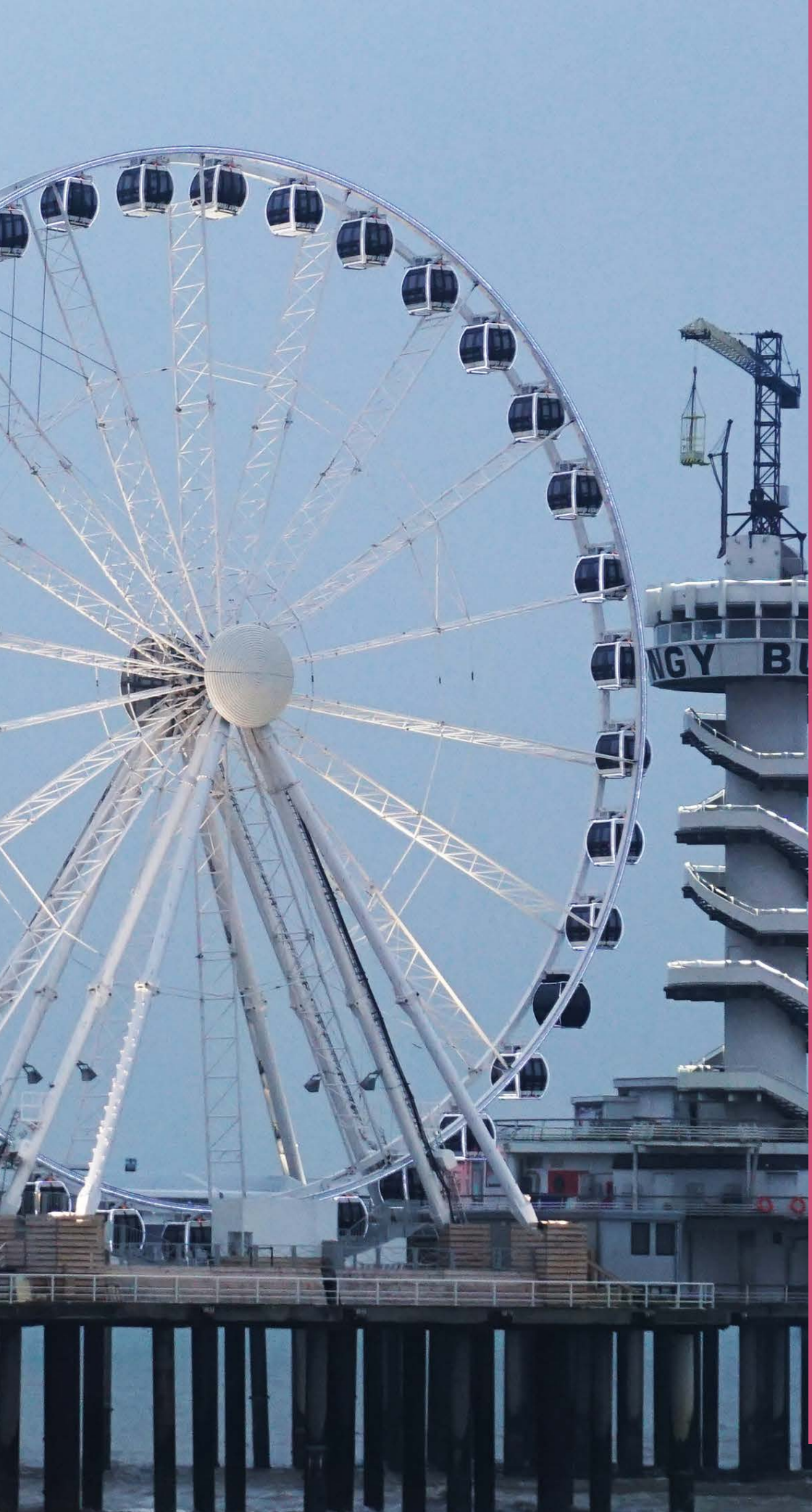
The newest, for now, is the one I'm enjoying on Scheveningen Pier, the landmark entertainment area known here simply as The Pier that's located just a few minutes by tram from downtown Den Haag, the political capital of The Netherlands that's home to the International Court of Justice.

The Pier Ferris wheel opened in August 2016 to much fanfare — it's Europe's first to be built over the sea — and is the centrepiece of a masterful revitalization project currently being undertaken of the historic Pier, where generations of Dutch have been coming to enjoy this area's iconic beach and carnival-like atmosphere.

With a frosty North Sea wind seemingly pushing The Pier wheel higher and faster, my glass pod rises into the sky just before dusk and I'm treated to a brilliant multi-colour show as the neon lights start to twinkle along Scheveningen's beachfront.

As we climb higher, the iconic wooden dome of the historic Grand Amrâth Kurhaus Hotel, which sits on the brown shoreline like a giant sandcastle, comes into view. Then, when we reach our maximum

The observation wheel and bungy tower give The Pier a youthful appearance.



10

OBSERVATION WHEELS THAT EXCITE US MOST

1 **SINGAPORE FLYER:** This city's skyline is the most beautiful in Asia and the best place to take it all in is the 165-metre-high Flyer, which opened in 2008 along lovely Marina Bay. From its 28 capsules you can even see neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia.

2 **LONDON EYE:** It's not the tallest in the world – just 135 metres high – but the views of England's capital from one of its 32 glass capsules is truly spectacular. It opened along the Thames River in 2000 and is now one of London's biggest tourist attractions.

3 **DUBAI EYE:** The UAE city has the tallest building in the world (Burj Khalifa) so why not the biggest Ferris wheel? When it opens in 2018, Dubai Eye will rise 210 metres into the sky and will feature 48 "luxury" pods.

4 **NEW YORK WHEEL:** It's being tested as we write and will open in 2017. New York Wheel will be the centrepiece of a Staten Island retail complex and it's expected to draw quite a crowd.

5 **LAS VEGAS HIGH ROLLER:** Currently the tallest in the world, the High Roller now dominates the Strip and is becoming the city's biggest tourist draw. Tip: Take it at night. Wow!

6 **YOKOHAMA COSMO CLOCK 21:** Opened in 1989 as part of the Yokohama Expo, this wheel dominates the city's fabulous waterfront entertainment district. It has 60 observation pods and can hold up to 480 people. It's especially beautiful when lit up at night.

7 **ORLANDO EYE:** The Florida city is best known for Disney World and Universal Studios but the Eye is getting lots of looks from tourists as well these days. In fact, the best views of the mega theme parks is from the Eye.

8 **SEATTLE GREAT WHEEL:** Located at Pier 57, the Great Wheel opened in 2012 and now challenges the iconic Space Needle as the city's No. 1 tourist attraction.

9 **TOKYO BIG O:** Not to be confused with Montreal's Big O (Olympic Stadium), Tokyo's Big O is the world's largest "centreless" Ferris wheel. It's the centrepiece of the Dome City entertainment area.

10 **THE PIER IN THE HAGUE:** It's the newest of the observation wheels and it's the first in Europe to be built over sea. Wow, what a view of the North Sea you get from this Ferris wheel, which sits right next to one of my favourite hotels in the world – the historic Kurhaus. There's also a new hotel near the wheel and one of the Hague's better restaurants is also located there.

–Marc Atchison

height of about 40 metres, all of The Hague spreads out before me — its modern skyline a contrast to most European capitals.

"On a clear day you can see Rotterdam," Herman Smit, the man leading The Pier's renaissance tells me. "Ships heading into Rotterdam pass right in front of our pier and many anchor here before they enter the main port."

When my pod reaches the very top, the wheel stops to let more people on and I'm left dangling in the air with a gentle North Sea wind swaying the closed gondola — there's 36 in all and each can hold up to six people. The view is breathtaking and when I reach ground level after my 20-minute ride, Smit offers to show me what else he and his group of investors are doing to make this pleasure pier — the original 19th century wooden pier was lost in World War II — more relevant to the 21st century.

"We are trying to attract young people with the addition of the Ferris wheel and our (neighbouring) Bungy Jump tower," says Smit, who says soon a 380-metre long zip-line will be added.

"The kids will reach speeds of over 100 kilometres an hour on the zip-line," says an excited Smit as we reach the entrance of the Pier Suites, a unique five-room hotel that appears to be Smit's pride and joy.

He swings open the door of the largest of the five rooms, which is located on one of two stilted "islands" that hang off the end of The Pier. The modern two-bedroom suite offers uninterrupted views of the North Sea and Smit invites me to follow him onto the suite's large terrace, where the sound of waves crashing against concrete stilts creates a thunderous sound.

"We will soon be adding a hot tub to this terrace and we plan to build another eight smaller units on the other island," Smit tells me. "I love coming here all by myself with a glass of wine and look out on the sea. It's very calming and especially beautiful at night when the ships are anchored and their lights shine on the black water."

The five rooms offer mood lighting and a large Jacuzzi tub sits in the middle of each, which probably accounts for the hotel's popularity with romantics.

The other eight rooms Smit talked about will hang off the end of the larger stilted island that's also home to a massive circular building where start-up companies can rent space or hold conferences.

"The pier went bankrupt a few years ago so it is important that we come up with new ways to generate income," says Smit as we walk along the lower enclosed deck, which is lined with shops and restaurants serving lots of Dutch treats like French fries drenched in mayonnaise — the inspiration for poutine, maybe?

The 14,000 square metre Pier, which gets about 3.5 million visitors a year, is especially popular on weekends when music and art festivals are held. There's also flea markets and pop-up shops that keep the crowds coming back. The topless upper deck offers stunning views of the ocean, beach and town and as many as 35,000 people have crowded onto the deck on summer days.

Thanks to the massive investments, The Pier's future looks pretty bright, especially when it's seen from The Hague's new Ferris wheel. ■

The Amrâth Kurhaus Hotel looks like a giant sandcastle.

Historic Kurhaus Hotel gets better with age

THE HAGUE — Walking along the beach in the playful Scheveningen section of this lovely Dutch capital, it's not hard to spot the Grand Amrâth Kurhaus Hotel. It rises like a giant sandcastle along the shore where thunderous North Sea waves crash against the hard-packed sand.

Once you walk into the historic Kurhaus, though, you realize it truly is a castle, where many a king and queen have danced under its opulent domed ballroom ceiling, the one adorned with frescos fit for a royal palace.

Not just royalty have filled the rooms of this legendary Dutch hotel, though — kings and queens of stage and screen have also occupied its lavish rooms, the ones that look out on the breathtaking sea vista. Superstars from Monet to the Rolling Stones have all slept here, but that was before a multi-million-dollar facelift, started a few years ago, saved the hotel from the wrecker's ball and transformed this grand old lady into one of Europe's most beautiful properties again. It's now recognized as a "monument" building by the Dutch government and forever will remain a part of this country's history.

Most of the 250 rooms at the Kurhaus have been updated and luxuries like a world-class spa and a new restaurant, appropriately named Waves, have been added to help enhance a guest's stay.

From my seaside terrace table at Waves, I look out on the twinkling lights of ocean-going ships headed for port in nearby Rotterdam while enjoying the sumptuous offerings of Chef Marc Smeets, whose's culinary genius draws foodies from near and far. When the North Sea calms and the evenings get warmer, diners move outside for drinks and chef's famous barbecues. After dinner, I swing open the double doors of my seaside room and let the soothing sounds of the waves lull me to sleep.

Each room at Kurhaus is elegantly appointed and jammed with all the five-star amenities a luxurious property of this nature is famous for supplying guests.

The mini-bar is free so you can toast your good fortune of securing a room at the Kurhaus before jumping into one of the hotel's oversized beds.

The Kurhaus originally opened in 1885 as a hotel/concert hall — that explains its beautiful ball room — but was destroyed by fire a year later. It reopened in 1887 and was saved from bankruptcy in 1979 by the Amrâth hotel group, which has spared no expense in bringing it back to its original glory.

The Kurhaus is just a short ride from downtown The Hague, so it's a favourite with dignitaries who visit The World Court of Justice.

Staying true to its concert hall roots, the Kurhaus hosts a number of important musical events each year.

The Kurhaus makes everyone who stays there feel like royalty. ■

— Marc Atchison

JUST THE FACTS

• The Scheveningen Pier Ferris wheel is open daily from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. It costs 9 euros for adults and 7 euros for children.

• Rates at the Pier Suites run from 240 euros to 300 euros but the experience is priceless. Rates at the Kurhaus start around $200 Cdn a night.

• KLM and Air Canada offer direct daily service to Amsterdam. The Hague is a 30 minute train ride from Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport.

• For more information on Holland, go to http://www.holland.com

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STORY BY ULPA CHAUHAN

Travel is the best teacher and the world is the ultimate classroom. Whether they are learning a new skill or learning a life lesson, there is no better way to gain knowledge than through experience. Children are sponges, absorbing everything they see and hear, so here are 10 ways children can learn through travel:

1 Learn the local language

Children don't need to learn the language fluently but a few words such as "good morning, please and thank you" in a local tongue will go a long way and put a smile on someone's face. Search and find a few phrases for them to learn before travelling or use a language app that can be fun such as Duolingo, Babbel and Mondly. (All available via Android and iOS)

2 Sample different foods and flavours

With beautiful and unusual looking fruit and vegetables in many destinations, it is the perfect opportunity for children to try new foods and flavours. They may not like everything, but at least they will learn what they do and don't like. You can educate them on how different foods grow. Many farms and plantations are happy for you to wander around and will even talk to you about the fruit and vegetables they grow, allowing you to pick and taste as you go along.

3 Learn to read a map

This is a great skill, learning to navigate a map and follow directions. Let them lead the way but know that you are there if they have any questions or need guidance. Remember that a wrong turn is also part of the learning process and may take you somewhere magical and off the beaten track. Follow your journey on a map and the children can plot and draw where you are going, or let them plan any excursions and routes.

4 Build their confidence and learn something new

It is very likely you will have access to activities and experiences which are not easily available back home, so whether it is snorkelling or riding a camel in the desert, learning a new skill means they come back feeling they have accomplished something, in turn, helping build their confidence. Until they try it, they won't know if they will enjoy it.

5 Learn about the history of a place

History is all around us. Seeing and experiencing places that they may only have heard about in books brings it to life. Their faces when they encounter something they have read about is pure magic.

6 Learn to take pictures and get creative

In an era before digital cameras, you didn't know how your shots turned out until they were developed, resulting in many pictures of fingers and floors. Today's digital cameras and smartphones allow you to snap away and delete many times. Let the children be the photographer for the day using their own camera, allowing them to make their own memories.

7 Learn about nature and the local wildlife

When travelling away from home, stepping outside (or sometimes inside) your accommodation, you are confronted with wildlife and creatures that you may not encounter back home. There is nothing like seeing animals in their natural habitat. Many destinations have great safari parks and animal sanctuaries for you to learn about creatures.

8 Learn about the value of money

Depending on how old your child is you can teach them many things about using a different currency:

- Ask them to identify the value of the note or coin;
- Work out how much change they are due back;
- Ask them to convert the price of something back into your own currency using the current exchange rate

9 They learn what to do when there is nothing to do

Learning the skill of patience is important. There will be many road trips or delayed flights that require children to deal with boredom. Take this opportunity to start a conversation that leads to all sorts of imaginative thinking or engage them in games such as "I went shopping" or word association. This teaches them to use their imagination and take in what is actually going on around them.

10 They learn to understand the world better

Travelling gives kids a new-found appreciation for everything they own and do. It improves their social skills and helps them understand that there is a world outside their little bubble. Gaining a better insight and understanding of people, cultures and the world broadens their minds. ■

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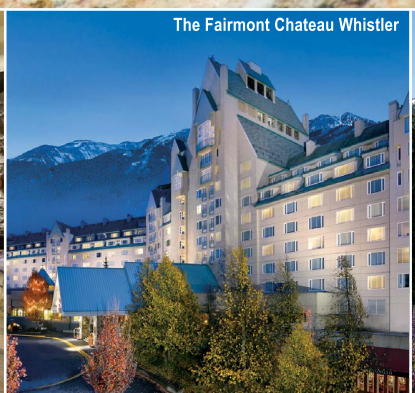
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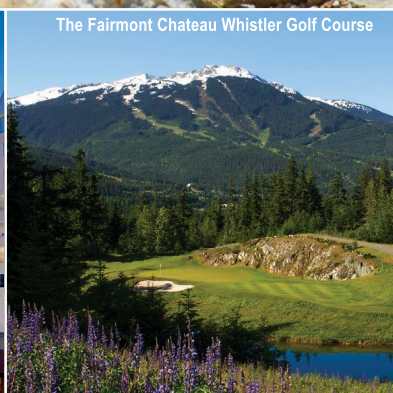
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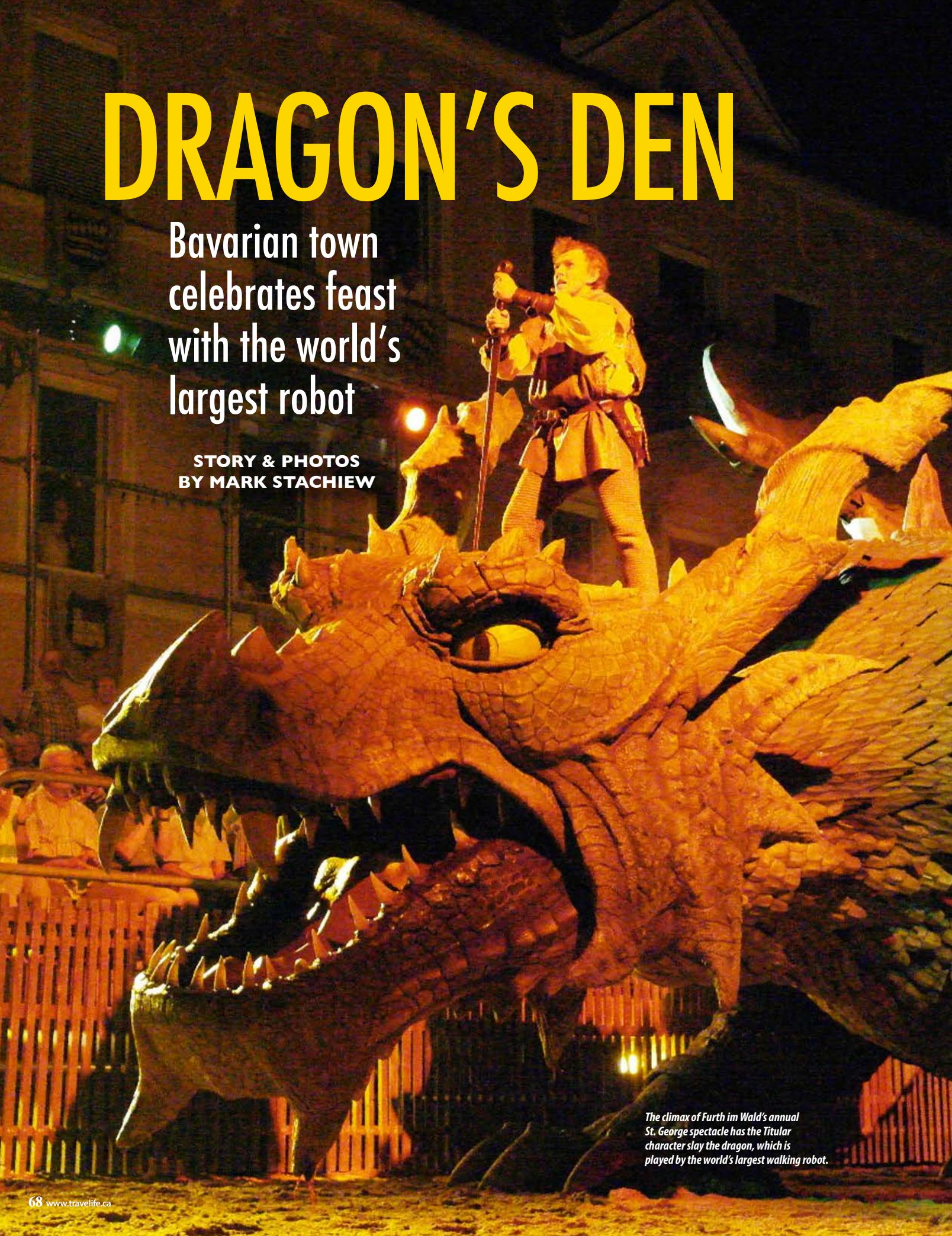
DRAGON'S DEN

Bavarian town celebrates feast with the world's largest robot

STORY & PHOTOS BY MARK STACHIEW



The climax of Furth im Wald's annual St. George spectacle has the Titular character slay the dragon, which is played by the world's largest walking robot.

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Furth Im Wald has only 9,000 residents, but as many as 1,400 of them, like this young woman, play roles in the town's St. George spectacular every year.

Furth im Wald plays up its dragon connections with winged serpents visible in all sorts of signs throughout the town and every other shop or restaurant seemingly has 'drachen' in its name.

FURTH IM WALD, GERMANY — For 500 years, this tiny Bavarian town has staged an annual performance of the story of St. George slaying the dragon that has grown from a humble religious procession into a spectacular event that today features the world's largest walking robot.

On the day I had come to this medieval German town near the Czech border to witness this event, it was grey and rainy. The show would go on, despite the weather, but the thought of spending two and half hours sitting in the rain didn't sound like fun.

Prior to the start of the show, I visited some of the sights in the town related to the performance. The Drachenhöhle is a museum that explains the long history of the St. George play known as Drachenstich that is staged here each August. It displays old photos from years gone by, antique costumes and models showing how the gigantic dragon robot was built. It also explains how it began as part of the annual Corpus Christi procession, but broke off from the church in the 19th-century as a secular event.

> *"The detail of its scaly skin, flapping wings, powerful claws and fire-breathing mouth add to the realism. It is so complicated that it requires four operators to control during a performance."*

It's all in German and I had skipped the English audio guide, so I didn't understand a lot of it, but it was worth visiting because it's also the "garage" where the gigantic, fire-breathing robot dragon is parked for the other 50 weeks of the year when there are no performances. I was able to inspect the 15.5-metre-long, 11-ton monster up close and it truly is a remarkable creation. The detail of its scaly skin, flapping wings, powerful claws and fire-breathing mouth add to the realism. It is so complicated that it requires four operators to control during a performance.

As I stepped out of the museum, I heard church bells ringing. Someone explained to me that the bells were calling the actors to church to pray for a good performance. I hoped they were also praying for an end to the rain.

This mostly Catholic town has only 9,000 residents, but as many as 1,400 of them take part in the St. George spectacular, along with 200 horses.

Furth im Wald certainly plays up its dragon connections with winged serpents visible in all sorts of signs and displays and every other shop or restaurant seemingly has drachen in its name. It's no wonder that the town is also known as Drachenstadt, the City Of Dragons.

Dominating the medieval town's skyline is a 19th-century tower that replaced the origional that was destroyed by a devastating fire. Visitors can climb to the top for breathtaking, panoramic views of the town below and the mountains of the Bavarian and Bohemian Forest in the distance. Adjacent to the tower is the Landestor und Drachenmuseum where you can see the dragon used in the annual Drachenstich performance before the construction of its robotic successor. It is certainly an impressively large creation, but it pales in comparison to the modern version.

When we eventually clambered to the top of the tower, we didn't get to enjoy the views for very long because the skies broke open and it began to pour rain. As I climbed the stairs back down to the ground, I dreaded the soggy night ahead watching the play.

There were still a few more hours before the show began, so we enjoyed a meal of traditional Bavarian food at a local biergarten, or beer garden. The meal featured lots of pork, sausages, dumplings and, of course, beer. As we ate, the skies began to lighten and the rain stopped. Maybe it wouldn't be so soggy after all.

We took our seats in the town square where the play is performed. On opposite sides of the square are giant castle gates and walls that are opened and closed to let people on horseback, armies of soldiers, horse-drawn wagons and, of course, the mighty dragon come and go on stage as the story unfolds.

From the tower that dominate's Furth Im Wald's skyline, top photo, visitors enjoy panoramic views of the town and the mountains of the Bavarian and Bohemian Forest in the distance. The town is always jammed for the festival.

The dragon makes an early appearance. He eats some sacrificial virgins, breathes some fire, but it's early in the evening and it is still light out so he doesn't seem all that scary. As the play progresses into the night, the dragon becomes much more menacing in the darkness and the light of the flames spewing from his mouth appear even more dramatic.

It's all in German so it's hard to follow the dialogue if you don't speak the language, but the tale of Good versus Evil is obvious and the spectacle of the hundreds of costumed extras streaming in and out of the square during the play is enjoyable by anyone.

Over the years, the story has been adapted for the times. For many years, it was a Cold War allegory, the town's proximity to the Iron Curtain of the nearby Czech border amplifying the theme. It has since been rewritten to reflect the medieval origins of the play.

The stars of the show are always a local man who plays St. George and a local woman who plays the princess with a different pair being chosen each year. In the climax of the show, George battles the ferocious dragon. There is much *sturm und drang*, but he finally clambers onto its back and plunges his broadsword into its skull. Once again, Good triumphs over Evil. At the end of the show, the star performers receive flowers and there is much applause for their efforts. Even the robot dragon has flowers placed in his mouth and he bows his head to acknowledge the roaring crowd.

Throughout the performance, no video or photos are allowed, but when the show is finally over, the crowd rushes into the square to get up close with the dragon robot to grab some selfies with the true star.

As I join the crowd to get my chance to see the dragon up close, I realize that not a single drop of rain had fallen during the show and the performances were flawless. I guess the visit to the church earlier in the day by the performers was a success. ■

- ***For more information: http://www.drachenstich.de***
- ***This year's festival dates are August 4-20, 2017.***
- ***For tourist information on Germany, go to http://www.germany.travel***

TAKING JAPANESE *Culture* TO NEW HEIGHTS

Hoshino Resorts' amazing HOSHINOYA Tokyo keeps ryokan traditions alive

TOKYO — I arrive at the entrance of the HOSHINOYA Tokyo, the capital's newest hotel, on the eve of *Bunka no Hi* (Culture Day), when the nation celebrates its deeply rooted customs and traditions.

As I step out of the cab, I feel like I've arrived at the cultural crossroads of Japan. On one side of the street I see the Imperial Palace grounds, the venerable home to Japan's revered Emperor and his family; on the other side stands the gleaming glass and steel office towers that make up Tokyo's prestigious Otemachi business district.

HOSHINOYA Tokyo appears perfectly juxtaposed. That's because this amazing property, whose concept is based on preserving Japan's threatened ryokan culture (traditional inns that date back centuries that are normally built near onsen hot springs) is located in one of Tokyo's newest buildings.

A young man wearing an haori jacket welcomes me to the hotel's *genkan* — a traditional entrance where shoes are normally removed. I'm instantly impressed with the arrangement of seasonal flowers, sliding paper screens and aromatic Japanese wood featured at the entrance.

HOSHINOYA Tokyo is located in one of the capital's newest buidlings, which rises high in the city's chic business district. The property brings Japan's traditional ryokan (small inn) culture, complete with onsen hot spring, to the fast-paced metropolis. Each floor of the hotel offers just six rooms and a public lounge where attendants serve tea and sake and teach guests about the history of the famed ryokans, which are fighting for their survival. The hotel entrance, above, is especially lovely and inviting.

STORIES BY MARC ATCHISON / PHOTOS BY DENNIS CHU

10

THINGS WE LIKE ABOUT HOSHINOYA EXPERIENCE

1 Each of Hoshino Resorts' HOSHINOYA properties offers a unique insight into the traditions and customs of the place where they are located. The company's resorts in Kyoto, Karuizawa, Okinawa and Bali are as equally impressive as the new Tokyo property.

2 HOSHINOYA Tokyo offers 84 rooms in total. They are spread over 14 floors of the 17-storey tower, which is located in Tokyo's Otemachi business district. The hotel is within walking distance of Tokyo Station, the Imperial Palace, Ginza and many of the capital's biggest tourist attractions.

3 The HOSHINOYA properties are always being singled out for awards. The HOSHINOYA Kyoto, one of the most beautiful in the Hoshino Resorts stable, was awarded its fifth consecutive Michelin Guide 5-star rating recently. We'd give it a sixth star on good looks alone.

4 Service at each of Hoshino Resorts' HOSHINOYA properties is second to none. Staff have been hand-picked and many have served overseas in countries like Canada and the U.S. and are accustomed to North American tastes.

5 Asking which of the HOSHINOYA properties we like most is like picking our favourite child. But thoughts of HOSHINOYA Karuizawa, located an hour outside Tokyo, still has us smiling a year after our visit.

6 Not everyone can afford the HOSHINOYA experience – room rates start well north of $500 U.S. a night – so Hoshino Resorts have created alternative ryokan experiences under its equally impressive brands like KAI, Risonare and Hotel Bilston. The latter is an American-style resort located in Karuizawa.

7 Cuisine is taken to art form at HOSHINOYA Tokyo thanks to the addition of Executive Chef Hamada Noriyuki, a true Iron Chef who has been recognized by France's prestigious Bocuse d'Or competition for his culinary creativity. Chef Hamada, who finished third in the 2013 competition, was formerly at the company's Karuizawa property, where he won rave reviews.

8 HOSHINOYA Bali is the newest member of the Hoshino Resorts family. It opened in January, 2017 and gives guests an insight into Balinese customs and traditions.

9 Getting to Japan from Canada to experience HOSHINOYA Tokyo is easy. Air Canada has direct flights to Japan from Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver and JAL (Japan Airlines) offers flights from Vancouver.

10 To learn more about HOSHINOYA properties, go to http://www.hoshinoresorts.com/en/ If you are planning to trip to Japan, make sure you visit the Japan National Tourism Organization http://www.ilovejapan.ca

Guests walk on tatami floors and are required to don Japanese garb while in the hotel. The well-trained attendants respond to a guest's every need.

Master Chef Noriyuki Hamada Rules HOSHINOYA Tokyo Restaurant

TOKYO – Like a painter uses a brush, Chef Noriyuki Hamada uses chop sticks to painstakingly arrange his delicate French/Japanese cuisine on a white plate canvas until a culinary masterpiece appears. The visual delight is only surpassed by the taste of his gourmet creations – each bite an explosion of flavour that creates an orgasmic taste experience for the diner.

An introduction to Chef Hamada's gourmet cuisine quickly makes you realize why he was tapped by Hoshino Resorts Group to oversee the kitchen of their new HOSHINOYA Tokyo restaurant, which sits in the bowels of the ultra-modern property in the heart of Tokyo's business district. Of course, the Hoshino company was well aware of Hamada – his chic 24-table restaurant at their Bleston Court Hotel property in Karuizawa was the talk of Japan.

That came after Chef Hamada rocketed to fame after his third place finish in the 2013 Bocuse d'Or competition – the biennial culinary Olympics held in Lyon, France – thus becoming the first Asian chef to ever achieve such an honour.

I'm invited to sample Chef Hamada's menu during a visit to HOSHINOYA Tokyo, which brings Japan's ryokan (traditional inn) culture to its most modern city. Hamada was given to task of creating a ryokan menu using his signature techniques, which incorporates French and Japanese cooking styles and ingredients.

One bite tells me he's surpassed all expectations.

Hamada's 10-table restaurant will soon become the most sought after reservation in Tokyo and hopes that some Michelin stars will soon follow.

Award-winning Chef Noriyuki Hamada has been recognized as one of the best in Japan and now he's the star of HOSHINOYA Tokyo, the city's newest and most talked about property.

Chef's signature "precious little things" dish, top photo, and the one above, showcase his culinary artistry, which is equalled by the taste of his creative cuisine.

Diners are immediately impresssed with the entrance to the hotel restaurant.

But before I reach my romantic table in the basement of the hotel, I'm treated to the ambience of the stunning restaurant, which features dramatic rock formations.

Once seated, my delightful server Iano arrives with a series of dishes with some playful titles: "Five flavours of delight", followed by "This is, an apple?", "I fall for autumn", "Let's take a dip", "Oh so golden", Juicy harvest" and his signature finale "Precious little things".

The cored apple is stuffed with hairy crab and sea urchin and when you lift it up, the hollowed bottom contains an apple puree that finishes the dish perfectly.

The "let's take a dip" entree is a soup of pureed chestnut – yummy! – and chef follows that with a dish of Spanish mackerel, which has been pan fried and infused with chicken broth.

Amazing taste!

The "oh so golden" dish features a Wagu beef roll wrapped in soya milk skin and topped with eatable flowers. After consuming every morsel of the "juicy harvest" dish – it features Japanese pears – chef ends our incredible dining experience with tapas style treats served atop polished rocks that have either been frozen or heated, depending on the corresponding offering.

Chef rules over a six-person kitchen staff and diners are expected to wear traditional kimono-style clothing, which truly enhances the experience.

Chef Hamada and HOSHINOYA Tokyo were made for each other – and well deserving of many Michelin stars.

– Marc Atchison

"We've been expecting you," says the attendant as he leads me to an elevator with the tatami flooring. A few seconds later we step off on the ninth floor of the 17-storey property and a young woman manning the *ochanoma* (lounge) — each floor has one — bows and welcomes me again.

"Please follow me," says Tomoko as she leads me down a dimly-lit hallway to the entrance of my room — there are just six guest rooms on each floor of HOSHINOYA Tokyo, the city's only 5-star ryokan which is operated by Japan's famed Hoshino Resort Co.

As I cross the threshold, I feel like I'm being transported back to ancient Japan.

A glorious light streaming through some shoji screens highlights the room's traditional trappings — futon beds raised on a platform anchor one end of the L-shaped suite, which is wrapped in lots of warm blonde wood and bamboo. The room, whose checkerboard-designed tatami ceiling mirrors the flooring perfectly, also includes a dining table and a cozy low back sofa with lots of pillows. The room's furnishings were custom-crafted by the renowned Hinoki-Kogei woodwork factory and the room's lanterns were designed by the legendary Masanobu Takeishi. Walls are painted in colourfully-rich adzuki-bean purples or matcha-tea greens. Very pleasing to the eye. Tomoko is anxious to show me the bathroom, the highlight of Hoshino's 5-star HOSHINOYA properties — the company operates similar award-winning resorts in Kyoto, Karuizawa, Okinawa and Bali.

The spacious bathroom comes complete with a wooden bucket and stool for those who prefer to bathe in the traditional Japanese style. However, the bathroom area also includes a state of the art shower, a stylish square bathtub and a self-cleaning toilet that look like they were designed by NASA. The posh toiletries, specifically made for HOSHI-

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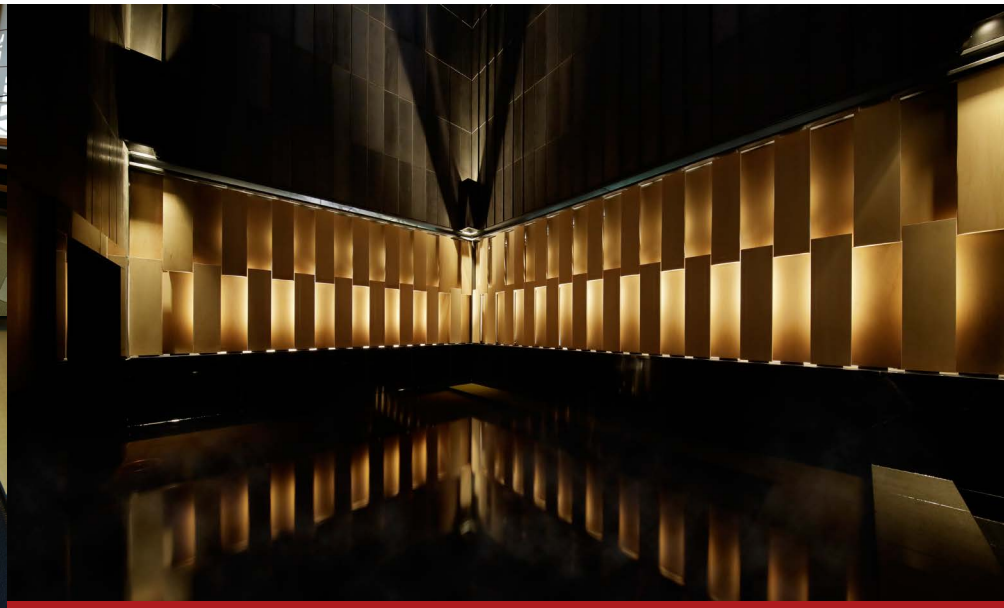

The spacious suites at HOSHINOYA Tokyo come adorned with traditional bedding and furniture. However, each room offers modern bathrooms. Guests can enjoy in-room breakfasts and then retire to the onsen hot spring located atop the property.

NOYA Tokyo, are fit for the Emperor's wife.

Tomoko tells me each room is overloaded with modern technology — high speed internet, etc. — but she reluctantly introduces me to the television, which is hidden behind a black mirrored wall.

"We like our guests to live a traditional Japanese lifestyle without any modern interruptions while staying at HOSHINOYA Tokyo — but the TV is here if you feel a need to watch," she says in a soft voice.

The young attendant then pulls out a drawer filled with traditional Japanese garb.

"We encourage guests to wear these kimonos (for dinner and elsewhere in the hotel) and pyjamas (modern cotton jersey outfits) when they are walking around their floor so they can have the complete ryokan experience," Tomoko tells me.

The room is also bathed in a magical kimono motif effect, which is created by the light filtering through the stylish black metal lattice work which wraps around the HOSHINOYA Tokyo tower.

"Every kimono has a hidden interior design and the architect (Rie Azuma) used the Edo Komon pattern on the exterior of the building because it is considered good fortune. It also means 'four directions', so it welcomes guests from everywhere," Tomoko informs.

After freshening up and changing into my comfortable lounging pyjama outfit, I join Tomoko in the ochanoma where she prepares me a cup of seasonal tea and treats me to some nigiri rice balls. The lounge also serves sake and Japanese wines (surprisingly good!) in the evenings and was created by Azuma to encourage guests to mingle. It's also a place where staff like Tomoko and front desk manager Asuka Nagayama, who lived in Vancouver for two years, educate guests on the traditions and cultures of this amazing country.

"You've arrived in Japan at a good time because we are having Shichigosan," says Asuka, referring to an event held annually in November when children aged 3, 5 and 7 are taken to temples and blessed in an ancient ceremony celebrating the rite of passage.

One of the biggest challenges Azuma and her team from Azuma Architect & Associates faced when it came to creating this modern ryokan tower was staying true to an authentic ryokan experience, which meant finding a natural hot spring in the heart of Japan's magnificent capital.

"Before construction even began, they drilled 1,500 metres under the ground where HOSHINOYA Tokyo now stands and found a thermal hot spring in the seabed (Otemachi district is built on reclaimed land).

"That water is now pumped up to our 17th floor where our hot spring baths are located," says Asuka. "Our hot spring is very different, though — it's salty because it's fed from a seabed hot spring."

The hotel's Otemachi Onsen Hot Spring is an oasis of relaxation in one of the world's busiest cities. Guests, many of whom are business executives, soak in curative waters in rooms with open roofs — providing a magical experience under a glorious nighttime sky.

Just as relaxing is the hotel spa, manned by exceptional therapists like Naoyo Iwsaki, who administers massage treatments using traditional techniques meant to meet the health needs of guests.

Naoyo insists I perform a pre-massage workout which includes stretching and dips in the hot spring so "I can check the level of tension and pain in your body."

The understated elegance of the treatment rooms — more soothing blonde woods and bamboo — get you into a relaxed frame of mind very quickly.

Morning breakfast can be enjoyed in the ochanoma with other guests or delivered to your room. Guests have two choices: a) complimentary rice ball and miso soup meal at the ochanoma lounge or b) a full in-room Japanese or Western breakfast.

In the hotel's stylish lobby, guests are treated to traditional performances, which break out regularly.

Hoshino Resorts' HOSHINOYA Tokyo is where Japan's ancient and modern cultures co-exist in harmonious splendour. ■

JUST THE FACTS

• Rooms at HOSHINOYA Tokyo are always in great demand so we suggest you book well in advance of your arrival. Accommodation for this type of experience is never cheap — HOSHINOYA Tokyo rooms start around $800 (Cdn.) but the cultural experience is priceless. http://hoshinoyatokyo.com/en/

• Air Canada offers direct daily service to Tokyo from several Canadian cities.

• Tour East Holidays (http://www.toureast.com) offers many Japan tour option.

• For tourist information on Japan, go to http//:www.ilovejapan.ca/

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10 MOST BEAUTIFUL GREEK ISLANDS

1 SANTORINI: It was devastated by a volcanic eruption in the 16th century BC, forever shaping its rugged landscape. The whitewashed, cubiform houses of its two principal towns, Fira and Oia, cling to cliffs above an underwater caldera (crater).

2 MYKONOS: It's best known for its summer party atmosphere. Beaches such as Paradise and Super Paradise have bars that blare thumping music. Iconic landmarks include a row of 16th-century windmills, which sit on a hill above Mykonos town.

3 CORFU: It's defined by rugged mountains and a resort-studded shoreline. Its cultural heritage reflects years spent under Venetian, French and British rule before it was united with Greece in 1864. Corfu Town, flanked by two imposing Venetian fortresses, features winding medieval lanes, a French-style arcade and the grand Palace of St. Michael and St. George.

4 RHODES: The largest of Greece's Dodecanese islands, Rhodes is known for its beach resorts, ancient ruins and remnants of its occupation by the Knights of St. John during the Crusades. The city of Rhodes has an Old Town featuring the medieval Street of the Knights and the castle-like Palace of the Grand Masters.

5 NAXOS: Its fertile landscape spans mountain villages, ancient ruins and long stretches of beach. The namesake capital (also called Hora or Chora) is a port town filled with whitewashed, cube-shaped houses and medieval Venetian mansions.

6 PAROS: Parikia, the bayside capital, is a boating and transportation hub for the Cyclades region. It's also home to the Panagia Ekatontapiliani, a landmark Byzantine church from the 4th century A.D.

7 SKIATHOS: It's best known for its beaches and buzzing, youth-driven nightlife scene. The action centres around Skiathos Town, where bars and restaurants spill onto sidewalks along the old harbour and Papadiamanti Street.

8 MILOS: Also known as Melos, this is a volcanic island in the Aegean Sea, just north of the Sea of Crete.

9 KOS: It's known for its abundant sandy beaches and is rich with Greek and Roman landmarks, particularly in and around Kos Town. This harbor town is dominated by the 15th-century Neratzia Castle.

10 SKOPELOS: It's one of several islands which comprise the Northern Sporades island group, which lies east of the Pelion peninsula on the mainland and north of the island of Euboea.

STORY BY ATHENA LUCERO / PHOTOS BY ATHENA LUCERO & SOURCES

DELPHI, GREECE — My professor friend had just returned from visiting the Greek islands, but didn't have enough time to see Delphi as she had hoped. I was departing the next day for mainland Greece — the Corinthian Gulf, the Peloponnese Peninsula and central Greece — and made it to Delphi. I thought of Rita as I stood amongst the ruins on Mount Parnassus where ancient Greeks trekked to seek sacred counsel of the Oracle — a "Wow-I-can't-believe-I'm-here" moment. This journey through a magical region of roads less travelled had become my own Greek odyssey.

Northwest of Athens, the gulf, also known as the Corinthian Riviera, is dotted with a string of resort towns within easy driving distance of one another. My small tour group discovered Loutraki, Corinth, Xylokastro, and Aigio on the Peloponnese coast; and Dorida, Arachova and Thiva across the gulf in central Greece.

I embraced the slower pace of this sophisticated region where Athenians escape the capital for the weekend and where I got a peek into the rhythm of authentic Greek life.

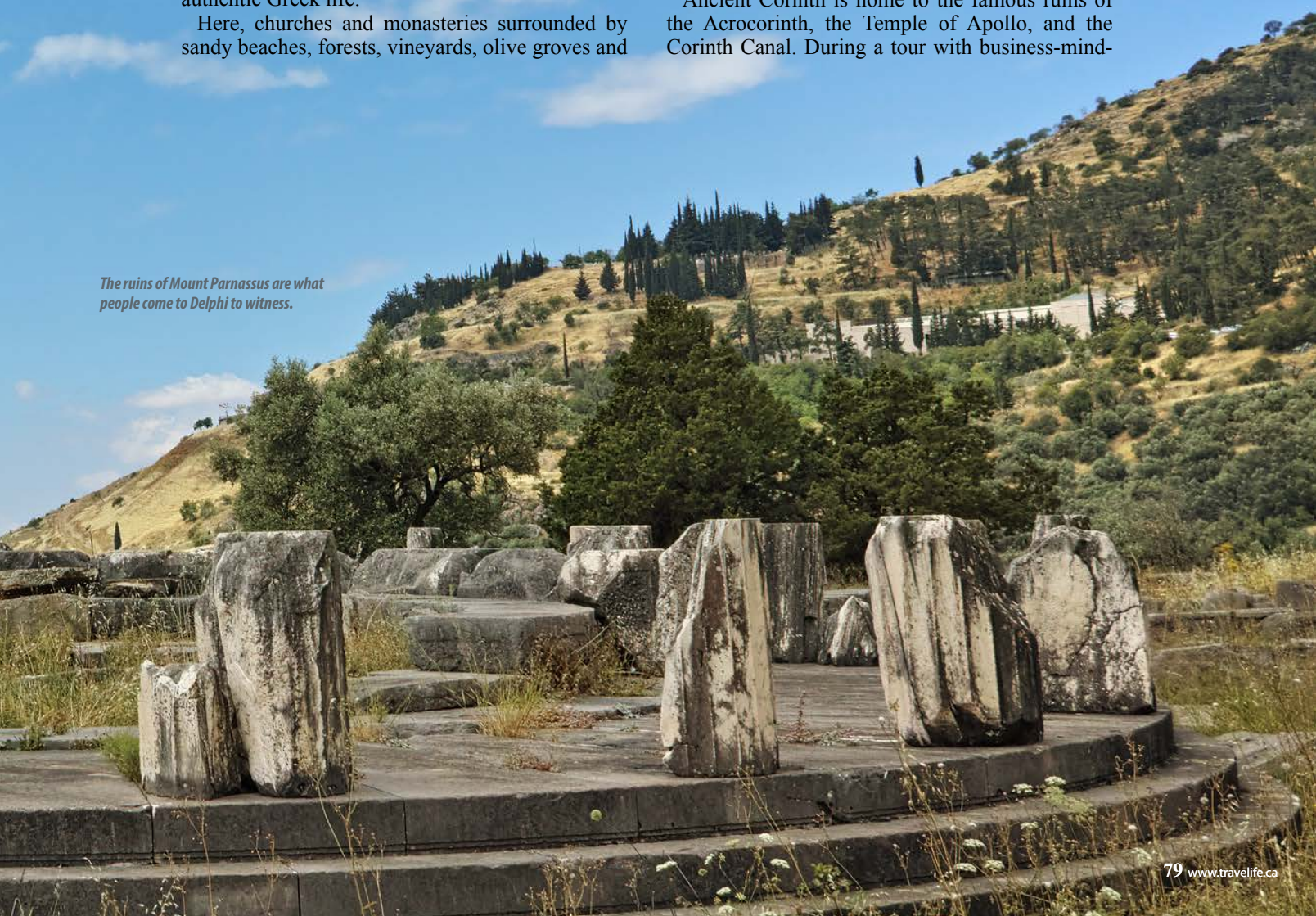
Here, churches and monasteries surrounded by sandy beaches, forests, vineyards, olive groves and farmland have been the landscape since antiquity; where fishing, winemaking, agriculture, olive oil and cheese-making still thrive.

Healthy farm-to-table and sea-to-table meals are not trendy here, but a way of living. We were the beneficiaries of this wealth of natural resources as we broke bread over gastronomic and gregarious family-style meals made with lots of love and the reason why the food culture of the Greeks is a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

These common characteristics are what tie the vast gulf region together. Just as vast was the richness of each town as we connected with warm and friendly communities and their local culture.

An hour's drive west from Athens, the spa town of Loutraki was our gateway to the gulf, where the mainland and the Peloponnese meet. This visit had set the bar high, from an overnight at the Club Hotel Casino designed like an ocean liner, tastings at Kalielaion Olive Oil Press and Loukami candy maker, lunch at a lakeshore fish tavern as octopus tentacles dangled overhead, a soak with locals at Loutraki Thermal Spa, and a seaside dinner at the upscale Paladar restaurant.

Ancient Corinth is home to the famous ruins of the Acrocorinth, the Temple of Apollo, and the Corinth Canal. During a tour with business-mind-



The ruins of Mount Parnassus are what people come to Delphi to witness.

ed nuns at the secluded Monastery of the Holy Cross (they run a high-tech dairy farm in the mountains), and surprised us, on their day of fasting, with an exquisite buffet and performed for us a mesmerizing Byzantine chant. Back on the coast for dinner, we burned off calories with Greek dancing between courses (and lots of Greek wine) — with the town mayor and his family.

Xylokastro is where the beach and pine forests meet. In a single day, we strolled the marina and restaurant-lined quay, visited the awe-inspiring Church of Agios Vlasios, spontaneously erected a two-table roadside "pop-up café" in the ski centre of Ziria (yes, there's skiing in Greece), took cover from the rain under olive trees in Melissi, then indulged in tastings of award-winning Ladolea olive oil and local wines at Hotel Lido on the beach.

In Aigio, we drove deep into romantic wine country to the mountain winery of RIRA and met its two female winemakers, visited a factory at the Agricultural Cooperative Union where tiny Corinthian currants bursting with flavour — a nutritious food since ancient times — are packaged for international distribution. We visited the Archeological Museum housed in the historic marketplace, then salivated as our lunch of fresh-caught fish and shrimp was cooked table side.

By evening we clinked glasses with the winemaker at mountain-top Tetramythos Winery, and back down at the beach al fresco under the stars, chowed down on scrumptious gyro sandwiches, Greece's original street food.

We reached Dorida on the other side of the gulf by way of a short ferry crossing with close-up views of the Rio-Antirio Bridge, the world's longest suspension bridge that opened in 2004.

A huge municipality, Dorida's extraordinary offerings include remarkable collections at the folkloric and nautical history museums, the Monastery of Trikorfo, Trizonia (the only inhabited island in the gulf), the noble seaport village of Galaxidi, Mellin apiary where fir and thyme honey are produced, the mountain village of Loidoriki, and a modern cattle farm (sheep and goats, too) operated by two young brothers who invited us to enjoy freshly-made yogurt, cheese and breads.

From Dorida we climbed in elevation to cosmopolitan Arachova, a year-round mountain resort built on dramatic cliffs and one of the most picturesque ski towns I have seen.

Famous for its proximity to Delphi, it is Greece's top winter destination. Prides of the town are the four-faced clock tower and its protected Formaella cheese made and sold only in Arachova. Our lunch (rather, feast) at Taverna Kaplanis, Arachova's oldest and most authentic tavern, fortified us for a mushroom-hunting trek in Mount Parnassus National Forest and a visit to the ancient port village of Antikyra.

Back down at sea level the final leg of our grand tour took us to Thiva where we met more local producers and their lovely families — bakers, pasta makers, and cheese makers. And at Terra Thiva winery in the city we sat for an elegant evening of wine tasting led by winemaker Yiannis Flevianos, who studied viticulture and enology at the prestigious University of California, Davis.

Once the powerful city-state rival of Athens, Thiva is where legends inspired classical literature — Hercules ("the strongest of all mortals"), Dionysos (god of wine), and Oedipus (he answered the riddle of the Sphinx and became the mythical king of Thebes). At the magnificent Archeological Museum of Thebes that opened to much anticipation last summer, their stories came to life.

And unexpectedly, while walking the museum's shiny marble floors, my mouth dropped in awe when a glass case displaying thousand-year-old relics automatically lifted open and our guide invited us to hold the precious objects.

It wasn't long before the museum's treasure trove of artefacts discovered around Thebes whisked my imagination to the magical world of Greek gods and goddesses, rituals and lore. ■

Spanning the Gulf of Corinth, the Rio-Antirrio Bridge, above, opened to vehicle, pedestrian, and bicycle traffic in 2004. It is the longest suspension bridge in the world connecting Rio on the Peloponnese Peninsula to Antirrio on mainland Greece. Visitors to this region of Greece are welcomed by fertile farming land, fresh fish and lots of ancient history.

• ***For complete information about attractions and lodging around the Corinthian Gulf, see http://www.visitgreece.gr***

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STORY BY BRUCE SACH

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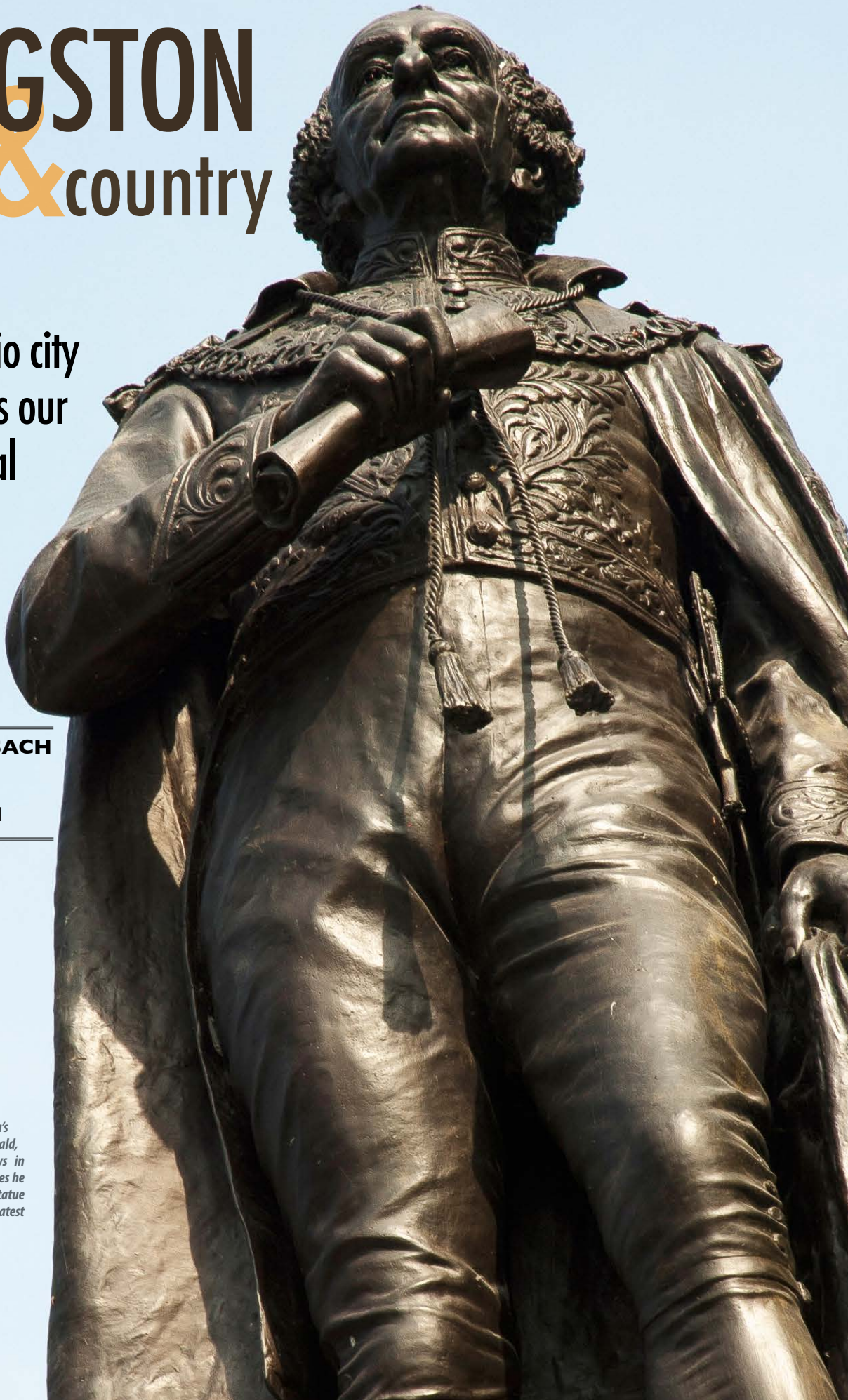

Kingston was the hometown of Canada's first prime minister Sir John A. Macdonald, a Father of Confederation. His days in Kingston are remembered at the homes he lived in and the places he worked. A statue of the man many argue was our greatest PM, stands in the centre of the city.

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KINGSTON, ON — We were in this city's historic City Hall when it really hit me. Sure, I knew that Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, had made his mark in Kingston, and had lived here for years. But when I saw his old desk, (a partners' desk) carefully preserved in City Hall, I finally had tangible proof of his having lived and worked here.

Along with being the stomping grounds for Sir John A. Macdonald, Kingston was once briefly the capital of Canada. After 1832, Kingston was linked to Ottawa by the Rideau Canal, and it remains the gateway to the Thousand Islands, a stunning series of islands between Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River.

Kingston has a lot to be well known for. Members of its Royal Military College were instrumental, back in the mid-60s, in promoting and creating Canada's current flag, the Maple Leaf. Furthermore, in a country not known for fortresses, one of Canada's best-known ones, Fort Henry, is located here. And let's not forget Queen's, Canada's oldest university.

Sir John A., as he is popularly known, became Canada's first prime minister and served in that role for a total of 16 years. He is known by many Canadians as the most important Father of Confederation, and has graced the Canadian $10 bill for decades. He has countless roads, bridges and airports named in his honour.

And because he was a resident of Kingston for so long, there are references galore to his life here.

At Bellevue House, one can visit the largest house that Macdonald inhabited in Kingston. He and his family moved there in 1848 in the hope that living in the country and breathing country air would improve his wife's health. Bellevue is a beautiful Italianate villa, complete with design and styles from the Victorian era. It has been preserved as it was in 1848, including

Cadets from Kingston's legendary Royal Military College, top photo, march in front of historic Fort Henry, one of the city's most visited tourist attractions. Kingston is also where Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, once lived and there's many reminders of his years there — like the homes he lived in and the desk, above, that he worked at. It's on display in Kingston's City Hall.

extensive grounds, an orchard, and a kitchen garden. There is a giant red oak there, said to have been planted the same year of Macdonald's birth, 1815.

There are many houses in Kingston associated with Macdonald, most of which you cannot visit. It seems he moved often and was always renting. One wag said it would be easier to fix plaques "Sir John A. Macdonald did NOT live here" across town than affix plaques to those places he did reside.

Sir John A.'s parish church, St. Andrews is still going strong, and you can view the stained glass that he paid for at the Catholic church of St. Mary's. What is amazing is that in Kingston so many places directly connected with Sir John A. are still up and operating, a tribute to the thoughtful heritage preservation here.

Now, back to the partners' desk I saw in City Hall. This unique, oversized desk is designed for two people. Both business partners face each other and share a very wide and deep desktop. They have built-in cabinets to the left and the right of where they would sit. Our interpretive guide indicated that the side Macdonald would have used had pigeonholes to keep his bottles in — it is common knowledge that Sir John A. liked to imbibe. There is even one famous incident where he appeared to be drunk in the House of Commons.

Coincidentally, one of his law offices has now been converted into Sir John's Public House. It is an unpretentious kind of place that serves up pub fare, including that modern-day Scottish pub specialty: deep-fried Mars bar! According to Tim Archibald of the pub, "there is little doubt that discussions concerning the dream of a confederated Canada took place in this building".

What I really like about Kingston is that so much of the old town has been preserved. And, because it is relatively small, almost any place can be reached on foot. We could easily walk from our residence at Queen's University along Lake Ontario into the historic centre of town, where we passed the Murney Tower, now a museum, a military tower built for defence, but never attacked. Interestingly enough, the huge Fort Henry, at the other end of town was never attacked either.

Kingston briefly served as Canada's national capital and the historic buildings that crowd its handsome old town are a reminder of the city's importance in our history.

You have a feel for where everything is located after just a day. Chez Piggy restaurant, founded by local Zalman Yanovsky of the Lovin' Spoonful, has become an institution in Kingston and his daughter's Pan Chancho Bakery/Restaurant sells the kind of eclectic choices that reminds one this is a university town.

Another must visit in Kingston for those interested in Macdonald would be his gravesite at the Cataraqui cemetery. As cemeteries go, this place is a beauty. It is built on a highly forested area with rolling hills, and is full of beautiful monuments. What is refreshing, though, is the utter simplicity of Sir John A. Macdonald's gravestone. A single cross with a simple message: *At Rest*.

It is hard to be in Kingston for more than a few days without being intrigued by the dozens and dozens of wind turbines that appear to be working in the middle of Lake Ontario. They are in fact, located on Wolfe Island, where the island lifestyle hasn't changed in hundreds of years, and the land is still mainly farm country. There may not be a lot to see there historically speaking, but it is a beautiful car or bicycle drive.

Close to where you take the Wolfe Island car ferry, boats for the Thousand Islands dock. You can take a sunset cruise and wonder how splendid it would be to have a cottage amongst these quiet waters, so perfectly isolated, yet so very close to a town jam packed with Canadian history. ■

10

THINGS TO DO DURING CANADA'S 150TH BIRTHDAY

1 Visit a national park: Parks Canada is offering its Discovery Pass, which will allow visitors to enjoy national parks, national marine conservation areas and national historic sites free of charge throughout 2017.

2 Visit Montreal: On May 17, Montreal officially celebrates its 375th anniversary, which also falls in the same year as the 50th anniversary of Expo 67.

3 Make some art: A handful of communities across Canada will create a mural in their town, which will be made up of between 400 and 750 individually painted tiles depicting that community's interpretation of a train moving through town.

4 Open doors in Toronto and Ottawa: The two cities will open doors to architecturally, historically, culturally and socially significant buildings, monuments and landmarks. Doors Open Toronto will take place May 27-28 and Doors Open Ottawa will take place on June 3-4.

5 Vancouver Fringe Festival: It runs from May 31 - June 2 and crams in 15,000 years of Canadian history.

6 Visit National Gallery: Throughout 2017, Ottawa's National Gallery will host "Our Masterpieces, Our Stories," a celebration of art in Canada. Sadly, admission is not free.

7 Ottawa welcomes the world: A number of embassies will celebrate Canada's 150th with events. Turkey (April 23-25), Ireland (June 16), India (September 29) and dozens more are scheduled throughout 2017.

8 Spirit of 150 Victoria festival: From June 21 to Canada Day, the city of Victoria will host 11 days of free outdoor events in the city's Inner Harbour.

9 Travel by Train: Via is offering lots of "150" options and discounts to travel the rails this year and the incredible Rocky Mountaineer train is also offering lots of specials.

10 Quebec City Tall Ships Regatta: On June 30, tall ships from around the world will sail into Quebec City for a an event-filled celebration that will last from July 18-23.

Happy Birthday Canada!

Heather Lea and Dave Sears sell up everything and head out on an incredible two-year motorcycle odyssey where they discover the world and themselves

THE GREAT ESCAPE

PART 1

STORY BY HEATHER LEA / PHOTOS BY HEATHER LEA AND DAVE SEARS

Heather Lea and Dave Sears rode off into the sunset on motorcycles for two years, during which they discovered special places like Grand Teton National Park, above, and camped out under moon-lit skies. Along the way they discovered much about the world.

TO DATE, THE MOST exciting proposal I've ever heard from a man was not, "Will you marry me?" No, it was, "Will you travel around the world with me on a motorcycle?"

My answer was "yes" before he even finished asking and suddenly, I was married to two years of life on the road by bike.

I had a motorcycle for a year before Dave. Just after we met in April, 2014, he immediately went out and got his endorsement to ride and later that week bought a bike. It wasn't a beginner bike, either. He fully committed to a BMW F800GS — a powerful adventure bike that could travel on and off-road.

At the time, I had a 250cc Kawasaki Super Sherpa. The upside was being able to ride backroads in the mountains, which we both loved. The downside was, although I technically had more time in the saddle than Dave, he quickly advanced in off-road riding, while I was literally left in his dust.

I wondered how we would survive riding around the world together if we couldn't even ride around one province (British Columbia) within sight of each other.

But before June, we'd crafted a plan to outfit our motorcycles and ride them from Canada through the U.S., into

10

THINGS THAT CAN GO WRONG ON A MOTORCYCLE TRIP

1 Accidents: Dave had a close call in Peru when he was forced into the dirt at highway speeds by a semi coming head-on into a corner. Luckily Dave kept the bike upright. The driver had no clue he was even there. In Avery, Idaho, I hit a boulder and crashed, breaking my wrist.

2 Other Drivers: In Central and South America, motorists seem to recognize all motorcycles as local. When they give us 'room' to pass, they assume we are as agile and slim as a local 150cc farm bike when really we are working to balance a large motorcycle that, with our side bags, can be as wide as a small car.

3 Weather: I don't think Dave nor I have ever felt perfectly comfortable temperature-wise on our trip. In Central America we felt so hot riding in full protective gear we would stop at gas stations and use their hoses to pour water over our heads. In Patagonia and Alaska, our feet were so cold we could barely operate the gears.

4 Fatigue: Often we would underestimate how long it would take us to find a home for the night and ride long past the feeling of being tired. This, along with staying on your toes at all times as a traveller was exhausting.

5 Mechanical Breakdowns: It's impossible to carry a tool or spare part for everything that will break on a two-year trip around the world. And nothing can prepare you for something like buying a second hand G650GS that quite often broke down in the most inconvenient of places, like 150 km from any source of drinking water on a 35°C day along the Cañon del Pato.

6 Language Barriers: late one evening Dave and I were setting up camp in Northern Peru. Suddenly a motorcycle appeared out of nowhere. They started to yell at us and wanted us to leave their property immediately. Thanks to my limited Spanish (Dave has none) we escaped by paying them $20.

7 Improper documents: We had problems crossing from Chile into Argentina when we did not get to proper exit visas. So we had to circle back and get the stamps before Argentina would welcome us.

8 Road Surfaces: We've fought with mud so slippery it took hours to go 15 km. Sand has snuck up out of nowhere and caused us both to wipe out. Pot holes are vicious!

9 Fights: We've had some spectacular fights during our journey and it's hard to look back and think of some of the petty things we lost our tempers over.

10 Delays: First, there was the three-month delay after I broke my wrist. Then a four-month postponement when we could not get visas for Russia, which we finally did. Since we first began our trip in September, 2015, we have spent seven out of 16 months staying with friends and family in the U.S. and Canada just waiting.

Mexico, then Central and South America. From there we would assess whether we liked the lifestyle — and each other — well enough to continue over to Africa, Europe, Russia and Alaska.

A lot of work is involved in organizing 24 months away from home; from travel insurance to finances to what sort of gear to take and add to the bikes. One of the more difficult things was deciding when to spend money and when to avoid spending money. We wanted our bikes to be amazing machines so they could stand up to the task, but we didn't want to look flashy and attract attention.

We sold everything we could through yard sales and posted items online. Dave sold his house and truck. My own house had been sold a few months before meeting Dave and I had invested the money. But what good is banked money if you can't use it?

We are both self-employed. I sold my business as the publisher of an arts and culture magazine in a B.C. mountain town. Dave is a contractor and has the advantage of just saying "no" to the next project.

The departure date was set for mid-September, 2016. Fifteen months to learn Spanish and Rus-

Heather and Dave take a break to admire the incredible scenery in Chile's Torres Del Paine National Park, top photo. The distances between stops were often long and camping out on chilly nights was all part of the adventure.

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llamas in Ecuador pose for Heather's picture with mount Cotopaxi providing a breathtaking backdrop.

sian, take an off-roading course, work and save, give family and friends time to get used to the idea and, because we were newly dating, see if we could work well as a team. If we couldn't make it through the prep stage, we surely wouldn't make it out on the road.

As Dave lived in the U.S. and I in Canada, seeing each other wasn't easy. The distance was only an hour's drive but we encountered problems crossing the border so frequently.

One day, it was decided we would leave a year early on our trip. We could be together, for one, but we had another reason; what could happen in a year that might stop us from starting? Our dream had begun to grow wings and flutter distractedly around us during the daily grind. It became our main focus.

We budgeted $50 U.S./day/person and figured we could save money using resources like couchsurfing.com, or we could work for room and board. We also planned to camp as much as possible to save hotel fees.

On Sept. 17, 2015, we packed the last carefully selected item onto our bikes and rode away from my parent's home in central B.C. Dave now had a used red BMW F800GSA, an even more powerful bike designed for the adventure rider, with a larger fuel tank and better off-roading modifications. I had bought a used black BMW G650GS, which would later be nicknamed "Frankenbike" for all the hassles it caused.

I tried to imagine what it would feel like not to see anything familiar but each other for 731 days. When this felt too overwhelming, I developed a way to micro-manage my anxiety for what Dave and I were attempting. The trick was just to enjoy the day getting somewhere; think only of the next 24 hours and see where we ended up. When broken down into daily goals, our round-the-world trip seemed possible.

Seven months and 23,486 km had passed when Dave and I reached the world's southern-most road accessible point. Ushuaia, Argentina greeted us with a snowstorm on April 24, 2016. Our journey to this point had many challenges. We had mental and mechanical breakdowns, many spills off our bikes, over a dozen border crossings, intense winds, rain, mud, snow and heat. We were chased by dogs, narrowly escaped head-on collisions, faced extreme fatigue and got sick.

Very shortly after we left in September, however, we had to return home for three months after I broke my wrist in a minor crash.

Despite all of this, the good times prevailed, as did we. Dave and I flew ourselves and our bikes back to the U.S. from Chile and from May 14, 2016 until Oct. 1, 2016, rode from California to Canada's northern-most road accessible point in Inuvik, NWT and the world's northern-most road accessible point in Deadhorse, Alaska.

In February, 2017, Dave and I arranged flights for ourselves and the bikes from Vancouver to Cape Town, South Africa, where we plan to take the year to ride Africa's eastern coastline and then Europe and Russia for the second half of our journey.

I think the hardest part will be coming home. ▪

NEXT ISSUE: Ride on the wild side

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TRANSPORTING MEDELLÍN
INTO THE FUTURE

STORY & PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON

New transit systems, along with street art and hip-hop, helping transform Colombian beauty into a model for the world

MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA — The Metro cable car lifts off from Santo Domingo station and the cows and horses grazing in the makeshift pasture beneath the gondola scatter in all directions. As we slowly glide along the steel cable, a sudden gust of wind swirls up from the Aburrá Valley below and causes the tiny pod to sway ever so gently. Soon, all of sprawling Medellín and the glorious Andes mountains surrounding it come into full view.

"I love it up here," says Juliana Correa, my pod partner and an employee of Metro de Medellín, the city's award-winning transit system that has helped transform this once crime-ridden metropolis into a model community that is the inspiration for the developing world.

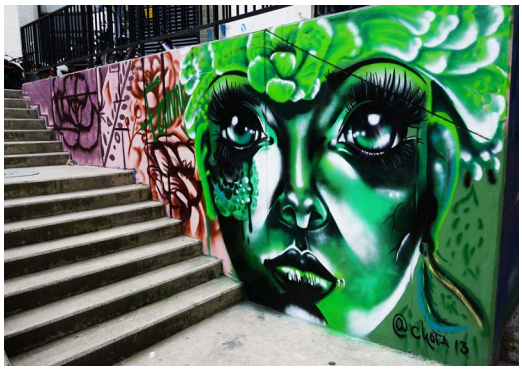
> *'From up here I see how my city has changed for the better — how we, the people of Medellín have changed forever'*

"It's so quiet and peaceful and from up here I see how my city has changed for the better — how we, the people of Medellín have changed forever," says the proud Juliana.

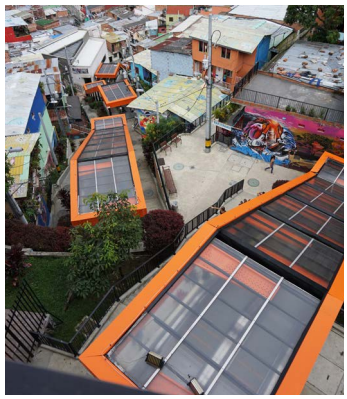
Hope springs eternal these days in the "City of the Eternal Spring" and it's mainly because of the transit initiative started by civic leaders 20 years ago that has helped close the massive gap between rich and poor here.

While some look upon the cable car as a mass transit solution, it's really a lifeline for the poorest of this city's five million residents — displaced people who were once cut off from jobs, health care and proper education and left to rot in barrios (slum neighbourhoods) ruled by notorious drug lords and their ruthless thugs.

Along with the cable cars, Medellín — pronounced Mede-jean — has installed a gleaming new subway system that interacts with the cable cars, and escalators that connect the poorest neighbourhoods to the city centre. At the same time, the local government built hospitals, libraries and community centres in the



While the addition of Metro cable cars, opposite page, and a subway have helped connect the poorest to jobs and education, the hip-hop artistry taught to young people in Medellín's slum areas by former gang members like Juda, top photo, have helped make the city a model for the world.



People who travel on the city's Metro cable car are rewarded with wonderful panoramic views of Medellín, one of Latin America's most beautiful cities. The cable cars and orange topped escalators, right, have helped the poorest find new jobs and new hope.

barrios — also known here as comuna — so young people could learn skills instead of hanging out on street corners with gangs.

"This is all part of the transformation of Medellín," says Juliana as we fly over La Avanzada, once one of the toughest barrios in the city. "Now it is very safe to walk there."

Since the introduction of the cable cars in 2014 — the first in the world to be used for mass transportation, by the way — crime in Medellín has been reduced by "66 per cent and the quality of life in the comunas has been improved immensely," reports Juliana.

Each day, over 850,000 people use Medellín's public transportation system (30,000 on the cable cars alone). "It used to take four buses and a lot of time to get from the barrios highest in the mountains to the city centre and that discouraged people from travelling. But it takes just 20 minutes by cable car now," says Juliana, who adds that "there are even banks in the barrios and police stations — things that you never saw there before."

The cable cars have also become an inexpensive way — rides cost about 80 cents — for tourists to get grand panoramic views of Medellín, one of the most beautiful cities in all of Latin America. In the sweltering summer months, many locals ride the cable cars to the top because, as Juliana points out, "the temperature in the mountains can be two or three degrees cooler than in the city."

As we pass over other colourful barrios — "companies donate paint so residents can make their homes look nice" — music comes drifting up to the cable car from the neighbourhood and I see some creative graffiti painted on rooftops.

"If you think this is nice, then you must visit Comuna 13 where people are being taught to paint graffiti and learn hip-hop — these are the things making Medellín better," says Juliana as the cable car comes to its final stop at Arví Park, a lush eco preserve that serves as the lungs for this remarkable city.

Markus Jobi, a German expat who moved to Medellín — "for the love of a woman" — and has since started a travel company — Palenque Tours — agrees to show me around Comuna 13, a place so dangerous that even the police would not venture a few years ago. "I know Comuna 13 well — I lived very close to that area when I first arrived in Medellín," says Jobi, who pulls his car up in front of a row of low-rise apartments on the edge of Comuna 13 and tells me to wait. A few minutes later, Jobi returns with a young man who looks like he just stepped off a hip-hop album cover.

"Meet Juda, he's one of the co-founders of Casa Kolacho, a local initiative that helps educate kids in the ghettos," says Jobi. "Casa Kolacho is self funded and Juda and other members of his hip-hop band help finance the project by leading graffiti tours through Comuna 13."

With Jobi acting as the interpreter, Juda, a former gang member himself, tells me "life is getting better for the people living in Communa 13 and its because kids are using their talents to paint graffiti and perform hip-hop instead of joining gangs.

"I turned away from crime when one of my friends was gunned down and now I use my energy and his memory to help others out of poverty," says Juda, who gives me a short tour of his sound studio, which also sells souvenirs.

Juda hops in the car and a few minutes later we arrive at a spot in Comuna 13 that looks more like an outdoor art gallery. Street art abounds and each brilliantly crafted wall painting tells a story.

"Many people were killed by paramilitary units on this street (it has no name) and the graffiti here tells the story of the people who died — some were old, others were very young. The graffiti artists who did these were graduates of Casa Kolacho.

"We are tired of suffering. We are tired of living what we've lived. We believe now it's possible to have a better world and we are capable of doing it," says the inspiring young man.

As I walk up the steep street with no name, youngsters rush up to me and say "hello"; one boy offers to share his soccer ball; old ladies flash toothless grins and Juda is treated like a rock star. And to think, in 2011, 162 people were murdered while walking on this same street.

"Things started to turn around here when the city constructed that," says Juda, pointing to a series of escalators that rise 10 sto-

JUST THE FACTS

• The Metrocable car operates daily from 4:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Rides cost 80 cents and tickets can be transferred to the Metro subway system. There are five cable car lines currently operating in the city and more are being planned. The escalator is free.

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Two young residents of Comuna 13 reflect the hope and optimism this once crime-ridden area of Medellín now has by welcoming visitors with their bright smiles. The area once ruled by drug lords and their gangs, now offers a ray of hope for those who live there, below.

reys to the top of Comuna 13.

I follow Juda onto the escalators with the orange canopies and pass many unescorted foreign tourists who are busy taking pictures of the imaginative wall art — most of which are museum worthy.

When we get to the very top — "this is where the poorest people live," Juda says — I'm rewarded with another spectacular panoramic view of Medellín.

"Medellín is a laboratory where we experiment on a daily basis," says the young man. "Issues remain — the drug gangs still exist but they have agreed to a ceasefire now because even they are tired of fighting.

"I like coming here because from here I see a better Medellín."

Thanks to people like Juda and the initiatives taken here, Medellín is only going to get better. ■

10 THINGS WE LIKE ABOUT COLOMBIA

1 GETTING THERE: Copa Airlines, a Star Alliance partner and the Colombian airline leader in on-time performance and quality of service, offers flights to Medellin via Panama City from Toronto and Montreal. Copa's Business Class service is becoming one of our favourites and connections are excellent. The airline has a young fleet and services many Latin American destinations.
http://www.copaair.com/en

2 HOTEL PATIO DEL MUNDO: This chic little property offers 7 amazing rooms in one of the best areas of Medellin. It's owned by a lovely French expat named Agnes Garcia and she and her staff treat you like family. Rates in high season are just $150 a night with breakfast.
http://www.patiodelmundo.com/en

3 COFFEE TOURS: Just outside Medellin there's plenty of coffee plantations that you can tour and learn all about the magic bean and the people who grow them. It's a fascinating insight to the rural lifestyle in Colombia. As a bonus, you get to see some awesome countryside. Lunch is supplied by the families who own the plantation and a day trip with guide and driver costs about $100 per person. Palenque Tours offers one of the best tours.
http://www.palenque-tours-colombia.com

4 MEDELLIN RESTAURANTS: Some trendy rooms have opened the past several years in the chic El Poblabo neighbourhood and we especially liked the eating experience at Oci, Carmen, Paralelo 17 and El Cielo. All offer great food.

5 VALUE: Medellin may be the best bargain in the travel business. Hotels and restaurants are all very affordable.

6 TRANSPORTATION: Medellin's award-winning metro and gondola service have transformed the city and both are safe.

7 PLAZA BOTERO: Medellin's favourite son is the brilliant Fernando Botero. In the plaza that bears his name you'll find many of his giant sculptures and across the street a museum devoted to his paintings is great.

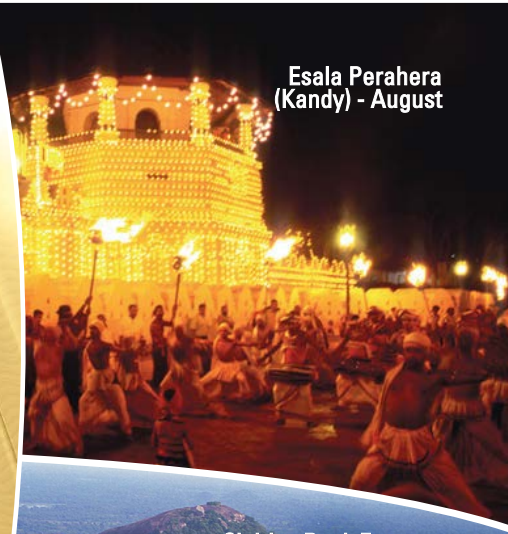
8 MUSEO CASA DE LA MEMORIA: This moving museum honours those who lost their lives in the many conflicts Colombia has endured, incldluing the drug days.

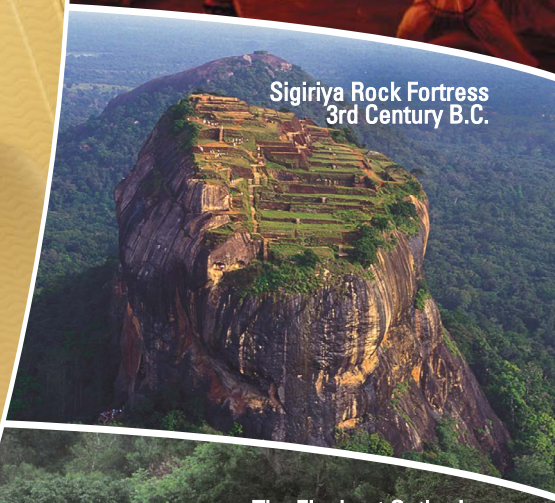
9 FAVELA TOURS: Don't be afriad to join one of these tours. Our favourite was the one to Comuna 13, an area where drug gangs once terrorized the people living there. Now young people are using art and hip-hop to get their message across.

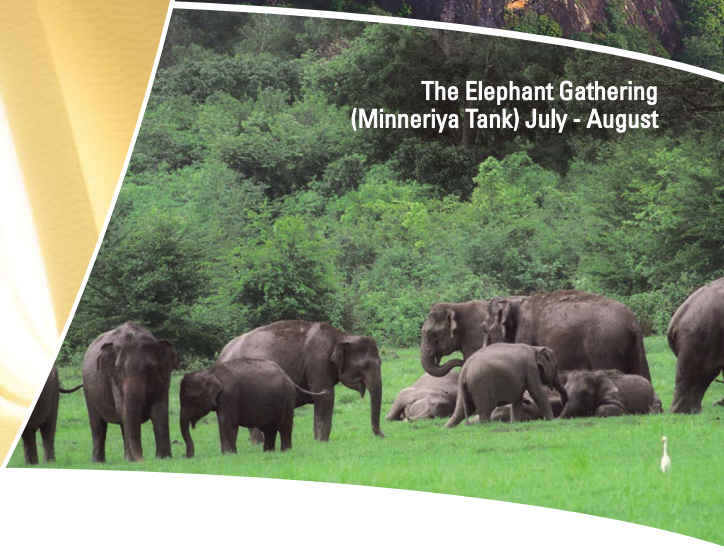
10 DAY TRIPS: There are some great historic towns within a 90-minute drive of Medelllin – our favourite places to visit where historic Santafe de Antioquia and Guatape.

For more information on Colombia, go to
http://www.colombia.travel

"Sri Lanka – Number 1 destination in the world to visit in 2013"
Lonely Planet







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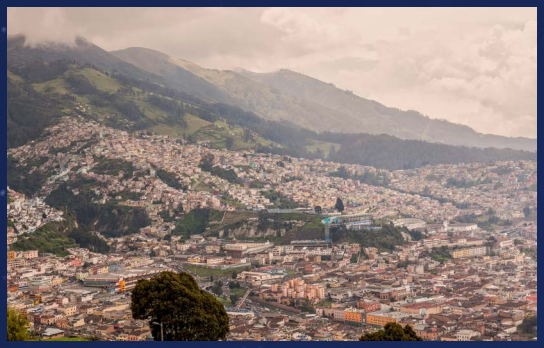

Panoramic view of Quito shows how the Andes protect it from harm. The Old Town, left, is filled with lots of history and charming colonial buildings and plazas and the Virgin of Quito statue, right, watches over this UNESCO city.

MIDDLE EARTH

STORY BY CRISTINA HURÉ / PHOTOS BY BIGSTOCK

Quito is the centre of the universe for travellers looking for new thrills

QUITO — It's 3 a.m. — touch down at last! The first thing I notice when I step out of Quito's airport is that the air is remarkably crisp. It's a certain kind of crisp that leaves you feeling invigorated — this is what you get when you're standing 2,850 metres above sea level.

As I leave the airport, what I think to be stars twinkling high above the airport are actually lights lining the mountains — life is truly lived on the edge for those huddled on the jagged peaks that encircle Quito.

When the sun rises, you begin to realize you're living amongst the clouds. Sometimes, you can even touch them. On clear days the views are breathtaking — the snowcapped Andean peaks, the picturesque plazas, the concrete homes lined up neatly along the slopes. Standing on a terrace and looking out on this beauty is a humbling experience.

When you descend from the city's highest point, you drive through lively streets jammed with traffic and vibrant market stands before eventually arriving at the jewel of Quito — Old Town.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Quito's Old Town looks different from others in South America. Home to a number of architectural treasures and colonial monuments, the streets here narrow and vendors are lined up on the busiest street corners. Cobblestone pathways lead to charming plazas that remind me of Europe. The most magnificent features of Old Town are its colonial religious buildings — 40 chapels and churches along with 16 convents and monasteries are wedged into this small space.

Old Town is a desirable destination for visitors because it showcases lots of European and Indigenous art, which is featured in the many citadels that lie within the Old Town plazas.

As you walk through the Old Town, you can sense its history — it feels as though you're walking through a different era. Even the horse-drawn carriages that line the handsome streets offer a glimpse into Quito's colonial past.

As if the elegance and charm of the Old Town isn't enough, I discover Vista Hermosa Café Mirador, which sits atop one of the highest buildings in the historic sector. The name of the café translates directly to "Beautiful View" and it truly offers one of the most spectacular views of Quito, especially the Old Town.

In the evening, when all the mountains sparkle with light, I look out from the Southern edge of Vista Hermosa and see La Virgen del Panecillo (the statue of the Virgin of Quito) — the city's guardian that stands majestically overlooking Quito from its perch on Panecillo Hill (known locally as Bread Loaf Hill).

Quito is also home to the Mitad del Mundo, (aka "the middle of the world"). Because the Equator (hence the country's name) slices through Ecuador's centre, a monument is fixed on the precise location that marks the dividing line between the Southern and Northern hemispheres. Bucketlisters love to straddle the imaginary line — stepping back and forth between hemispheres like a child skipping rope.

And who cares if studies have shown that the monument is imprecisely situated, and that astronomers were wrong about the exact coordinates of where the equatorial line passes through. The story of the Mitad del Mundo still makes the monument appealing to many tourists and it's still the most popular tourist site in Quito.

For whatever reason (hint: the proximity of the Galapagos Islands), Quito has always been a city overlooked by travellers. With its colonial influence, unique situation, splendid views and some if the kindest people you can meet, it's surely not one to be missed. In fact, you haven't lived until you've seen Quito, with all it has to offer. ■

10

THINGS YOU MUST KNOW ABOUT LOVELY QUITO

1 Because it sits on the Equator, visitors get a special thrill at Mitad del Mundo (Middle of the World). It's a monument that allows you to step foot in the northern and southern hemispheres at the same time.

2 The best preserved colonial sectors in South America are found in Quito. When you visit the "Old Town", you can see magnificent churches, open squares and narrow cobblestone streets, reflecting Spanish colonial influence.

3 Quito was declared a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site along with Poland's Krakow in 1978.

4 On a clear day you can see the Cotopaxi, the highest active volcano in the world, from Quito. Although the volcano hasn't erupted in over 70 years, experts suggest a new eruptive period began in August 2015.

5 Don't underestimate the altitude's effects. Quito is 2,850 metres above sea level (second highest capital city in the world) and you will most likely experience altitude sickness when you first arrive. Drink a lot of water and don't engage in strenuous activity for the first few days, and drink coca tea, as is recommend by the locals.

6 Be prepared for what feels like changing seasons in the morning, compared to at night. Bring summer clothes, but also fall attire and rain boots!

7 The local markets in Quito are full of culture and lots of handmade products. Check out the Mercado Artesenal, Santa Clara market or San Francisco market. If you haven't prepared for the chilly evenings, you can grab a handmade poncho here.

8 If you're feeling extra adventures, try one of the local delicacy that would typically be found as pets – roasted guinea pigs. You can eat your heart out in Quito, and expect your taste buds to be absolutely delighted. Canelazo is traditional to Quito. It's a famous cinnamon and sugar cane schnapps drink made from Tomate de Arbol (tree tomato – not your typical tomato) and it's served warm.

9 If you're looking for a party destination, check out La Mariscal neighborhood.

10 Keep an eye out for the traditional party buses! They're called Chivas and you can party on them for a couple of hours while it takes you around the city. There are no seats, so dancing is a must. Visit http://www.lachivademipueblo.com for more information on the buses.

Bear Facts

About Quebec's Saguenay — Lac-Saint-Jean

STORY & PHOTOS BY CYNTHIA DIAL

Natural wonders abound in this untouched treasure

SAGUENAY — LAC-SAINT-JEAN, QC — From its rolling green hills to flower-box accessorized homes to a landscape dotted with water everywhere, Saguenay — Lac-Saint-Jean had me at "bonjour."

A region — not a town — the vibe of this area almost four times the size of Belgium is so surprisingly cozy that locals call it "a small village at the end of the road." Comprised of Lac-Saint-Jean and the Fjord-du-Saguenay, the destination is large, diverse and comfortably isolated (a one hour, 15 minute flight from Montreal; a two-hour drive from Quebec City); but its overflow of down-to-earth experiences and out-of-the-norm adventures makes whatever effort necessary to reach it worth it.

Adventure is in this region's DNA. Winter season entertains ice skaters, ice fishermen, downhill and cross-country skiers and dog-sledders, while warmer weather appeals to hikers, fishermen, beluga whale watchers, boaters and kite surfers. With 700 km of road

Early-morning sea kayaking in the Saguenay's world-famous fjord, top photo, is just one of the great outdoor activities visitors can enjoy in this unspoiled part of Quebec. The area is abundant with wildlife and here you can get close to bears and moose. You can even feed a baby moose.

biking lanes and 200 km of mountain bike trails, it's a cyclist's dream as well.

The 256-km Véloroute des Bleuets (Blueberry Trail) — which wends around Lac-Saint-Jean, crisscrosses 15 municipalities and enters countless villages, with interspersed treks through farmland and forests — attracts more than 200,000 annual cycling enthusiasts. With five microbreweries on La Route des Bières (The Beer Route), be forewarned that the only thing missing from this fun-filled trail may be a designated driver.

Beyond these active temptations, some of the area's most popular ventures include the word "bear." Okwari Aventures is where black bears can be observed from a watchtower in their natural habitat (of the region's 3,500 black bears, 30 are here). With assistance from a guide, visitors can hike the area, learn about the world of beavers and salmon and ride along the water in a Rabaska canoe. To maximize a bear watching visit, it's good to know that between the end of June and mid-July cubs are prevalent and September's blueberry season is a delicious attraction for the mammals.

Then there's the 26-hour, bear-filled

It's love at first sight of the Saguenay — Lac-Saint-Jean, the Quebec playground that offers some of Canada's most spectacular natural wonders, like the 55-metre-high Ouiatchouan Falls, above, which is actually taller than world famous Niagara Falls.

JUST THE FACTS

- *It is important to note that many of Saguenay Lac-Saint-Jean's out-of-doors attractions and accommodation are seasonal and fill quickly, so book well in advance to avoid disappointment.*
- *For tourist information on Saguenay Lac-Saint-Jean, go to http://www.saguenaylacsaintjean.ca*

Sleeping in a treehouse and waking up to views of Saguenay's breathtaking fjord, is just one of the many thrills for visitors. Just watch your step if you get up to go to the outhouse at night.

VIP tour and overnight stay called "Adventure in the Land of the Caribou." Located within Zoo Sauvage de Saint-Félicien (named one of the world's most beautiful zoos and home to more than 1,000 animals from 75 native or exotic species), the experience is unique in an opposite sort of way — the animals roam free while its VIP guests are "enclosed." During the venture, a ride in an elevated, open-air, protected trolley train through its 324-hectre Nature Trail Park section can be stop and go. As it's in an area where bears (alongside such large North American mammals as elk, bison and deer) roam freely and continually wander along the road, cross it and sometimes block it, the most valuable visitor advice is cue the cameras.

The wrap-up of this VIP adventure includes an old-fashioned meal cooked over an open fire, a finale of s'mores and an overnight within a prospector tent tucked into a sleeping bag atop a bed of balsam needles. There are no showers and no flush toilets, simply an exceptionally clean outhouse, the opportunity to bottle feed a baby moose and the possibility of an unannounced up-close-and-personal caribou greeting anytime, anywhere within the campsite. The rules are simple: Always walk in a group, never wander off and rely on good old-fashioned common sense.

"Creative adventure" best describes the assortment of accommodations found in Saguenay — Lac-Saint-Jean. In addition to the within-the-zoo stay is Parc Aventures Cap Jaseux's variety of high-energy adventures and assortment of overnight possibilities — from accommodation in a tree house eight metres above ground to a stay in a huge fibreglass bubble dome (windows cover a third of its surface) to sleeping in a suspended sphere — all perched in pine trees and all featuring panoramic views of the Saguenay Fjord. Awaking within the woods (actually overlooking it) is like no other "good morning." There are no hotel-like amenities; but the outhouse is again impressive.

Activities can be negotiating the tree-to-tree ropes course, propelling along the park's nine zip lines, tackling the via ferrata (imagine climbing a sheer cliff above the fjord) or, my selection, early-morning sea kayaking in the fjord.

Jerome, our kayak guide, describes this on-the-water choice "always different, never the same," citing the ever-changing variables of tide, wind and group number. "But it is always special," he concludes.

A more subdued but no less distinctive immersion into the region's past is an overnight in a ghost town, the historic village of Val-Jalbert. A booming, thriving pulp mill company town from the 1920s (at its 1926 peak there were 950 residents), one couldn't even visit during its decades-long closure. However, these days its recreation of the back-in-the-day town and the natural site on which it sits lure thousands of annual visitors.

Among Val-Jalbert's irresistible enticements are 40 original buildings seemingly frozen in time, 24 rooms situated in its turn-of-the-century houses now converted to 21st-century luxury accommodation, the general store, convent school, post office and walk-about "residents" in character — perhaps Mother Superior in route to school or the mayor's daughter riding her bicycle along its main street. Additionally appealing is Val-Jalbert's unparalleled natural beauty. The draw of its paper pulp past, 55-metre-high Ouiatchouan Falls, surpasses Niagara Falls.

My departure arrives all too soon. As I bid farewell to this area of which I knew little but to which I instantly bonded, I reflect upon my Quebecois adventure. Aboard the small airplane, I turn to my seatmate, a local named Andre — until now a stranger. "In a few words, can you describe this area — your home?" I quiz.

He replies in three: "I love it." ■

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ST. MAARTEN

On Sail

Caribbean island is where sailors have 'serious fun' during famous regatta

STORY & PHOTOS BY TOM WUCKOVICH

Moorings yachts, like this one, are a favourite mode of transportation for sailors attending the annual Heineken Regatta in lovely St. Maarten.

PATIO DEL MUNDO

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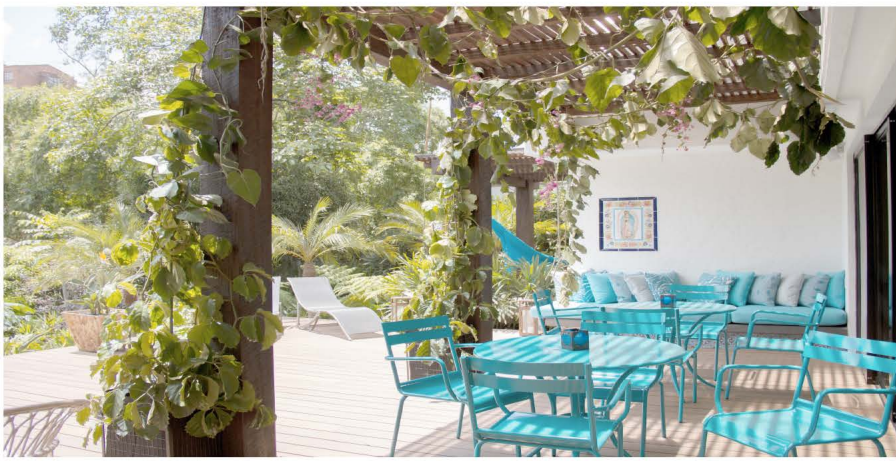

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St. Maarten is a Dutch treat all year long

Glorious beaches abound in St. Maarten.

JUST THE FACTS

- *The Heineken Regatta is scheduled for March each year.*

- *Sailings with the Moorings (sail yourself or hire a skipper) start from $3,056 U.S. - 7 nights / 2 passengers. Power Charters start from $9,065 - 7 nights / 2 passengers. Crewed voyages (with captain and chef) start from $11,410 - 7 nights / 2 passengers*

- *How to book a Moorings trip:*
  - *Typically travellers books 3-4 months out*
  - *You can book online at https://www.moorings.com or by calling 888.788.0653*
  - *You need only 30 per cent of your trips cost to reserve your vacation.*

- *Oyster Bay: http://www.oysterbaybeachresort.com.*

- *Sonesta Ocean Point Resort: http://www.sonesta.com/oceanpoint.*

- *For more events, check out the St. Maarten website http://www.vacationstmaarten.com.*

PHILIPSBURG, ST. MAARTEN — To paraphrase Shakespeare, how many times have I visited St. Maarten? Let me count the days. I began my love affair with this Caribbean island nestled in the heart of the Leeward Islands some 30 years ago, making landfall there during a sailboat charter with The Moorings, a yacht charter company headquartered in Clearwater, Fla. My arrival coincided with the staging of the Heineken Regatta, which was in its infancy then, but what has become one of the premier sailing events in the world, attracting some 300 sailboats from around the globe. While it is a sailing competition, the affair is best described as a gigantic party that brings together locals and tourists in a four-day festival of fun. In fact, the regatta's motto is "Serious Fun."

The regatta, held the first weekend in March each year, showcases both sides of the island, which is shared by two nations — the Netherlands and France. It is a small island, but it has a big appetite for pleasure. Sadly, the activities slated for the French side and centred in Marigot, the capital, were suspended in 2015 due to the lack of funding. But the Dutch were not deterred, and in Philipsburg, the capital, the party rages on, featuring local and international bands and top name acts at outdoor venues, as well as varied entertainment at the bars and pubs located in and around the boardwalk meandering along the beach. On Sunday, the last day of the gala, the scene moves to Kim Sha beach for one gigantic, exhausting finale featuring the headliner act and concluding fireworks.

My modus operandi lo these many years has been virtually the same: Check into my hotel on Thursday as early as possible, since the first party is that evening at Port de' Plaisance Resort and Casino, where live music, food and souvenir vendors, Heineken

Regatta memorabilia and much more help kick off the events in grand style. There are excellent hotels on both sides of the island, ranging from all-inclusive resorts like the Sonesta Maho Beach in Maho Bay, the luxurious Sonesta Ocean Point Resort, to small boutique hotels such as L'Esplanade on the French side. In between, there are family-oriented hotels, including Oyster Bay Resort on the border between the Dutch and French side, which was my base in 2016, and Great Bay, a newly remodeled resort near the heart of Philipsburg.

The Sonesta Maho Beach and Sonesta Ocean Point resorts are two of my favourite hotels because this lively quarter is home to a great casino, disco and specialty shops and restaurants like Bamboo Bernie's and Cherri's Cafe adjacent to the hotels. The parking garage also is a plus if you rent a car. The Maho area is so popular with tourists that parking on the street is next to impossible.

After attending festivities at Port de' Plaisance, well into the early morning hours, Friday is a day to experience one of the many magnificent beaches in order to get some rest and prepare for the celebration on the boardwalk in Philipsburg. Two of the best and most visited strands are Cupecoy and Orient Bay. Orient Bay is a clothing optional beach that is generally clogged with Europeans who are extremely fond of the lax rules regarding nudity. The French portion of the beach is sans clothing while the other half is not. Other options include Baie Rouge (Red Beach), Friars Bay and Mullet Bay, the latter within walking distance of the hotels.

After working on a tan and getting some much-needed rest, I usually head back to the hotel in plenty of time to get ready for the boardwalk bash. Philipsburg will be a challenge when it comes to parking, so arrive early and take in all the sights. The city is noted for its duty-free shopping, local handicrafts and souvenir stands. Stores are situated mostly along Front Street next to the placid waters of Great Bay, and Back Street one block away. Locals also set up booths wherever they can to hawk their wares to passersby. Cruise ships dock in St. Maarten in great numbers, anchoring at one of the most modern piers in the Caribbean, and give their guests an opportunity to soak up some vibrant Caribbean atmosphere … with a little European touch, as the island likes to boast. The problem with cruise ships is they usually don't stay overnight, depriving their passengers of an opportunity to take part in an exceptional island vacation experience.

For many visitors, including myself, it seems more sensible to stay on the Dutch end of the island and sample the French-owned territory on day trips. In Marigot, you'll find boutiques filled with the latest fashions from Paris, the finest in French perfumes, exquisite jewelry and, of course, many restaurants majoring in delectable French cuisine. Grand Case, just a few kilometres north of Marigot, is famed for its street of restaurants specializing in every kind of fare imaginable and prepared in a variety of ways. Café Calmos is always on my list for lunch or dinner. For a grand adventure, hike Pic du Paradis, the highest peak on the island, and do the zip line, one of the longest in the Caribbean. Views from the mountain include all of St. Maarten/St. Martin, and surrounding islands of Anguilla, Saba and St. Eustatius.

An especially good day to saunter over to Marigot is on Saturdays when the market along the waterfront opens. It is jammed with vendors selling everything from fruit to wooden carvings to island music. Scattered among all the trappings of booths and tables are locals cooking tempting barbecue chicken, fish and beef on outdoor grills the size of small Volkswagens. There also is an air-conditioned upscale mall nearby if you need a break from the sun. Before the race events were cancelled, you could watch the sailboats arrive in the bay at the end of the second day's races. A brief hike up to Fort St. Louis offered an extraordinary view of the racing and the finish. Later that night, the yachtsmen and other partygoers joined in the intense revelry.

Parties, sightseeing and sailing. That's what sailors and their fans have to look forward to each year when they drop anchor in St. Maarten for the world famous Heineken Regatta.

Even without the Marigot leg and accompanying festivities, the event is still a compelling three-day affair worth planning a vacation around. Visitors who want to get more immersed in the happenings can go out on sightseeing boats for a few dollars to get a close up view of the sailing. But at the end of every day and into the wee hours, there is that commitment to serious fun.

"In the States and elsewhere, a lot of regattas are very serious," said Robbie Ferron of the St. Maarten Yacht Club. "Here, it is very simple: You get up in the morning and go race. Then you go party. Then you go to sleep. Then you do it all over again."

And that's why I keep coming back! ■

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