

10TH ANNIVERSARY | JULY 2018

# travelife

MAGAZINE

## SHELL GAME

VIRGINIA TURNS  
BACK THE TIDE  
ON ITS HISTORIC  
OYSTER INDUSTRY  
AND TOURISTS  
BENEFIT THE MOST

### ASIA

- ▶ HONG KONG STREET ART
- ▶ TREKKING IN MALAYSIA
- ▶ SUMATRA IS SEDUCTIVE

### AMERICAS

- ▶ RUNNING AROUND CHICAGO
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### EUROPE

- ▶ LONDON IS GOING POSTAL
- ▶ FLYING INTO MUNICH
- ▶ SPAIN BLOWS OFF STEAM







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## OUR COVER

*Editor-in-Chief Marc Atchison visits Virginia's Chesapeake Bay area and meets the people who helped revived the state's oyster industry, which now creates jobs and lots of interest among tourists from around the world.*

*Read Marc's report on Page 50*

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A man and a young girl are sitting on the floor of a grand, ornate hall, looking up at a large, glowing chandelier. The hall features a high, vaulted ceiling with intricate carvings and a large, arched window in the background. The lighting is warm and golden, creating a magical atmosphere.

4:12PM

*The moment Montreux  
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# Writing's

## On the wall for Hong Kong

Hollywood Road street art  
captivates visitors in Central



On the hilly streets and small alleyways that run off Hollywood Road, one of Hong Kong's oldest streets, visitors are amazed by the wall art and murals they find. The works draw a lot of attention from young tourists who have seen the paintings used in music videos.







Some of the wall art is museum-worthy, like the one above. The Brooklyn Bar and Grill, top right, is another famous stop on the wall art tour. The staircase work by Korean artist Lee Tao-ho, below, is another must see.

## STORY & PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON

**HONG KONG** — Artists in Asia's most colourful city have taken to the streets and are painting the town red — and blue and purple and every colour of the rainbow. And by doing so, they've unwittingly created the world's largest and most interesting outdoor art museum.

Talk about live art.

Their paintings and murals, which are showcased in the narrow streets, hidden alleyways and outdoor staircases leading off Hollywood Road in Central District, have become one of the biggest tourists attractions in Hong Kong.

Their canvas? The walls of the neighbourhood buildings — interestingly enough, some of those buildings house the chic art shops and galleries that this area is renowned for.

It's pure eye candy — especially for millennials, who have seen the wall art used as backdrops in fashion shoots and music videos.

"Please take our picture, mister," one giggling Japanese teenager pleads with me as she and her friends dash across Graham St. to pose in front of the most popular of the paintings — a massive work that adorns the wall of a townhouse. It was painted by local artist Alex Croft and stretches half the length of the hilly street.

The narrow sidewalks of Hollywood Road, one of the city's oldest streets, are always crammed now with tourists searching for the eclectic works, and that creates challenges for the taxi and lorry drivers who have to navigate around the visitors, many of whom stand in the middle of the busy traffic street to photograph the paintings.

The quality of the murals is indeed impressive — worthy of hanging in the nearby Hong Kong Museum of Art. Some are provocative, others whimsical. What some might call graffiti, oth-



ers, myself included, call masterpieces. One even pays homage to Hong Kong's favourite son, actor Bruce Lee — it resides in a staircase between Hollywood Road and Square St. and was painted by Korean artist Xeva.

Because most of the paintings are hard to find, walking tours have been organized along Hollywood Road, which is dominated by pencil-straight highrises. This area of Central is favoured by expats, whom I see sitting at numerous outdoor cafés nursing their tonic and gins, reminiscing about home, while a soccer game plays out on the television above their heads.

You can't miss the largest of the works — a tribute to legendary American entertainers, including Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe. It stands three-storeys high and wraps around a building on Hollywood Road.

Most of the murals are painted by a local group, HKWalls. However, the most beautiful, in my estimation, is the imaginative "gold fish staircase" painted by Korean artist Lee Tao-ho, which resides in the PMQ, the former Police Married Quarters barracks. The white-washed PMQ now houses the studios of some of Hong Kong's most promising artists and designers.

Another crowd pleaser is the colourful mural that covers the front of the Brooklyn Bar and Grill on Stuanton St. •

• Air Canada and Cathay Pacific offer daily direct flights to Hong Kong from several Canadian cities.

• When visiting Hong Kong, the best place to stay in Hong Kong is the Mandarin Oriental Landmark Hotel in Central or the boutique Pottinger Hotel.

• Tour East Holidays has many tours to Hong Kong. For more, go to <http://www.toureast.com>



Enjoying Mexico at a

# *Turtle's Pace*

**P**UERTO ESCONDIDO, MEXICO — Along a barely discernible roadway, a dog leans back lazily as it settles in to resume its snooze in the dusty shade. Bells toll, not on the hour or half of it, but somewhere in between, as they seem to announce their own purpose to the moment. Roosters can be heard, as can the children in schoolyards, all in the distance but seemingly close by at the same time.

A shopkeeper sweeps the walk in front of her store, while on the beach men gather around the ice van as it delivers its frosty cargo to be distributed amongst the boats and the days fresh catch. Looking out to sea, a pair of humpback whales can be seen, their breathy spouts of mist marking their presence across the horizon.

This is Puerto Escondido, as it always has been. Quietly tucked into the Pacific shoreline and just down from the Sierra Madre Mountains in the state of Oaxaca, the town hugs the meandering shoreline like a child with its favourite blanket. Named from the legend of a woman in hiding (La escondida, the hidden one) it's obvious that this rustic jewel of the West Coast has remained off the radar of mainstream vacationers, almost as if by choice.

## Puerto Escondido retreat a hidden West Coast gem

STORY & PHOTOS BY CRAIG MINIALLY





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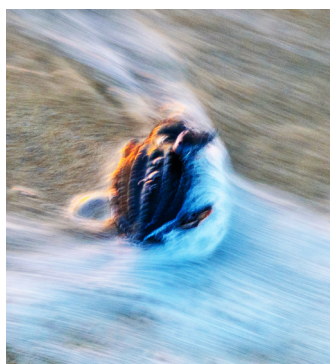
KEEP CLIMBING







*Freshly-caught seafood is quickly turned into mouth-watering cuisine by local chefs who always spice their dishes with smiles.*



*The Palmarito Turtle Release Program and its almost daily events, are in existence almost solely through the ceaseless efforts of its dedicated volunteers. Visitors can participate in the moving event where turtles are released back into the sea. Sometimes, it's a battle for the determined creatures.*



*Former Canadian Olympic ski team member Cary Mullen, upper right, is heading up the new Vivo Resort development in this area of Mexico which is dominated by colourful street markets, right, and working ports where fishermen head out to the sea for the daily catch.*



An hour's drive from Huatulco airport, serviced by numerous charter airlines, or accessible by a short hopper flight from Mexico City, Puerto Escondido is as much a treat for winter weary souls as it is for the adventurous spirit.

Our hosts, Felix and Cherie, allowed us to share time in the villa hideaway they built overlooking the Pacific, and from there we were able to venture out to discover the delights in beach wanders, shopping, dining and casual nighttime entertainment.

There is much to enjoy walking the streets of Puerto Escondido, or within a short drive in any direction outward from the town. The mayhem following a weekend fishing derby on Playa Manzanillo Beach was fabulous to enjoy, just as the casual relaxation was to be found at the other end, under the umbrellas serviced with intriguing seaside delicacies, and of course, cold beers.

If you are a foodie, then you're in for a real treat. It seemed that each and every menu we saw offered tantalizing choices with an amazing attention to detail, each with blended recipes of sea and flora that provided endless opportunities of exciting and delectable discoveries.

Wrapped around the town and its random lowrise architecture, is a seemingly endless stretch of beaches, some of which are famously ranked among the world's best.

Heading just east of the main beach (Playa Principal), lies one of the most famous beach breaks in the world, Playa Zicatela. Producing year-round waves in the two to five metres plus range, this is home to world-class surfing events in August and November.

A little further down the beach is la Punta (the Point) almost a throwback and timeless village setting of psychedelic painted storefronts, hostels, surfboard rentals and roadside feed spots, again with some fabulous food offerings that belie their humble street presence.

If you truly want to escape from it all, a 20-minute drive down the highway can take you to Playa Aqua Blanca. Somewhat of a local secret, it offers empty beaches of beautiful calm waters for swimming, adventurous snorkelling, and is serviced by a couple of sleepy palapa restaurants providing fresh seafood, cold beer and the ever-present mezcal (alcoholic) choices. There's even a choice of hammocks slung between the table settings for the inevitable napping events.

Lifestyle pursuits and personal investment choices are slowly drafting their presence, as evidenced by the Vivo Resort development that lies along the beach west of here. It's the vision of Cary Mullen, a Canadian ski Olympian now turned resort developer. You could almost refer to him as



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*Walking along one of the area's world-class beaches, below, or watching fish monks and street-side chefs prepare dishes that are washed down with a cold local brew is always a good idea.*

a lifestyle consultant, with the intriguing “pretirement” opportunities he’s made available in the area.

A new destination, Vivo combines the getaway pampering of a beautiful seaside hotel along with hassle-free ownership opportunities, but also provides custom development lots and support for those inclined to build their own villa within the adjoining neighbourhood plans.

“We have something for everyone” say Mullen, “whether they want just a week or two, or are wanting to build their dream home as part of their lifetime getaway plan.”

Vivo is also a philanthropic sponsor to the sea turtle sanctuary, located midway between Vivo and Puerto Escondido on Palmarito beach.

A must-do exploration for all ages, the Palmarito Turtle Release Program is in existence almost solely through the ceaseless efforts of its dedicated volunteers in a life’s work that is truly humbling.

Living within a couple of wind-worn tents, the lonely duo ventures out each night by ATV to locate fresh turtle nests in the dark, then re-locates the clutches to the safety of their netted compound. Visitors to the isolated experience are briefed on the history and daily tasks, then after carefully washing their hands in seawater, encouraged to assist with the evening’s release.

The experience of seeing hundreds of tiny turtles scurrying forth seeking the pounding seas, quickly becomes an emotional roller coaster for its viewers. Equally frenzied, then completely worn out, the critters erratically navigate the sand pits, waves and other hazards of the beach to finally arrive at the water’s edge. Seemingly the finish line to the event, it is in fact the start line of a much larger quest for survival.



Established in 2004, the Palmarito Sea Turtle Rescue organization is now successfully releasing some 40,000 – 60,000 turtles a year, and is truly making a difference to their fragile and critical survival.

Back in town, the evenings out are just as much an adventure, as you can wander the streets and enjoy the treasures of the markets, dining opportunities or some of the live entertainment found at the individual beach bars and restaurants.

Well lit, and ablaze with colour, there’s new discoveries every few steps – crafts, clothing, snacks, drinks and even furnishings are all set-up as part of the nightly custom, in defiance of the actual bylaws.

When hunger sets in, the restaurant choices abound. And, if you have a friend familiar with wines, as we are fortunate to, then the experience of dinner takes on new heights. Fabulous and imaginative cuisine is paired with wonderful wine choices

from local and afar vineyards, and all at prices that are a fraction of what you might expect.

So whether for a short getaway, or as an extended multi-month plan away from the winter’s cold, you’ll find that the charms of Puerto Escondido have a way of working their way into your heart on first sight, and then calling you back time after time, like a seaside Shangri-la in the shimmering warmth of the setting sun. •

• Huatulco airport has regular and seasonal charters from Canadian airports with Air Canada, Westjet, Air-Transat, Sunwing and others. Car rentals and bus services to Puerto Escondido are available at Huatulco airport.

• For a more flexible schedule, fly into Mexico City with AeroMexico, then connect through VivaAerobus or Aeromar for the 70-90 minute flight directly to Puerto Escondido.





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# treKKing

though Malaysia's Kota Kinabalu

STORY & PHOTOS BY DENIS CHU



## Outpost is considered 'Borneo light'

**K**OTA KINABALU, MALAYSIA — The only thing hotter than the suffocating air hanging over this city's bustling night market are the flames I see spewing from the mouth of a man standing just a few metres from me.

I know Malaysian cuisine is reputed to be hot and spicy, but who knew it could produce this kind of heat?

Okay, it's all part of the act — the flame-spitting man is soon joined on stage by dancers wearing traditional dress and they wow the crowd, made up mostly of hungry young tourists, with some delightful cultural dances, songs and fire-breathing acts. It's a feast for the eyes.

Located off Jalan Kampung Rd., near the old Filipino craft market, the night market is this city's main gathering spot for tourists and locals alike. Both come looking for something to eat after a day of exploring this capital of



*Visitors to the night market in Kota Kinabalu are treated to some Malaysian culture in the form of native music, traditions and fiery dances.*





*People gather on one of Kota Kinabalu's pristine beaches each evening to watch the glorious sun dip into the South China Sea.*

Sabah, the picturesque Malaysian state that borders the South China Sea and is the gateway to Borneo.

Spicy scents hang over the market, which stays open until the wee hours of the morning and is dimly lit by a series of single light bulbs. Sweet-smelling smoke wafts from the many food stalls assembled here and people queue up to order a mix of dishes from all over Southeast Asia — Indonesian, Filipino, Chinese and, of course, Malay foods are most in demand.

The market is the perfect place to end a day of absorbing the fascinating wonders this area of Malaysia offers. It's home to Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park and the fabled Mount Kinabalu, from whence the former British colonial city gets its name.

I've long had a desire to visit Kota Kinabalu, known simply as KK in Malaysia and throughout Asia, so on a recent trip to Hong Kong, my wife Rebecca and I hop aboard a discounted Air Asia flight — return fare \$250US each — for the 2.5-hour flight so we can spend a few days exploring what some people call "Borneo Light."

KK is not only one of Malaysia's major industrial and commercial centres, but it's the fastest growing city in the country. It's small but modern airport is staffed by friendly immigration officers who make us feel welcome the moment we walk off the plane.

After purchasing a coupon from the airport taxi counter, we start out in the direction of Shangri-La Rasa Sayang, the beachside resort we've booked during our stay. The road is lined with thick vegetation and the majestic Mount Kinabalu is always in our site. As we get closer to the resort, the small rainforest that surrounds it comes into view.





*Taking long walks on near-empty beaches are what attracts most people to a place simply known as KK in Malaysia. Kota Kinabalu is one of the loveliest cities in all of Asia.*

After a wonderful treatment at the resort's world-class spa — it features 11 exceptional massage villas — and a good night's sleep, we're ready to go on a boat tour in search of proboscis monkeys, the cartoonish-looking long-nosed creatures that are native to this area. Malaysians also call them the Dutch monkey because their long noses remind locals of the early Dutch settlers.

We quickly discover the reddish-brown monkeys are an elusive bunch — we don't see any during our hour-long boat ride and the captain says that's the norm. So why offer the excursion, we wonder?

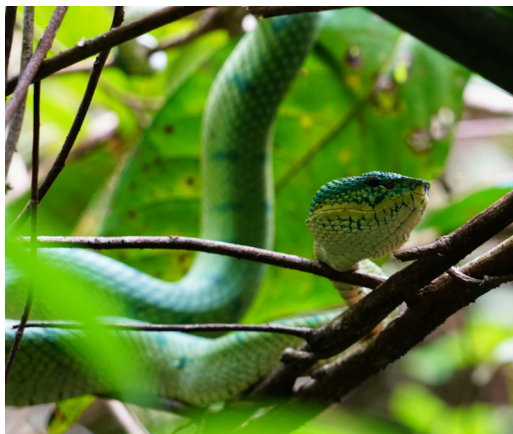
When we're offered another boat tour later that evening to see the multitude of fireflies that hang out around KK, we're somewhat skeptical at first because of the monkey saga but roll the dice and are rewarded with an amazing spectacle.

Next morning we head off into the rain-forest and come face-to-face with an assortment of snakes and insects and climb to a high point where we get uninterrupted views of the resort's crescent-shaped beach and far-off Mount Kinabalu. The sacred mountain is a popular hiking spot but it's strictly controlled and adventurers need to book well in advance of their arrival.

On a city tour of KK later in the day, we see how modern this city of 500,000 is. New office towers, condos and shopping malls dominate the skyline, showcasing KK's success over the last few decades.

We stop to admire the handsome City Mosque on Central Rd. and then head over to the Sabah Museum, the state facility that occupies 17 hectares (42 acres) of land at Bukit Istana Lama. The vast grounds contain an ethnobotanic garden, a zoo and a heritage village. Inside, we find galleries covering Islamic civilization, archaeology, history, ceramics and brassware. Fascinating.

We arrive back at the Shangri-La Rasa Sayang Resort at sunset and watch the fiery orb dip into the South China Sea, reminding us of the fire-eating act we saw at the night market. Kota Kinabalu really does get visitors fired up. •



*Kota Kinabalu is often called Borneo Light and visitors like to take adventure trips into the mangroves surrounding KK where they get to see large reptiles and native villages where time stands still.*



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GERMANY

# Dresden Dazzles

War-ravaged German city returns to its former glory

STORY & PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON

*The Church of Our Lady has been rebuilt and stands as a monument to the many who lost their lives when Dresden was needlessly bombed in WWII.*



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*Dresden's Old Quarter skyline is reflected in the Elbe River, where steam boats take visitors on night cruises down a river lined with handsome homes.*

## Regal city on the Elbe offers many surprises

**DRESDEN, GERMANY** — The late-day sun sits high in the sky over handsome Neumarkt Square, casting the iconic Frauenkirche (the Church of Our Lady) in an angelic light. The gigantic domed structure with the checker-board sandstone exterior looks like a giant sandcastle.

Cafés ringing the Old Town square are filled to capacity with beer drinkers and sun worshipers. The air is scented with the smell of bratwurst and schnitzel cooking on grills at a neighbouring market. Laughter is everywhere.

Amidst such a festive setting, it's hard for anyone to imagine that this square was Ground Zero for one of the most horrific acts against humanity — the senseless fire bombing of Dresden by Allied forces in the waning days of World War II.

It was a well documented act of revenge. (Nazi bombers had mercilessly destroyed much of England's Coventry in the early part of WWII and Winston Churchill, knowing Adolf Hitler's regime was near collapse, ordered Dresden levelled). It was a decision that many today might argue was a war crime.

In four raids over three days (Feb. 13-15, 1945) more than 1,200 British and American bombers dropped 3,900 tons of incendiary devices on Dresden, causing a huge firestorm that engulfed 80 per cent of the buildings in this state (Saxony) capital and the deaths of almost 30,000 people.

This was Europe's Hiroshima.

The only thing left standing in the Old Town after the raids was the Church of Our Lady, where many people had hid during the bombing. However, two days later, thanks to its main sandstone columns being weakened from the heat of the surrounding fires and the weight of its massive dome, the church collapsed in on itself — the last act of lunacy against this historic city.

The rubble that was once the Frauenkirche remained through



*Dresden's handsome squares are filled with reminders of the city's regal past when kings ruled Europe from here.*

Dresden's Communist era — the city was part of East Germany after WWII — but when Germany was reunified in 1991, plans were quickly set in motion to rebuild the treasured church. Donations (over \$160 million Cdn) came pouring in from around the world and in 1994 the rebuild began. The original plans were found and followed religiously and the \$250 million project was finally completed in 2005.

The Church of Our Lady now stands as a monument to the people killed during the bombing and a testament to the resilience of the residents of this beautiful Baroque city on the shores of the Elbe River.

Many of the original 11th-century sandstone blocks — 9,286 to be exact — that had been blackened by time and the elements, not the bombings, were interspersed with new blocks during the reconstruction, thus giving the exterior its unique checkered appearance.

The church's 96-metre-high dome — second in height only to the Vatican's St. Peter's — is crowned with a gold cross made in England by a craftsman whose father participated in the bombing of Dresden.

In an act of reconciliation, when the cross was raised in place, the craftsman along with dignitaries from Coventry, were invited to participate in the moving ceremony and on Oct. 29, 2005, Dresden's Church of Our Lady rose from the ashes of war to once again take its rightful place as the symbol of this remarkable city.

As impressive as its exterior is, though, the Frauenkirche's unique multi-tier circular interior, lavishly decorated in pastel shades with ornate gold trim, is what really leaves visitors awestruck.

Surrounding the great church are many regal buildings, leftovers from Dresden's Holy Roman Empire days when Augustus II ruled much of Europe from here.

Nicknamed "Augustus the Strong" because he could break horse-shoes with his bare hands and, according to legend, fathered 370 children — he actually only had nine — the ruler amassed a trea-



sure trove of riches during his reign, much of which is now displayed in a wonderful museum called the Zwinger — the old Royal Palace.

Among the priceless objects in the collection is the 41-carat Dresden Green Diamond, perfectly preserved silk garments worn by rulers over the centuries, rare Ottoman tents, armour from that period and some fascinating art, like a frigate made of ivory so thin it's transparent.

When the Soviet Army arrived in Dresden in 1945 and put the city under communist rule, most of the Zwinger's treasures were moved to Moscow and only returned in the late 1950s.

A beautiful promenade nicknamed "the sidewalk of Europe," runs along the Elbe and supplies visitors with spectacular views of the slow moving river and Old Town skyline. One thing you quickly notice while walking the promenade is that many of the old blackened structures are topped with golden ornaments. The City Hall tower, for instance, features a golden statue of Hercules. His outstretched arm, however, caused a problem for the Russians.

"When they (Russians) first arrived they wanted to pull Hercules off the tower because they thought his outstretched arm was the Nazi salute," a guide name Christine informs me. "However, they relented when citizens convinced them the statue dated back to the late 19th century and had nothing to do with Hitler."

The Elbe is usually filled with lots of steam engine paddle boats that take visitors on lunch and dinner cruises down the mighty river that's lined with lots of stately castle homes and terraced vineyards. While one of the smallest wine growing regions is Germany, Saxony is a big producer and the quality of wine here, especially the whites, is second to none.

Oddly enough, the people of Dresden are big fans of Dixieland music and hold one of the world's biggest Dixieland festivals each year.

The Contemporary Art Museum and the Art Academy, topped with a dome nicknamed the "Lemon Squeezer" because of its serrated shape, are just as impressive as the Zwinger.

Off Peter Square, where the State Opera House is located, Christine draws my attention to a massive mural running along the Royal Palace wall and identifies it as the "Procession of the Princes."

"It's made of 24,000 Meissen tiles (the famed ceramic city is an hour's drive outside Dresden) and actually survived the WWII bombings," Christine says of the impressive 101-metre-long mural that traces the city's royal history.

To get a real sense of the horror this city



*A mural known as the Procession of the Princes, top photo, is a remarkable work off St. Peter Square that survived the Allied bombings. Priceless treasures, like the ivory ship, left, are displayed in a wonderful museum in the Royal Palace, above. You really get an ear full, and a lot more, at the Deutsches Hygiene Museum, right, that looks at human life in many different and unusual displays.*



## JUST THE FACTS

- *The Pullman Hotel in the heart of Dresden, close to the rail station, is a great place to base yourself. For info: <http://www.reservations.com/>*
- *Air Canada and Lufthansa offer daily flights to Dresden via Munich or Frankfurt.*
- *German tourist info: <http://www.germany.travel/en>*

faced near the end of WWII, the place to visit is the new Military History Museum of the Bundeswehr, which opened in 2011 and was designed by the legendary American architect Daniel Libeskind.

The Bundeswehr originally opened in 1877 as a barracks for the Saxon army of the day and Libeskind injected a massive arrowhead made of glass, steel and concrete in one end of the historic structure when it was turned into this marvellous museum.

From the very top of Libeskind's unique design, where there are no right angles and no true horizontals or verticals, visitors look down through a series of beams and get a mesmerizing view of the destruction of war. It's a moving visual journey.

Because it's such a compact city, Dresden's historic area is easy to walk and its excellent tram system allows visitors to quickly get to suburban museums like the Deutsches Hygiene Museum (it looks at all facets of human life in some very entertaining and revealing exhibitions) and the Kraftwerk Mitte Dresden, a former coal fired power plant that now houses artists and other creative types and is home to Dresden's hottest new disco.

Many tourists elect to go on guided bike tours along the Elbe and through the historic area. The flat city is easy to navigate and motorists here actually respect cyclists.

The rebuilding of Dresden continues even today; old drab communist-era buildings are being torn down and replaced with traditional German-style architecture, thus making it look exactly as it did before the war.

From the ramparts of the old Royal Palace, I look out on Dresden and admire the painstaking work it took to return all the historic buildings to their original state. A mammoth task, but one the resilient residents of Dresden are so proud, and rightfully so. •



# Georgia

## *Is on their mind*

STORY & PHOTOS BY GILLY PICKUP

*Former Soviet republic has its own language and culture*

**T**BILISI, GEORGIA — I quickly discovered that the Georgians overfeed you with pleasure. It was only my second day in the country and I'd already experienced three *supras*, or feasts. Georgians are extremely hospitable and, in their culture, it would be extremely rude not to offer guests a table overflowing with food. So, as a foreigner, I was treated to these lengthy restaurant *supras* by my kindly hosts, each accompanied by traditional dancing and singing.

When guests sit down at a *supra*, the table is already groaning under the weight of countless dishes of food — canoe-shaped breads dripping with melted cheese and butter, fat steaming beef dumplings which you eat with your fingers, colourful salads mixed with walnuts and herbs and plenty of delicious Georgian wine to wash it all down. Then, before the original dishes of food have little more than a dent in them, more food arrives — in the shape of earthy soups, heady stews, kebabs, chicken cooked in milk and garlic, heavily spiced



Visitors to a Georgian home are welcomed with a banquet called a *supra*, which consists of many regional dishes. Song and dance and lots of wine accompany such meals.







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ratatouille, hot cornbread ... and so it goes on and on.

But first things first and food aside, I should explain for those who are not quite sure, that Georgia is a country located in the Caucasus mountain range, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. It is remarkably hospitable to visitors and listed as the world's eighth safest country on the Crime Index Rate.

I had arrived in Tbilisi, the country's 1,000-year-old capital with no idea of what to expect in this still emerging destination. The name Tbilisi comes from the Georgian word for warm referring to natural hot springs which feed the city's sulphur baths. "Taking the waters" has been part of everyday life for the locals for centuries — the water is said to cure all manner of ills — and



*The Iron Age town of Uplistsikhe, above, brings back memories of Silk Road merchants. The old capital city of Tbilisi, left, is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and offers many remarkable landmarks.*

you'll know you're heading in the right direction when your nostrils catch the eggy smell of sulphur and you see the dome-shaped bathhouse roofs.

The city itself is a jumbled mix of architectural styles. Crumbling mansions sit next to Byzantine churches, synagogues and mosques, art nouveau design rubs shoulders with neo-classical buildings, all interspersed with grey Soviet-era apartment blocks. Most eye catching of all are the balconied dwellings perching precariously on cliff tops above the Mtkvari River as they have done for centuries. Not that it's all blast from the past stuff. There are plenty of trendy clubs, modern art galleries and a burgeoning fashion scene in town, too, and rather bizarrely, recently built police stations and government

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*Notorious Soviet leader Josef Stalin was born in the small Georgian town of Gori. The bullet-proof train carriage he rode to the 1945 Yalta Conference in now sits at the back of his boyhood home.*

buildings are constructed from steel and glass, rendering them see through, symbolic of Georgia's aspirations for democratic transparency.

Lording it over the mish mash of styles is 4th-century fortress Narikala, best reached by cable car unless you feel like a seriously tough climb. Alongside is the gigantic aluminium statue of Kartlis Deda or "Mother Georgia." She has been there since 1958, the year Tbilisi celebrated its 1,500th anniversary, holding a cup of wine in one hand while brandishing a sword with the other. How better to symbolize the country — Georgia puts enemies to the sword and welcomes friends with wine.

Mtskheta, Georgia's old capital, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is about an hour's drive from Tbilisi. The dusty main street of this small, dishevelled town is lined with stalls selling fruit, souvenirs, wine and local handicrafts. Stall holders are keen to offer food and drink samples — as I said, these are really hospitable folks. Mtskheta's pride and joy is the 11th century Sveti-Tskhoveli Cathedral, heavily adorned with stone carvings outside and in. It is revered by worshippers as legend says that Christ's Crucifixion robe is buried under the central nave.

The small town of Gori in the Georgian countryside is famous — or infamous — for being Stalin's birthplace. He was born Josef Dzhugashvili but took the surname Stalin later in life — it translates to "steel" in Russian. The simple dwelling of his birth in is now housed inside a glass-roofed temple-like structure. In the grounds, his 83-tonne bullet-proof train carriage, in which he travelled to the Yalta Conference in 1945, is popular with camera clicking tourists.

You can follow in the footsteps of Silk Road travellers to the cave town Uplistsikhe. Although it gives the impression of being in the back of beyond it is only 10 kms from Gori. This rock-hewn settlement dating back to the early Iron Age was once home to 20,000 people and features a 10th-century Christian stone basilica.

On the way, you'll pass structures which were once pagan places of sacrifice, dwellings, a pharmacy and bakery, all evidence of a fascinating past. •

**WHERE TO STAY:** The stylish *Rooms Hotel Tbilisi* (<http://www.roomshotels.com/Tbilisi>) and the *Mercure Tbilisi Old Town Hotel* (<http://www.accorhotels.com>). Both are centrally located, serve fabulous food, have friendly English speaking staff, comfortable, sparklingly clean rooms and free WiFi.

**HOW TO GET THERE:** Canadians can fly to London with either Air Canada or British Airways and then fly to Tbilisi with Air Astana.



*Georgians are very proud to tell visitors that their country is the "birthplace of wine."*

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CUBA

# Inside Cuba



Whether it's a tobacco worker making the world's finest cigars, a playful school girl, or hard-working farmers Omar Martinez, centre, or Eulogio Montesino, Cubans throw out the welcome mat and Americans now arriving in the island nation are discovering lost of surprises.

STORY BY WILLIAM ECENBARGER / PHOTOS BY SUSAN ECENBARGER

*American tourists surprised to find island nation is much more than vintage cars and beaches*





*Two young school girls take a break from class. Compulsory school attendance gives Cuba a very high literacy rate — one of the best in the world.*

**P**LAYA LARGA, CUBA — Birds are giving the morning rave notices. Crows, kestrels, spoonbills, herons, woodpeckers, cuckoos and the Cuban national bird, the tocororo. Birds hang-gliding, flapping, hopping, hovering, fidgeting, chirping, cheeping. Frank Medina raises his binoculars, stares fixedly and announces, “That’s a yellow warbler. Yellow with black stripes on its face.” He mimics the bird’s call.

Medina has worked here at Zapata National Park for 37 years, and became park director seven years ago. “More than 900 species of flora, 170 species of birds and 31 reptile species and many mammal species call these wetlands home.” Without pausing, he adds, “In fact, all of Cuba abounds with flora and fauna. There are more than 6,000 species of flowering plants and some 350 bird species.”

Later, as we lunched on a terrace at the Hotel Enrique, Medina emitted a little wheeze of frustration and said, “People are shocked to learn that there’s more to Cuba than vintage American cars, Havana

and beach resorts. But we’re the biggest island in the Caribbean and we have much to offer.”

Indeed, as our group of 12 Americans discovered, Cuba has historic cities, nine UNESCO World Heritage sites, seven national parks, rugged mountains, rolling plains, coffee plantations, galleries, museums and music everywhere.

Just before our 44-minute flight from Miami, we were briefed by a representative of International Expeditions, the outfitter for our trip. “To prepare you for Cuba, I’m going to have to use the F-word.” He paused ... “Flexible. That’s the key for this trip. Go with the flow. Things change for no reason. No explanation. See Cuba the way it is. Don’t try to understand it because there’s no logic. It’s complicated.”

We first noticed this at the airport. Cuban-Americans were paying to check as

many as 10 bags, each loaded with goods — televisions, computers, jeans, microwave ovens, vacuum cleaners and other items unavailable or scarce in Cuba — to take to friends and families. When they boarded, they jammed all overhead space with big



*Musicians are everywhere in Cuba — “Music is compulsory.”*





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bags and boxes. Cuba was complicated. There were brief power outages at some hotels. Sometimes the showers were only lukewarm. Internet access was spotty. We could use only bottled water, even to brush our teeth. Our credit cards were not accepted.

But travel should be a voyage of discovery rather than a ritual of reassurance. So if you're willing to accept these inconveniences, you will find a country with no commercial billboards, safe streets, lightly trafficked highways, few souvenir shops, cobbled squares, sunlit Spanish courtyards and, most of all people – farmers, teachers, naturalists, artists, dancers, musicians – who are eager to meet you.

We rode around Cuba for 10 days in a bus manufactured in China. Our guide was Edelso Alvarez, who loves baseball, American music and most of all, Cuba. He was witty, amiable and very well informed. He was frank about Cuba's problems – housing shortages, food shortages and low incomes that force physicians to moonlight as cab drivers. But Alvarez was clearly proud of his country and its history.

One of our first stops was the city of Cienfuegos, whose well-preserved neo-classical buildings earned it designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Here we were given a concert by the 22-member Cienfuegos Choir, which originally was a church choir, but after the revolution in 1959 became a professional choir focused on preserving Cuban musical traditions.

For nearly an hour, they sang through a repertoire that ranged from traditional Cuban music to the Beatles. As they performed, their bodies swayed, arms waved, hands clapped and faces made theatrical gestures. But most of all they were a mellow river of a capella voices. It was one of the trip's highlights.

High in the Sierra del Escambray, Cuba's second largest mountain range, we met Omar Martinez, a fifth generation coffee farmer, who winked conspiratorially and said through a translator, "I sell 90 per cent of my coffee to the government and keep the other 25 per cent for myself to sell."

Scabbing his machete and wiping his brow, Martinez said he likes farming because it gives him a sense of personal freedom, but he worries about climate change causing a shorter growing season and especially about the future of his farm. None of his sons or grandsons is interested in continuing the family's agricultural traditions.

At Soroa, in the western-most province of Pinar del Rio, we visited a botanical garden that had more than 700 species of orchids blooming along twisting pathways that climbed up a steep mountain blanketed with a syrupy humidity. There was a profusion of other plants, branching and budding everywhere, and you could almost hear things growing. Our guide, Aliett Diaz, was trilling her R's like thunder, pointing out, "Bromeliads, shrrrrimptails, magnolias, anthurrrrium, begonia, carrrrrib."

Like Omar Martinez, Eulogio Montesino is worried about climate change. Only instead of coffee, he is growing and making Cuba's most famous product, cigars that are indisputably the world's finest. Standing outside the drying shed of his farm near the pictur-

esque town of Vinales, he carefully explained that change of any kind can upset the delicate business of cigar making.

"It takes five different leaves to make one cigar." He lifts a calloused hand and begins counting across his fingers. "One for aroma, one for combustion, one for strength, one for filler and one for the wrapper. The entire process is manual and the product is completely natural. Every tobacco leaf will be handled about 150 times. From the planting of the tobacco to the lighting of the cigar is three years."

The sun made a coppery mask of his face. In the distance I can see timbered, green mogotes – 305-metre-high, cone-shaped mountains of limestone – soar into a blue sky and snowy heaps of cloud. The view spread out like an oriental carpet.

The long bus rides enabled us to glimpse Cuban life. In every town, there were chairs and tables along the roadside attended by women eying the passersby passing by and watching each other watch each other. Men engaged in percussive games of dominoes and sipped mojitos, the rum-based national drink. Their days were woven together with life's simple pleasures.

Often Cuba seemed to be going in one era and out the other. We saw horses grazing among solar panels, and once a farmer talked on a cell phone while ploughing his field with an ox.

Buildings looked in need of some repair, suffering from peeling paint, falling plaster and mildew.

Traffic was so light that one morning along a two-lane highway one of the lanes was filled for long stretches with rice that had been set out to dry that morning. It would be picked up and bagged by farmers that afternoon. Vehicles simply used the other lane.

We saw all manner of vehicles. Sixty-year-old Fords, Chevrolets and Buicks painted pink, lime green and purple. Wheezing, smoke-belching, valve-rattling, oil-dribbling trucks loaded beyond any regulation with tottering burdens, and Russian Army trucks refitted with seats to serve as buses and crammed to the bursting. Along the sides of the road were donkey carts, hitchhikers, bicycles, motor bikes and skateboarders.

The only road signs were government political propaganda decrying the American embargo, proclaiming Venezuela as "our best friend" and praising the leader-

ship of the late Fidel Castro. But it is Che Guevara, the Argentine who played a key role in Cuban independence, who dominated the landscape. His iconic image is everywhere – on walls, buses, t-shirts and souvenirs.

But perhaps the most ubiquitous feature of Cuba is music. The African drum and the Spanish guitar have united into a vibrant, soulful music that is inescapable. Wherever we went – restaurants, gardens, farms – a band of three or four or five musicians would materialize faster than you could say "Guantanmara."

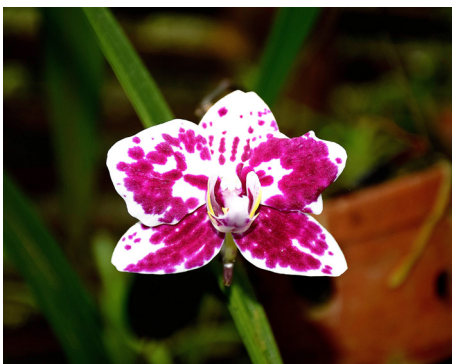
All of them came equipped with tip boxes and CDs for sale. "Music is compulsory in Cuba," they tell us. •



*Rice is left to dry on a rural road — drivers adapt.*



*Two old men enjoying a cigar in Cienfuegos on a sunny day.*



*There are more than 700 species of orchids blooming in Cuba.*



AMERICA

# *Running*

Around Chicago

*A marathoner's street view of the Windy City*

BIGSTOCK PHOTO



**C**HICAGO — My love for this Windy City started more than a decade ago. The Magnificent Mile wooed me with its shiny, multi-level flagship boutiques and I was giddy with finds at Nordstrom Rack. Sitting in Avec at a communal table — this shared-plates resto was way ahead of the trend for this type of seating — where we chatted with the locals seated beside us, was a fun new way to dine. And as much as we tried to do it all, there are simply too many beautiful sites and things to do in Chicago in just a few days; even just poking around any one of the neighbourhoods is a treat, never mind having biggies like the Art Institute of Chicago and Lincoln Park Zoo to explore. And, of course, throughout the city, you'll find friendly Chicagoans, always happy to help you with directions and to have a quick chat, something that makes this city more like one very fabulous town than the third largest city in the U.S.

With a few more visits, I've only become even more completely enamoured with this city, and it was only a matter of time that I made the Chicago Marathon one of my goal races. Besides providing myself with a great reward for completing another 42.2k race with the fun of spending vacation time in this great city, Chicago would also mean I was crossing off my first of the Abbot World Marathon Majors, aka the renowned "big six" marathons (the remainder being New York, London, Berlin, Tokyo and Boston).

Now having completed two Chicago Marathons, both my fastest marathons of the 11 I've run, I'm a big fan of the race and for making it the perfect reason you finally make a trip to the Midwest to explore Chicago.

### *Get your rest before race day*

For a hotel that's centrally located and that's more low key (I know I need some serenity rather being surrounded by the frenetic buzz of race weekend), reserve a room at the James Hotel and you'll be right off of Magnificent Mile and a few easy subway stops away from the race start at Millennium Park. Race-day morning, we found breakfast fuel set up in the lobby of this River North boutique gem and were as well rested as race jitters would allow us thanks to the luxurious beds.

**Tip:** During your post-race stay, pop into the lobby for the hotel's daily wine hour in the evenings.

### *Fuel well before and after the race*

Chicago is a city made for foodies. It boasts 24 Michelin-starred restaurants this year (formerly 25, however chef Curtis Duffy's restaurant Grace has since closed) and many more non-Michelin starred restaurants that serve up delicious grub. Brunch at Dove's

Luncheonette has a cozy retro feel with the menu featuring Mexican with a Southern twist (such as the brisket, poblanos and eggs in their burnt ends hash dish). Publican is just about every locals favourite and I ate the best bacon I've ever had in my life there, and if you're not there on the weekend, a sandwich lunch at Publican Quality Meats across the street is just about as satisfying. But, as a marathoner, you know that anything too rich or adventurous pre-race is a no-no. For your carbs before the big day, a plate of pasta at a classic red-sauce joint such as Club Lago will be made of familiar ingredients that'll give you the energy you need.

### *Keep those legs moving*

In the days that follow the race, you'll want to keep moving to get the blood flowing to your muscles, helping to ease recovery. Take this as an opportunity to explore the many neighbourhoods that make up Chicago. The EL train is easy to navigate and can get

you to the lovely shops in Bucktown and Logan Square; it's fun even just to just ride it around the Loop to take in the sights of the downtown skyscrapers.

Street art fan? If you're blessed with mild weather, you could spend all of your free time after the race exploring the city's fantastic public art, including a 260-foot-long mural by Jeff Zimmerman. If

the weather is not cooperating, use these days to duck inside the Art Institute of Chicago (where you'll find works by Pollock, Picasso, Renoir and Lichtenstein) and the Shedd Aquarium for the penguins, jellyfish and more.

### *Tick off these Chicago sightseeing essentials*

Although you'll need want to keep walking to a minimum before the race, plan your time well so that you make sure to tick off a few essentials to see in Chicago:

- Visit Cloud Gate in Millennium Park, the shiny bean by artist Sir Anish Kapoor. Take a photo here with your medal. Be there at sunrise, though, if you're hoping to get a photo without hundreds of tourists in your shot.
- See Chicago from above. You've got two options when it comes to taking in the city from the sky: Skydeck Chicago and 360 Chicago. Enjoy the views of the Lake Michigan, skyscrapers and greens spaces that make this metropolis such a beauty (or get your adrenaline rush by doing Tilt or the Ledge more than a thousand feet high).
- Get aboard the Chicago Architecture Foundation River Cruise. Learn about the beautiful architecture you've been awed by in the city such as the Wrigley Building and Marina City as you cruise the Chicago River. •





ASIA

# Seductive Sumatra

Photo courtesy of Indonesia Tourism

STORY & PHOTOS BY LINDA BARNARD

*It's love at first sight of this island paradise*



Lake Toba, top photo, was born 70,000 years ago thanks to a volcanic eruption and the paradise and culture that has grown up around this remarkable inland lake is something that visitors to northern Sumatra don't soon forget.





*Traditional Sumatra housing, with their wind-swept-style peaks, make this area of the world unique and a very special place to visit.*

**TUKTUK, SAMOSIR ISLAND, SUMATRA** — Here's a travel riddle: What's the world's largest island in a lake — that's also on an island in the ocean? "It's geography nerd stuff," our guide joked as the ferry chugged across Lake Toba in North Sumatra to our destination and trivia answer, Singapore-sized Samosir Island.

We're nerds in paradise, passing steep green slopes cut by deep inlets around the freshwater lake. With its unique local culture, this area is one of the showplaces of exotic Sumatra.

Like Samosir, Lake Toba was born from a catastrophic super-volcano some 70,000 years ago. It's about a four-hour drive from the chaotic, traffic-clogged regional capital city, Medan, and we were glad to leave its oppressive heat behind.

Located in Western Indonesia, Sumatra is pretty much bisected by the Equator but at an elevation of about 900 metres, Samosir Island's Mediterranean climate feels ideal. No wonder it's a popular getaway for Sumatrans — their version of Muskoka.

The ferry motored past villages, fish farms and small lakeside hotels and cottages with distinct, swooping saddle-shaped roofs unique to the Toba Batak people.

Batak culture is visible everywhere. Members of this sizable and ancient ethno-cultural group continue to follow the old ways, including a belief in animism, where plants and animals are sacred.

North Sumatra is home to about five million Batak, whose clan ties are unbreakable. A shared surname makes unrelated men brothers, explained our guide; you can't marry anyone with the same family name, no matter how distant a relation. When a teenager meets a girl he's interested in, his first instinct is a whispered prayer: "Please don't let her have my last name."

We made our base in the village of Tuktuk, a little town on the island's single ring road bracketed by brilliant green rice paddies and dramatic caldera views. There's a good selection of small ho-



*North Sumatra is home to almost five million Batak people, whose clan ties are unbreakable and who share the same surname — making unrelated men brothers.*

tels, restaurants, craft shops and a used bookstore with ambitious prices for musty paperbacks.

Our roomy cabin had a signature Batak roof and the open-air dining room served coffee grown on nearby mountainsides, the coffee cherries dried on a tarpaulin in the sun, then roasted on-site.

Two words in the local dialect will see you through: "*Horas*," which means everything from "hello" and "goodbye" to "bless you" after a sneeze, and "*liso!*" That means "cheers!" as you down glasses of milky funky-tasting tuak, the local sour palm wine. I preferred arak, the regional moonshine made from distilled tuak, coconut or rice and flavoured with fruit.

"*Liso!*" works for both, or a frosty Batak beer, and also popped



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up repeatedly in a drinking song performed by the owners of Elios Restaurant while our supper of whole lake fish cooked on a charcoal grill at the entrance.

About 15 km from Tuktuk, in the village of Simanindo, there's a small museum and a group of royal tombs. Locals perform traditional dances in front of three historic houses, including one that once belonged to a Batak king.

A water buffalo has a starring role — she's not sacrificed as her predecessor would have been — and we were invited to join in for the finale dance.

We heard stories about how ancient Batak kings had superpowers and about animal sacrifice, elaborate burials and even cannibalism.

Some traditions survive in the modern world. We visited a Karo Batak village where families live in large wooden houses built on stilts with low doorways to humble those entering the central room.

Buildings are marked with simple spiritual symbols of geometric shapes, lizards and snakes in black, white and red. Everything has meaning and a spirit.

Family tombs, from replica houses to elaborate pagodas and statues, were visible in fields and strung across the green hillsides.

Samosir is also accessible from the mainland by a tiny bridge and the drive around the lake slowly climbs to provide great views. We took the road off Samosir to our next stop, the city of Berastagi, driving past massive rubber tree plantations. Each

tree's bark is scored with diagonal thin strips, to allow the sap to drip into a small cup.

Indonesia was largely created by seismic activity. Volcanoes made the land and mountains continue to erupt. In Berastagi, we signed up to do some after-dark volcano chasing, hoping to spot flowing lava on famed Mount Sibayak.

Jimmy Gideon Ginting, our guide and part-time exotic insect hunter, showed us a photo of the mushroom-cloud eruption of Mt. Sinabung "in my backyard" two weeks prior.

We bumped up a winding mountain road and climbed out at the once-prosperous and now-deserted town of Sukanalu, one of many "ghost villages" left to the wild grasses and jungle creep when volcanoes threatened residents. We were skunked on this trip and didn't see any lava or volcanic activity but weren't too disappointed. How many times do you get to say you went volcano hunting in Sumatra?

Does Ginting worry about living so close to Sinabung?

"I know I'm living in the ring of fire," he said. "So I have to dance to the rhythm." •

## JUST THE FACTS

**Getting there:** We flew Cathay Pacific to take advantage of a 36-hour Hong Kong stopover to break up the long journey. From there, we flew to Kuala Lumpur on Cathay Pacific and to Medan on Malaysian Airlines

**Where to stay:** We stayed at Tabo Cottages on Lake Toba in the village of Tuktuk. It has a German bakery and coffee roaster on-site. Room rates start at about \$90 per night, including breakfast.

**Good to know:** Toilet paper can be scarce at some stops, so carry some tissues. Many facilities are squat toilets.



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ENGLAND

# Going 'Postal' *Under London*

*Museum's secret Royal Mail train  
takes visitors on journey back in time*

STORY BY NANCY WIGSTON / PHOTOS FROM VARIOUS SOURCES





Visitors to London's Postal Museum go underground and travel through the ages of the Royal Mail to learn all about its fascinating history and the many historic events that have occurred during its time in operation.

## 'Mail Rail was like having your own giant train set to run'

**L**ONDON — Everybody loves a secret. No surprise, then, that the unveiling last fall of a “secret railway” beneath London streets has proven a first-class hit with visitors to London's new Postal Museum. From 1927-2003, four million letters and packages a day flew along this hidden railway.

Be warned: the hugely popular Mail Rail — “the beating heart of the British Postal System” — is often booked months in advance. But some tickets are released on a same-day basis — and we got lucky. Happily paying an extra £5 (\$9.50 Cdn), we head across the street and down to the subterranean train depot at Phoenix Place in Clerkenwell.

“Mail Rail was like having your own giant train set to run,” says the comforting recorded voice of 27-year Rail Mail veteran, Ray Middlesworth, as we scrunch into our seats aboard refurbished trains. Soon we're chugging along dark tunnels 21 metres beneath London thoroughfares — an engineering feat that reduced two-hour delivery times to 30 minutes.

Our toy-like train stops at riveting montages showing Royal Mail history — be it romantic, fanciful or practical. At each stop we see a map of London streets and virtually meet folks that relied on the mail. In the 1930s, a girl writes to her soldier sweetheart; a few decades later, a child in the early 1950s posts a letter to her adored “Princess Elizabeth;” in the Swinging Sixties, we spot Beatle George Harrison.

In fact, our 20 minute journey offers just a taste of the feast in the museum proper, where five centuries of Royal Mail history unfold. Wandering through this interactive tribute to Britain's “first social network,” we try everything from learning Morse Code, to sorting letters aboard a “moving” mail train car; to capturing our own “royal” images on stamps. My stamp (ironically) arrives via email the next day, although I rather regret selecting the green tint, but my jewelled crown is undeniably splendid.

Colour, heroes and villains — all are present and on view. It makes sense that modern Royal Mail transport has theatrical roots. Henry VIII had first established the “post,” but it wasn't until 1782 that theatre owner John Palmer imagined new possibilities for stagecoaches ferrying his actors between Bath and Bristol.

Palmer's idea was an immediate hit, with one





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catch — only parliamentarians were guaranteed free delivery.

Regular folk paid to receive mail, so many refused, preferring to decode the messages hidden on envelopes before handing back their letters. All that changed in 1840 with the Penny Post stamp, bearing a very young Queen Victoria's likeness. The "Penny Black" and guaranteed delivery resulted in skyrocketing literacy rates, forging a bond with the public that endures to this day. Sixty-eight million Penny Blacks were printed before being replaced by reds and blues in 1841 — today, the Museum's rare sheet of Penny Blacks is priceless.

Love letters, Christmas cards and Valentines entered the rhythms of British life, as did the red pillar boxes that remain national icons — they stand for something reliable in British life. The first pillar boxes, designed by postal employee and prolific Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope, were in fact green, but red soon became the Royal Mail's bright symbol. For years, we're told, letter carriers also wore red-and-blue topcoats under black top hats, their bright uniforms making it easier to spot them, in one cynical official's words, "idling in the pub."

As mail delivery exploded, innovations quickly followed.

How best to carry the post? After stage coaches — one was famously attacked by a lioness escaped from a travelling menagerie — there came five-wheeled Victorian delivery bicycles, mail trains, buses, and boats.

A stylish 1941 green postal motorbike gleams on display and an 1980s Dodge Spacevan post bus is another attention-grabber.

Perhaps the most striking storyline follows the emergence of postmen (and from 1870 onward, women) as heroic figures. During World War I, letters and packages from home nourished both spirits and appetites of those serving at the front, and letter carriers were often honoured soldiers.

In World War II, Britain again kept the mails moving. When the need for help was advertised, thousands of women signed up as postal volunteers and workers. As English cities suffered under bombs, postal workers kept calm and carried on.

One thrilling story centres on coastal Devon's post, run almost without interruption despite near-constant bombardment. When Miss W.N. Scanlan of Dover's post office was honoured for her bravery, she insisted on sharing it with her female colleagues, announcing, "Girls, we've got the British Empire Medal!"

There were rogues too, or, as Londoners still like to say, villains.

The most notorious, perhaps, were Ronnie Biggs and his gang, who boarded a Roy-



*A museum worker stands beside the toy-like train that takes visitors to the Postal Museum through a labyrinth of tunnels under London's busy streets where the mail was carried for decades without most people knowing. The museum is quickly becoming one of the most popular in the British capital.*

## JUST THE FACTS

- **The Postal Museum is located at Calthorpe House, 15-20 Phoenix Place, London, WC1X 0DA**

- **For hours and ticket prices:**  
<http://www.postalmuseum.org>.

- **Ground floor treats include an old-fashioned British café and tea room, plus a gift shop bursting with mail-related items. The bestsellers, we learn, are the ionic red salt-and-pepper shakers, one shaped like a pillar box, the other like a telephone booth — both were sold out the day we visited.**

- **Air Canada, British Airways and WestJet offer daily flights to London from most major Canadian cities.**

al Mail train in 1963, seizing "HVP" (High Value Packages) containing cash worth £40 million (\$70 million Cdn) in today's money. Escaping from prison in 1965, Biggs flaunted his glamorous Brazilian lifestyle

for years before illness forced him back home. "The Great Train Robbery" entered the public imagination, for good or for ill.

Design and stamp buffs will be intrigued by Tony Benn's 1964 attempt — vetoed by Her Majesty — to remove the royal profile in favour of a portrait of public heroes like Winston Churchill. The compromise was larger stamps showing famous faces and topical subjects; the Queen's profile remains in the right top corner. This is, after all, the Royal Mail.

A lot of postal history like *Night Mail*, the brilliant 1930s documentary touting the mail's importance (with words by poet W.H. Auden and music by Benjamin Britten), or the beloved children's TV show, *Postman Pat*, were news to us. This intriguing addition to London's museum scene guarantees thrills for kids and adults alike — from riding the Mail Rail, to playing in a miniature post office to drinking in the history of this most solid and enduring of British institutions. •



BASQUE  
SPAIN

# Tales

From a  
Basque  
crypt

STORY & PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON





*Inside Vitoria's historic Santa Maria Cathedral, visitors are awed by its gorgeous stained glass windows and stopped in their tracks when they come upon the ancient skeletons, opposite page, that were unearthed in modern times.*

## Vitoria's historic cathedral is a real thriller

**VITORIA-GASTEIZ, BASQUE, SPAIN** — I'm told to don a hard hat before entering the 11th-century Santa María Cathedral, and cautioned not to hit my head on the scaffolding and supports helping to prevent the crumbling structure from falling on my head.

A young guide tells me to stay close behind as we reach the lower portion of the massive Gothic landmark, where excavation work has been ongoing since large cracks began appearing in its walls and foundation in 1993.

"Renovations started as soon as the cracks appeared but then it switched to an excavation site when they dug up these," says the guide while drawing my attention to some skeletons lying in stone coffins.

"Don't worry, they aren't real," she smiles. "The real ones are now in the national museum — these are replicas. We think this was a Medieval crypt and so far they've uncovered more than 1,000 graves."

The skeletons on display each have a coin in their mouth. "Historians believe the coins were to pay for the deceased's passage into heaven."

Santa María is the "rock star" of this historic city — Vitorio is the capital of Spain's Autonomous Basque region — thanks to the notoriety it received after being featured in British author Ken Follett's best selling novel, *World Without End*, the sequel to his thriller *The Pillars of the Earth*, the most read book in Spain in the last

two decades. Follett said Santa María inspired him to write *World Without End*, and so thankful were the people of Vitoria, they erected a statue of the famous author outside the cathedral's entrance.

"Mr. Follett was here for the statue's unveiling and the picture of him standing beside it was shown around the world," says the gleeful guide.

Which explains why it's so important for the people of Vitoria to preserve Santa María.

"Oh, we cannot lose our beloved cathedral — that would be a sin," says the guide.

The cathedral was originally designed as a fortress church and finally completed in the 14th century. Between 1496 and 1861 — the year it was declared a cathedral — Santa María served as a collegiate church. Its Latin-cross plan — wide transept crossing and circular apse containing several chapels — features a richly decorated portal that rivals anything I've seen in Rome. From its 35-metre-high tower I get a bird's eye view of the Old City, its original three streets and the mountains that surround Vitoria.

Also found during the excavation were fossils dating back 70 million years.

"Our city was actually built over the Medieval village of Gasteiz, hence the hyphenated name," the guide informs me.

While Santa María may be the drawing card to this former walled city, Vitoria has much more to offer tourists.

Its lovely main square, Plaza de la Virgen Blanca, features a large, impressive statue of a British general, the famed Duke Wel-



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lington — he of Waterloo fame — who saved Vitoria from Napoleon's French army in a famous battle fought just outside the city in 1813. The term "guerrilla warfare" actually came out of the Battle of Vitoria — Basque fighters would stage hit-and-run attacks against the confused French troops, a tactic never before employed before in battle.

Plaza de la Virgen Blanca is ringed with lovely cafés and restaurants and is the main meeting point in Vitoria. Each year, the square fills up with over 60,000 people for the festival of the "White Virgin." During the festivities, a mythical character known as Celedón — a rag doll who carries an umbrella — slides across the square from the Church of San Miguel to a balcony on the opposite side. The revellers below celebrate Celedón's feat with champagne and song.

"It's really great fun and something everyone in Vitoria looks forward to each year," says my guide.

While everyone in Vitoria treasures the city's historic past, they are also proud of their "green" future, thanks to an ambitious environmental program that saw six parks merge into one of Europe's most beautiful wetland habitats.

Known as Salburua Park, the environmental project was started in 1994 and when completed, earned Vitoria the title of European Green Zone for 2012 — an award sponsored by the European Union.

The 32-sq-km green zone, located on the eastern outskirts of Vitoria, is a bird watcher's paradise and from the park's Ataria platform I get to see rare birds who thrive in this thick wetland environment. Ataria also offers lectures and interactive displays that are truly appreciated by its younger visitors.

The park is also part of the migration route for massive vultures and Egyptian eagles and home to the European bison.

The park gets 12,000 visitors a year and, according to my guide, is "the jewel of our city."

I honestly had never heard of Vitoria before arriving here, but after one glorious visit, I'll never forget it. •

• *The Best way to get to Basque region from Canada is via London or Paris. Air Canada, British Airways and Air France have daily flights to Europe.*

• *For more information on the beautiful Basque country, go to [www.basquecountrytourism.eus](http://www.basquecountrytourism.eus)*



*Vitoria is one of the most beautiful cities in the Basque region of Spain and its main square, above, features some stunning architecture, handsome monuments and is ringed with quaint cafes. Running off the main square is historic Santa Maria Cathedral, whose spire can be seen down narrow streets. Vitoria is one of Europe's greenest cities and its fabulous Salburua Park, below, offers some great wetland areas where birds like to migrate.*





GREECE

# Sailing

## Off to Greece

*There's always a new thrill on the horizon*

STORY BY MARK STEVENS / PHOTOS BY SHARON MATTHEW

**P**IRAEUS, GREECE — Roughly half an hour into our sail from Athens' chief seaport, a crew member on our chartered sailboat — a 44-foot catamaran called "Wind-sprite" — points at the water off our stern.

A pod of dolphins, sleek and graceful, breaks the surface with great white splashes.

We turn the boat and drift, our sails flogging in the winds they called the Meltemis (every wind here has its own special name), watching this nautical spectacle in awe as the dolphins cavort every which way. When they finally disappear, my wife and I, and our yacht club friends Ed and Kim North, all smile at each other.

Then we fill the sails again and steer toward the rugged slopes of the Peloponnesian Peninsula. Corinth lazes just beyond the horizon off the starboard bow; the port of Epidaurus reclines just past a towering island called Moni (our signal to turn toward the island of Aegina, tonight's berth), beside the ruins of an amphitheater where Greek dramas played out 3,000 years ago.



*Sailing through the Greek islands introduces sailors to some amazing little villages and coastlines that are usually drenched in sunlight.*





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I wrestle the wheel to port, making for Perdika on Aegina. There we'll lash to a seawall before dining al fresco at a seaside taberna at ancient wood tables set on a cobblestone pathway beside an Orthodox church. There we enjoy saganaki and moussaka, fresh octopus and baklava. And lots of ouzo.

Next morning, sipping coffee in the cockpit, I gaze shoreward, and synchronize with the rhythm of this timeless place.

The sky-reaching slopes of the nearby island of Moni blush in the rising sun. A traditional wooden fishing boat chugs out of the harbour. A man crosses himself when he passes the church on the shore. Two girls giggle on their way to school, an old man sipping coffee on a taberna terrace smiling at them.

I leave the boat and stroll through serpentine alleys climbing the slopes overlooking the harbour, every twist and turn revealing a new vista of waters whose colours match the blue trim of whitewashed homes that could hold their own in Santorini.

I enter a church perched on a headland and reflect on the adventure thus far and I envision the next few days of our exploration of the Saronic Gulf in the Aegean Sea.

We've set sail on our own voyage of discovery, plying the waters of dreams, along with six other boats.

One boat's manifest includes our lead skipper, a boat technician, and a social director who will host a couple of group dinners, conduct a week-long friendly competition and even a party like the one we'll share tomorrow night on the seawall guarding the island of Paros.

Because I am an experienced sailor and skipper and my crew are all seaworthy, we have our own boat. But we don't speak Greek and we don't know these waters or local must-dos so we've signed up for a flotilla offered by Sunsail, the world's foremost yacht charter company.

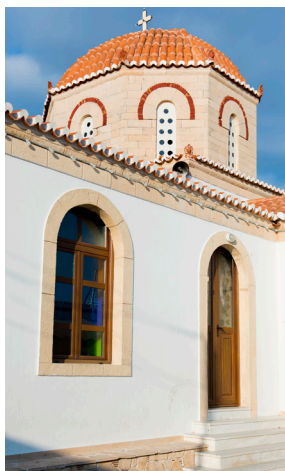
"A flotilla is the perfect compromise if you know how to sail but want some guidance – and some company," says lead skipper Chris Donahue. "You skipper your own boat, but we recommend overnight stops, stops along the way, organize some group meals."

Late in the week the various boats split up for a couple of nights to pursue individual float plans before we meet up back in Piraeus for a farewell cocktail party.

But first the Aegean awaits.

We continue south, skirting rock formations like gigantic sculptures in the sea, and head west through the Gulf of Hydra, past the picture-postcard island where Leonard Cohen once had a home.

Winds of another name – vorias or boreas, ostra or sirocco – shove "Windsprite" down



*Ancient treasures abound in this part of the world and coastal villages seem to always have a party atmosphere. The fishing village of Poros is especially welcoming.*

## JUST THE FACTS

• For more on Sunsail schedules and options, go to:  
<https://www.sunsail.com/yacht-charter/mediterranean/greece>

• For an excellent introduction to Greece click on  
<http://www.visitgreece.gr>

the gulf toward Ermione.

Safely docked, my wife and I climb the road into a forested park where ancient ruins await at every turn, before we dine high above the water, watching the setting sun gild the seas off Kavas Restaurant.

Next day we beat into waves exploding into glittering shards on our bow. We rock and roll. We tack back and forth up Hydra in 20 knots of bluster, skirting the harbour where donkeys clip-clop on cobblestone alleys.

We turn and motor up the coast past an is-

land fortress where Greeks and Turks once waged war.

We stop at Poros where fishing nets are strewn along the seawall, where a white church steeple towers over rocky slopes above Baroque buildings boasting terracotta tile roofs, arched doorways, wrought iron balconies and shuttered windows.

Then, on our last day, we tarry a while for a swim anchored in the lee of two uninhabited islands before making for Piraeus and the allures of nearby Athens.

Waters are calm when we raise the hook so we turn on the engine and start for home.

I play back the week in my head – slipping into the back of an Orthodox Cathedral in Epidavros and savouring the exotic singing of the priest, inhaling the aroma of incense; dining dockside in sight of ancient ruins; hiking to rocky beaches we call our own – even as we make for the shores of the cradle of civilization, the sun off our stern slipping behind the indigo peaks of the Peloponnese. •



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STORY & PHOTOS BY MARC ATCHISON

# World's His *Oyster*

*Travis Croxton and his cousin Ryan  
rescued Virginia's historic oyster  
industry and opened up a whole  
new tourist attraction for the area*





*Thanks to dedicated and passionate people like Travis Croxton, co-owner of the Rappahannock Oyster Co., opposite page, and William Saunders, who harvests wild oysters in the Chesapeake Bay area, a once threatened industry is thriving again.*

***“We used all our savings and maxed out our credit cards to make it work”***  
 — Travis Croxton, co-owner of Virginia’s Rappahannock Oyster Co.

**T**OPPING, VA. — Travis Croxton sticks out his meaty, calloused hand and welcomes me with an enthusiastic emoji smile. His ruddy, boyish face makes him look much younger than his 40-something years. His attire — untucked pink and grey plaid shirt, faded blue jeans and worn sneakers — is not the usual uniform of a business tycoon. But then again, Travis Croxton is not your usual titan of business.

In a hearty southern drawl, he welcomes me to his famous oyster restaurant, Merroir, which sits on the banks of the Rappahannock River in this rural area of Virginia called the Northern Neck.

“So glad you could drop by,” says Croxton, who, along with his cousin Ryan are legends in these parts for helping revive the oyster industry in and around Chesapeake Bay.

Like Travis, Merroir’s looks are also deceiving. Its exterior resembles a roadside shack, complete with slamming screen door. Inside, patrons huddle around small tables on a narrow porch or a cramped bar enjoying lots of shellfish that’s washed down with oyster beer (a tasty brand called Pearl Necklace that is poured over oyster shells during the brewing process). The overflow crowd sit at picnic tables on an el fresco terrace made of crushed oyster shells.

The kitchen staff, led by an entertaining chap named Peter Woods — he sports a stylish snow-white pointed goatee — works in a shoebox-sized cookhouse that becomes a steam room during Virginia’s sweltering summer months. Appearances aside, *People* magazine dubbed Merroir “the most popular restaurant in Virginia” and Zagat named it one of its Top 30 restaurants in America.

“On a busy day we serve between 600 and 800 people (many are tourists who come from as far away as Canada),” says Croxton, who opened Merroir as a tasting room next to



*A workman at the Rappahannock Oyster Co. in Topping, Va., cleans tiny oysters in a lengthy process that results in the sweetest, most buttery farmed oysters imaginable. Old shells are important to the wild process because the new oysters attach themselves to shells reefs.*





*The morning view of the Rappahannock River from the dock at the charming Tides Inn in Irvington, Va., is quite spectacular. The river is one of the best breeding grounds for oysters.*

where he harvests the buttery oysters that feed his main business, the Rappahannock Oyster Co., of Topping, Va.

Croxtan is just one of the passionate people in this area who are dedicating their lives to an industry that was on the verge of extinction in the 1980s thanks to overfishing and pollution.

Their efforts and results have been nothing short of miraculous:

- The rivers leading into Chesapeake Bay have all been cleaned up;
- The oyster industry is now one of the Northern Neck's biggest employers;
- The catch is so bountiful that Travis is hoping to soon export his oysters to countries around the world like China, Japan and Vietnam;
- And tourism here is booming thanks to the number of annual oyster festivals — the state even features an “oyster trail” that introduces visitors to fairy tale Northern Neck towns like Irvington, Kilmarnock and Urbanna, all of which have lots of dollhouse homes and inns.

Travis and Ryan, co-owners of the Rappahannock Oyster Co., now have restaurants in Richmond, L.A. and Washington, and are hoping to soon expand to Houston.

“When we first started you could not see the bottom of the Rappahannock because it was so murky with pollution,” Travis tells me as we look into the river’s now crystal-clear waters where oysters sit on the sandy bottom maturing in cages.

“It wasn’t easy,” remembers Travis, who, along with Ryan gave up well-paying jobs in the financial sector to take up the challenge of aquaculture.

“We used all our savings and maxed out



*Peter Woods, head chef at Merroir, shows how to properly shuck an oyster. Woods, a native of Denver, moved to Virginia to work with Croxtan at the Rappahannock Oyster Co. because “I really believe in what these guys are doing.” The restaurant also serves up oyster beer — it’s poured over oyster shells during the brewing process before being bottled and the dark brew has a salty finish.*

our credit cards to make it work,” says Travis, whose family’s roots in the oyster business date back to the late 1800s when his great grandfather started the Rappahannock Oyster Co.

“Oysters are filter feeders that protect the (Chesapeake) bay and clean the water (oysters filter 50 gallons of water a day). Because of that, and some strict government rules, the rivers (where the oysters are raised) are no longer polluted. Our (farmed) oysters are grown in open waters right next to wild oysters.”

One of Travis’ proudest accomplishments is creating employment in this economically challenged part of Virginia.

“People are returning here from Richmond and other big cities to work in the oyster industry and that makes me very happy,” says Travis as he introduces me to several of his 390 employees, whose backbreaking efforts result in the perfectly shaped, sweetest-tasting oysters this shucker has ever enjoyed.

“It takes 18 months of constant monitoring to get the oysters to market size,” Travis reveals. “The Rappahannock is a great place to farm oysters because of its sandy bottom and its four seasons. It gives our oysters a unique taste.”

The cousins also farm oysters in the York River and the black narrows of Chincoteague Bay and raise three types, the mildly salty Rochambeau, the heavily salted and aptly named Olde Salts and, my favourite, the Rappahannock, a deep cupped variety that is sweet and buttery with a crisp, clean finish. Yum!

Travis gets orders from around the world and tells me he ships his oysters in special



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ice packs (at a constant temperature of 7.2C) to help preserve their freshness.

“Oysters can last up to two weeks using our method,” says Travis, who adds that on-line orders are up to “70 to 100 per week.”

Travis’ efforts have also created a cottage eco-tourism industry in the Northern Neck. Travellers who come here to enjoy oysters can also learn about its long history by attending the Virginia Oyster Academy run by a delightful woman named Joni Carter at the elegant Tides Inn resort in Irvington.

Carter, a filmmaker (*Journey on the Chesapeake* for PBS), historian and oyster aficionado, offers some real insight into the industry during a short lecture, and tourists who participate learn things like:

- The Indigenous people introduced Virginia’s first settlers to oysters when they arrived in the 16th century (“The protein from oysters helped save the settlers’ lives in the early days,” Carter tells us.);
- Early settlers consumed at least 10 bushels of oysters annually — pickled, smoked, baked or stewed;
- Waterman is the name given to those who harvest wild oysters in small boats called a deadrise;
- Wars broke out in the 1800s over oysters when northerners and pirates invaded Chesapeake Bay after their own oyster beds dried up;
- Oysters contain zinc, which enhances their reputation as an aphrodisiac;
- There are only five species of oysters (Pacific, Kumamoto, Atlantic, European Flat and Olympia);
- You can tell how old an oyster is by counting the rings;
- Oyster shells have been used to build roads and homes — they were crushed to make mortar and plaster — as well as chicken feed, fertilizer and, at one time currency (early settlers were paid off in oysters);
- While it takes 18 months for oysters to reach market size using aquaculture techniques, it takes almost three years in the wild;
- There is a taste difference between wild and farmed oysters — the wild oysters have a stronger, saltier taste while farmed oysters are milder and more buttery and are preferred by restaurants;
- While oysters can last up to two weeks refrigerated, they are best eaten in three days to ensure freshness.

As part of the academy course, we get to meet an actual waterman, William Saunders, who takes tourists out onto the Rappahannock River to show them how wild oysters are harvested.

The crusty Saunders, who has been a waterman since the age of 8, bears the scars of his trade — his face is as tough as leather thanks to the long stretches (“up to 63 days



The mortar used in building lovely Christ Church in Weems, Va., is made of crushed oyster shells.

## 10 Things We Like About Virginia’s Northern Neck

**1** The Tides Inn in Irvington is a perfect place to base yourself in Virginia’s Northern Neck. The chic property offers a homey feel and its oversized rooms offer breathtaking views of the Rappahannock River. It’s perfect for families and offers lots of outdoor activities like sailing and golf. It has a world-class spa, wonderful pool area and its main dining room, the Chesapeake restaurant, serves up oyster and other seafood specialities that are plucked fresh from the surrounding waters. <http://www.tidesinn.com>

**2** There are many fascinating things connected to oysters to Virginia, like Christ Church in Weems, Va. It was built by local legend Robert “King” Carter — the Warren Buffet of the 16th century — whose ancestors included two U.S. presidents, eight Virginia governors and Robert E. Lee. The remarkable church was built with crushed oysters shells serving as its mortar. <http://www.christchurch1735.org>

**3** One of the most popular activities in the Northern Neck each year is the Spring Oyster Crawl that is held in late April. This wine and oyster pairing event is a big draw so plan early. <http://www.chesapeakebaywinetrail.com>

**4** Irvington offers many quaint B&B-style inns and the loveliest is the Hope and Glory on Tavern Rd. The dollhouse inn offers lovely rooms and cottages and started out in 1889 as a schoolhouse. Its quaint bar, Detention, and its Dining Hall restaurant are very cozy. <https://www.hopeandglory.com/>

**5** One of the most charming and interesting towns in the Northern Neck is Kilmarnock, the birthplace of America’s first president, George Washington. The Kilmarnock Farmers Market, held the fourth Saturday of each month, is a Virginia tradition where you get lots of fresh seafood. <http://www.kilmarnockva.com/>

**6** Urbanna is another Northern Neck town filled with history. The quaint fishing village is home to the John Mitchell Map, which was used in Colonial days to determine state boundaries. <http://urbanna.com/>

**7** The Dog and Oyster winery outside Irvington produces some interesting vintages and its rosé is a real winner. <http://dogandoyster.com/>

**8** Colonial Williamsburg, America’s loveliest city, is an hour away from Irvington and well worth the detour.

**9** Canadians looking for more travel information on Virginia should go to <https://www.virginia.org/Canada>

**10** The best way to get to Virginia’s oyster region from Toronto or Montreal is via Washington. Air Canada, Porter and WestJet all offer services to Reagan and Dulles. Irvington is a 2.5 hour drive from the U.S. capital.



Giant corkscrew at the Dog and Oyster winery.





*Farmed oysters start out as tiny larva and mature in cages at the bottom of the Rappahannock River before being grilled in their own liquor by chefs like T.V. Flynn, right, at the charming Tides Inn in Irvington, Va. The only thing better than the oysters are the charming people connected with the industry.*



straight on one occasion”) he’s spent on the water.

After picking us up at the Tides Inn dock in Irvington, Saunders, with his small dog Rusty acting as his first mate, heads out into the widest part of the river and dredges the bottom. His hauls include lots of oysters, blue crabs and other sea life. While searching through his catch for the perfect oysters, he grumbles that “watermen get 16 cents each” for their oysters at market while aquaculture producers get “60 cents to \$1.20” for theirs. (Aquaculture techniques are much more expensive.)

“Aw, you’ll like this one,” says Saunders, who takes out a sharp knife and pries open a large oyster covered in mud before handing it to me. My mouth jolts alive with the taste of the sea as I quickly devour the salty liquor and meat in one gulp. Delicious!

“Here, have another,” says Saunders, who tosses the open shells back into the river. “It’s important to restock the river with the old shells because the new oysters attach themselves to the shell reefs that form here. In fact, you can get \$10 (U.S.) a bag for old shells,” says the man who can harvest up to 4,000 oysters in two hours.

On our way back to the Tides Inn, Saunders tells our small group that Virginia has eight oyster tasting regions and the taste differs in each — “just like wine regions.”

When we dock, The Tides Inn’s head Chef T.V. Flynn is waiting with a tray of chilled oysters, which he roasts on a small barbecue in their own nectar and some melted butter infused with herbs.

One of the most popular items in the inn’s elegant main dining room is Angry Oysters — wild oysters are dredged in breadcrumbs and deep fried before being tossed in a spicy hot sauce. “It’s our take on Buffalo Wings,” says Chef.

Flynn also demonstrates the correct way of opening an oyster

without causing serious harm to one’s self — he expertly uses a razor-sharp two inch blade. He also tells us the best oyster shucker in the state is a local woman named Deborah Pratt. She has represented the U.S. at several Oyster Shucking World Championships in Ireland and can shuck and present an oyster in less than five seconds.

“Deborah shucks two dozen in less than two minutes,” Chef tells us.

As Chef’s oysters bubble in their juices on top of the BBQ, William and Rusty head back out to sea. “Don’t forget to give them some of our local wine,” barks Saunders as his tiny boat disappears on the horizon.

Some of the Inn’s wines come from the award-winning Dog and Oyster vineyard just outside Irvington. The boutique, six-acre property grows four varieties of grapes — Chardonnay and Vidal Blanc are used for their white wines and Chambourcin and Merlot for the reds.

The vineyard also holds Sip and Slurp events where we get to sample the wine — unexpectedly good — and local oysters under a blue sky canopy amongst the vines.

The owners of the Dog and Oyster also run the charming Hope and Glory Inn in Irvington. The pretty boutique hotel, which looks like it jumped off a Norman Rockwell canvas, has been named one of the Top 10 in America and its fine dining restaurant, the Dining Hall, features some incredibly fresh farm-to-table and boat-to-table cuisine. An old schoolhouse, the inn’s tiny bar is called Detention and it’s the perfect place to end a day after learning so much about Virginia’s incredible oyster industry and the amazing people involved in it. •



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# Mississippi's Golf Coast

STORY BY GARY TRASK / PHOTOS VARIOUS SOURCES

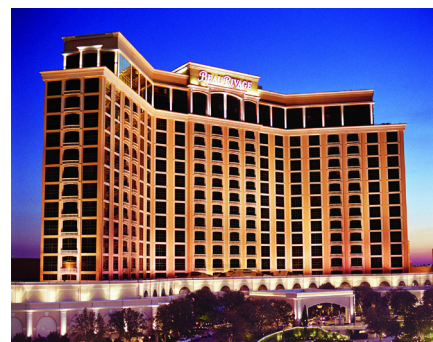
## *Golf, gambling and good times await*

**B**ILOXI, MS — He's a lifelong resident of the area, a well-known businessman, and current mayor of Biloxi. So, there aren't too many people more qualified to speak to the tremendous growth and popularity of the Mississippi Gulf Coast than Andrew Gilich.

Gilich, who founded the first high-tech software business in Biloxi in 1983 and has been mayor since 2015, always gets a charge out of the reaction he hears from first-time visitors.

"They usually kind of shrug their shoulders and say, 'I had no idea,'" he says with a thick Southern accent and a wide smile. "The key for us to get 'em here. We've got the product, so once we get 'em here, we're confident they'll enjoy themselves, and they'll be back. That's a bet I'm willing to make."

The Mississippi Gulf Coast celebrated the 25th anniversary of its first casino opening last year, but there's much more than just gambling action here. The region offers almost 100 kilometres of scenic shoreline — stretching from



Outstanding golf courses like the Jerry Pate-designed Preserve, top photo, combined with fun-filled restaurants like Seafood and Brew and world-class hotels like the Beau Rivage, above, make Mississippi a golfer's paradise.





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Ocean Springs to Biloxi to Gulfport to Bay St. Louis — and an abundance of music, golf, culture and authentic southern cuisine. Toss in a year-round temperate climate and genuine southern hospitality and it's crystal clear why Gilich is so eager to wager about return visitors.

Recent numbers from Visit Mississippi indicate that the Magnolia State gets more international travellers from Canada (24 per cent) than any other country in the world. In 2016, 36,000 Canadians overnighted in Mississippi — a record.

Here are just a few of the highlights found within the Mississippi Gulf Coast that we're pretty certain that if you give them a try, you'll likely be wanting for more.

Just as Mr. Mayor predicted.

## CASINOS

**Beau Rivage Resort & Casino:** Owned and operated by MGM Resorts International, Beau Rivage — which means “beautiful shore” in French — brings a delectable taste of Las Vegas to Mississippi. The Beau is the tallest building in the state at 32 storeys, with a casino floor that checks in at 85,000 square feet, a lavish pool deck overlooking the Gulf, a 20,000-square-foot spa and salon and an array of first-rate restaurants. And there's no better way to begin a hotel visit than to walk in the entrance to see and smell a stunning arrangement of fresh flowers and plants in the elegant atrium and lobby area. A \$10 million (U.S.) suite renovation was completed in April, capping off a multi-year renovation project that included an expanded VIP check-in area and luxurious high limit area on the casino floor.

**Golden Nugget, Biloxi:** Located seven km east from The Beau on Beach Boulevard sits The Nugget, which recently underwent a \$100 million renovation that gives the entire property a modern look. The Rush Lounge, found just inside the main entrance, is a great meeting spot that features table games and live entertainment. The Nugget also has a great selection of restaurants — ranging from a Morton's The Steakhouse to Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. — and a Saltgrass Steakhouse was due to open this summer. But the biggest draw here may be the expansive H2O Pool area, which regularly attracts a spirited crowd thanks to its choice of cabanas, daybeds, fire pits, a swim-up bar and poolside blackjack tables with bikini-clad dealers. Yes, please.

## GOLF COURSES

**Fallen Oak:** Open exclusively to guests of Beau Rivage, a visit to Fallen Oak, perennially



*Mississippi offers golfers a remarkable collection of championship courses that compare with anything in North America.*

ally ranked as the No. 2 casino golf course in the U.S., is more of an experience than simply a round of golf. The locker room and caddy service and expansive practice range set the tone for what promises to be one of more pleasurable 18-hole stretches of your life. Before or after your round, don't miss the legendary Fallen Oak Bloody Mary, best enjoyed sitting at the sunken bar inside the clubhouse, which was ranked by *Golf Digest* as one of the best 19th Holes in America.

**The Preserve Golf Club:** Jaw-dropping beauty and nature collide at this Jerry Pate creation, located about 20 minutes from the Gulf Coast in Vancleave. As beautiful as the course is and as fun as it is to play, the best part about a trip to The Preserve may be the exceptional value and service. The Preserve is the amenity course of the newly renovated Palace Casino Resort and stay-and-play packages are especially reasonable during off-peak months.

## RESTAURANTS

**Coast Seafood at Beau Rivage:** Just like Gilich, Kristian Wade was born and raised in the Biloxi area where his grandmother taught him to cook. The 41-year-old has been at Beau Rivage for 19 years, working his way up from sous chef to executive chef. Coast Seafood & Brew is Wade's Mona Lisa, if you will. Wade, who has cooked alongside Chef Irvine on the

Food Network's *Dinner Impossible*, has his handprints all over not just the menu at the Beau's newest dining venue that sits steps off the casino floor, but the ultra-hip design, which was unveiled last year. You will not regret choosing any of the fresh oyster combos available and the best way to enjoy them is grabbing a seat at the extended bar, ordering one of the 40 craft beers on tap and catching a game on one of the 16 high-definition TVs. Talk about being in your happy place.

**Half Shell Oyster House:** Just across the street from Beau Rivage and the Hard Rock Casino Hotel Biloxi, this trendy downtown restaurant is another favourite for locally caught seafood and majestic cocktails. The historic, two-storey brick building was transformed from a bank to dining establishment by adding vintage chandeliers, Deco brick walls and French Quarter art on the walls. The Charbroiled Oysters are highly recommended and the Shrimp Orleans is as mouth-watering as it sounds, with Gulf shrimp sautéed in an original New Orleans-style smoky Cajun sauce, served with sliced French bread. •

• Daily, reasonably priced, one-stop flights flying into the Gulfport-Biloxi International Airport are available from Canada on Delta, United, American Airlines and Alaska Airlines.

• Biloxi is also a three-hour drive from Jackson, the state's capital, and an easy, 90-minute ride from New Orleans.

• For information on Mississippi, go to <http://visitmississippi.org>





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*Vacant buildings stand out under big prairie skies near the town of Kindersley, Saskatchewan*

# Under A Prairie Sky



*Nikon Ambassador Tony Beck captures the raw beauty of Saskatchewan during the Prairie province's fall months*





*A small flock of lesser snow geese and Ross's geese migrate south over Saskatchewan.*



*A small flock of sandhill cranes take to the air at dawn over the golden skies of Saskatchewan.*

**S**ASKATOON — From a hilltop overlooking endless golden fields and rolling landscapes, the morning sun rises to the echoing calls of distant sandhill cranes and snow geese. From above, you'll hear the lyrical chatter of migrating longspurs, pipits and larks. From a distant aspen woodlot, a buck elk trumpets its territory. Such is a typical autumn dawn in southern Saskatchewan.

If you like to travel through remote open countryside, then make the backroads of Saskatchewan your next wild destination. Late September and early October is a good time to visit the Prairies, especially around Regina and Saskatoon. Largely untouched by tourists and full of migrating birds with endless rustic scenery, Saskatchewan is a photographer's dream.

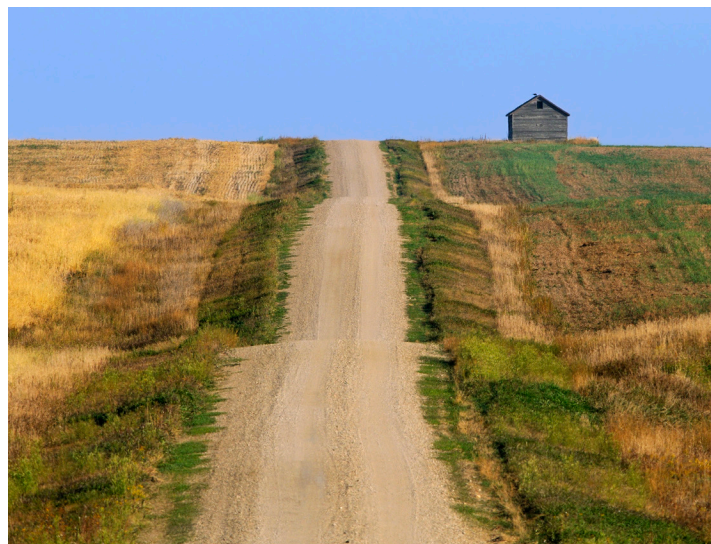
### *Scenes and subjects for every photographer*

Saskatchewan covers more than 650,000 square kilometres with a small population of just over one million. A network of roads spreads over these vast open spaces providing an infinite show of picturesque landscapes punctuated with rustic sheds, grain elevators and abandoned buildings. Although some of the Prairies are flat, most of it flows with rolling hills under big skies.

Millions of birds use the central flyway as a route between the breeding grounds of the Canadian Arctic to the wintering grounds of the United States. While on route, hundreds of thousands of migrating ducks, geese, shorebirds and sandhill cranes rest in the open fields and wetlands of the Prairie provinces.

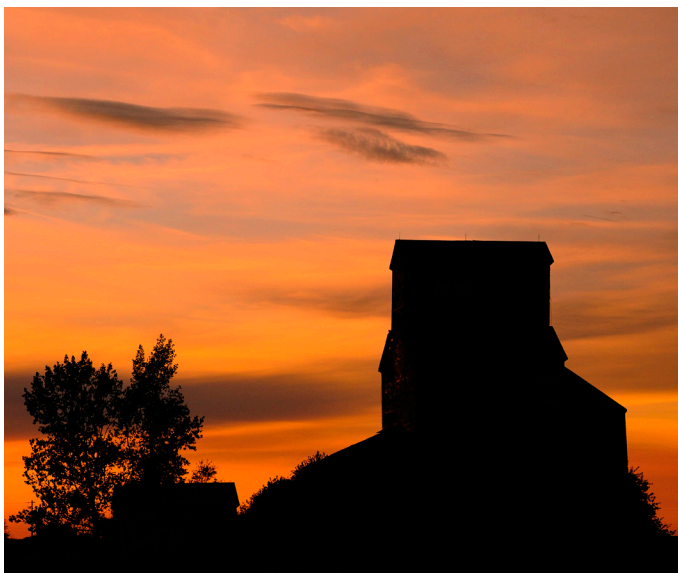


*Train tracks lead to grain elevators and other buildings in the village of Kenaston.*



*A vacant shed at the top of rolling hills south of Saskatoon.*





*Grain elevator silhouetted against a sunset in the village of Riverhurst.*



*A male and three female Pronghorns roam through a harvested field.*

Photographers with discerning eyes should look for rare and endangered species like the whooping crane, North America's tallest bird. With around only 600 left in the world, the species is at risk of extinction. However, a few are usually observed somewhere in the harvested fields of southern Saskatchewan while travelling between their nesting areas of Wood Buffalo Park in northern Canada and the wintering grounds in Aransas, Texas.

Driving around, you'll pass many wetlands and Prairie sloughs full of life. Bald and golden eagles often follow these birds looking for easy prey. If you're lucky, you'll witness a family of eagles disrupting a large flock of waterfowl, chasing thousands of birds into the air producing one of nature's greatest spectacles – a swirling mass of birds dominating the sky.

Thousands of Arctic songbirds like snow bunting, horned lark and lapland longspur migrate through the tundra-like Prairies looking for seeds and insects. With fall colours emerging, the forested parklands, campgrounds and isolated woodlots are often full of warblers and sparrows coming down from Canada's Boreal Forest. Deer, moose and elk also hide in these woods while pronghorn and coyotes roam the open fields.

### **Planning your adventure**

With so much land to cover, photographers will want to spend several days capturing what Saskatchewan has to offer. It's easy to run productive photography day trips from Regina or Saskatoon. The more adventurous will want to explore while camping, or staying at lodges in remote communities.

Virtually any of the backroads of the province hold potential for photographers to see wildlife. However, some of my favourite spots include: Last Mountain Lake, Quill Lakes, Gardner Dam/Lake Diefenbaker, Danielson/Douglas Provincial Parks, Grasslands National Park and Cypress Hills.

### **How to prepare to photograph Saskatchewan**

Expect all types of weather in the fall. Prepare for rain, cold and even snow. However, there's a good chance you'll have comfortable and clear conditions.

Keen photographers will want a long telephoto lens, especially for wildlife. Wide angle and short telephoto zooms are ideal for the abundant scenery and sunsets. A solid tripod helps keep your camera steady, especially if you're after images of a star-filled Prairie night sky. Just remember to keep your equipment guarded from elements like rain, dirt and the ever-present Prairie dust.

With a little preparation, you'll discover many hidden gems in this rarely explored corner of Canada. •



Tony Beck is a freelance naturalist and photographer working out of Ottawa where he and his wife Nina Stravlund operate "Always An Adventure," a company offering photography, nature and birdwatching services. He has more than 30 years experience in photography including 20 years as a professional. In 1983, Tony bought his first SLR — the versatile Nikon FG. He has been loyal to Nikon ever since. In 1993, he took the plunge and went professional.

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HAITI



# Culture Shock

Dispelling the myths and stereotypes about Haiti, a country rich in beauty

STORY & PHOTOS BY ROSALIND CUMMINGS-YEATES

**P**ORT-AU-PRINCE — Pay no attention to the media stereotypes of disaster and the ridiculous utterings of a certain world leader. Known as the Pearl of the Caribbean, Haiti and its vibrant capital, Port-au-Prince, bursts with art and activity. With a culture steeped in creativity and hospitality, this under-the-radar island gem offers singular experiences that you will never find anywhere else.

Anticipation bubbled in my belly when I landed in Port-au-Prince. Growing up in Chicago, which was founded by Haitian explorer Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, I have always felt pride in Haiti as the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere. I've long ignored the media portrayals of extreme poverty and devastation because people and places of colour are rarely portrayed fairly. So I felt excitement as I rolled through the bumpy streets of Port-au-Prince and I was not disappointed. Every building, wall and bus was covered in vivid paintings and illustrations. Art lined the sidewalks like an open air art gallery and locals filled the streets, some with pots on their heads, some in the latest fashions.

Stepping into the Marriott Port-au-Prince, I was dazzled by



*Art lines the sidewalks in Haiti's bustling capital Port-au-Prince and kids learn how to play musical instruments in a land that's full of culture and beauty but not always portrayed in a good light by the media or politicians.*



even more art. Specially commissioned by Mr. Marriott himself, the hotel boasts 1,500 pieces by 22 local artists curated by noted Haitian artist Philippe Dodard. Sparkling vodou flags, a hand-wrought iron wall covered in mermaid scenes and innovative sculptures fill the space. The chic and inviting decor makes it the sort of hotel that you want to hole up in but Port-au-Prince beckons.

On Thursday nights, it is absolutely essential to head to the legendary Hotel Oloffson. As the setting of Graham Greene's *The Comedians* novel as well as the headquarters for celebrity parties and journalist hangouts, Hotel Oloffson is iconic. Perched on a small hill, the white, gingerbread mansion is surrounded by towering palms and a rambling garden. It looks like something out of another time or dimension and it basically is. A statue of Baron Samedi, the top-hatted vodou loa of death and sexuality, greets visitors but I avert my eyes past his eerie image.

People are packed into the first floor and are dancing to the hypnotic sounds of RAM. The 16-piece band is also iconic, with the lead singer and Olafsson owner Richard Morse producing rasin music, which is a swirling blend of rock, reggae and funk, layered with vodou rhythms. On the floor in front of the stage, *veves* or symbols representing different loas are etched in chalk. Lunise, Morse's wife and RAM's second lead vocalist, sings with commanding beauty, waving her hands and dancing like she is holding a sacred ceremony. All around me, locals and tourists are dancing and revelling in the atmosphere. Goatskin drums and long tin horns called *konet* blast through the thick air and the song lyrics in Kreyol seem to transport me, even though I don't understand them. In front of me, a local starts convulsing and her friends calmly sit her down, familiar with the spiritual trance that the music can inspire.

After recovering from the night of music and dancing which lasted until 4 a.m., I visit the Musee du Pantheon National Haitien the next day. Like most everything else in Haiti, this underground museum is unlike anything I've ever seen. Tucked beneath a sculpture garden in downtown Port-au-Prince, the building is modelled after the circular shape of the homes of Haiti's original Taino inhabitants.

The tombs of the Haiti's founding fathers, Alexandre Sabès Pétion, the republic's first president, Toussaint L'ouverture, general of the revolution, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, general after L'ouverture's capture and later emperor of Haiti, and Henri Christophe, general and later king, form one striking section of the museum. The other two focus on artifacts and art that reflect



**The UNESCO World Heritage site of La Citadelle La Ferrière is one of the biggest tourist attractions on the island and a cultural hotspot for Haitians.**

Haitian history. There's the hulking, rusty anchor from Christopher Columbus's ship, the Santa Maria, which landed in Haiti in 1492, elaborate robes and crowns from Haiti's kings and even the top hat and gold-tipped cane from the notorious dictator Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier.

Wandering into the sun-streaked streets filled with tap taps, or buses painted with ornate designs, I realize that bustling Port-au-Prince also offers a chance to sample Haitian cuisine. Street vendors sell *griyo* delicately seasoned fried pork, but I opt for a visit to the popular restaurant L'Observatoire, in the trendy Petion-ville neighbourhood. The cafe sits atop a hill and offers lovely views of the mountainous island as well as Kreyol cuisine. I dined on Kreyol grilled fish with pikliz, a spicy condiment of pickled veggies, while gazing at the dreamy vistas. Artists are lined up at the bottom of the restaurant and I found it difficult to leave without at least one, make that six, pieces of original art.

I joined up with Cyril of Tour Haiti to experience the ultimate Haitian adventure; a climb up to the UNESCO World Heritage site of La Citadelle La Ferrière, on the northern coast of the island. Accessing the fortress isn't easy from Port-au-Prince so we took a small plane to Cap-Haitien, a charming small town with bougainvillea vines covering the walls and smiling children racing around. A quick drive to the town of Milot starts the journey.

The steep, 11-km trek is best made on horseback and a flurry of adolescent boys maneuver to guide your horse. Francois guided my horse up the long, hot path and when I glimpsed the top of La Citadelle, I gasped. Stretching across Bonnet a L'Eveque Mountain, with walls 41 metres high and three metres thick, viewing the fort rising over the island is a spectacular sight. Climbing off my horse, I strolled around the fort. Fortified with 365 cannons, the cannon balls still arranged in neat piles. As the largest fortress in the Americas and sometimes called the eighth wonder of the world, La Citadelle represents the Haitian people's steadfast refusal to return to slavery.

There are no blind spots in the structure — if French soldiers ever returned, views from the fortress would reveal them.

Looking out at the rolling green hills, you can spot the remains of Sans Souci Palace a little northeast of the fort, which served as an amphitheatre and castle complex for King Henri Christophe.

Thanks to the 100 year debt that France forced Haiti to pay as compensation to slave owners for the loss of property, Haiti might not be a rich country but it is most certainly beautiful. •



*Frequent Flyer Marc Atchison  
has been to hundreds of airports  
but few can match Munich's*



# Touch Down!

Munich Airport  
scores big points  
with travellers

*Munich Airport is an architectural gem where you can get the cheapest beer in the city at the Airbräu beer hall, right.*



**M**UNICH — I usually hate airports, but I hated leaving Munich's. That's because this loveliest of German cities' airport is not your normal, egregious airfield with low hanging ceilings that looks more like a crowded suburban shopping mall during the Christmas rush.

Instead, Munich's state-of-the-art airport is bright and airy and embodies the best of what this historic city has to offer visitors. I was actually hoping my Lufthansa flight from Munich to Toronto would be delayed so I could enjoy another beer at the Airbräu, the airport's brewery with a



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beer garden that's exclusive to Munich Airport.

The Airbräu sits in an area known as Munich Airport Centre (MAC), which connects Terminals 1 and 2 under a massive wing-style roof that was designed by Chicago-based architect Helmut Jahn.

At 10,000 square metres, MAC is one of Europe's largest roofed outdoor venues and has actually hosted concerts, basketball and beach volleyball exhibitions — even a Christmas market — without affecting the flow of passengers between the terminals. And there's plenty of passengers; 44.6 million passed through Munich Airport last year, making it the second largest in Germany after Frankfurt.

"MAC will be very busy during the (upcoming) World Cup (of soccer in Russia) because we'll have a 40-sq-m LED wall and a stadium with 2,000 seats where passengers can watch the games," says Corinna Born, the airport's Director International Media Relations.

MAC is so popular that many residents living around the airport come to enjoy what the city-style square has to offer.

"The Airbräu has the cheapest beer in Munich," the delightful Born tells me.

Just another reason to like Munich Airport, which was recently named Europe's first 5-star airport by the independent, London-based Skytrax Institute, which also rates airlines. Other prominent global airports that have earned a 5-star rating include Singapore, Seoul, Hong Kong and Tokyo-Haneda.

It's easy to see why, especially in Terminal 2, which is a joint venture between Munich Airport (60 per cent) and Germany's national carrier Lufthansa (40 per cent). The ultra-modern Terminal 2 has few equals, and Born is eager to point out some of its many features, like ergonomically-designed touch-down pods that look like mini lounges. They are located near gates and offer passengers



*Innovations like passenger pods, top photo, that are located near airline gates is one of the most appealing features at Munich Airport. The massive Munich Airport Centre between Terminals 1 and 2 is so big it can hold sports events. The airport's selection of gourmet restaurants, like the Bavarian eatery Sissi & Franz, above, makes you wish your flight is delayed.*



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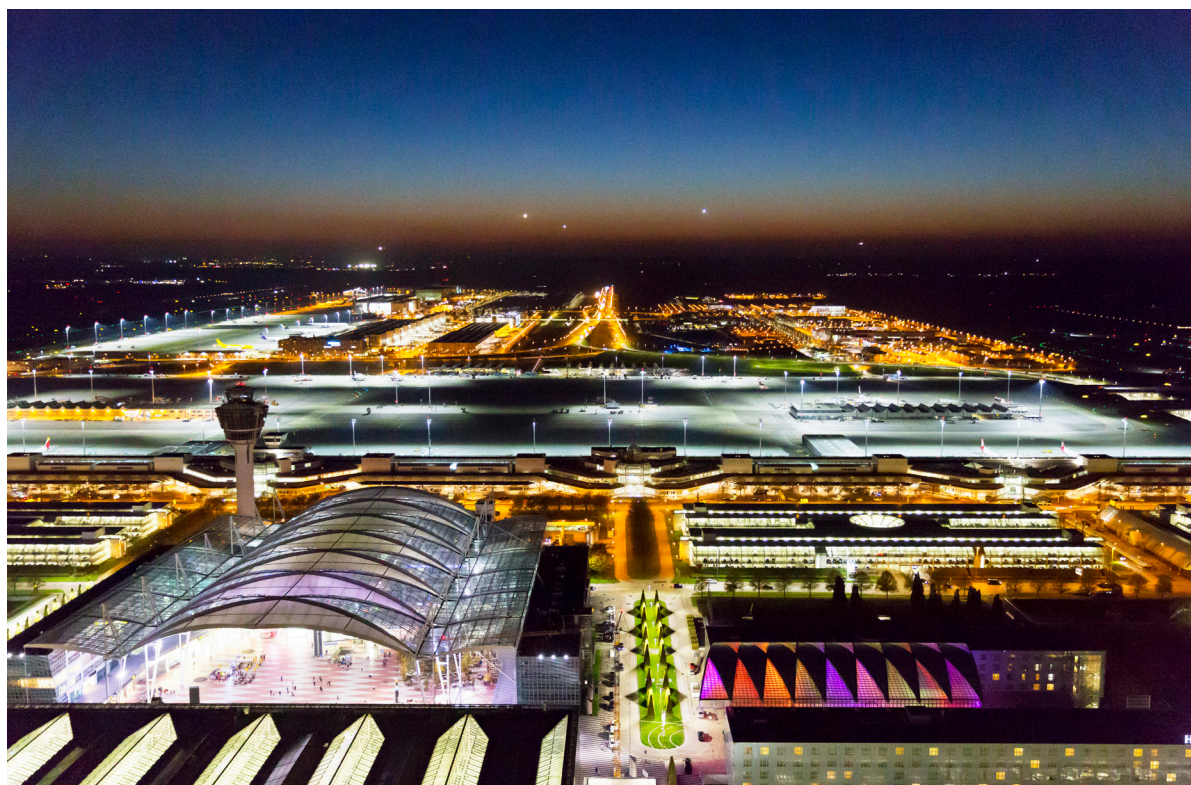
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*Munich Airport looks especially charming at night when all its colourful lights stand out against a clear sky. The airport, which welcomes over 40 million passengers a year, is the only 5 Star-rated airport in Europe and worth every star. Many of the technological advancements made here are being shared with other airports around the world.*



more privacy.

And if you are lost or have questions, you can speak directly to an airport official through an ATM-style terminal called Infogates where you can request individual directions.

An actual person appears on screen and quickly solves any issues an anxious passenger may have. Phew!

If your flight has been delayed, you can catch a few winks in a Napcab — a sleeping cabin developed for Munich Airport by students at TUM, Munich's renowned university of science and technology.

No wonder other airports are working with Munich Airport to upgrade their facilities.

Munich Airport is also home to some of the city's better restaurants.

Besides the Airbräu, where you can get delicious Bavarian fare, there are almost 60 restaurants offering everything from fish to frankfurters. My favourite was Sissi & Franz, where they serve up the best schnitzel in Munich.

Munich Airport is a family-friendly facility with playgrounds, a visitors centre and a daycare centre (Kinderland) where kids can hang out while parents go shopping for last-minute souvenirs.

In the Visitor's Park kids can enjoy themselves on swings, jungle gyms and sandbox playgrounds shaped like the five continents.

Oh, adults needn't stamp their feet in envy, there's an observation deck in Terminal 2 just for big people that comes com-

plete with a small café where you can get adult beverages.

Munich Airport has become one of Europe's best hubs, especially if you're flying on to Italy. The airport offers the most flights to Rome, Milan, Venice and Italy's other great cities and makes you feel you are already in the land of pasta before you get on the plane.

"Munich Airport is a perfect gateway to Italy with as many as 400 weekly flights to Italian cities.

"We offer a 'terminal' inside the terminal called Spazio Italia dedicated to flights to Italy, including an Italian coffee bar, Italian speaking staff, Italian TV and newspapers," says Born.

Terminal 2 is really an out of this world experience. But for the ultimate experience, save up your pennies and buy a First Class ticket on Lufthansa so you can visit the airline's new First Class Lounge. There's

nothing in the airline industry that even comes close to this beauty.

Guests get to sample Michelin-star-worthy cuisine served in an airy, bright restaurant setting that is accented with soft, light woods. Very calming.

On a bright, sunny day, you can even sip champagne on the lounge's private terrace while watching the planes take off and land. This lounge even has rooms where delayed passengers can sleep and one of the shower rooms comes equipped with a bathtub.

Lufthansa's First Class Lounge even has its own border guard stationed at the exit so you can clear customs and avoid long lines.

The airport's Hilton Hotel, which can be accessed through MAC, is a 5-star property where you're likely to bump into some VIP guests.

Munich has much to offer foreign visitors — starting with the best airport in Europe; maybe the world. •



*Munich Airport is a family-friendly facility with a daycare centre where kids can hang out while parents check in.*



# Salut, Bucharest!

Set your sights on Bucharest with our new seasonal flights starting this June. Be delighted by Bucharest's elegance as you stroll through its wide, tree-lined boulevards, explore its fabulous historical buildings and dine at one of its many trendy cafes.

# Salut, Bucharest!

Bucarest vous tend les bras grâce à nos nouveaux vols saisonniers débutant en juin. Laissez-vous séduire par son élégance alors que vous déambulez le long de ses boulevards bordés d'arbres, explorez ses magnifiques bâtiments historiques, ou dînez à l'un de ses nombreux cafés tendance.







# Taking Aim At Perth

## Historic Ontario hamlet is a 'big shot' again

STORY BY BRUCE SACH / PHOTOS BY CAROLE JOBIN

*"Any wound sufficient to agitate the nerves and necessarily make the hand shake must end the business for that day."*

**P**ERTH, ON — So reads "Rule No. 21 of Dueling" as explained in the local museum of this historic Upper Canada town, where much is made of the fact that Canada's last fatal duel took place here. In fact, the duelist who survived became a judge and ended up presiding in the same courthouse where he was tried and found not guilty.

The circumstances are analyzed and displayed at the Perth Museum, but without a morbid fascination.

Neither is there anything moribund about Perth, where one can indulge in an appreciation of the past. This well-preserved town 80-km southwest of Ottawa with many pre-Confederation buildings, has incited some au-



*The peaceful Tay River, above, flows through downtown Perth. The Perth courthouse, left, is where an American cannon captured in the War of 1812 proudly stands. John Wilson, the winner of the last fatal duel in Canada, later became a judge in the same courthouse where he'd been acquitted following the showdown.*



thors to refer to it as Canada's Williamsburg (Virginia). But since Perth is a living, viable town, the comparison is not especially valid.

Perth does not rest on its laurels, hosting a brilliant summer drama series, music fest, a garlic festival and an opportunity for visitors to get a feel for Canada's past.

Residents of Perth seem to heed the town's motto — Make Haste, Slowly — and have maintained many of their fine old sandstone buildings, along with a genteel, reserved mind set. Perth remains well preserved partly because of its steady, yet unspectacular growth. Throughout its history, Perth has owed its continual prosperity to its wise use of natural and human resources and government largesse.

Have you ever wondered what happened to our soldiers and officers after the War of 1812?

Retired half-pay army officers from the War of 1812 settled early in Perth and invested carefully, rarely inducing a boom-and-bust cycle. They became the new commercial elite, pouring money into their residences, many of which remain today. In 1850, Perth lost its status as district town, and since then its population has barely doubled. A golden opportunity for underdevelopment, some might say.

Local Potsdam sandstone and clay were used for building here. Two examples are the Perth Town Hall and the Matheson House, which houses the Perth Museum. The perfect symmetry of the house can be seen in the dining room and one can imagine frequent guest, prime minister Sir John A. Macdonald, being entertained there. You can almost hear the Scottish songs, quiet laughter and chin wagging echoing in the room.

The two pistols from the famous duel are on display and the entire episode is documented in a sober, reflective way.

A beautiful example of Perth architecture, complete with its gabled roof, is nearby at Inge-Va House. It was here that Robert Lyon, the fatally wounded duelist, came to die. He is buried next door.

Not far away is the McMartin House. Much to the chagrin of locals, the original owner insisted that only American materials be used. In architecture, at least, the War of 1812 lives on!

Even the design is typically American, of the Federal style rarely seen in Canada, with recessed archways over windows and a cupola on the top, surrounded by four lanterns.

The two cannons proudly displayed in front of the Perth courthouse were recaptured from the Americans in the War of 1812.

These cannons now sit solidly in front



*The McMartin House, top photo, is an anomaly for Perth and its American Federalist style of architecture stands out from the rest of the town. Perth City Hall, left, is a proud example of local Potsdam sandstone, which was used in the majority of Perth's pre-Confederation buildings. Inge-Va House, above, is where the victim of the duel, Robert Lyon died. He is buried nearby.*

of the courthouse on Drummond St., serving as a gentle reminder that Perth stands on guard for the heritage and past of Upper Canada. In more recent times, the town highlighted its Scottish origins by staging the longest kilt run in the world! A kilt run? Think men in kilts running in an eight kilometre race.

You can't turn a corner in Perth without being reminded of the past. Next to the Perth Museum at 1 Gore St. E. is Shaw's of Perth, one of the oldest department stores in Ontario. It is anything but decrepit. Other preserved buildings along Gore Street include the old post office and the building housing Maximilian's Restaurant (99 Gore St. E.). There are many antique shops and used book stores — always a good sign.

Facing the old mill is the park donated by the town matriarch, Jessie Stewart. When she bequeathed the park to the town, she insisted that all activities held there be free

of charge. That's why the Stewart Park Festival, a musical event in the summer, is free, along with hugs.

Residents of Perth are very proud of a new statue at the entrance to the park in honour of local hero, the legendary Canadian jumper Big Ben. He was the first horse to win two World Cup Finals, back to back, in 1988-89. He and his rider, Ian Millar, were inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame, Big Ben being only one of two animals ever bestowed this honour.

You may have remarked that almost everything of interest in Perth can be visited on foot.

This is part of its irresistible charm. Don't focus on the duel — just follow your instincts and enjoy walking, or heck, cycling around this gem of a town. ●

*For tourist information on Perth and the surrounding area, go to <http://www.lanarkcountytourism.ca>*



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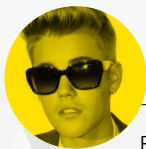


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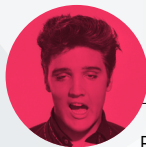
**Justin Bieber**  
Stratford Ontario

For nearly a decade, Justin Bieber has arguably been one of the most famous people on the planet. The 24-year-old has an eye-popping 100 million followers on Twitter and more than 10 billion video views on Vevo. Despite the fame and fortune, The Bieb is still a small-town guy at heart. He regularly returns to his native Stratford to visit friends and relatives. The local tourist association ([visitstratford.ca](http://visitstratford.ca)) has even put together a Bieber-ific map, which allows you to take a tour of his life - everything from his favourite ice cream parlour to the location of his first date, where he spilled spaghetti and meatballs all over himself. He didn't get a second date.



**Shania Twain**  
Huntsville, Ontario

The future Queen of Country Pop arrived at the Deerhurst Resort in Huntsville in 1988, looking for a job to support her younger siblings after their parents had been killed in a car accident. She earned a spot in the resort's Las Vegas-style show and three years later launched a spectacular recording career, which includes selling more than 100 million records. But even when she turned big time, Twain kept her connection to Deerhurst. Her wedding to producer Mutt Lange was held at the resort and Twain owns a place on the water at nearby Lake of Bays.



**Elvis Presley**  
Tupelo, Mississippi

Everybody remembers the last gasp Elvis, with the vacant eyes and the Cadillac-sized sideburns, who squeezed into too tight jumpsuits and rhinestone capes. However, if you want a real feel for the man, make the pilgrimage to the place where The King was born, a humble, one room wooden shack in Mississippi's rural Tupelo. For a closer look at the later Elvis, head to Graceland, the mansion he bought in Memphis at the age of 22. It's also the spot where Elvis passed away and is buried.



Graceland is the Memphis mansion in which Elvis Presley lived, died and is now buried.



**Van Morrison**  
Belfast, Northern Ireland

Raised at 125 Hyndford St., a red-brick, working class row house in Belfast's east end, Van Morrison was inspired by his close knit neighbourhood. Morrison, who was knighted by Prince Charles in 2016, wrote about his up-bringing in such songs as Cypress Avenue, On Hyndford Street, A Sense of Wonder and Brown-Eyed Girl. A few years ago, a bronze plaque marking his childhood home was unveiled by the Belfast Blues Appreciation Society.



**John Lennon**  
Montreal

In June of 1969, John Lennon and Yoko Ono staged a Bed In for Peace at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel (now a Fairmont property) in downtown Montreal. The shaggy duo, who stayed for a week, lounged in their pajamas in suite 1742, where Lennon wrote and recorded the anthem, Give Peace of Chance. The background singers included a couple of dozen visitors, who ranged from comedian Tommy Smothers to Petula Clark. The suite is available for stays and includes a guitar in case you get the urge to compose your own anthem.



**Jimmy Buffet**  
Key West, Florida

Newly divorced and unable to find success in Nashville, Jimmy Buffet limped off to south Florida in 1971. The laid-back vibe (T-shirt, cut-off shorts and flip-flops is considered over dressing) inspired Buffet to create his Margaritaville songs, persona and eventually a chain of successful restaurants. Buffet has branched out to become a best-selling author and recently, Forbes magazine estimated that the singer/songwriter of Cheeseburger in Paradise is worth over half a billion dollars.



**Bono and The Edge**  
Dublin, Ireland

Built in the 1850s and perched on the edge of the River Liffey in the heart of Dublin, the bar at the Clarence Hotel was a hang-out for everyone from the local parish priests to emerging rock bands like U2. Bono and The Edge liked the place so much that they bought the hotel in 1992 (and later sold it). You might even spot the former owners in the hotel's Octagon Bar - their favourite place to hang out when they're back home.



**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**  
Salzburg, Austria

One of music's greatest talents, Mozart was born in a cramped, third floor apartment in Salzburg in 1756. By age 3, he was playing piano and by 5 composing original pieces. By the time he died at the age of just 35, the former wunderkind, had produced more than 600 classics. The Mozart apartment was turned into a museum in 1880 and includes everything from locks of his hair to his childhood violin.



A statue of the great composer simply known as Mozart now stands on the main square of Salzburg and his boyhood home has been turned into a museum. It's the most visited tourist attraction in the lovely Austrian city.





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## Simple baguette offers travellers some food for thought

STORY & PHOTOS BY LAUREN PARSONS

**P**ARIS — One of the best mottos in life is “keep it simple.” And, as I recently found out while travelling through France, simple often means great tasting food that’s easy on your stomach and your wallet.

Food is often one of the most expensive parts of travelling. And while I recommend (and highly encourage) that a person indulges in as much regional cuisine as they can, it’s not always realistic to eat at two- and three-Michelin star restaurants for every meal.

This is where my favourite French lunch comes in. Found in nearly every bakery, deli or restaurant: The jambon-beurre is a traditional ham sandwich on a crunchy baguette and slathered with creamy butter (often with camembert cheese).

And although this is something you think you could easily make at home, there is no comparison to the fresh, and regionally-specific, ingredients used. You have to understand that this is not just slices of deli ham folded onto a baguette with some butter. The ham is not deli-style ham, but *Jambon de Paris* (Parisian Ham). It is slow-cooked to perfection, retaining much of its moisture before being sliced thick. The baguette is cooked to have a crisp and golden exterior — to add that flakey crunch — while maintaining a soft centre, and the butter is divine, creamy with a hint of sourness, and spread heavily over the bread. Make no mistake, this cannot be made at home.

Every day in France more than two million jambon-beurre sandwiches are sold — more than any other sandwich (including McDonalds’ hamburgers). I don’t deny that fact, because

everywhere we went - from Bayeux, to Paris, to Lyon, to Nice — everybody was eating one, and so were we. Often we would grab a sandwich to eat on the go, or to take in our backpacks until we found a place to sit and eat. It makes a great lunch for long train rides, or as something quick to eat on the pit stop of a tour.

One of the best we had was on the lunch break of our Normandy Sightseeing Tour. Our guide was from Caen and recommended a little spot in Saint Aubin Sur Mer. The sandwiches at this shop were kept slightly cool in the display case, which kept the meat chilled while the butter remained just as creamy. Every bite was a satisfying crunch. My partner strayed from tradition and opted for the pizza sandwich, pepperoni, sauce and cheese on a large round bun. Before this trip, I may have said his was the better option — but I can say with confidence, nothing beats a simple butter and ham.

These sandwiches vary in price from 2.50 euros (\$4.75 Cdn) to 5 euros, depending on quality and location. However, some of the best sandwiches we had were priced at 3 euros.

Like many people, my default for a quick and affordable lunch in past visits to Europe has been fast food.

But this most recent trip has opened my eyes, and my stomach, to what the locals eat. And from now on, ham and butter sandwiches will hold a special place in my heart. •



## Brussels deli is well worth the detour

Most bakeries across Europe will have different variations of the French sandwich, adding some ingredients, including different cheeses — but the tour de force can be found at a tiny shoppe in Brussels. If the words cheese and bread excite you, it is now your mission to visit Tonton Garby.

The owner, Garby, is as wonderful as the delicious creations he makes. Immediately upon entering the shop we were greeted with enthusiasm. Garby has a menu of some of his favourites, but encourages his guests to choose their own creations (or to let him choose for you depending on

your preferences). I recommend you let him choose, because the results are surprising and incomparable.

My baguette was topped with spicy chevre, plump tomatoes and honey and my partner’s had a creamy chevre with olive tapenade.

We were in complete silence eating them because they were the best sandwiches we had in our lives.

I promise you that visiting Garby will leave you with a smile on your face, a full stomach and a new appreciation for a man who truly loves and knows cheese.



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SPAIN

# *Fire & Nice*





Sunset over Playa Blanca on Lanzarote, opposite page, is one of the most beautiful in Europe. The island offers visitors a unique landscape and the best place to see it from is Timanfaya National Park, above.

STORY & PHOTOS BY AMY LAUGHINGHOUSE

## Volcanic island Lanzarote erupts into a vacation escape

**L**ANZAROTE, SPAIN — As my airplane swoops down towards Lanzarote, the scene growing ever larger outside the cabin windows isn't really what I was expecting. With its barren, brownish-red surface pockmarked by tall, conical peaks, it looks less like an island beach paradise and more like another planet — The Planet of the Ants.

I've been assured, however, those towering "ant hills" were not made by giant alien insects at all. Oh, no. Those were created by volcanoes. So, um, not to worry, then?

Yes, like all of Spain's Canary Islands off the West Coast of Africa, Lanzarote was born of some hot tectonic plate action. The last whopper of an eruption began in 1730 and lasted for six, count 'em, six years, with lava and ash destroying villages and eventually covering approximately two-thirds of the island. The most recent eruption occurred in 1824, but that one only lasted two months. So, y'know, no biggie.

Given its lack of lush tropical trappings, what is it that draws nearly three million visitors a year to this hardscrabble Atlantic isle, covering just 846 square kilometres? In a word: climate. Not too hot, not too cold, and sunshine virtually guaranteed.

Average temperatures range from 17C in January to 25C in August, and there are typically fewer than 20 rainy days in an entire year. There's also a selection of Blue Flag beaches, with white sand imported from the Sahara.

It is, in fact, the promise of a fool-proof, sun-drenched seaside holiday that brings me to the five-star luxury Princesa Yaiza Suite Hotel Resort on Lanzarote's southern coast. Located in the town of Playa Blanca, home to a shop-lined boardwalk and luxury marina, the Princesa Yaiza rises above the Playa Dorada beach like a white Moorish castle.

This sprawling, 385-room hotel encompasses 55,000 sq. m., with an indoor jungle which may be the greenest spot on the island. The resort also features a 2,000-sq. m. Thalassotherapy spa, a 10,000-square-metre family leisure and sports facility, six pools, four bars, and nine restaurants.

Dining options include Spanish tapas, Italian, Mexican and a Japanese teppanyaki restaurant, where the chef prepares your food on a hot grill right in front of you. But the most unique offering is Isla de Lobos, which serves gourmet Canary Island cuisine using fruit,



Lago Verde, located within a half-collapsed volcanic crater in El Golfo. Left, camel rides are a popular activity for tourists on Lanzarote.





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vegetables, cheese and meat sourced from the resort's own farm, the Finca de Uga.

Once a month, Princesa Yaiza offers guests an opportunity to visit the Finca de Uga, about a 20-minute drive northeast of the resort. This "Kilometre Zero" experience helps visitors understand where their food comes from and how the animals are looked after on this high-welfare farm.

Paco Fabelo, the farm's director, greets my friends and I at the gate to show us around. First, he introduces us to the pigs, which include two species: Iberian and black canary.

"They are really happy, because they enjoy a beautiful spa," says Fabelo, motioning to a large fountain where the inhabitants can cool their hooves, presumably when they start to smell the scent of roasting bacon.

Then we move on to meet some friendly Majorero milking goats, a breed specific to the Canary Islands.

"They are very close to an African species and can withstand the hot weather," Fabelo explains as several goats rear up on their hind legs to nuzzle their visitors. "They give good milk because they will eat dry grass, which has very high-quality fat."

We briefly visit a few cows, including one randy girl who insists on mounting all her friends. Maybe she's been peering over the fence at the bull, who breeds with four lucky ladies every week. "He's the happiest animal on the farm," Fabelo grins.

The workers play music for the animals—Latin, pop and rock in the morning, and classical or Zen tunes in the evening. Judging from some of the behaviour I've seen among these critters today, I reckon they've been listening to a little too much Barry White, if you know what I mean.

It's hard to say whether the highlight of our tour is getting to hold bleating baby lambs, with their puppy-soft fur and floppy ears, or visiting the dairy. Several of Fabelo's mouth-watering cheeses, made from various combinations of sheep, goat and cow's milk, have been honoured at the World Cheese Awards.

The drive from the resort to the farm has also whet my appetite for something else — Lanzarote's Martian-like landscape. Even the folks at NASA think it's "out-of-this-world." According to Gladys Becerra, who works in Princesa Yaiza's marketing department, American astronauts on the Apollo missions studied photographs of Lanzarote's surface to help them prepare for landing on the moon.

"Some people think there is nothing here, because it's not green," Becerra says. "But there is beauty; it's just different."

The entire island has been named a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, which places strict restrictions on development. Roadside billboards are forbidden, and most houses can be no more than two storeys tall, with a paint palette limited to sandy "Sahara" or gleaming white. As a result, the rural villages look like low stacks of sugar cubes, all the better to feed the alien ant invaders, I imagine.

The best place to experience the volcanic drama of Lanzarote is Timanfaya National Park, covering 51 sq. km. on the southwestern end of the island. It is here, where the Montañas del Fuego (Fire Mountains) now stand, that the eruptions of the 18th and 19th centuries occurred. Even today, its arid plains and lava fields remain devoid of plant life, except for some pioneering patches of lichen.

While you can't just lace up your hiking boots and tramp off through the lava fields wherever you like on your own, there are other ways to explore. You can arrange a guided hike in the park, saddle up for a camel tour, or take a bus tour around the Ruta de los Volcanes.

You can also get a feel for the powerful forces that created this incredible landscape at the Islote de Hilario. This hilltop stop within the park features a jaw-dropping panoramic view and several areas where park workers demonstrate the fierce heat that still lurks in pockets beneath the earth. The tastiest example is at El Diablo



*At El Diablo restaurant in Timanfaya National Park, a chef roasts chicken using only the natural heat emanating up from a hole in the earth. Left, Paco Cabello holds a pair of lambs at Finca de Una high-welfare farm, where he is director. Cabello produces award-winning cheeses from many of the animals he raises here.*

## JUST THE FACTS

**Getting there:** Fly into Lanzarote (Arracife) Airport from London or other major European cities.

**Where to stay:** Princesa Yaiza Suite Hotel Resort. <http://www.princesayaiza.com>

**Information:** <http://www.turismolanzarote.com/en/>, [http://www.spain.info/en\\_GB/](http://www.spain.info/en_GB/)

Restaurant, where chefs grill meat on a barbecue using only geothermic heat.

More curiosities beckon along the coast. At Los Hervideros, north of Playa Blanca, visitors can sometimes witness a strange phenomenon — a seemingly boiling sea and geyser-like ocean spray as powerful tides force water into lava tunnels that undercut the cliffs above.

Stranger still is the Lago Verde at El Golfo, just north of Los Hervideros. This striking emerald green lake lies inside a half-collapsed crater at the ocean's edge, separated from the Atlantic by a black volcanic pebble crescent. Instead of hunting for shells, beach-combers are more likely to come across bits of peridot, a pale, glassy-green type of olivine.

Of all the natural wonders I witness on Lanzarote, there is one that I look forward to every night. Reclining on a chaise lounge beside Princesa Yaiza's central swimming pool, I wait for the show to begin.

As the sun sinks low on the horizon, the burning gold disc yields to luminous clouds smouldering in shades of pink and purple, the beauty of the spectacle doubled by its reflection in the mirror-like pool. Lanzarote's volcanoes may be sleeping, but this isle's ethereal, otherworldly spark is resurrected like a Phoenix in celestial flames. •



# Home on the range

*Mongolia's  
yurt tents  
become a big  
tourist draw*

STORY & PHOTOS BY HEATHER LEA





**WHITE LAKE, MONGOLIA** — My first-ever experience staying in a yurt was in this far-flung Mongolian outpost. I was on a cross-country motorcycle tour with my boyfriend Dave, and while en route to the country's capital, Ulaanbaatar, we stopped in this remote area where residents still embrace the nomadic lifestyle.

The Mongolians we met had set up their homesteads in the beautifully barren steppes and stay here for months before moving on with their herds.

Because of this age-old tradition, yurts are still the most common type of home in Mongolia, and even in Ulaanbaatar, almost half the population of 1.31 million still live in these traditional abodes.

Yurts, or gers, as they are called locally, have been used as portable dwellings for over 3,000 years by nomadic travellers in Central Asia. They take, on average, two hours to set up and seem rather immobile in comparison to nylon tents used by modern travellers. Yurts were originally designed to be easily broken down and carried by camels or yaks when it was time to move on.

The large, but short round tents, usually covered in what looked like white canvas, stood out on the treeless, windswept steppes as we rode past.

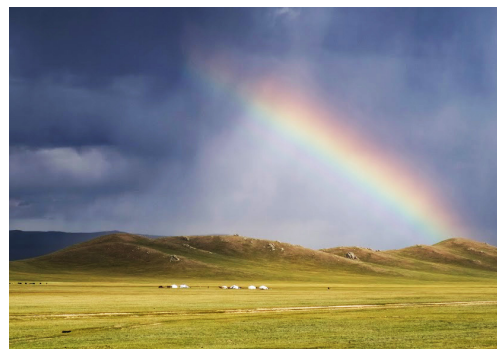
Inhabitants are forced to stoop while exiting and entering through the squat doorways — I imagined they were designed to keep heat in or out, depending on the time of year. They reminded me of the teepees the Great Plains tribes of North America used for centuries.

The conventional yurt's roof consists of a sequence of latticework made from pieces of wood or bamboo, usually traded in river valleys or along the Silk Road.

Once in place, the latticework is covered in skins or felt, acquired from herd animals, like sheep and yaks, that travel with the nomads.

A compression ring at the crown keeps everything in place, aided by the weight of the yurt's covers and sometimes supplemented with a heavy weight hung from the centre.

Once established, the yurt offers a surprising amount of insulation and protection from the elements. Their round shape makes them virtually indestructible during gusting winds from any direction, which the Siberian steppes can experience often. Temperatures here can reach as high as 25C and all the way down to -30C, but inside the yurt stays temperate.



*Colourful yurt doorways are a welcoming sight for travellers in Mongolia. The iconic nomad dwellings offer shelter for foreign guests and give the visitors a unique insight into the harsh lifestyles of these hard-working people. Our writer, top photo, shows how small the entrances are.*



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*A yurt homestead spreads out on the shores of White Lake. The relaxed lakeside town is a perfect place to rest while on a motorcycle journey.*

We were able to find out all about the gers after riding through the remote region near White Lake and stopping after a particularly exhausting day at a yurt camp we found along the road.

White Lake was shimmering in the late afternoon sun, with a series of about 20 white yurts set back from the shoreline. Dave and I immediately booked two nights, not even looking inside, just sure we'd welcome the relaxed lakeside setting and the modest staff providing yak stew and warm beer.

After filling our stomachs, Dave and I went inside our yurt to explore. The door was less than five feet high and the interior about six feet, with the centre rising to just over seven feet at the crown.

The wooden poles that had been put in place for the ceiling were beautifully and painstakingly hand-painted, as was the door. Half a dozen single beds ringed the gers canvas walls and an iron wood stove with a chimney extended up through the crown, which is left open to allow air to circulate.

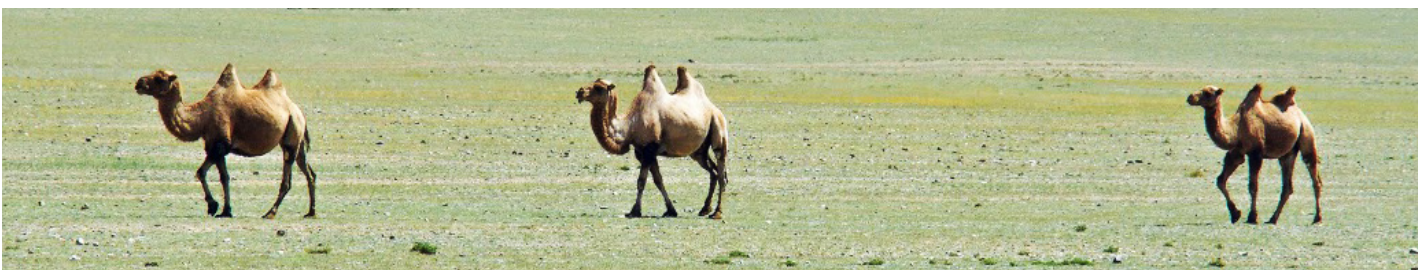
Although it was hot enough during the day to swim in White Lake, the evenings would cool off considerably and we appreciated the fire that warmed our living space.

Yurt camping today has seen a trendy increase as a rustic option for charming tourist accommodation. They are usually built now as permanent structures on wooden platforms and the steam-bent wood framing is covered in canvass or tarpaulin. Beautifully hand-painted doorways remain a colourful addition, nicely offset with the white canvass siding, and the interior can be anything from basic to luxury, depending on your budget and comfort requirements.

Our ger at White Lake was not luxurious, but there are yurt camps in the area that are much better serviced.

An overland expedition to White Lake is a fantastic way to see the country and talk with locals, although be sure you and your travel partner are hardy enough to withstand hours of bumpy off-roading leading to your yurt camp, complete with primitive pit toilets, outdoor, cold-water hand washing stations and locally-sourced food, which is often sinewy yak meat served on plates washed in lake water.

So, can you think of a reason not to go? •



*Camels are still widely used by the nomadic Mongolian people. They provide transportation and haul the yurt tents from place to place when the need arises.*



BRAZIL



# Portraits

## Of beautiful Rio's ugly past

Walk on the wild side reveals city's bleak slave history in an area now known as Little Africa



Wall murals in Rio de Janeiro tell the story of the city's slave trade past. The wall painting top, is located in Pedra do Sal, while the one left is of Eduardo Kobra.



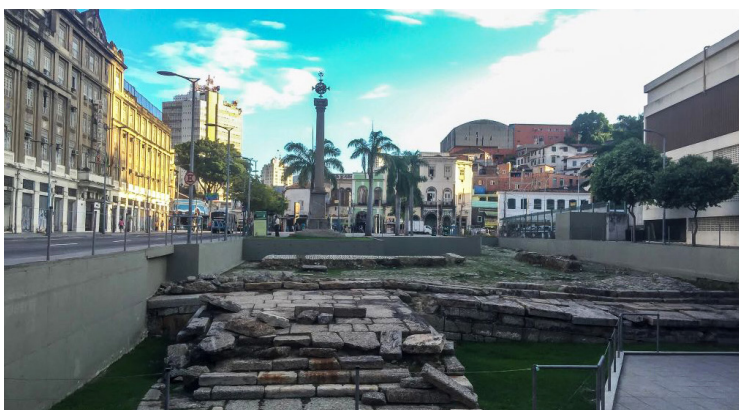


*The walls of Pedro do Sal are an outdoor museum that tell the sad tale of the Brazilian slave trade and the people who suffered during it.*

**R**IO DE JANEIRO — Standing on the rooftop of the five-storey Museum of Art (MAR), I have an aerial view of the Praça Mauá square in the heart of this playful Brazilian city. Below me, the wide public space is bordered by Guanabara Bay, a deep blue body of water dotted with yachts and framed by the Niteroi bridge in the horizon. The Museum of Tomorrow stands between the bay and the square, enticing intrigued tourists to take photos of its futuristic architecture before venturing inside to learn about climate change and the Earth's future. Slim palm trees with broad leaves line the pale stone plaza, a hint of Brazil breaking up the square's European design.

"It's here the name Little Africa was born," says Gabriela Palma, my tour guide. I'm here in the city's downtown to learn about Rio de Janeiro's past slave trade. More than five million slaves were brought to Brazil – that's about 10 times more than sent to the U.S. – from the 16th century until 1888 when slavery was abolished. It has been one of the most influential events in Brazil's history, yet it's rarely talked about.

Nowadays, Praça Mauá is a popular tourist destination, yet just over 100 years after slavery ended, the scene in this square told a different story. With no money and no home, thousands of freed slaves banded together in this region, planning their next move in a haze of uncertainty.



*Valongo Wharf is now a top tourist destination in Rio but 100 years ago it was where many of the African slaves sent to Brazil landed into a life of hell. More than five million slaves were brought to Brazil.*





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Valongo Wharf was built so the wealthy residents of nearby Conceição Hill, above, didn't have to see the slaves that came to this port.

"Locals heard them talking in different African languages. They called the area Little Africa as it seemed like a mini-version of the continent," Gabriela explains. The name stuck and today the region is home to the oldest Afro-Brazilian population in Rio.

Rio de Janeiro accounted for two million enslaved Africans and the rest went to other coastal cities, mainly Salvador in Bahia. Many of Rio's defining features from samba and Carnival to its ethnic diversity and cuisine comes from the traditions of the African people.

With Gabriela as my guide, I walk down into the square and head into Rio's city centre, making a quick detour to Olympic Blvd. next to Praça Mauá to see the world's largest street mural designed by São Paulo-born Eduardo Kobra in 2016. At 15 metres tall and 170 metres long, the masterpiece is made up of five portraits of indigenous people representing Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas and Australasia, and mixes photorealism with geometric patterns in an explosion of colour and culture.

We head further into the city centre. At the end of a walkway, we come across a cornered-off platform built from large grey slabs of rock forming the outline of a former port from the early 18th century. Known as the Valongo Wharf, it was built so the wealthy residents that lived at the top of nearby Conceição hill didn't have to see the estimated one million slaves that came through this port. Looking at it now, surrounded by office blocks with white-collared workers in smart suits hurrying past, it's hard to picture its past. Now it's remembered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as a reference to its importance in Brazilian history.

We move from the wharf and head to The Research Institute and Memorial of the New Blacks, a small museum that plays a big role in preserving the memory of those brought to Brazil. Displays mounted on the wall explain the journey from Africa to Brazil and into slavery. Images of former slaves hang from the ceiling. A wall at the back of the museum is covered in the names of those enslaved in this period of history. The most poignant of all is the burial ground where an estimated 30,000 bodies of those who died during the journey from Africa to Brazil are buried. Beneath a glass pyramid case, bones peak through the soil serving as a sobering reminder of the past's harsh realities.

Back outside the museum, Gabriela takes me to Pedra do Sal (Salt Rock) a name coined from when the slaves were forced to break huge chunks of salt on the large rocky platform there. Gabriela explains that after slavery was abolished, Pedra do Sal became the residence of the first quilombos, the communities of freed slaves who sought shelter there. It was these groups that made the first samba songs and turned Pedra do Sal into the birthplace of samba.

Today, Pedra do Sal's name has become associated with Rio's largest and most famous live samba party that takes place in the cobblestone backstreets of Gamboa every Monday and Friday night. Live bands — known as roda de samba — fill the air with the hypnotic beats of the iconic Brazilian genre while a mix of locals and tourists gather to drink potent caipirinhas and dance until dawn.

If the heart of Rio is in its downtown, it's here in Pedra do Sal where you'll find its soul. •

## JUST THE FACTS

### Where to eat

- **Angu do Gomes:** A low-key restaurant in the city centre, Angu do Gomes is famous for its classic Brazilian cuisine and cold beers. Try the angu, an Afro-Brazilian dish made with corn flour and served with cuts of meat in a rich sauce. <http://www.angudogomes.com.br/>

- **Bodega do Sal:** A participant in the Comida di Buteco, a competition in Brazil that searches for the best bar snacks in the country, Bodega do Sal is a traditional Brazilian pub next to Pedra do Sal. Try their competing dish, the deep-fried sardine coquettes with a coriander pesto. <http://botequimbodegadosal.com.br/>

- **Imaculada:** Off the main road in the city centre, even taxi drivers haven't heard of Imaculada, yet that doesn't stop it from filling up every evening. The star of the menu is the roasted ox tongue with potatoes and farofa (fried cassava flour). <http://www.barimaculada.com.br/>

### Guide

- For a guided tour of the Little Africa region and to learn about its history, Sou + Carioca provides both Portuguese and English tours. My tour was with Gabriela Palma. <https://www.facebook.com/soumaiscarioca/>

### Attractions

- The city centre has plenty of attractions to see and you can easily spend a couple of days exploring the area.

- **The Museum of Tomorrow:** The museum is just as famous for its futuristic style architecture as it is for its contents. The striking elongated roof is the design of Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava and the museum uses interactive displays to discuss climate change and the future of our planet. <https://museudoamanha.org.br/en>

- **The Museum of Art (MAR):** Holding some of Brazil's most important artworks, the Museum of Art features collections from both Brazilian and international artists dating back from the colonial era to the present day. <http://www.museudeartdorio.org.br/en>

- **The Research Institute and Memorial of the New Blacks:** The memorial preserves the history of slavery in Brazil and is the final resting ground of approximately 30,000 enslaved Africans. [http://www.museusdorio.com.br/joomla/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=107:memorial-dos-pretos-novos-the-memorial-of-the-new-blacks](http://www.museusdorio.com.br/joomla/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=107:memorial-dos-pretos-novos-the-memorial-of-the-new-blacks)

- **Churches:** Standing the test of time are the early 17th-century Sao Francisco da Prainha church and the mid-18th century Nossa Senhora de Saude church.

- **AquaRio:** One of the largest aquariums in South America, the AquaRio features a long aquarium tunnel where visitors can walk through and get up-close-and-personal with a variety of marine creatures. Its interactive and informative displays make it ideal for an educational activity for kids. <http://www.aquariamarinhodorio.com.br/>

- **Lapa:** Known as Rio's nightlife district, the neighbourhood is packed with late-night bars, typical Brazilian restaurants and lively dance clubs.

- **Selaron steps:** The bright-coloured staircase is a hand-made mosaic created by Chilean-born Jorge Selarón, who dedicated his work to Brazil after declaring the country his second home.

**Tourism info:** <http://visit.rio/en/welcome/>



# Jammin' in Jamaica

Visitors to tiny Negril enjoy island's 3 Rs: Reggae, Rick's & Red Stripe

STORY & PHOTOS BY TOM WUCKOVICH

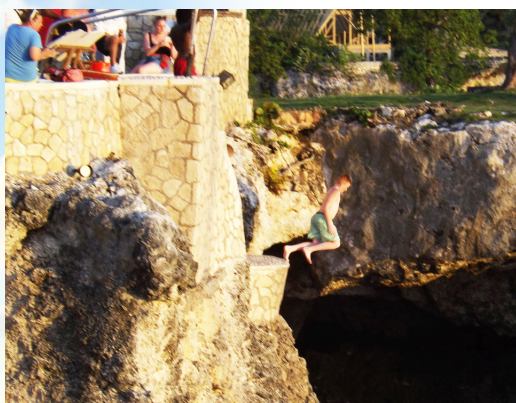
**N**EGRIL, JAMAICA — He looked 10 days older than dirt. Bamboo thin, he barely cast a shadow in the waning Caribbean sun as it slowly descended below the horizon, thrusting fingerlike ribbons of light into the low-lying patchwork clouds.

Sunset, a glittering boundary between day and night, seemed to energize the revellers at Rick's Café in Negril, prodding them to rise from their carefully chosen

spaces and move en masse, like a giant wave, toward the outdoor dance area. Here, the old man swaggered across a raised stage, alternately pumping his fist and exhorting the mostly young crowd dressed in scant clothing to embrace Bob Marley's plea to "let's get together and feel alright!"

The relentless, hypnotic reggae beat blaring from oversized speakers washed over the undulating dancers whose bodies seem to be tasting each note as if it





*Lovely Negril has much to offer visitors, especially those who get their courage from a bottle of the local brew called Red Stripe and dive off a rocky cliff into a cove below. For those not so adventurous, there's plenty of sailing and swimming on beaches that are sugary sweet. Or they can escape into the luxury world of Sunset at the Palms, above, an all-inclusive, adults-only resort.*

was some delicious tropical drink. But the dance floor is not the only place in this wild, rolling landscape of human activity to be seen and heard.

Nearby, groups of spectators perched on limestone rocks, watched and alternately cheered as one intrepid soul after another tested their resolve by jumping or diving from a designated platform on a cliff into a deep emerald green pool far below — many no doubt emboldened by profuse amounts of rum and Red Stripe beer. Flocks of gulls circled overhead, raucously mocking or admiring the proceedings, depending on your point of view.

This outdoor arena is an outstanding feature of Rick's Cafe, a genuine tourist curiosity in Jamaica seemingly renowned the world over. From 1974 until the present, visitors and locals have made it the premiere gathering spot for sunsets and celebrations, even overshadowing the breathtaking and majestic 10-km-long beach not far away.

Waitresses carted bottles of the genial and hearty Red Stripe beer in appropriately coloured red plastic buckets through the throngs of vacationers gathered here on a sultry June evening, the "canned courage" inspiring friendly encounters and small talk known locally as "Gi laugh fi peas soup," (to joke around and have a good time).

Rick's somehow personifies the achievement of what so many visitors come to Jamaica to get: fun, freedom and an excess of hospitality. Negril delivers.

Situated on the far western tip of the island, Negril is almost a two-hour drive from the main airport in Montego Bay. Aside from the beaches and the vibrant nightlife, it offers some sightseeing, such as Mayfield Falls, which touts all things reggae. At the entrance, a bamboo stairway leads to a wooden bridge that plops visitors into the middle of a Rasta Village dotted with huts where village tour guides accompany guests to the Reggae River, Reggae Style Island and point out the healing properties of the reggae plants.

Before exiting Mayfield Falls, sightseers can opt to luxuriate in 44 mineral pools and 21 natural Jacuzzis while imbibing on homemade foods and juices along with seasonal fruit. Entertainment includes native folklore and tips on local culture. It's a leisurely way to spend the day before the lure of the famed nightlife takes hold.

Additional activities can include golf, river rafting, canoeing, diving, touring by horseback, mountain biking or zip-lining. Those adventures, and countless others, can be arranged by the numerous resorts and hotels that crowd the coastline.

One such hideaway almost within hailing distance of Rick's is Sunset at the Palms, an all-inclusive, adults-only resort cautiously tucked away in an ocean of tropical vegetation.

Infinitely interesting and surprisingly complex tree house-style accommodations are perched amid lush plants and flowers affording guests ultimate privacy. Each of the 85 wooden bungalows, three of them suites, are strategically located along meandering pathways and received high praise from *Architectural Digest* magazine for their distinctive design. Most feature peaked ceilings, gargantuan wooden fans, Asian-inspired furnishings, dark natural wood floors and private balconies. The tree houses provide the perfect haven to relax and unwind after a full day of island adventures.

The only prominent building on the property is the cavernous main dining room, a massive wooden pavilion with a soaring cathedral ceiling where vacationers come together to indulge in buffet-style Caribbean fusion cuisine. For those guests that want more intimate dining, small enclaves in and around the dining hall offer a more romantic cloistered setting.

The Lotus Leaf Restaurant is a more elegant venue and requires reservations and appropriate sophisticated resort wear. On select nights, the Executive Chef prepares authentic local cuisine to a very limited number of guests in an open-air venue that also requires reservations. The seven-course meal is a favourite with honeymooners looking for that special evening.

Sunset at the Palms is rated as one of the top 10 all-inclusive Jamaican resorts by many websites. With all its varied activities, including entertainment and an inviting beach a short distance away, there's quite possibly no reason to leave the charming enclave.

But then, Rick's Cafe and its mystique are calling. Very few don't heed the call. •



ITALY

# *Return* To Medieval Italy

STORY & PHOTOS BY DON HEIMBURGER







*Servigliana, left and above, is an ancient town named after a Roman settlement. Its quadrangular castle annually returns to the year 1450 when residents play the part of Medieval damsels and knights in heavy armour.*

## Marche region's ancient towns and customs thrill the tourists



*An elderly resident of Offida sells her lace and jewellery from the open door of her quaint home. There's always a lineup.*

**M**ONTEGIORGIO, ITALY — A brisk, chilly wind buffets my face as I walk from my guest house at Officina Del Sole in Montegiorgio to a bountiful breakfast in a separate dining facility situated on the far side of a vast field of colourful hillside vineyards.

In the distance are the beckoning, sometimes snow-covered 2,400-metre mountain peaks of Monti Sibillini National Park set in Italy's Marche region on the country's sweeping Adriatic Coast.

I've come here to explore the area's intriguing landscape, its ancient Medieval villages and fortresses, and maybe learn the secrets of the popular Mediterranean diet which originated here.

Le Marche is not Tuscany or Umbria - the real estate is less expensive, the pace slower and it feels "like home." The landscape is particularly stunning, with woods full of boar, truffles and mushrooms, and the ever-present undulating hills. And then there's the Marchigiani, the people of the region: simple, smiling and approachable.

Breathing the pure, fresh air on the way to breakfast was helpful in arousing my senses and making me more aware of this picturesque landscape. One of the first stops in my venture was Montefiore dell'Aso, perched high above the surrounding cultivated fields and sturdily-built stone farm houses.

The cobbled, precipitous, muscle-stretching streets in this Borgo — part of a collection of 23





*The towns of Le Marche region are surrounded by fields flush with vineyards to yield a high-quality grape. The area's wines, while not as popular as Tuscany's, have a strong following.*

certified fortress-like communes in the region — make me realize I should have worked out more than I did prior to coming. But my efforts are rewarded: the Polo Museale di San Francesco, where the stunning 15th-century wooden triptych is displayed — it was created by artist Sala Carlo Crivelli — is easily accessible once inside. The work virtually shines in the specially-designed museum setting, and I attentively gaze for 20 minutes, amazed at the intricate work from nearly 550 years before.

My Marche visit turns up even more exceptional paintings, sculptures and other works by the likes of Piero della Francesca, Raphael, Perugino and Bramante. This landscape was the inspiration for their genius, and thankfully there are still traces of their Renaissance works remaining in these villages.

Later, with a small gathering of friends around a table brimming with local wines and a selection of mouth-watering meats and cheeses, I'm introduced to another aspect of life in Le Marche: very fresh, delectable food.

"All the flavour is good," reads a brochure I pick up from a local three-generation family-run pasta company called Molini Agostini Srl.

"Passions were born," says Agostini Manager Roberto, "to re-introduce things that in the past were interrupted."

Now Roberto is restoring a whole line of organic dried pasta "that distinguished our grandparents' way of life and eating," he says. Slow-drying is one of the keys to his product's success, he adds.

Now maybe I was getting somewhere with this Mediterranean diet thing.

But it's time for me to move on to Servigliano, a small neoclassic Borgo town named after a Roman settlement which held as many as 5,000 World War II prisoners from a number of Allied countries. Today, this quiet commune, with its quadrangular castle walls, annually returns to the year 1450 when residents play the part of Medieval damsels, knights in heavy armour and jousting again becomes a sport for the locals.

But I've come to see a special performance of a folkloristic show with colourful flag wavers and historical musicians, many displaying beautifully-crafted base and snare drums. With sunlight gone and lights illuminating the rough cobblestones on the city square, they march in uniform precision as the expert drill team executes deft maneuvers with flags as large as half a metre square.

The town mayor looks on as a crowd gathers to view the spectacle; except for the modern vehicles parked nearby, this show of colour and rhythmic excellence could have taken place centuries before.

Offida, 40 kilometres away, sits on a steep hill in southern Le Marche, and seems to preserve its old world charm by bottling it up within its massive light-coloured brick walls.

The dramatic Medieval church of Santa Maria della Rocca appears as if it sprang out of a rock, and when a fog appears in the valley below, I'm told the Romanesque-Gothic church seems to float on the clouds. An-

cient bones and timeworn inscriptions on the walls attest to century upon century of untold stories of this twin-chapel church. The fresco of Jesus is so expertly painted that Jesus' eyes follow me as I walk across the church floor.

I find the town's unusual triangular-shaped piazza resembles a set constructed on a Hollywood backlot. The locals use the quaint square for a running of the bulls festival at the town's annual Bove Finto during Carnevale. In the sun-soaked city square I discover several women sitting on chairs, partaking in the local custom of bobbin lace, or crafting of delicate lace, which can be traced to the 16th century. Changes come slowly to this venerable land.

I wander down Offida's inviting streets and alleyways, past its distinctive Renaissance-style town hall, dreaming of returning when the town celebrates its wine festival so I can fully appreciate the local red, Rosso Piceno. I'm told it's made from Sangiovese and Montepulciano grapes, which enjoy Marche's temperate climate, somewhat rocky soil and the superb Italian sunshine.

As I leave Offida, an old, gray-haired woman appears at the wooden door of her home. She is a lace maker and is selling her wares — a gorgeous, intricate golden lace bracelet using the small crack in her front door as a showroom. A crowd quickly gathers, and within a few minutes she's moved over 100 euros worth of her hand-made product. No big-box stores here, only products made from skillful individual craftsmanship. •



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