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THE ALLURE  
OF IRELAND'S  
ARAN ISLANDS

**SHORE THING**

On suburban Melbourne's Brighton Beach, a stretch of sand famous for its colorful bathing boxes. See page 90

**BULGARIAN  
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—FEATURES

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**FIELDS OF DREAMS**

An upstart cooperative is championing sustainable, small-scale coffee growing in the mountains of West Java. A visit to some of its farms reveals just how much the landscape is changing.

BY RACHEL WILL



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**SYDNEY OR MELBOURNE?**

Planning a visit down under during the Australian summer? If it's an urban break you're after and can't decide which of the country's two biggest cities to visit, read on to find out what's hot and happening in each. You might just decide to put both on your itinerary.

BY NATASHA DRAGUN



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**ROAD TO THE RHODOPES**

From Thracian tombs to Byzantine monasteries and Soviet-era monuments, temptations abound on a journey into the mountain fastness of southern Bulgaria, where ancient traditions meet modern comforts.

BY WARREN SINGH-BARTLETT



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**AN UNEXPECTED OASIS**

Founded 2,000 years ago on the edge of the Gobi Desert, Dunhuang is rich in Silk Road history and Buddhist art. Add a camel trek across sand dunes to the mix, and you've got one of western China's most beguiling destinations.

BY THOMAS BIRD

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**ON THE COVER:**  
On Melbourne's Brighton Beach. Photographed by Les and Dave Jacobs/Corbis



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: TERENCE CARTER; CALLAGHAN WALSH; CHRISTOPHER HILL; COURTESY OF PIKAIA LODGE; JOHN HOOPER



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HEARING THE WORDS “HOLIDAY TRAVEL” often conjures trials of patience in chaotic airports, crowded attractions and restaurants, and, of course, higher price tags. Yet this season is statistically one in which we travel the farthest and the most, not only because we can, but because we must. Religious celebrations aside, it’s the one time of year underlined with a universal go-ahead to prioritize spending time with loved ones, or simply with ourselves—a requisite often left out of our everyday routines.

So what’s your fancy? Mountains or deserts? Sea or snow, or both? Our roaming contributors have been sending back stories of all sorts of cinematic people and places that make us want to throw our own plans to the wind and follow in their footsteps instead: to rove through the southern mountains of Bulgaria to be bewitched by a pagan festival as Warren Singh-Bartlett did, or, like Thomas Bird, to prowl the Chinese desert where history unfolds on cave walls of ancient Buddhist art. For those wanting to summer-away their holidays, our Australian expert Natasha Dragun gives a thorough lesson in all one needs to know about Sydney and Melbourne these days; while up in the opposite hemisphere, Nantucket may be the summer camp of New England’s elite, but it sounds never more enchanting than in Mary Hickson’s recollection of a winter morning’s walk.

So fear not those security lines. A new year is upon us, and I can think of no better resolution than to step into it having reconciled the one behind, which is often done best with the flood of inspiration and perspective that comes with being far away.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ronald Liem', written in a fluid, cursive style.

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want, Mexico City itself is a great choice. It fills with celebrations in the lead up to Día de los Muertos, and nowhere more so than in San Andrés Mixquic, a sort of urban village to the southeast of the city proper. The atmosphere here is especially festive, with elaborate altars, costumes, food stalls, and, the highlight, a candlelit vigil held in the church cemetery, where the graves are festooned with marigolds. Magic.

—WILLIAM GREER, *Los Angeles*

**TALKING TURKEY**

Your article describing the indigenous edible treasures unearthed by a group of new Turkish chefs left me salivating [“Turkey’s New Delights,” Oct./Nov.]. What a departure from the lackluster fare that I encountered on my last trip to Istanbul, though to be fair, that was more than a few years ago. I have always thought some of the best aspects of Turkish culture could be found in the more rural environs of the country. Now that I can be assured that Turkey’s singular cuisine and uncommon wines await, there is a real incentive to revisit this country. Thanks for the insight. *DestinAsian* continues to be my most trusted travel advisor. —LYNDA MACPHAIL, *Sydney*

**ISLAND WISDOM**

Your latest issue was very enjoyable, and in particular I found the article about Japan’s Okinawa Islands and their long-lived residents to be fascinating [“Secrets of the Ryukyus,” Oct./Nov.]. We should all do as the elder Okinawans and eat well, keep active, and maintain some sort of spiritual connection.

—SARA ANDREWS, *Sydney*

**NORESERVATIONS**

I’ve been an avid subscriber of your prestigious magazine for the past 10 years; in my position with Philippine Airlines’ reservation office, we even used *DestinAsian* as reference material for our work! Each issue has been as impressive as the last—the stories are informative and colorful and do a great job of showcasing the various

countries that you cover around Asia and beyond.

—ROMEO SAN JUAN, *Manila*

**DEAD RECKONING**

I enjoy your “Next Stop” pages—the advice is timely and succinct, including the recent piece about Oaxaca [“Mexico Magico,” Oct./Nov.]. But if it’s Day of the Dead celebrations you

**We welcome your views and recommendations.** Letters to the editor should be sent via e-mail to [letters@destinasian.com](mailto:letters@destinasian.com) or by post to The Editor, *DestinAsian* Magazine, P.O. Box 08, JKPPJ, Jakarta 10210A, Indonesia. Published letters may be edited for style, clarity, and length.

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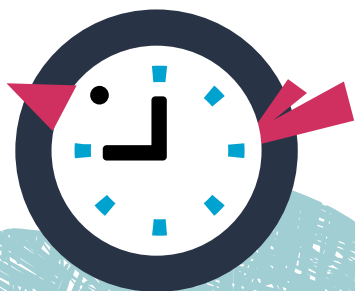
“Communist megaliths and stunning mountainscapes; hearty peasant fare and spring festivals that date back to the time of Alexander the Great—Bulgaria is a country firmly in touch with its incredible past,” says Beirut-based **Warren Singh-Bartlett**. “It’s also one of the few places on earth where you can go to Hades and back and still have time to get pleasantly mellow on a local wine over lunch.” Page 96.



Having spent her formative years in Melbourne, **Natasha Dragun** has a soft spot for Australia’s oft-gloomy, but always cool, southern city. But then again, the sun-kissed beaches of her current home, Sydney, have their own appeal. “For me, there’s no comparison. Both Australian cities are amazingly diverse, complex, cosmopolitan, and mesmerizing. And both will wear you out by the end of summer.” Page 88.



China-based **Thomas Bird** has been roaming the Middle Kingdom for several years contributing to guidebooks and penning feature articles. “The most surreal sensation,” he says of his recent desert jaunt in Gansu province, “was sipping red wine beneath lush grape vines watered by streams of crystal-clear ground water and knowing the arid desert was but a few meters away.” Page 106.



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Yet these practices do not compromise luxury and comfort. From the vibrant north to the majestic south, the hotels' bespoke experiences and tailor-made itineraries capture the essence of India for their guests. Those who venture to the Golden Triangle can luxuriate in warm hospitality while exploring the royal romance of Rajasthan and Agra.

In New Delhi, the legendary ITC Maurya is the preferred residence of visiting heads of state, global business czars, social glitterati, and academic leaders, while near the Taj Mahal is the regal ITC Mughal, recipient of the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture for its excellent representation of Mughal design. It is a beautiful base from which to explore the fifth-century capital of the Mughal Empire and offers a pampering wellness experience to return to at the hotel's unique Kaya Kalp Spa.

On to Rajasthan, the iconic ITC Rajputana in Jaipur immerses guests in the magnificence of the Pink City's palatial landscape. There are myriad palaces and forts to explore, exquisite foods to sample, and shoppers can carve out time to indulge in inspired sprees in the historic city's numerous colorful bazaars. And near New Delhi, the ITC Grand Bharat, Gurgaon is an all-suite destination resort with extensive wellness and recreation services, including a 27-hole Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course.

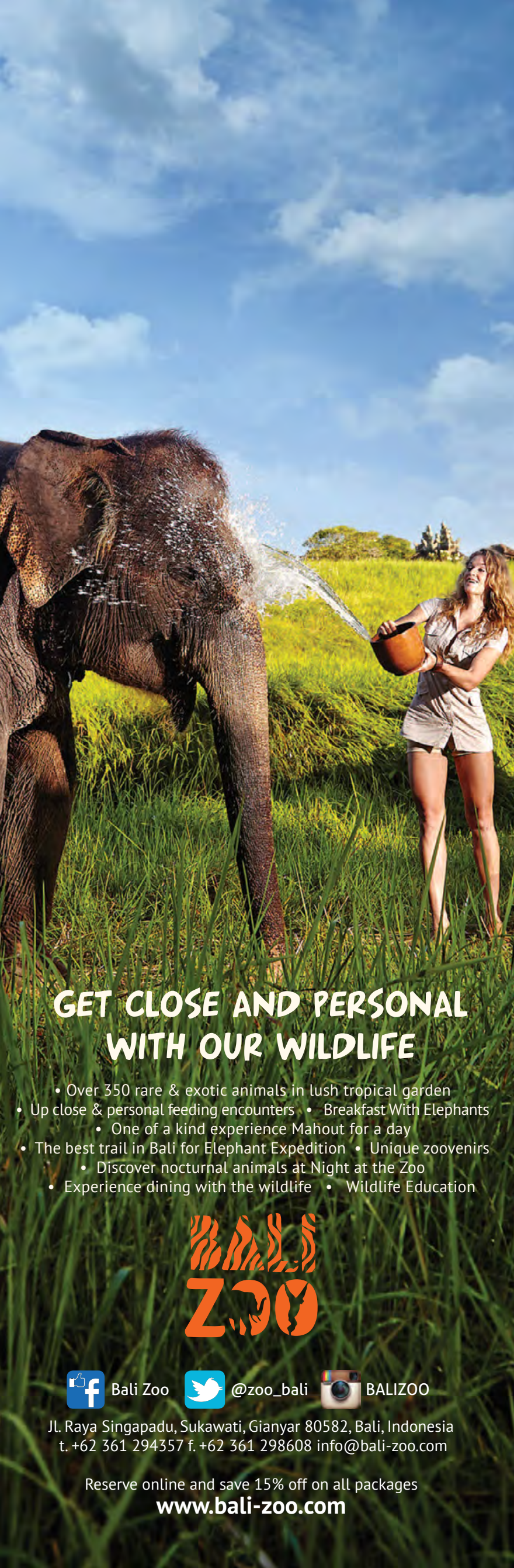
In Chennai, known as the Gateway to South India, the majestic ITC Grand Chola sets the stage for a memorable journey through the subtleties and sensibilities of the Southern



psyche. A sojourn to Bengaluru beckons with the alluring ITC Gardenia or the charming ITC Windsor, set in the old-world charm of India's Garden City. And a visit to the historic seat of the Nawab rulers in Hyderabad is best begun with a warm welcome at the ITC Kakatiya. With the famous Charminar mosque in its old city and delectable local cuisine, the City of Pearls summons travelers from the world over.

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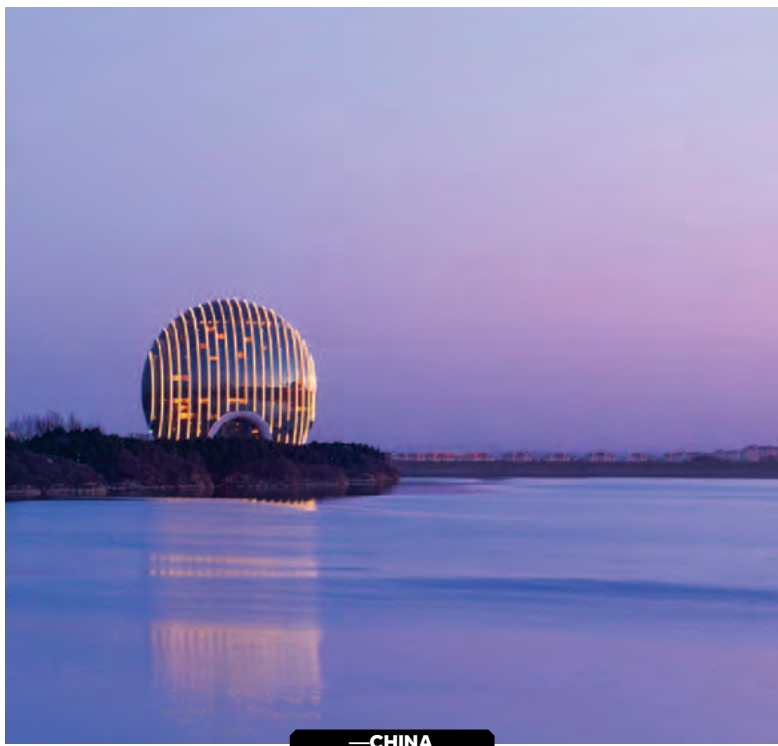
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### SPECIAL DEALS LUXURY FOR LESS



—CHINA

With hydroelectric-powered LEDs illuminating its sun-shaped glass facade, the **Sunrise Kempinski Hotel, Beijing** ([kempinski.com](http://kempinski.com)) is off to a bright start. Located an hour's drive north of downtown Beijing, the 306-room hotel opened in November as the centerpiece of a Kempinski-managed resort development on the southern shores of Yanqi Lake. It's the perfect base for exploring the Yanshan mountains and the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall, especially until the end of February, when an opening offer of US\$180 per night gets you 25 percent off best available rates plus breakfast.

#### —MALDIVES

A little bit of planning pays off at **The Residence Maldives** ([cenizaro.com](http://cenizaro.com)), where an Early Bird Offer gets you 25 percent off best available rates for bookings made 30 days in advance. Valid through the end of 2015 and applicable to both beach and over-water villas, the special also includes early check-in and late checkout.

#### —SINGAPORE

Majorly refreshed after a recent renovation, the **Fairmont Singapore**

([fairmont.com](http://fairmont.com)) is looking its best with a new lobby, cocktail bar, and nearly half of its rooms remodeled. Adding to the hotel's appeal is its Seasonal Saver offer running through April 30, giving guests 20 percent off stays of two or more nights and complimentary room upgrades when bookings are made online.

#### —VIETNAM

Travelers have yet another reason to linger in central Vietnam with **The Nam Hai's** ([ghmhotels.com](http://ghmhotels.com)) Long Stay promotion, which

offers 25 percent off room rates for stays of three or more nights through June. The deal includes daily breakfast, fruit baskets, and select minibar goodies as well as shuttle service to nearby Hoi An, whose well-preserved Old Town is among the country's eight World Heritage Sites. Guests booking a minimum of seven consecutive nights will receive additional incentives, including two three-course set lunches or dinners and an hour-long massage at the resort's pond-side spa.

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WHAT'S  
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BEYOND



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**ESTATE OF GRACE**  
A one-bedroom villa  
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## RAISING THE BAR IN BINTAN

—INDONESIA

With a grand opening slated for January 1, **The Sanchaya** looks set to become the best new reason to hop the ferry from Singapore to Indonesia's Bintan Island. The resort's prime beachfront location in up-and-coming Lagoi Bay is only part of the attraction. Its nine colonial-themed suites and 21 villas, the latter individually designed with decor and furnishings from across Southeast Asia, are as luxurious as accommodations come on the holiday island, and with staff trained at the British Butler Institute, service should be of an unmatched standard as well. Sophisticated touches also include a wine-and-cheese tasting room and croquet lawn ([thesanchaya.com](http://thesanchaya.com); doubles from US\$430). —DAVID TSE

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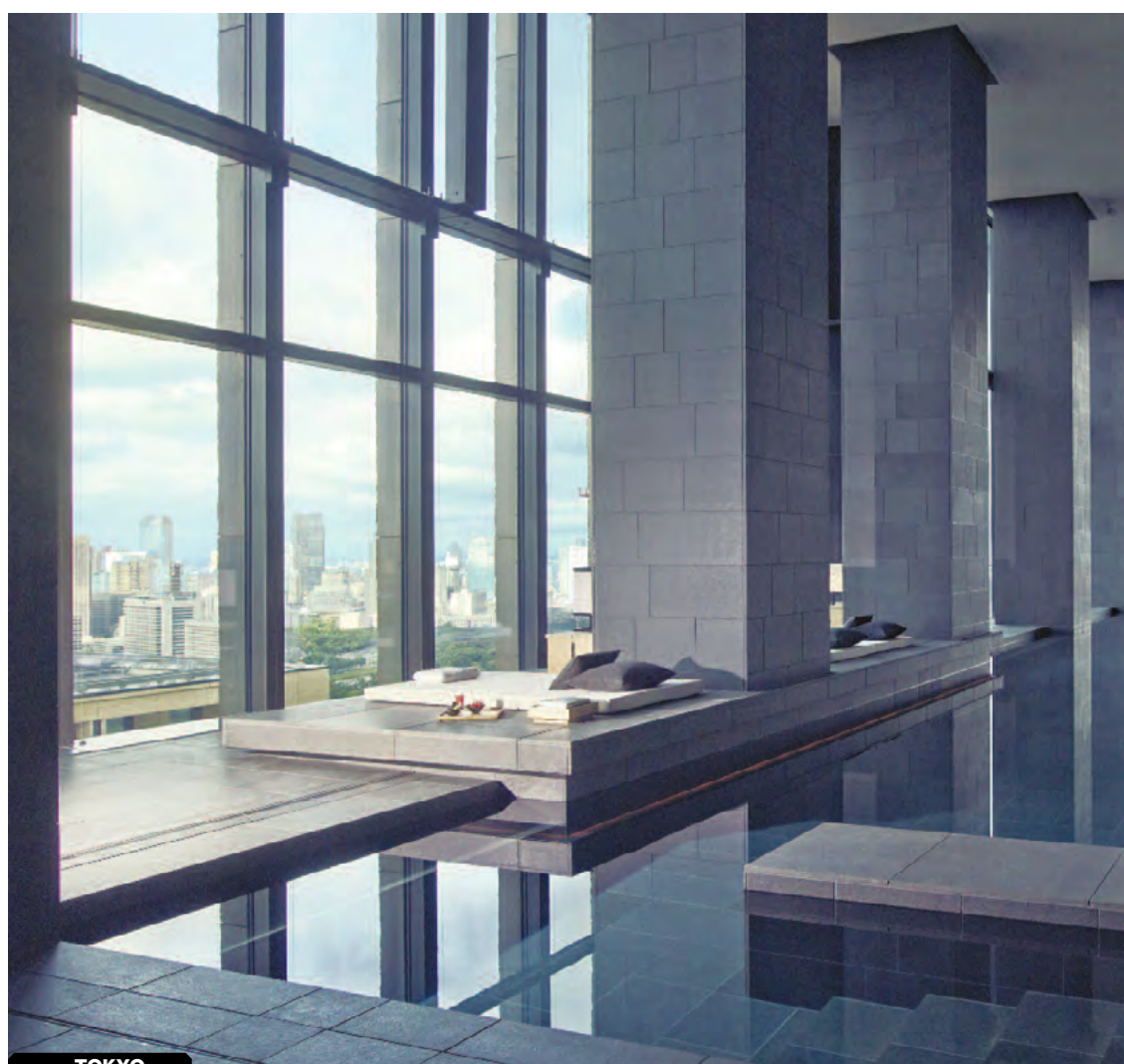
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**HIGH CONCEPT** When art- and publishing-world maven Carla Sozzani opened 10 Corso Como in Milan nearly 25 years ago, she forewent any niche marketing, compiled goods from all lifestyle disciplines—fashion, food, art, music—and dubbed it a “concept destination.” Concept stores come a dime a dozen now, but hers is still the taste-making nucleus, with a small constellation of outposts: Seoul, Shanghai, and as of late November, **10 Corso Como Beijing** ([10corsocomo.com](http://10corsocomo.com)). The 1,100-square-meter store in luxury mall Shin Kong Place was designed by American artist Kris Ruhs, who infused Beijing culture (royal colors of red and gold) with nods to Italy (a sculpture garden, kaleidoscopic light fixtures) to create a space as beautiful as its offerings, which range from Diptyque candles, Saint Laurent bags, and assorted garments of designer denim to cocktails, French pastries, and a fine-art gallery. —GL



—BEIJING



—TOKYO

## ZEN AND NOW

Amanresorts properties are like Birkin bags—exclusive, immaculate, and cool—and the latest opening on December 22, **Aman Tokyo** (1-5-6 Otemachi; 94-11/743-4000; [amanresorts.com](http://amanresorts.com); doubles from US\$630),

promises to be no different. Despite the group’s having a property in Venice (where George Clooney got hitched), it has declared this its first city hotel—or rather, “city retreat.” Housed at the top of the 38-story Otemachi Tower near Ginza, it overlooks the Imperial Palace Gardens and Mount Fuji beyond, though the lobby is a landscape of its own, with two rock

gardens under a 30-meter-tall *washi*-paper sculpture of a Japanese lantern. Consummate relaxation measures include a *furo* deep-soaking tub in each of the 84 guest rooms and a spa spanning two of the hotel’s six floors complete with Japanese hot baths. Other indulgences include a Mediterranean-inspired restaurant and a sky-high pool. —GABRIELLE LIPTON

## ON A ROLL

—HOIAN

What sounds more exhilarating—or photogenic—than zooming around Southeast Asian countrysides on the back of a Vespa? Break out those sepia filters, because **Vietnam Vespa Adventures** ([vietnamvespaadventures.com](http://vietnamvespaadventures.com)) and sister outfitter **Cambodia Vespa Adventures** ([cambodiavespaadventures.com](http://cambodiavespaadventures.com)) have recently put together five new tour itineraries. For four to six hours—and US\$60 to \$75—guests can motor through Hoi An’s farmlands and nearby sleepy islands on restored vintage Vespas from the ‘60s, or, in Siem Reap, cruise through a halcyon landscape of ancient Khmer temples or explore the street-food scene after dark. —DAVID TSE



COURTESY OF AMAN TOKYO; 10 CORSO COMO; VIETNAM VESPA ADVENTURES

—ON THE JOB

## WORTH HIS SALT

From pink Peruvian salt harvested in Andean springs to Welsh salt with hints of vanilla, the ubiquitous seasoning is such a centerpiece of the menu at Anantara Phuket Villas' Sea.Fire.Salt restaurant that a saline-savvy expert was brought on board to oversee it. Meet Sommai Wooniem, the resident salt sommelier whose job it is to ensure that each meal is paired with the appropriate salt—or is it the other way around?

**A typical day involves...** making sure that the restaurant is properly set up, the music is on,



and my salt jars are clean and filled. During lunch and dinner service, I learn the guests' names and what they ordered before going to their tables, presenting

the different salts, and helping choose the one that best suits their food and palate.

**If someone told me I would grow up to be a salt expert...** I would have just laughed. I wanted to be a surgeon or a businessman, maybe famous like Steve Jobs, but I have a passion for fine food, and discovering the world of flavors of different salts was a revelation.

**Salt is like...** wine. It goes through the same careful selection process when being matched with food—*tom yum* salt with seafood and white meat, for example, or green tea-infused salt with salad—because when the different salts and their flavors are used correctly, they can shape a dining experience.

**Few people know that salt...** was sometimes used as currency to pay Roman soldiers. This is where the word “salary” comes from, as well as the expression “to be worth one’s salt.”

**The most challenging part of my job is...** picking the right salt not only for the right dish but also for the right person. The salinity and the seasoning flavors of a dish are a question of personal taste, and choosing them is an art.

**Working in hospitality is...** not a job where you can look at your watch and clock time. It naturally requires long hours, but the shared story that has been created between my colleagues and me is one of the continual high points of my career.  
—GABRIELLE LIPTON

Incredible India

The logo for Goa, featuring the word "GOA" in a stylized, colorful font. The letters are blue, red, and yellow, with a white outline. The logo is set against a white background within a yellow-bordered square.

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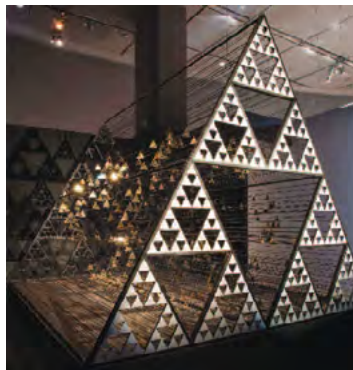
## LIVING LEGEND

—SHANGHAI

Just because something is abstract doesn't mean it's inaccessible, and perhaps no modern artist proves this more than Sean Scully. The two-time Turner Prize nominee's talent for densely packing emotion into colossal blocks of colors and shapes has made him one of the West's most famous living abstract artists, and two years in the making, his first major exhibition in China,

**Follow the Heart: The Art of Sean Scully 1964-2014** at Shanghai Himalayas Museum (*until Jan. 25; himalayas.art.cn*) could mean a similar near future for him in Asia. More than 100 works primarily from Scully's own collection range from realist pieces from his early career all the way to *China Piled Up*, a 15-meter-tall sculpture made specifically for this exhibition.

—GABRIELLE LIPTON



—SINGAPORE

## LION CITY LUSTER

Ever the art juggernaut, Singapore has clicked its creative agenda into especially high gear this winter. Two Da Vinci exhibits began with **Da Vinci: Shaping the Future** at the ArtScience Museum (*through April 31; marina.baysands.com*), displaying 26 pages of his 12-volume *Codex Atlanticus* alongside six paintings from his students and five contemporary art installations inspired by his penned models. And just across the water at The Arts House of the Old Parliament,

**Leonardo Da Vinci's Earlier Mona Lisa** (Dec. 6–Feb. 11; *monalisaexhibition.com*) debuts the artist's portrait of the enigmatic madam in her younger years.

In a more Singaporean renaissance, the **MAD Museum of Art & Design** (*madmuseumsingapore.com*) has moved into a new home on Tanglin Road, where it now fills two floors with works by contemporary artists as well as a cigar lounge, café, and gift shop. And as a finale to the season, **Singapore Art Week** (Jan 17–25; *nac.gov.sg*) overflows with gallery openings, exhibitions, special events, and all the art-world glamazons who will flock to Marina Bay Sands for the coinciding fifth edition of **Art Stage Singapore** (Jan. 22–25; *artstagesingapore.com*), the flagship art fair of Southeast Asia. —GL

**FRAME BY FRAME** From top: Works by 18 artists from 10 countries fill MAD's new 1,800-square-meter abode; An installation by architecture company WYTO based on Da Vinci's mathematical theories at *Shaping the Future*; Now based in New York, Irish-born Scully is one of the most influential living artists.

COURTESY OF MAD MUSEUM SINGAPORE; MARINA BAY SANDS; SEAN SCULLY STUDIO



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# TIPPLE PLAY

Hong Kong's cocktail scene continues to heat up, even as the weather cools. Here, four notable newcomers

BY NICK WALTON

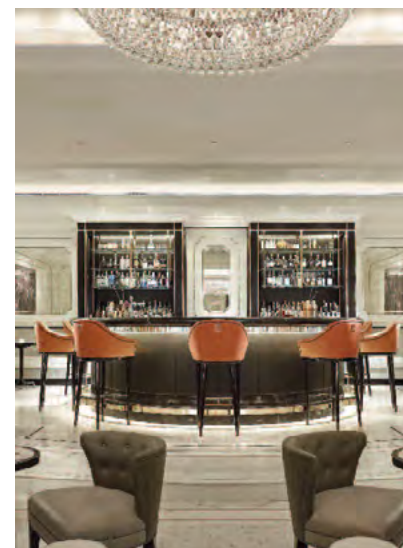
**THE WOODS** Part bar, part lab, one of the most innovative recent openings on Hollywood Road is all about challenging our senses. Bartenders at The Woods, which is hidden away below street level, house-cure, infuse, macerate, and barrel-age spirits with a myriad of locally sourced and often unexpected ingredients, including traditional Chinese medicinal herbs. Heady signature drinks include the Blackberry on Rye, with Michter's rye whiskey, plum bitters, fresh blackberries, and a dash of pinot noir; and a Dirty Dill vodka martini made

with pickle brine, mustard seeds, and slivers of gherkin (*17 Hollywood Rd.; 852/2522-0281; [therwoods.hk](http://therwoods.hk)*).

**THE ENVOY** Another bar taking cocktails to a whole new level is The Envoy. Located at The Pottinger boutique hotel, it offers a chance for "startender"



**SHAKING THINGS UP** Clockwise from left: The Envoy's Antonio Lai; the bar at Artesian; the Milo Dinosaur at The Envoy combines Absolut Elyx, Godiva chocolate liqueur, milk, and Milo powder in "dinosaur egg" cup; a Four Pepper margarita at The Woods.



brainchild of brothers Harsh and Rohit Roopchand, the clever chaps behind sensory sensation Fatty Crab. The bar shelves are packed with hard-to-source rums from across the world, and the cocktail menu is laced with fresh fruit and spice—the signature Dutty Wine (named for the Jamaican dance) blends three different rums with red wine, cloves, and cinnamon, and goes perfectly with the Sticky Island ribs and Jamrock jerk chicken (*28 Hollywood Rd.; 852/2523-7070; [rummintings.hk](http://rummintings.hk)*).

**ARTESIAN** Across the harbor in Kowloon, the most anticipated opening on the city's cocktail circuit is the Hong Kong branch of the Langham London's elegant Artesian bar, regularly named the world's best. The space exudes old-world charm and cutting-edge innovation, while highlights on its drinks list include the Lillet-and-absinthe-infused Paddington and the floral Gin Mare, a blend of basil, thyme, and rosemary named for its gin base. In fact, the bar's selection of 52 bourbons and 34 gins ensures there are plenty of adventurous combinations on offer (*The Langham Hong Kong; 8 Peking Rd., Tsimshatsui; 852/2375-1133; [hongkong.langhamhotels.com](http://hongkong.langhamhotels.com)*). ©

COURTESY OF THE ENVOY; COURTESY OF ARTESIAN; COURTESY OF THE WOODS



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**SOI STORY**  
Left: A waiter at Eat Me, carrying a crispy-skinned duck confit with roasted beetroot. Below: Prosciutto-and-scamorza bruschetta at Moko. Opposite, from left: The bar at U.N.C.L.E.; Namsaah's salmon-tartare wonton tacos.

# SIZING UP SILOM

Wedge between Silom and North Sathorn roads, the leafy residential backstreets of this old Bangkok neighborhood have a new buzz thanks to a fresh crop of drinking and dining venues. Read on to find the best of the newcomers—and one stalwart that is keeping things current  
BY LARA DUNSTON



**—EAT ME** Holding the 37th spot on Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list, this Silom hot spot isn't new. In fact, it's 16 years old—ancient in Bangkok years—but has remained au courant thanks to a team with their fingers on the pulse. Australian Darren Hausler and food stylist sister Cherie opened this local institution when there was little in the area except food stalls. The good-looking retro space would be a grand old dame if it weren't for frequent nips and tucks by American designer Kelly Wheatley of Lump, whose handcrafted furniture is made from recycled wood and vintage fabric. Chef Tim Butler (formerly of New York's Daniel) continually tweaks his seasonal menu of fine produce-driven cuisine that Hausler broadly labels "modern, international, regional." Try the Australian saltbush lamb rack with broad bean, mint, and charred lemon. Star "mixultant" Joseph Boroski is responsible for the classic cocktails (*Soi Pipat 2, off Convent Rd., Silom; 66-2/238-0931; eatmerestaurant.com*).

**—VESPER** When it opened in March, this European-style bistro and cocktail bar injected some sophistication into a street previously distinguished only by an Irish pub and a Mexican joint. By day Vesper has a gentleman's-club vibe with its leather Chesterfield sofas and black-and-white tiled floor. After dark, when the lights are turned down and the music cranked up, things get pleasantly boisterous. The drinks, designed by mixologists from London's Fluid Movement, draw a discerning crowd for the infused spirits and barrel-aged cocktails as much as the Spanish-Italian comfort food by chef Luca Appino, whose tapas introduce a menu of pizzas, grills, and handmade pastas such as orecchiette with 'nduja, a spicy Calabrian sausage spread (*10/15 Convent Rd., Silom; 66-2/235-2777; vesperbar.co*).

**—LE DU** The unpretentious decor of this petite restaurant belies the elegance of the contemporary Thai cuisine artfully arranged on the plates. The two twenty-something Thai chefs—Thitid "Ton" Tassanakajohn (who is also an owner) and Worathon "Tae" Udomchalotorn—trained at the Culinary Institute of America and worked at Eleven Madison Park and Jean Georges in New York before returning home to open Le Du last November. The name derives from a Thai word for "season,"



and the chefs source quality seasonal produce from around Thailand to create some of the most intriguing food in Bangkok right now. Dishes such as locally raised ostrich with tamarind, winged beans, and



sticky rice incorporate modernist techniques without the tricks and gimmicks. It's terrific value, too: a four-course tasting menu will only set you back about US\$30 (*399/3 Silom Soi 7; 66-92/919-9969; ledubkk.com*).

—**NAMSAAH BOTTLING TRUST** *Namsaah* is an oldfangled Thai word for sparkling water—a nod to the former life of this hot-pink early-20th-century villa as the office of a soda-bottling company. The owners—Thai celebrity chef Ian Kittichai, music impresario Fred Meyer, and nightlife maven Justin Dunne—tried to capture some of that colorful history in the building's latest incarnation as a fun bar and restaurant. And they succeeded. With its July opening, Namsaah quickly became a local favorite for its atmospheric decor, idiosyncratic soundtrack, whimsical cocktails, and playful Asian inspired dishes like salmon-tartare wonton tacos and a pink *krapow* burger (Wagyu beef in a pink-peppercorn bun). Match them with a smoky Negroni made with tangerine juice and roasted mandarin oranges or a Sang Som whiskey sour flavored with salted caramel (*401 Silom Soi 7; 66/2636-6622; namsaah.com*).

—**MOKO COFFEE & EATERY** Kult art gallery owner Martine Pailloux co-opened



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this airy, light-filled café in May, decorated it with design objects, modish light fittings, mismatched furniture crafted from recycled wood, and a rotating exhibition of art and photography on the walls. Fruit bowls and cookie jars on the marble counter ensure it's more café than gallery, as do stacks of magazines, tabletop herb pots, and friendly service. Italian chef Marco Rosato's light, mod-Med comfort food—think sesame-crusted tuna and shiitake risotto—makes use of fresh seasonal organic produce from Royal Project farms and features flavorful vegetarian options. Moko's all-day weekend brunches have been a big hit (*71/1 Sathorn Soi 10; 66-2/635-3673; no website*).

—**ROCKET COFFEEBAR** This cool little neighborhood café brought some clean-lined Scandinavian style to gritty Sathorn Soi 12 when it debuted in 2013. Inspired by cafés in Stockholm, San Francisco, and Sydney, the owners—a trio of successful Swedish mixologists—created a very contemporary yet warm and welcoming space, with communal tables and a U-shaped bar. The main draws are their artisanal breads and pastries (baked on the premises every morning), great coffee from small-batch roasters, and wholesome, healthy dishes created from organic produce. Expect anything from daily-made vegetable soups (try the carrot-cumin if you're there on a Thursday) to banana waffles with whipped



mascarpone, strawberry-lavender preserve, and fresh strawberries. The formula has proved so successful that Rocket has already spawned a pair of offshoots: one in trendy Thonglor, and another at Central Embassy mall's Siwilai concept store (*149 Sathorn Soi 12; 66-2/635-0404; rocketcoffeebar.com*).

—**LADY BRETT** Opened last March right next to Rocket, low-ceilinged Lady Brett, with its long bar and warm wood paneling, is a hip, cozy, contemporary take on the



**THAI STYLE** Clockwise from above: Cocktails at Namsaah Bottling Trust include Thai twists on Negronis and mojitos; Namsaah's upper-floor dining room; fettuccine bolognese at Lady Brett; Le Du's Thitid Tassanakajohn and Worathon Udomchalotorn.

kind of relaxed New York neighborhood tavern where you can hang out all day and comfortably dine alone with a book. And that's exactly what Bangkok's locals and expats are doing. The fare is hearty old-fashioned comfort food with a twist. Follow the garlicky prawn bisque with a melt-in-your-mouth braised lamb shank with truffled roast pumpkin and cherry-rosemary sauce (*Sathorn Soi 12; 66-2/635-0405; ladybrett.com*).

—**U.N.C.L.E** Just a few months old and still very much under the radar, this glam, dimly lit cocktail bar is a speakeasy in the true sense of the term—there is no sign out front and access is via an alley beside Lady Brett and then up a couple of flights of stairs. While there's a DJ some nights, the focus is on the drinks. The owners—the same Swedish mixologists behind Rocket and longstanding gastro-bar Hyde & Seek—have been making the city's best cocktails for the better part of a decade. Expect handcrafted cocktails, including many old recipes, made with premium spirits and housemade infusions, served in fine vintage-inspired glassware (*149 Sathorn Soi 12; 66-2/635-0406; avunculus.com*). ©

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# SPIN CITY

**The Place** Konya, Turkey. **The Route** Turkish Airlines ([turkishairlines.com](http://turkishairlines.com)) flies four times daily from Istanbul to Konya, which is situated 460 kilometers to the southeast in the plateau country of central Anatolia. Turkey's seventh largest city is also connected to Ankara via high-speed train, a journey of less than two hours. **Why Now?** Konya is the home of the whirling dervishes, or Mevlevi, a Sufi order founded by the 13th-century Persian mystic and poet Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. With their billowing robes and tall camel-hair hats, the dervishes are best known for the trance-like spinning ritual that they believe brings them closer to God. Though they perform the sacred dance regularly throughout the year, there's no better time to witness their rapture than during the Mevlana Festival, a 10-day commemoration of Rumi that will climax on December 17 (the 741st anniversary of his death) with especially ecstatic whirling. **What Else?** The dervishes' original lodge is now the Mevlana Museum, a complex that includes Rumi's tomb and its magnificent turquoise-domed mausoleum. Another must-see is Çatalhöyük, a 45-minute drive from town, where the ongoing excavations of a Neolithic town dating back nearly 10,000 years provide a fascinating glimpse into the ancient past. **Where to Stay** Just across the street from the Mevlana Museum, the **Hich Hotel Konya** (90-332/353-4424; [hichhotel.com](http://hichhotel.com); doubles from US\$192) inhabits a 200-year-old building whose 13 stylish guest rooms feature hand-knotted Anatolian rugs and wrought-iron beds. —TINA SINDUKUSUMO



**ALL AWHIRL** Dervishes performing in the gardens of Konya's Mevlana Museum.





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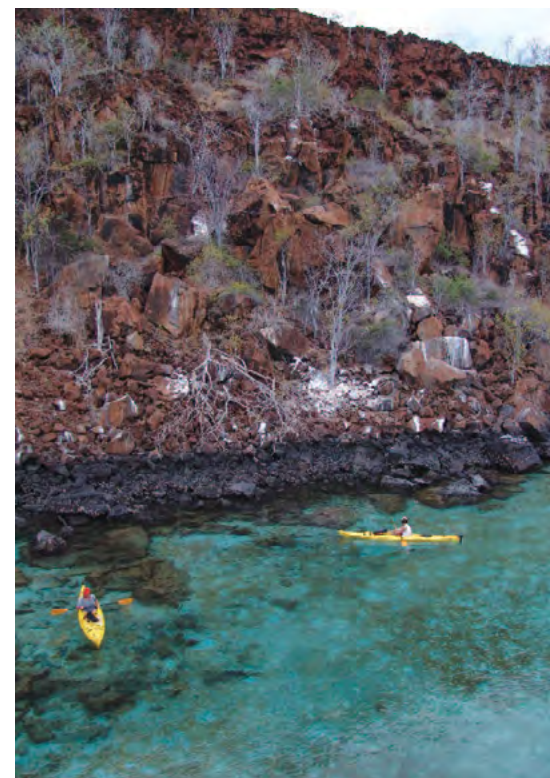


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## NATURAL SELECTION

The first luxury lodge in the Galápagos Islands provides creature comforts aplenty  
BY AYESHA KHAN

Situated in the highlands of Santa Cruz Island, the newly opened Pikaia Lodge began with founder Herbert Frei's desire to build a luxury retreat that was sustainable, not only out of respect for the pristine surrounds, but also because of its off-the-grid location on the crater of an extinct volcano. Completely carbon neutral, the lodge generates nearly all of its electricity through solar and wind energy, while rainwater is collected in a rooftop reservoir system and treated on site for use by the lodge. The 31-hectare property even includes a private reserve for giant tortoises.

Green credentials aside, what makes Pikaia



**ECO-LUXE** Clockwise from top: Pikaia Lodge is perched 450 meters above sea level amid the volcanic highlands of Santa Cruz Island; guests on a kayaking excursion; the lodge's pool suite.

Lodge unique in the Galápagos is the extent of its luxury—a far cry from the ubiquitous backpacker digs in Puerto Ayora, the island

capital. There are only 14 rooms, all of which feature terraces (the largest suite has a pool) and floors of bamboo and Peruvian marble, enormous bathrooms, and floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over even bigger vistas, stretching uninterrupted to the Pacific Ocean and sister islands of the archipelago beyond. The same views envelop Pikaia's Sumaq Spa, which, though small, fits in a state-of-the-art infrared sauna and bubbling whirlpool.

And then, of course, there's the most important element to Pikaia's winning formula: its location in the center of the Galápagos Islands. Four- to ten-day Exploration Packages guide guests by land and by sea (the resort has its own 30-meter luxury diving yacht, the only one of its kind in the islands) to promontories that rise high above the ocean and sandy beaches unmarked by footsteps. Early mornings start with traditional Ecuadorean breakfasts of plantain empanadas and yucca bread, surprisingly delicious fuel for days spent sea-faring, hiking, kayaking, and snorkeling off islands teeming with turtles, birds, and iguanas.

Evenings at Pikaia are spent marveling at the sunset with cocktails in-hand followed by gourmet dinners at the Evolution restaurant, where young Ecuadorian chef Norman Brandt puts the emphasis on local produce. And on clear nights, guests can arrange a guided stargazing session as a prelude to their slumbers (593/4371-1670; [pikaialodgegalapagos.com](http://pikaialodgegalapagos.com); doubles from US\$3,230 for a minimum three-night stay). ©

# Baros Maldives



The sole resident of a small island in the Indian Ocean, Baros Maldives is an exclusive romantic getaway. Beaches are soft and golden, waters are shimmering and clear, reefs are colorful and full of life, and accommodations are divine. From the moment guests hop aboard the speedboat that whisks them to Baros from the Maldives International Airport just 25 minutes away, they're surrounded by nothing less than paradise.

Nestled in gardens on the island or perched offshore in the surrounding lagoon, 75 villas fashioned from timber, sandstone, and thatched roofs immediately feel like home, each with a king-sized bed, daybed, veranda, espresso machine, and wine chiller filled with bottles selected by the resort's sommelier. For the utmost in privacy, the Baros Residence is a 268-meter award-winning villa with its own pool, garden, and butler.

Despite its seclusion, there's plenty to do here for water-lovers and landlubbers alike. A resident marine biologist and PADI dive center educate guests as they explore the reefs, and a luxury yacht and traditional sailing *dhoni* are available to venture farther through dolphin-filled waters

to other islands on day excursions or sunset cruises. A spa, hammock-filled palm garden, library, lounge, and resident yogi provide ample ways to relax as well, not to mention the resort's cuisine. Not only is food prepared from the freshest ingredients, but venues such as the overwater Lighthouse Restaurant and elegant picnics on a sandbank set in the middle of the Indian Ocean make for unforgettable dining experiences.

A member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, Baros celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2013 and continues to improve with age, most notably with the remodelling of the all-day-dining Lime Restaurant (which now features an open kitchen) and the debut of an 85-square-meter freshwater infinity pool, one of the first overwater pools in the Maldives. Open to all guests, the pool has been built into the restaurant's timber deck above the lagoon so as not to intrude on the island's natural environment, the pride and soul of the resort itself.

North Male Atoll; 960/664-2672;  
[baros.com](http://baros.com)

**BAROS**  
maldives

# ODE TO THE OKURA

The days are numbered for this landmark hotel, where echoes of 1960s Tokyo glamor are destined to give way to the crash of the wrecking ball

BY REBECCA MILNER

In a city like Tokyo, there is something particularly decadent about a building that sprawls horizontally as the Hotel Okura does. It's such a flagrant misuse of space, especially in the heart of downtown. And oh, how the Okura sprawls—its grounds cover an expanse more than three times the size of the city's baseball stadium. It has its own post office, its own barbershop, a private art museum, a tea ceremony room, and a salon just for playing *go*, an ancient board game akin to chess.

Opened in 1962 in the Toranomon business district, the Hotel Okura is a window into the luxuries of another time, when seats in coach had legroom and nobody had ever heard of molecular gastronomy. The genteel Orchid Room restaurant still serves things like lobster thermidor, brought to the table by tuxedoed waiters. Lobby attendants wear kimonos. But it couldn't last forever; it's a miracle it lasted as long as it did.

The past decade in Tokyo has seen a crop of luxury hotels pop up like bamboo shoots after the rain, as the Japanese say. They are all models of efficiency and all cast in the same mold: a skyscraper with the first 20 or more floors housing offices and then, in the top floors, the hotel. This is contemporary Tokyo, ever more streamlined.

Soon, the Okura will be no different. On the last day of next August, its main building (an annex was added in 1973) will shut its doors, and when those doors reopen in the spring of 2019—a year ahead of the Tokyo Olympics—they will be within a 38-story glass tower.

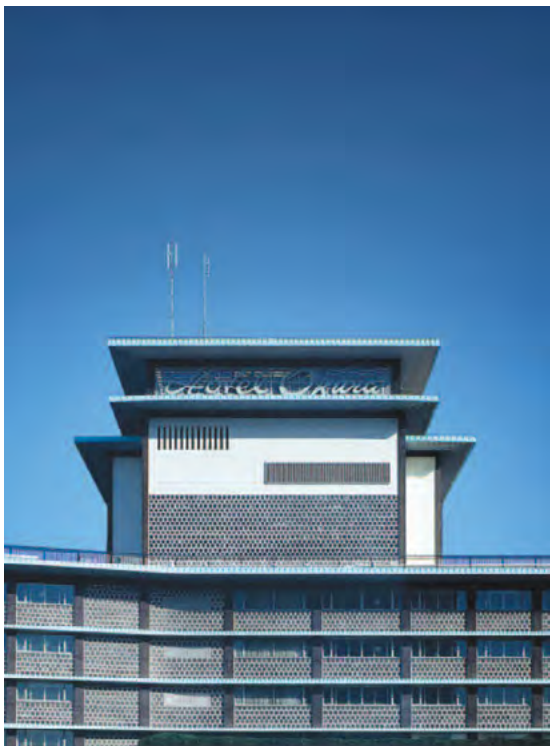


Gone will be the endless corridors; offices will occupy the new building's first 18 floors. Half the land will be turned over to a public park. It's hard to find fault with the latter, and there's no doubt the reopening will receive much fanfare. New openings usually do, and Tokyo always has a new opening.

What the city doesn't have, however, is many outstanding examples of 1960s design, especially those with the power to make design wonks go weak in the knees. Case in point: *Monocle* magazine has launched a quixotic campaign to save the hotel's main building, as when this landmark goes, so too

will its iconic vision of Japanese modernism. It feels like the passing of an aging Hollywood star, the last of her era.

When the Hotel Okura debuted in advance of the first Tokyo Olympics, it was the height of '60s glamour. Royalty, heads of state, and diplomats checked in, as did celebrities like John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who holed up for several months in the Okura's Presidential Suite in 1977. Even James Bond stayed here in the Ian Fleming novel *You Only Live Twice* (though the hotel that appears in the film version is actually the rival Hotel New Otani), and it's no stretch at all to picture a young Sean



**MARKING TIME** Clockwise from left: A vintage photo of a banquet at the Hotel Okura's Emerald Room, where waiters still wear tuxedos and bowties; the unique design of the hotel's lobby blends '60s sensibilities with the traditional colors, textures, and crafts of Japan; the main building's modernist facade. Opposite: Pendant lamps still hang in the Okura's lobby, though not for much longer.

**WHEN THE HOTEL OKURA FIRST OPENED, IT WAS THE HEIGHT OF '60S GLAMOUR. ROYALTY, DIPLOMATS, AND HEADS OF STATE CHECKED IN, AS DID CELEBRITIES LIKE JOHN LENNON AND YOKO ONO, WHO HOLED UP FOR SEVERAL MONTHS IN THE OKURA'S PRESIDENTIAL SUITE IN 1977**



Connery—or *Mad Men's* Don Draper—at the Orchid Bar, sipping a martini on one of its black-leather banquettes.

As with many of the structures built for the 1964 Olympics, the Hotel Okura was intended to showcase the very best of Japanese design. Lead architect Yoshio Taniguchi, who was also responsible for Tokyo's Imperial Theater and Museum of Modern Art (his son, Yoshio, would go on to redesign the MoMA in New York City) arranged the main building as a stack of horizontal planes—like a pagoda, but without the curling edges—and imprinted the outer walls with a crosshatch pattern that nods

to a decorative style favored by the rich merchants of centuries past.

Sure, the guest rooms feel a little old-fashioned now. But oh, the lobby! Never was there a better example of what excellent bed-fellows mid-century modernism and Japan's traditional aesthetic could be. A great expanse of carpet the color of *tatami* straw runs toward windows shaded with paper screens. The tables, perfect discs, look like lacquer trays polished to a high sheen. And the chandeliers, strings of faceted orbs, dangle like gemstones from the ears of a starlet.

On one wall, there's a world clock that con-

tinues to mark the time in Leningrad, as if to demonstrate that time really does stand still at the Okura. The chandeliers might survive the renovation and be installed in the lobby's next incarnation, but I have doubts about the clock. The months are numbered for this and other relics of the jet-setting 1960s. Until then, should you find yourself passing through Tokyo, raise a glass—a Manhattan maybe, or an Old Fashioned—to the Hotel Okura, a Tokyo icon that will be sorely missed. ©

2-10-4 Toranomom, Minato-ku, Tokyo; 81-3/3582-0111; [hotelokura.co.jp](http://hotelokura.co.jp)



**SKY HIGH** Admiring the aurora borealis from a vantage point in front of northern Sweden's Aurora Sky Station, perched 900 meters above sea level.

## SEEING THE LIGHTS

This winter is expected to provide one of the best opportunities to spot the northern lights in a decade or more. Here are four ways to check the celestial light show off your bucket list

BY TINA SINDUKUSUMO

—ICELAND

**On a Night Safari**

What could be more adventurous than chasing the aurora borealis in a four-by-four? The Northern Lights Hunt by Reykjavík-based Arctic Adventures is a guide-led jeep excursion that includes a spot of lava caving, a lobster dinner in the coastal village of Eyrarbakki, and a drive into the shadows of the Blue Mountains to witness the elusive natural phenomenon, conditions permitting ([adventures.is](http://adventures.is)).

—FINLAND

**From Your Bed**

In Finnish Lapland's remote Luosto ski area, the snug Santa's Hotel Aurora gives new meaning to the expression "room with a view." Ten new guest rooms with glass ceilings and walls conveniently come with alarms that alert guests when the lights are in the sky ([hotelauroora.fi](http://hotelauroora.fi)).

—NORWAY

**From the Deck of a Ship**

Venerable Norwegian shipping line Hurtigruten's Astronomy Voyage takes passengers on a 12-day round-trip cruise from Bergen along Norway's fjord-carved coast. A visit to the Nordnorsk Vitensenter planetarium in Tromsø, well north of the Arctic Circle, is part of the trip, as are lectures by an onboard astronomer ([hurtigruten.com](http://hurtigruten.com)).

—SWEDEN

**With a Four-Course Meal**

With its clear skies and minimal light pollution, Abisko National Park is one of the best places on the planet to observe the northern lights. To that end, ride a chairlift up to the Aurora Sky Station and enjoy a four-course dinner, after which a tour will take you out to marvel at the light show overhead ([aurora.skystation.com](http://aurora.skystation.com)). ©



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# *C'est. Magnifique!*

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*Sofitel marks its golden jubilee with  
luxurious new properties in Asia*

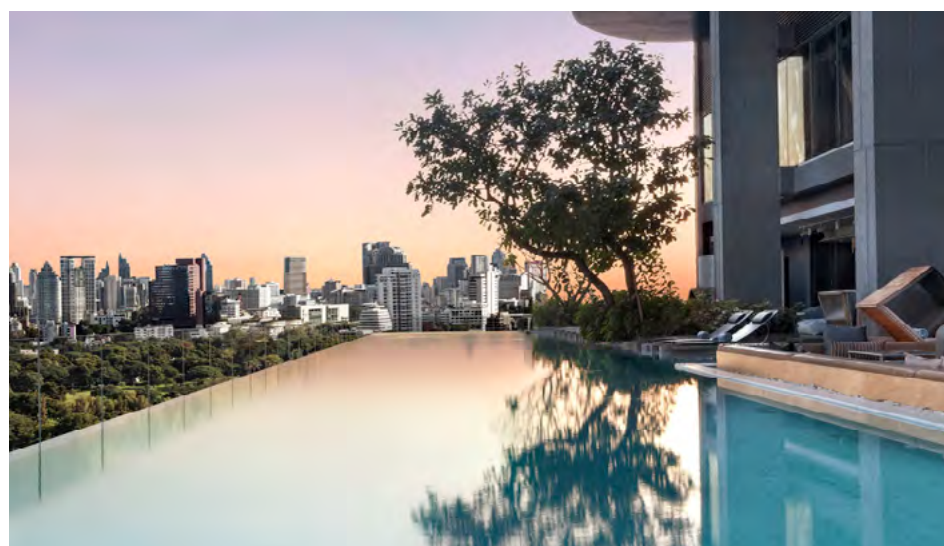
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Anniversaries are a time to celebrate, and French luxury brand Sofitel is ringing in its 50th with panache. Sofitel's decision to move its marketing team from Paris to Singapore as it reaches its half century puts Asia at the heart of its plans. For the luxury traveller, this means more destinations with more hotels that seamlessly blend culture, gastronomy, and design, all infused with French elegance.

There are now more than 40 elegant Sofitels in Asia Pacific, with lavish properties across Southeast Asia—from Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos to Vietnam and the Philippines—including flagship hotels for the fashion-forward Sofitel So and stately Sofitel Legend labels.

Whether it's in the heart of a city, perched on a beach or hidden away in the country, Sofitel has a knack for creating hotels that awaken all the senses. At the flagship Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Golf and Spa Resort for example, guests can spend a morning perfecting their swings on Cambodia's first championship golf course





before heading out to marvel at the ancient temple towers of Angkor Wat, just 10 minutes away. In the evening, they can indulge in the outstanding French-Khmer fusion food at Mouhots Dream before unwinding with an Ayurvedic oil treatment in the So Spa.

Sipping an expertly mixed cocktail in a moonlit cabana gazing out over Lumpini Park from the ninth-floor lobby of the Sofitel So Bangkok is a unique experience hard to match in Thailand's vibrant capital city. Christian Lacroix and five Thai design masters designed the hotel as a one-of-a-kind collaboration, a typical Sofitel So territory where the boutique brand invites world-renowned artists and designers to pair with famous architects to contemplate contemporary design.

For something with a little more mystique, enter the Legend collection. Step into a *fin de siècle*-styled suite in Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi's colonial heritage building just steps from the Opera House in the French quarter. An award-winning flagship, the hotel sets its refined experiences

in a centuries-old building bursting with historical character.

In two new addresses that fully embrace the French *art de vivre*, Sofitel will welcome two hotels in 2015, the Sofitel Luang Prabang and Sofitel So Hua Hin. Built in the early 20th century, the 23-room Luang Prabang property was converted from the local governor's mansion where, outside the windows, the fiery hues of orange-robed monks dramatically swish past the lush greenery of a UNESCO World Heritage city. And in Hua Hin, just three hours from Bangkok, the contemporary Thai-style hotel will sit in Cha Am, an indulgent beach resort town famed for attracting royalty.

For today's demanding travellers who expect nothing less than beauty, quality, and excellence at every turn, Sofitel, Sofitel So, and Sofitel Legend hotels and resorts tick every box. And with an anniversary approaching, it really is time to celebrate.

[sofitel.com](http://sofitel.com)



—OMAN AIR

## MAKING FOR MUSCAT

Just in time for the holiday travel season, Oman Air is launching two new connections between Southeast Asia and the Omani capital of Muscat. Beginning on December 2, the flag carrier begins flying two roundtrips weekly to Manila and adds a third on December 13; and on December 12, it begins flying thrice weekly to Jakarta, adding a fourth flight come January 2. Muscat-bound travelers will have to rise early for the respective 3:50 and 5:05 a.m. departure times, but they can take comfort in the fact that the carrier is deploying its A330s on the routes. Book a ticket in the planes' award-winning business-class cabins, curl up on a spacious lie-flat leather seat, and come the morning touchdown, arrive rested for your exploration of the ancient Arabian port city ([omanair.com](http://omanair.com)).

Dubai and Milan results in Emirates upping its passenger capacity on the route by 38 percent. Currently, the carrier operates a mix of 777-300 and 777-300ER aircraft on three daily roundtrip flights between the cities, but it has swapped one for an A380 as of December 1, marking the first permanent A380 service to Milan Malpensa Airport. In part, the change was made in anticipation of the Milan Expo 2015 beginning in May and the increased number of travelers the city is expected to receive thereafter ([emirates.com](http://emirates.com)).

### MALAYSIA AIRLINES

Passengers looking to upgrade their seats can now bid to do so via Malaysia Airlines' new MHUpgrade program. The virtual auction system emails eligible economy- and business-class passengers with the option to enter the highest amount they are willing to spend on an upgraded seat, and if their bid is a success, they will be informed and charged 48 hours prior to travel. All the benefits of upgraded classes are included as well, such as priority check-in, baggage allowance, priority boarding, and access to airport lounges ([malaysiaairlines.com](http://malaysiaairlines.com)).

### CATHAY PACIFIC

As awarded by Skytrax in July, the world's best airline has begun revealing its new brand image, which has been in the works for the better part of two years. Some changes are already apparent, such as the change of its logo to a single brush swish and color-coding for the different classes of travel. Others will be instated over the next year and a half, including everything from new lounges and entertainment options to in-flight services and website features ([cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com)).

### QANTAS

Australia's flag carrier is offering the airline industry's first seats that can recline through entire flights, from take-off to landing. Designed by Qantas' creative director Marc Newson, the seats are part of the new Business Suites that will be unveiled in the carrier's entire fleet of A330 aircraft beginning on domestic flights in December and, in January, on routes from Sydney to Bangkok, Jakarta, Shanghai, and Manila ([qantas.com](http://qantas.com)).

### ETIHAD AIRWAYS

After experiencing a 51 percent increase of passengers on its flights to India in the first quarter of 2014 compared to that of the year before, Etihad has joined with Jet Airways to meet the new demand. Together, the two will fly three times daily—rather than the current two—from Abu Dhabi to both

Mumbai and New Delhi, beginning in February and May respectively, as well as increase services to a dozen other major Indian cities throughout the year. The collaboration dovetails with Jet Airways' recent joining of Etihad Airways Partners, an alliance Etihad began in October after long remaining independent from other carriers ([etihad.com](http://etihad.com)).

### QATAR AIRWAYS

Beginning January 5, Qatar will begin servicing one of its four daily Doha-Bangkok flights with an A380 aircraft. Putting the superjumbo on the route was a decision based on demand, as Doha serves as a hub for many international travelers heading to the Thai capital, and the A380 offers 461 economy seats—a substantial increase from the 293 on the Boeing 777-300ER,

which will continue on the other three flights. The A380s also have first-class seating, an option the Boeings don't offer ([qatarairways.com](http://qatarairways.com)).

### ALL NIPPON AIRWAYS

As of December, ANA has introduced a new set of in-flight menus for travelers flying between Japan and Thailand, Singapore, China, Hong Kong, and Los Angeles. The carrier has partnered with renowned chefs from the Four Seasons, Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts, and the Patina Restaurant Group on new Thai, Cantonese, Italian, and American dishes—including special wine and cocktail choices on some flights—offered in addition to its traditional Japanese menus ([ana.co.jp](http://ana.co.jp)).

### EMIRATES

A single replacement of one of its aircraft flying between

**MUCH  
ADO  
ABOUT**

# MAKATI



If Manila is the Philippines's answer to New York City, Makati would be Manhattan. Being the capital's central business district, Makati throbs with life, never running out of tricks up its sleeves to excite its visitors and residents. It hosts not only a roster of international corporate offices but also a thick concentration of hotels, boutiques, restaurants, bars, foreign embassies, and museums, all within a stone's throw from one another. It's a cosmopolitan labyrinth of fun where one can enjoy a fancy feast on top of a skyscraper one moment and have a charming picnic amidst verdant lawns the next. This heady mix of lifestyle elements makes Makati a prime address from which to experience the best of Manila and urban life in the Philippines—and discover a few reasons to come back.

## Retail Respite

Having some of the country's most covetable shopping havens within its bounds, Makati is very much a shopper's paradise. Aside from the usual luxury labels such as Louis Vuitton and Prada, it also offers homegrown brands that showcase Filipino creativity and craftsmanship. Some of the stores not to be missed are **Aranáz** ([aranaz.ph](http://aranaz.ph)) for fine handbags, **Arnel Papa** for exotic jewelry, and **Myth** ([mythlifestyle.wix.com/myth](http://mythlifestyle.wix.com/myth)) for clothing—the brand was the toast of Philippine Fashion Week.

**SM Makati** ([smdeptstore.com](http://smdeptstore.com)), **The Landmark** ([thelandmark.com.ph](http://thelandmark.com.ph)), **Glorietta Mall**, and **Greenbelt Mall** ([ayalamalls.com.ph](http://ayalamalls.com.ph)) are a string of shopping malls linked by elevated walkways. This quadruple threat of a retail oasis is already a treasure trove of everything from fashion to furniture, but a visit to **Rockwell Center** ([e-rockwell.com](http://e-rockwell.com)), a compound composed of a mall, designer boutiques and residential buildings, is also worth the 15-minute cab ride. Farther afield, **SM Aura** ([sm-aura.com](http://sm-aura.com)) in the neighboring city of Taguig, also fits the bill for anyone with a taste for luxury.



## Flavor Full

Internationally experienced foodies would agree that Filipino food is one of the world's most underrated cuisines. There is nothing quite like the greasy, crunchy goodness of pork belly *sisig* and the sweet-sour flavor of meaty *adobo* that has inspired all sorts of variations in the Philippines and abroad, thanks to the extensive Filipino diaspora. **Mesa Filipino Moderne** ([mesa.ph](http://mesa.ph)) and **XO 46 Bistro Filipino** ([adventmanilagroup.com](http://adventmanilagroup.com)) serve some of the most

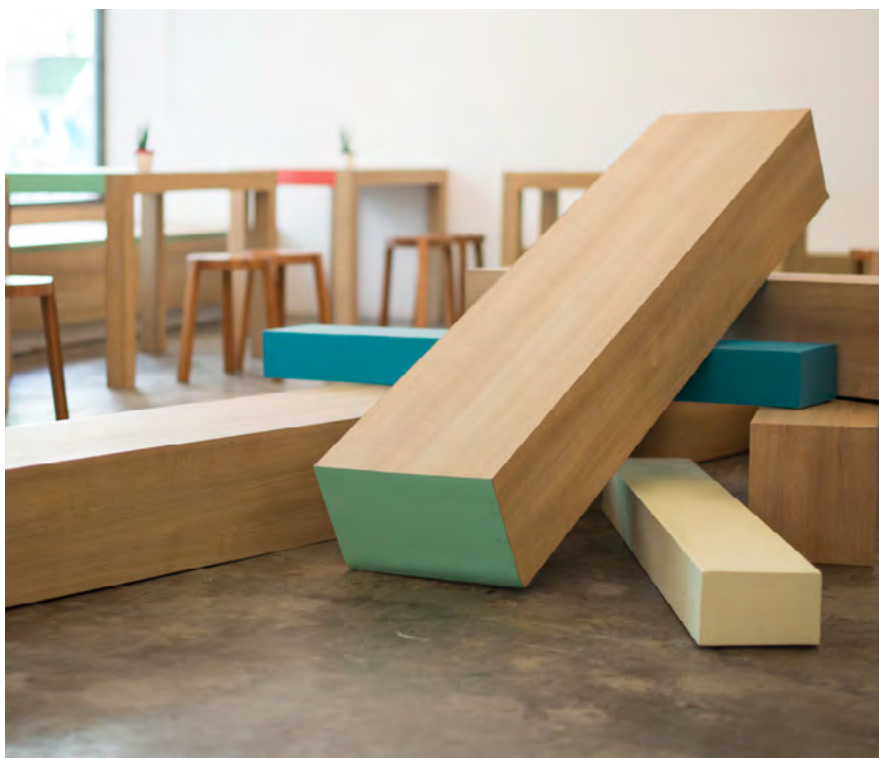
sumptuous dishes from across the archipelago, so a meal at these restaurants is a great way to get acquainted with the local fare.

Aside from the unforgettable Filipino food, Makati is also home to an international smorgasbord offering everything from Persian to Puerto Rican. In the Makati Avenue–Kalayaan Avenue area, the rest of the world is well represented with rows of restaurants tempting the palate with an array of flavors.

Another excellent way to sample the food scene in Makati is through its weekend markets. The **Salcedo Community Market** and the **Legazpi Sunday Market** have been around for quite some time now, and for good reason—the gastronomic finds, mostly of the farm-to-table variety, are worth waking up early for.

For fancy dinners, **Blackbird**, situated in an Art Deco concrete tower at Manila's old international airport (now known as the Ayala Triangle Gardens), and **Masetto** ([mgroup.com.ph](http://mgroup.com.ph)), hidden in the heart of Makati, are ideal venues. Both restaurants have impressive wine lists to go with menus of gourmet sensations by local culinary masters.

Recently, Manila has been blooming with some premium spots for caffeine fixes. Among its influx of third-wave coffee shops are a few standouts in Makati: **Yardstick** ([yardstickcoffee.com](http://yardstickcoffee.com)), **The Curator** ([thecurator.com.ph](http://thecurator.com.ph)), and **Toby's Estate** ([tobysestate.com.au](http://tobysestate.com.au)) are brewing some of the finest coffee with tasteful interiors to match.





# DUSIT THANI MANILA

WITH ITS ELEGANTLY REVAMPED BALLROOM, THE DUSIT IS A PERFECT HOST FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS IN THE PHILIPPINES

AS MANILA BLOSSOMS into its own as a Southeast Asian capital, so too is it increasingly becoming a destination for special affairs and momentous occasions. For those that require convenient accessibility and elegant design, the Dusit Thani Manila's recently renovated Mayuree Grand Ballroom offers the perfect pairing, with modern Thai style, a highly skilled staff, and the utmost hospitality in the heart of the city.

The Bangkok-based hotel group named the ballroom after the Thai word for the female partner of a peacock, as its new design is meant to evoke the grace and detail of the beautiful bird flaunting its feathers. Renowned Hong Kong-based design firm DWP created the interiors with special attention to details: a specially commissioned carpet design is colored with hues of emerald and gold, and local artisans hand carved the wood that bedecks the adjoining hallways. On the walls are imported glass panels, reflecting the light from the crystal chandeliers hanging above.

Easily tailored to fit the needs of its guests, the ballroom can transform to accommodate a range of occasions, from business conferences and corporate socials

to weddings, debuts, and anniversaries. Five hundred and fifty guests can comfortably be seated in the space, while for standing events, it can host up to 1,000. And as the hotel itself offers 538 rooms and suites and a full range of facilities including seven dining choices, a fitness center, and a spacious outdoor pool, it easily lends itself to affairs where guests may need—or want—to stay a little longer.

*Ayala Center, Makati City, Manila;  
63-2/238 8888; [dusit.com](http://dusit.com)*



## All Too Well

With all the delicious food, it's a good thing there are a number of options to keep in shape while visiting Makati. The **Ayala Triangle Gardens** ([ayalatriangle.com](http://ayalatriangle.com)), a green patch in the middle of the district's concrete jungle, is an idyllic spot for jogging and playing Frisbee. The place is also a favorite place among pet-owners to bring their beloved four-legged companions.

There are numerous fitness centers all over the city, so there's never a problem finding a class of choice—yoga, Pilates, dance, spinning. But for those looking to be pampered during their stay, **The Spa** ([thespa.com.ph](http://thespa.com.ph)), at its location on Paseo de Roxas, is the ultimate indulgent oasis. This haven is tucked in the middle of Makati and attached to the Greenbelt shopping area yet remains a peaceful and relaxing hideaway, its private rooms providing a refreshing break from the bustle outside.



exhibitions respectively. Meanwhile, those looking to enrich their own art collections should be sure and visit **Salcedo Auctions** ([salcedoauctions.com](http://salcedoauctions.com)) and pick up a piece or two from local and international artists.

## Night Time is the Right Time

Come nightfall, the city wakes up in a different way. A host of spectacles, from cocktail parties to musical performances, extend to the wee hours of the morning in a party circuit beloved by international revelers.

Makati's club du jour is **71 Gramercy**, which is aptly named for its location. Perched on the 71st floor of Gramercy Residences, this nocturnal hot spot takes parties to new heights with a bar full of premium spirits and exhilarating views of the city skyline. With its fancy ambience and the occasional international DJ manning the booth, this club is the haunt of Manila's most discerning night owls.

**Finders Keepers** and **Black Market** ([blackmarketmnl.com](http://blackmarketmnl.com)) are other nightspots worth checking out. Both share the same location and exude a cool, underground vibe that attracts Manila's artistic set. Funk, hip-hop, house, techno and electronica dominate the playlist while simple, straightforward drinks are on the menu.

Day in, day out, Makati never disappoints. There is always something new and interesting around the corner. And while it could be likened to any other city center with its host of upmarket attractions, it has a charm distinctly its own.

## Art Smart

Filipinos are an artistic bunch, and in Makati, anyone would be hard-pressed not to notice. Besides the occasional public art installations and music festivals, museums and galleries are fixtures in most neighborhoods. Some of the most notable include the **Ayala Museum** ([ayalamuseum.org](http://ayalamuseum.org)), which is connected to Greenbelt mall, and **La Fuerza Compound**, an area that showcases local creativity through a collection of contemporary art spaces.

The **RCBC Plaza** ([rcbcplaza.com.ph](http://rcbcplaza.com.ph)) is also a promising destination, comprised in part by the **Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium** and **Yuchengco Museum** ([yuchengcomuseum.org](http://yuchengcomuseum.org)) and all their theater performances and art





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*Rolex's most formal line of watches returns to classicism with its latest collection, showing beautiful restraint in the artistry of its three new models*

Of Rolex's primary lines of watches—the Oyster Perpetual, the Professional, and the Cellini—the latter has always fulfilled the role of the dressiest, the watch to wear or gift for the most special occasions. Trends like square faces, slim bands, and precious stones have defined the line before, but this year's new collection marks a return to basics for the 110-year-old house of luxury, making the Cellinis as timeless as timepieces can be.

Named after Renaissance goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, the line has always been founded in classicism, epitomized with its three latest models. Each has a round face with a diameter of 39 millimeters—the universal size of comfort for a man's watch—set inside a double bezel both domed and fluted and cast in 18-carat gold, either white or Everose, Rolex's signature version of rose gold. Elongated Roman numerals and appliqués mark the hours told by dauphine faceted hands atop a dial lacquered in either black or white,

bearing the house's iconic emblem, the *rayon flamé de la gloire*. Straps are of large-scale alligator in black or brown and clasped with gold.

The three models comprising the collection are the Cellini Time, Cellini Date, and Cellini Dual Time, all set in motion by a self-winding chronometer made entirely in-house, able to hold the time for 48 hours when fully wound. Cellini Time is the most restrained, telling the hour, minute, second, and nothing else. Cellini Date adds a sub-dial positioned at the third hour to tell the day, and Cellini Dual Time tells the time in two zones with a sub-dial positioned at the sixth hour and a sun-and-moon motif indicating day or night.

Handsome yet understated, formal yet practical, wearable and inimitably well made, Rolex's new Cellinis embody their definition of being “symbols of excellence, performance, prestige, and innovation,” investments that will only appreciate the more their hands turn around.





p. 54—ISLAND SCENE Ireland  
p. 60—CITYSCAPE Hong Kong

# DISPATCHES

—ADVENTURE

## THE WHITE STUFF

Famed for its powder, the northern Japanese ski resort of Niseko is one of the snowiest places on earth. It also happens to have plenty of character off the slopes as well  
BY CHRISTOPHER P. HILL



**MOUNTAIN MAGIC** Mount Yotei as seen from a Hirafu gondola.

CHRISTOPHER P. HILL



**A** decal-splattered fridge door framed by snow opens onto Bar Gyu, a rustic, dim-lit boîte with worn wood floors, unfinished beams, olive-green ottomans, and shelves packed with vinyl records. It's the tail end of the ski season in Niseko and the crowds are beginning to thin; inside Gyu, the jazz soundtrack is mellow and the conversation subdued. Too subdued, apparently, for some. When Mike, my drinking companion, utters "Holy sh\*t" (or something to that effect), I turn to look out the window. There, dancing on the sill-high snowbank in the moonlight, is a willowy Japanese beauty who just minutes ago was downing shots of plum wine with friends at the table behind us. Now, she's wearing nothing but furry boots, a beanie, and panties. The impromptu spectacle doesn't last long—it's minus 8°C outside, after all—but it definitely warms up the atmosphere in the bar, which the girl re-enters moments later through the aforemen-



tioned fridge door, fully clothed and giggling. Mike steadies himself with a slug of whisky and shrugs. "Guess she must have lost a bet."

The Japanese aren't the only people letting their hair down in Niseko. Come winter, the ski resort, a three-hour drive southwest of Sapporo on Hokkaido, fills with Australians who are leaving their own summer behind to spend a week or more on Niseko's powdery, birch-lined slopes. That, and to party: with its varied collection of bars and restaurants, Niseko—specifically the main village of Hirafu—has the liveliest après-ski scene in Japan, making it a sort of cold-weather Kuta for college-age Aussies. On our bar hop that night, Mike and I stumble from an unbearably raucous pub to an underground rave party before retreating to the relative sobriety of Bar Gyu.

By day, of course, it's all about the snow. Niseko may only have 55 kilometers of groomed slopes across its 60 or so runs, but it has plenty of light, dry powder; from mid-December through April, the snow falls almost every day, delivered by Arctic winds that blow across the Sea of Japan from Siberia. I'm told there can be more than 15 meters of snow per season, which, judging by the towering snowbanks that wall in the streets of Hirafu, is easy to believe.

"It can make you feel like a mouse in a



**SNOWED UNDER** Clockwise from above: A natural spring near Niseko Village; food (and tequila) trucks add to Niseko's special character; lunchtime at Green Farm Cafe; a stand of silver birches in Hirafu.

maze,” says Anthony “Chook” Trovatello as we drive through the backstreets of the village on a crisp gray morning. Chook is a director at SkiJapan, the Australian tour operator I’m traveling with, and though this is his sixth season in Niseko, he still exudes some of the wide-eyed wonder of a first-timer. “So much snow!” he continues. “They have to haul it away continuously with dump trucks. In the countryside, farmers sprinkle ash on their fields to help melt it.”

Strung out across the foot of Mount Niseko Annupuri, Niseko comprises four main resort areas: Hirafu, Higashiyama (a.k.a. Niseko Village), Hanazono, and Annupuri, all of which can be skied on the same pass. Though it doesn’t have the big resort hotels of Higashiyama (which is owned by Malaysia’s YTL group) or Annupuri, Hirafu is the hub of the action, laid out across a sloping plateau on the edge of Shikotsu-Toya National Park. It was here that Niseko’s first ski lift opened

in 1961, but it wasn’t until the late ’90s that the sleepy backwater began appearing on the map of international skiers and snowboarders, particularly Australians, for whom the combination of affordability, proximity, and all that snow proved unbeatable. Singaporeans, Hong Kongers, and mainland Chinese have since discovered the place, but Australians still account for half the international visitors, as well as a good share of Hirafu’s business and condominium owners.

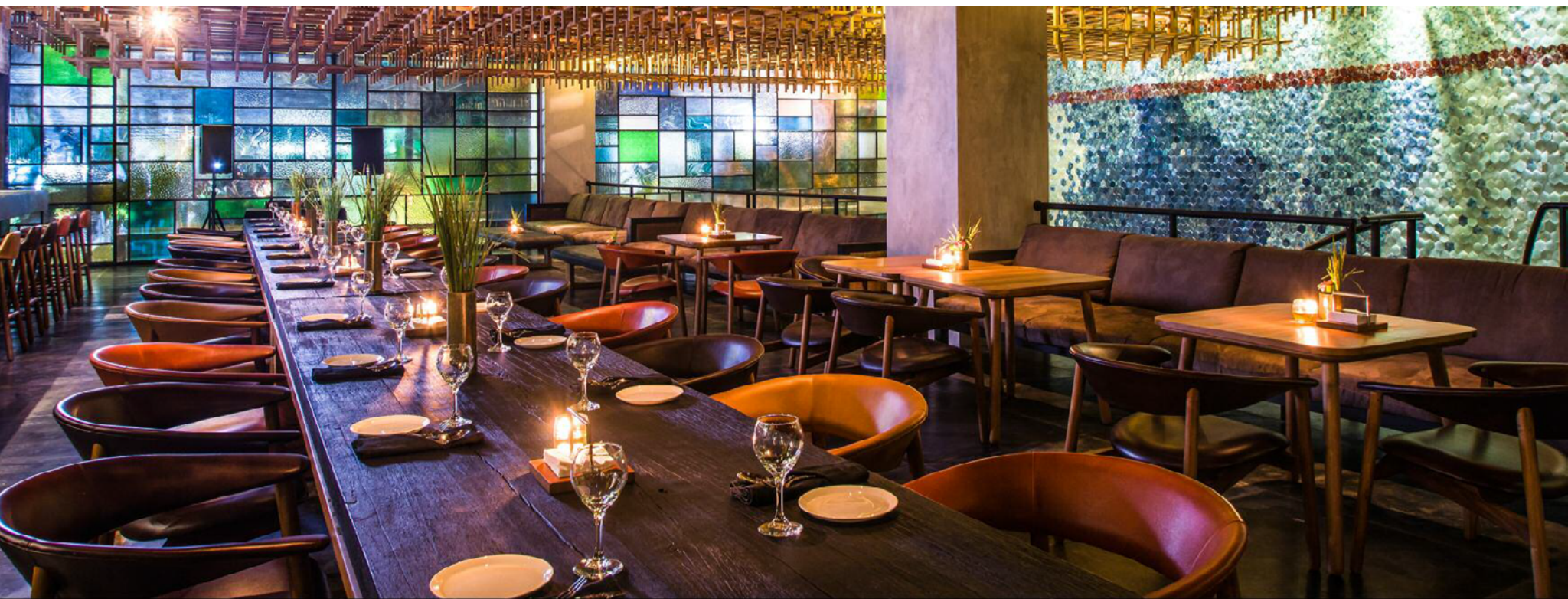
“Niseko has become a very cosmopolitan

**SINGAPOREANS, HONG KONGERS, AND MAINLAND CHINESE HAVE SINCE DISCOVERED NISEKO, BUT AUSTRALIANS STILL ACCOUNT FOR HALF OF THE AREA’S INTERNATIONAL VISITORS, AS WELL AS A GOOD SHARE OF HIRAFU’S BUSINESS AND CONDOMINIUM OWNERS**

place,” says Kohei Nikahara, who manages a Swiss-chalet-style pension that his father opened 25 years ago, Grandpapa Lodge. “Eight percent of Hirafu is now owned by foreigners, can you imagine? They have bought up all the old farmhouses and pensions and turned them into condos. It’s good, because it means that me and my friends could come back home to work, instead of moving to the big city.”

Boosters have taken to calling Niseko the “Aspen of Asia,” and with hundreds of millions of dollars in the works to upgrade the area’s facilities, it may be only a matter of time before it emerges as the Japanese equivalent of St. Moritz or Whistler. For now, though, it has plenty of character of its own, including Hirafu’s kooky amalgam of building styles: I spot log cabins, half-timbered chalets, and concrete cubes among the more utilitarian condo units.

“Every other ski resort in the world looks



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## DISPATCHES ADVENTURE—JAPAN

the same,” Chook says as we dive past snow-bound food trucks advertising Indian curries or paella or tequila shots. “But here, you have this eclectic mix of things, from the architecture to the food.”

The food is undeniably a draw. Hokkaido is renowned for its seafood, produce, and livestock, so visitors can expect to eat well pretty much anywhere. One dinner, at a Japanese-Italian restaurant called Dragon, involves succulent Makkari pork dressed in



mustard sauce; the next night we gorge on beautifully fresh fish—sushi and sashimi, smoked and grilled—at an *izakaya* recommended by Chook. I can also attest to the quality of the chili burger at farm-to-fork Green Farm Cafe, right on Hirafu’s main drag. And Grandpapa Lodge, by all accounts, makes a mean fondue.

Most people, of course, spend their days on the mountain, skiing or snowboarding the groomed slopes or schussing through the trees—Niseko is one of the few ski areas in Japan that permits you to go off-piste. There’s good accessible backcountry, too, as well as night skiing, with some lifts running until 10 p.m. And for those who tire of the slopes, there are plenty of other things to do. One outfit, White Isle, offers snowmobile excursions in the fields outside town (the machines are on the old side, but not enough to diminish the fun of plowing



tracks through the blinding-white terrain). Another evening I try my hand—or rather, foot—at snowshoeing, heading into the forest with a guide from the Niseko Outdoor Center, our way illuminated only by a wan moon and flashlights.

When it comes time to warm up, there are the *onsen*, or thermal baths. Hokkaido is dotted with volcanic springs, and Niseko is no exception. I visit a bathhouse located outside Annupuri on the assumption that the farther from Hirafu it is, the less crowded it will be. Sure enough, I’m rewarded by having the

**NORTHERN EXPOSURE** A snowboarder takes a break from the slopes above Hirafu. Far left: Gearing up for a tour of the White Isle snowmobile park.

place—or at least the men’s side of it—pretty much to myself. After stripping down and scrubbing, I step outside into the alfresco pool and lower myself gingerly into the steaming water. With snowflakes falling around me, I can feel my slope-sore muscles finally begin to melt. I’m not sure I achieve the blissfully immersive state that the Japanese called *yudedako* (literally, “boiled octopus”), but after an hour of soaking, I’m ready to strap on my boots again.

My last morning in Niseko opens to a bright blue day. The low clouds are gone and the snow-capped summit of Mount Yotei, a Fuji-like volcanic cone to the east, has finally revealed itself. Leaving my skis behind, I ride the Hirafu gondola to its upper station on Niseko Annupuri one last time to take in the full panorama. The centerpiece of Shikotsu-Toya National Park and a Hokkaido landmark, Yotei doesn’t disappoint. Intrepid powder hounds can hike to its top—a six-hour trek, according to Chook—for the thrill of crater skiing. Chook’s only tried it once. “It’s pretty wild,” he says.

Too wild for me, at any rate. But then, I already have more than enough reasons to revisit Niseko next season. ☺



### THE DETAILS

#### NISEKO

—**GETTING THERE** Sapporo’s New Chitose Airport is served by direct flights from Bangkok, Hong Kong, and, with the December 1 launch of a seasonal service by Singapore Airlines ([singaporeair.com](http://singaporeair.com)), Singapore.

#### —PLANNING YOUR TRIP

**SkiJapan** ([skijapan.com](http://skijapan.com)) is Niseko’s leading inbound tour operator, specializing in packages that include transfers, apartment or hotel accommodation, lift passes, and off-mountain tours. The company also runs Niseko Base Snowsports, the area’s top ski-instruction and rental center.

#### —WHERE TO EAT

The finest restaurant in Hirafu is chef Yuichi Kamimura’s French-Japanese dining room **Kamimura** ([kamimura-niseko.com](http://kamimura-niseko.com)), where degustations showcase the best of Hokkaido produce. Grilled local venison awaits at **Dragon Restaurant** ([dragon-nf.com](http://dragon-nf.com)), which also has one of the best

wine lists in town. For a taste of the island’s marine bounty in more casual surrounds, try **Ezo Seafoods** ([ezoseafoods.com](http://ezoseafoods.com)); for burgers and pasta with a front-row seat onto Hirafu’s main drag, there’s the **Green Farm Cafe**. Nearby, **Niseko Ramen Kazahana** is famed for its creamy potato ramen (a Hokkaido specialty), but the kitchen here is equally adept at other homey Japanese dishes.

#### —OTHER ACTIVITIES

The snowmobile park run by **White Isle** ([niseko-weiss.co.jp](http://niseko-weiss.co.jp)) makes for a fun diversion, as do the snowshoe tours led by guides from the **Niseko Adventure Center** ([nac-web.com](http://nac-web.com)); the nighttime forest trek is a must-do.

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**DISPATCHES**  
ISLAND SCENE—IRELAND

# THE WILD WAYS OF THE ARANS

A trio of stony outcrops in Ireland's Galway Bay, the Aran Islands offer a captivating mix of elemental scenery, Iron Age ruins, artisanal traditions, and a surprisingly contemporary energy  
BY ISOBEL DIAMOND

**BLEAK BEAUTY** On the rocky, windswept shores of Inisheer, looking back across Galway Bay to the Irish mainland.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN HOOPER



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**DISPATCHES**  
ISLAND SCENE—IRELAND

**D**ropped in the briny Atlantic off the west coast of Ireland are the bleakly beautiful Aran Islands: Inishmaan, Inisheer, and Inishmore. Wildly seductive, they share a stark limestone landscape marked by a crosshatch of stone walls, ancient ruins, and windswept coastlines. On clear days the flinty terrain is painted in remarkable light. Other times, the elements throw tantrums, and storms rage across weather-beaten headlands.

Steeped in tradition, the islands' Arcadian communities keep crafts like knitting and weaving alive, and Irish remains widely spoken. *A chara*, meaning "dear friend," is a popular greeting. But lately, Aran heritage has been re-energized by a new generation of artisans and entrepreneurs, which I discover as I hop by ferry boat to visit the trio in turn.

From Ros a' Mhíl on the mainland, it's a 45-minute journey across Galway Bay to Inishmaan, my first stop. With less than 200 residents, the island—called Inis Meáin in Irish—is both achingly romantic and utterly remote, yet not without its comforts. Opened in 2007 by husband-and-wife team Ruairí and Marie-Thérèse de Blacam, Inis Meáin Restaurant and Suites is a low, limestone-clad building that blends in seamlessly with its



surroundings. Its five suites, designed by Marie-Thérèse with "as many natural materials as possible," are minimally elegant, with rough rendered walls, bespoke wooden furniture, and luxuriously woolen cushions and throws. Curling up with a book from the well-stocked shelves would be easy, but fishing rods, bicycles, and packed lunches are available for guests who want to explore the outdoors.

I cycle down narrow lanes called *boreens* between fields bound by low stone walls—according to my guidebook, there are more than 1,600 kilometers of these windbreaks crisscrossing the Aran Islands—and ramble along cliff tops where wild flowers entangle the fissured rock. In the village, which comprises a pub, church, post office, a couple of B&Bs, and a 300-year-old thatched cottage (now a museum) once frequented by the playwright John Millington Synge, the air smells of freshly baked biscuits.

At the Inis Meáin Knitting Company, I meet Ruairí's parents, Tarlach and Áine de Blacam. Since opening the factory in 1976, the couple has been designing and manufacturing modish knitwear rooted in ancient Celtic patterns and inspired by the natural textures and hues of their island home; today, they export most of their products to exclusive stores overseas, including Barneys New York. "Guys in America are loving these shawls,"



**ROCK SOLID** Clockwise from top left: Stone walls crisscross the fields of Inishmaan; Ruairí de Blacam working his magic with local ingredients in the kitchen of his Inis Meáin Restaurant; Mairéad Sharry's Teas shop on Inisheer; outside Inis Meáin Restaurant. Opposite, from top: Cliffside drama on Inishmore; a guest room at Inis Meáin Restaurant & Suites.



**AT LESS THAN SIX SQUARE KILOMETERS, INISHEER IS EASILY EXPLORED BY FOOT. WHILE WANDERING, I STUMBLE UPON THE WRECK OF A CARGO SHIP WASHED ASHORE IN 1960, AS WELL AS THE CHURCH OF ST. CAOMHÁN, A FORLORN RUIN THAT'S SUNKEN BENEATH THE GROUND**

says Tarlach, picking up a mustard-colored alpaca scarf and draping it dramatically around his neck. Fortunately for me, they also sell samples of their gorgeous sweaters and scarves in an adjoining shop, whose walls are hung with old black-and-white photographs of Inishmaan farmers and fisherfolk.

Come evening, I sit down to the set four-course dinner in Inis Meáin's intimate 16-seat restaurant, where an elemental dining concept spotlights the pure flavors of local ingredients.



Lobster tail is served with unctuous tarragon mayonnaise and peppery rocket flowers, and for dessert, a custardy prune tart offers a sweet counterpoint to the nutty bitterness of cream made with oats.

The next day I take a ferry east to Inisheer (a.k.a. Inis Oírr), where I'm greeted by a sun-dappled shoreline stacked with lobster pots and curragh fishing boats. This may be the smallest of the three Arans, but my arrival coincides with Drop Everything, a biennial cultural festival that attracts a creative crowd from across Ireland, Europe, and the United States. Curated by Galway-born Mary Nally, the event fills three days with parties, music, workshops, and programs covering art, fashion, and science. The local handball court has been commandeered to showcase a mesmerizing audio-visual installation by New York-based artist Sougwen Chung, while Dutch silk screener Lukas Julias Keijser has festooned the island with bedsheets printed



**DISPATCHES**  
ISLAND SCENE—IRELAND

with the titles of classic pop songs.

Encompassing less than six square kilometers, Inisheer is easily explored by foot. While wandering, I stumble upon the rusted wreck of a cargo ship washed ashore in 1960, as well as the Church of St. Caomhán, a forlorn ruin that's sunken beneath the ground. But there are livelier attractions as well. Aran Seaweed Baths and Spa harnesses the health benefits of local seaweed in treatments whose potent smells are enough to prove the plant's alchemy. At the South Aran House cooking school, Maria and Enda Conneely teach everything from gluten-free recipes to foraging. Áras Éanna, the islands' only arts center, is housed in a renovated weaving factory; when not taken over by Drop Everything events, the hilltop venue hosts a steady stream of Irish artists and performers. And in the main village, a cottage crafts shop called Teas sells a cornucopia of vintage and handmade wares. Its



owner, Mairéad Sharry, is a smiley, crinkle-faced character with short claret-colored hair who also leads workshops on knitting, weaving, felting, and making pampooties, the islands' traditional rawhide slipper.

"This island has a real sense of place," Mary Nally tells me later in the garden outside the Tigh Ned pub. It's the closing night of her festival and the party has spilled out onto the rocky beach. The tangerine sunset is glorious, the Guinness is flowing, and the mood is

euphoric. I find myself nodding in agreement as the DJ flips on another disco track.

MY LAST STOP IS Inishmore, where I set off by bike from the port town of Kilronan, leaving the themed pubs and tourist shops behind. Known locally as "the big island," Inishmore—in Irish, Inis Mór—is the largest of the Arans both in population (800) and size



**HOOFING IT** Horse carts on Inisheer. Left: Tarlach and Áine de Blacam at their Inis Meáin Knitting Company.

(31 square kilometers). It also happens to be fresher and greener, with rolling meadows and breezy coastal roads plied by horse-drawn carriages.

At the Cáis Gabhair Árann goat's cheese factory, I talk with owner Gabriel Faherty, a former deep-sea fisherman who turned to cheese making a couple of years ago. "It's a new concept to the island," he explains, adding that he sells his farm-to-fork range of fromages in local shops and guesthouses. I sample a gouda flecked with native dillisk seaweed. It is utterly delicious.

Tucked away by the entrance to Dún Aonghasa, a cliffside fort that dates back to the Iron Age, Sarah Flaherty runs a small shop that sells hand-knitted Aran sweaters. Thick cream-colored cardigans are displayed next to baby hats and booties and hipster-worthy sweaters. "I've been here for the best part of 40 years," she tells me with a lilting Irish accent. But when I probe her about Inishmore's knitting traditions, she keeps mum. "It's private business," she says, refusing to reveal anything about the age-old craft that is still central to the local economy.

The Arans' farthest point from the mainland is on the lonely west coast of Inishmore, where fractured limestone cliffs plunge 90 meters into a drumroll of foaming waves. As I stand there taking in the elemental scenery, I decide that these islands are entitled to keep a few secrets to themselves. ©



**THE DETAILS**  
**ARAN APPEAL**  
—**GETTING THERE** From Galway City on Ireland's west coast it's an hour's drive to Ros a' Mhíl, where **Aran Island Ferries** (aranislandferries.com) provides a year-round passenger service to all three islands, though not between them. For inter-island transport, your only option is **Doolin Ferries** (doolin2aranferries.com), a family-run business that only

operates between March and November. Flying is also an option: **Aer Arann Islands'** (aerarannislands.ie) fleet of light aircraft services the islands from its base at Inverin. —**INISHMAAN** The award-winning **Inis Meáin Restaurant & Suites** (353-86/826-6026; inismeain.com; doubles from US\$690 for two-night-minimum stay) is the island's best base, pairing innovative, locally focused cuisine with five sleekly designed suites. Note, however, that it is open only from April through September, the Arans' tourist season. Be sure to visit the **Inis Meáin Knitting Company** (353-99/73-009; inismeain.ie) for a look at the factory's handsome knitwear. —**INISHEER** A five-minute walk from the pier, **South Aran House** (353-87/340-5687; southaran.com; doubles from

US\$97) has four rooms and a whitewashed cottage built in the 1800s. Its restaurant and cooking school are excellent. Other Inisheer attractions include the **Áras Éanna Arts Centre** (353-99/75-150; araseanna.ie), Mairéad Sharry's delightful crafts shop **Teas** (353-99/75-101); seaweed-infused body treatments at **Aran Seaweed Baths and Spa** (353-87/760-0684); and, once every other spring, the **Drop Everything** biennale (dropeverything.net). —**INISHMORE** Stock up on local cheeses at **Cáis Gabhair Árann** (353-87/222-6776) outside Kilronan before checking into the stone manor that now houses **Kilmurvey House** (353-99/61-218; kilmurveyhouse.com; doubles from US\$68). The prehistoric ruins of Dún Aonghasa are just a short trek away.

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In the trendy Kemang neighborhood of Jakarta, grandkemang Hotel was Mesa's original property, and it still holds court as the premier residence in the area. Contributing its own contemporary facade and detailed room designs to its locale in the city's cultural hub, the hotel is in walking distance from a slew of restaurants, lively bars, music venues, and art galleries and is known to play host to various arts and cultural festivals too. Not far from the city's Central Business District, it's a prime base for both leisure and business travelers, never more so than this winter's holiday season, when its

annual Christmas and New Year's dining specials and room packages fill the hotel with festivity.

In the central Java highlands of Magelang north of Borobudur, MesaStila resides on what was once a coffee plantation, now a wellness retreat that sits in the shadows of eight surrounding volcanoes. Among its many draws such as individually designed villas, horse stables, and organic meals is a *hammam*, the only authentic Turkish steam bath in Southeast Asia. Fed by spring water the hammam offers ritualistic treatments of massages and body masks so decadent that they've won the resort numerous spa awards worldwide.

And on the high cliffs of southern Bali's Uluwatu area, The edge comprises just four villas, a private haven of luxury that attends to the personalized wants and needs of each guest with on-call butlers and meal plans designed during consultations with the chef. Here, too, the spa has been hailed as one of the most innovative in Asia, as it hangs over the ocean in a seemingly gravity-defying design. Liquid floors and glass walls add to its sublimity, while traditional treatments ensure that guests leave deeply relaxed.

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**DISPATCHES**  
CITYSCAPE—HONG KONG

# HOMEGROWN HONG KONG

A trading hub known for its openness to imports, Hong Kong has started to look inward for its produce —with interesting, and often delicious, results  
BY JONATHAN HOPFNER



**THE GOOD EARTH** Yuwing Wong in the cornfield at his Au Law Organic Farm.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CALLAGHAN WALSH

A promotional image for Bloomberg TV's 'The Asia Edge' team. It features four hosts—three men and one woman—standing on a construction site in Hong Kong. They are dressed in professional attire: the woman in a dark blue dress, and the men in suits with purple and grey ties. The background shows a large-scale construction project with yellow cranes and high-rise apartment buildings under construction.

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**DISPATCHES**  
CITYSCAPE—HONG KONG



**FIELD NOTES** Clockwise from left: One of a growing number of organic farms in the Kam Tim area of the New Territories; claypot mud crab with sticky rice at Sofofama; the restaurant's head chef, Siu Ka Shing.



**T**here's not another person in sight. The only movement is the gentle wind-ripple of crops in the surrounding fields, and the languid silence of this late-summer morning is broken only by the occasional drone of insects. It's an unlikely place for a revolution—or even for Hong Kong. But here we are, a mere 10-minute cab ride from the Kam Sheung Road train station, in the heart of the New Territories. It is a side of the city visitors

don't often see, where the buildings rarely rise beyond three stories, and village lanes are too narrow for cars to navigate. And where a handful of farmers are determined to change the dining habits of an entire food-obsessed metropolis. Raising seasonal vegetables on small plots, they're working to wean Hong Kong off its dependence on imported produce, mostly from mainland China.

The question of autonomy—how much is desirable, or even possible—looms constantly in Hong Kong, still wrestling with its place in China nearly two decades after it was handed back from British rule. And while its prospects





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**DISPATCHES**  
CITYSCAPE—HONG KONG



**LOCAL BOUNTY** From left: Sweet potatoes at Au Law Organic Farm; one of Au Law's farmers; Sunday crowds at Island East Markets, where Hong Kong's best produce is on display.



fade politically, more residents appear ready to demand it on the dinner table. A network has taken shape over the past two years that links organic produce from urban farms to a growing roster of markets that blend old-school bartering and trendy design; specialty products formulated in semi-abandoned industrial spaces; and restaurants that simultaneously pursue commitments to sustainability, health, and the culinary cutting-edge. The result is a proliferation of venues and flavors that, while often internationally inspired, are united in championing all things local.

For Yuwing Wong, the owner and operator of Au Law Organic Farm—the place I'm visiting in the New Territories—it's less a new phenomenon than a return to the way things once were. He estimates that when his parents began farming in the area 60 years ago, around 70 percent of the city's vegetable supply was produced domestically. That's since dwindled to two percent. Nonetheless, four years ago, he walked away from a management position at an electronics company to take up his parents' trade, only with organic techniques. "My boss couldn't believe it," he recalls with a broad, infectious grin. The first year, Wong farmed alone, but he soon realized there was a lot of pent-up demand for locally grown greens produced without harsh pesticides. He's since expanded the farm twice and now employs seven people, who diligently tend

the fields around us or trundle past on bicycles with full baskets of *choi sum*, a leafy Chinese cabbage. Customers can now place orders via the farm's website or a mobile app, which Wong plans to make available in English next year. On weekends he welcomes visitors and runs organic farming courses.

One doesn't have to look far to find similar stories to Wong's. On Hong Kong's largest island, Lantau, Donald Latter recently gave up his job as a teacher to work full-time on Dragontail Farm, nestled in the forested hills outside the laid-back beach community of Mui Wo. While Latter is still awaiting formal organic certification, he sells a range of potatoes, carrots, greens, and herbs to local residents, and also holds hands-on experience sessions for visitors where they learn organic techniques and composting, help prepare beds and plant seeds, and even catch tadpoles or try their hand at nature-inspired

artwork. "I would like our farm to become a model for others to learn from and to inspire others to take up organic farming to whatever extent they are able," Latter says.

Honey is another commodity that artisans are lining up to make locally. Founded in 2010, collective HK Honey produces the golden liquid—as well as candles made from natural beeswax—at a network of rural and rooftop beehives, including one on the roof of the InterContinental hotel. Bee's Nest, meanwhile, makes 100 percent organic ivy, longan, and lychee-flower honey varieties along with honey-based soap and beauty products.

Organic produce has been cultivated in Hong Kong for some time of course. But along with a new generation of farmers has emerged an entirely new market—several, in fact. In 2012, Vince Poon was among those who got the ball rolling in earnest when he noticed a shortage of safe, verifiably local veggies and weekend activities, at least compared to his native Sydney. The idea was born for Island East Markets, an event that now takes over a square at the heart of the Taikoo Place office complex each Sunday. It has blossomed into a warm, community-infused experience that is equal parts shopping and theater. Pram-pushing parents and stylish couples navigate the lanes between festive-looking tents where vendors hawk everything from fresh tomatoes to handmade soaps and

used children's books, and local musicians frequently turn out to serenade the crowd. Yet Poon believes Island East Markets has a serious mission, and he is working with farmers and now fishermen to expand the range of local food on offer. "We want people to be able to come here, get everything they need for the week, and be guaranteed of its safety," he says. "There's a sense of peace that comes with knowing where your food is from."

In Hong Kong that peace has been elusive recently. The regular drumbeat of food-safety scares in Greater China—tainted milk, expired meat, and, most recently, "gutter" or recycled waste oil—has been driving a surge of interest in food localization. "In Hong Kong information is very open, so every problem that occurs, everyone knows about," Wong says. "China has many food problems, people know it's not safe for sure. So now they're thinking locally."

In addition to Island East, Poon's Hong Kong Markets Organisation now runs several

other events, including the PMQ Night Market, an edgier, more design-focused affair on the grounds of the former Police Married Quarters in Central, since reborn as a retail space and incubator for creative types. Weekend markets have also popped up at the iconic Central Star Ferry pier and the expat enclave of Discovery Bay. One of the more prominent recent arrivals is Harbour Artisanal, which has at regular intervals taken over a pedestrian path in the trendy Tai Hang neighborhood,

**ONE OF THE MORE PROMINENT NEW MARKETS IS HARBOUR ARTISANAL, WHICH HAS AT REGULAR INTERVALS TAKEN OVER A PEDESTRIAN PATH IN TAI HANG, DELIGHTING FOODIES WITH ITS ROSTER OF HYDROPONIC VEGETABLES, HAND-CRAFTED BEERS, PURE ORGANIC HONEY, AND BARBECUED BRATWURST**

delighting foodies with a roster that includes hydroponic vegetables, handcrafted beers, pure organic honey, and barbecued bratwurst, all made by small-scale producers in Hong Kong. At Harbour Artisanal's inaugural event, which was intended to run all day, hungry revelers cleared many of the vendors out in a mere four hours.

"We believe the popularity stems partly from the variety in an environment where big chains have come to dominate the landscape," explains Harbour Artisanal co-founder Timothy Bush. "We're also a community social activity, and this is something Hong Kong has lacked."

Elements of community are also appearing in Hong Kong's notoriously competitive restaurant scene. In July 2013 former ad exec Larry Tang opened Locofama in the up-and-coming Sai Ying Pun neighborhood, a short hop west of the trendy bistros of Central. His approach was very different; simple, no-fuss



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**DISPATCHES**  
CITYSCAPE—HONG KONG



**VEGGING OUT** A basket of local produce at Island East Markets, left. Below: The outdoor patio at Sofofama, where diners can admire the restaurant's organic mini-farm.



food that employs organic ingredients but doesn't feel like denial—wraps, salads, even short ribs—in a modest, café-like setting. “We want to change the perception of organic food being bland—and vegetarian,” Tang says. The response was immediate. Barely a year later Tang has opened a second restaurant, Sofofama, in the PMQ complex in collaboration with legendary local lifestyle brand Goods of Desire.

Focusing on Chinese comfort food, it's a small but cozy space where (thanks to advanced hydroponic technology) greenery literally springs out of the walls, and is sometimes plucked by the restaurant's skilled mixologists to garnish a killer list of cocktails. While not everything is sourced locally, Tang is determined not to go any farther for ingredients than is absolutely necessary. In fact, some of Sofofama's vegetable supply comes from a miniature agricultural operation on the premises overseen by WKND Farmers' Club, a local collective that uses an ingenious system of moving trollies to coax maximum yield out of a limited area and also runs regular urban farming workshops on-site.

Farmers, restaurateurs, and market operators are all likely to have to get similarly inventive as the localization movement runs up against the crowded city's perennial space constraints. Stratospheric rents put many a quality eatery out of business and make large markets or urban farming operations like those

seen in cities like Chicago or even Singapore tricky. But insiders say these limits have less to do with physical realities than government policy. “There's really not a lack of public venues in Hong Kong,” says Harbour Artisanal's Bush. “However there is a lack of public venues that the government will allow these types of events to be held in.” Wong of Au Law Organic Farms says that the possibility of rezoning for commercial redevelopment, and profiting as a result, prevents many land owners from renting or selling to farmers, crippling the city's agricultural potential.

In a place where trends don't tend to enjoy long life spans, there's also the question of how long the new taste for local will endure—and just how many artisanal markets or organic restaurants the city can support. Poon agrees that market and food events have proliferated recently, but sees that as a sign of success. And in terms of future plans, it seems to be full steam ahead. Tang intends to set up an e-commerce portal that will enable consumers to connect with organic farmers and have produce, as well as pre-prepared ingredients for healthy chef-designed meals, delivered straight to their homes; according to Bush, Harbour Artisanal is poised to carve out a permanent space where it can hold events with greater frequency. For visitors and residents alike, genuinely local experiences are likely to be easier to come by than ever. ©

**THE DETAILS**  
HONG KONG'S LOCAL LARDER

- MAKE FOR THE MARKET**  
**Harbour Artisanal** An outdoor weekend market featuring a rotating cast of the city's top boutique food vendors; visit their website for news about upcoming events ([harbourartisanal.com](http://harbourartisanal.com)).
- Island East Markets** Held every Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at Tai Koo Place in Quarry Bay ([islandeastmarkets.org](http://islandeastmarkets.org)).
- VISIT A FARM**  
**Au Law Organic Farm** Set in rural Yuen Long in the New Territories, this enterprise welcomes weekend visitors (852/9108-1731; [yuwing.com](http://yuwing.com)).
- Dragontail Farm** Donald Latter's organic farm on Lantau Island runs recreational and educational programs geared particularly toward children (852/5422-2844; [djlatter.wix.com/dragontail-farm](http://djlatter.wix.com/dragontail-farm)).

- EAT LOCAL**  
**Grassroots Pantry** French-trained chef Peggy Chan sources unprocessed local ingredients for her café's organic vegetarian menu; suppliers include Zen Organic Farm in the New Territories (12 Fuk Sau Lane, Sai Ying Pun; 852/2873-3353; [grassrootspantry.com](http://grassrootspantry.com)).
- IPC Foodlab** The high-ceilinged Central branch of this farm-to-table restaurant grows some of its own produce at its HQ in Fan Ling, where facilities include a rooftop farm, food lab, and mushroom nursery (38A Caine Rd.; 852/2810-6083; [ipcfoodlab.com](http://ipcfoodlab.com)).
- Locafama** Across the road from Grassroots Pantry in laid-back Sai Ying Pun, Locafama showcases “fresh organic bites” in dishes like salmon ceviche with quinoa and a tofu-topped kale salad (13 Fuk Sau Lane; 852/2547-7668; [locafama.com](http://locafama.com)).

- Posto Pubblico** The fare at this buzzy Soho osteria is true New York-Italian comfort food, but with an emphasis on local, sustainable ingredients (28 Elgin St.; 852-2577/7160; [postopubblico.com](http://postopubblico.com)).
- Sohofama** An offshoot of Locafama, Sofofama pairs urban farming with homey Chinese cooking (think truffled *xiaolongbao* and seasonal herbal soups) in an indoor/outdoor space at the revamped Police Married Quarters (PMQ) in Central (G/F Block A, PMQ, 35 Aberdeen St.; 852/2858-8238; [sohofama.com](http://sohofama.com)).
- Yin Yang Coastal** Recently relocated from Wan Chai to a house on Ting Kau Beach, the private kitchen of Margaret Xu dishes up nouveau Cantonese cuisine made from wild-caught fish, farm-raised poultry, and produce from the chef's own organic gardens (117 Ting Kau Village, Tsuen Wan; 852/2866-0868; [yinyang.hk](http://yinyang.hk)).

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# OUT TO SEA IN NEW ENGLAND

The chill of Nantucket's winter may keep the tourist crowds at bay, but there is still plenty of magic to be found along the shores of Faraway Island  
BY MARY HICKSON

It is winter in Nantucket, when few tourists visit. But the island's main town is picture-perfect, every street decorated with Christmas trees and twinkling lights. Before dawn, I peer through the ice-crusted dormer window of my third-story room in the historic Roberts House Inn and my pulse quickens. A light snow is falling.

I clamber down the steep staircase, my winter clothing making me clumsy and graceless. I imagine a maid in years past struggling down with skirts around her ankles and a lamp in hand. The stairs widen as I descend, then I quietly step out to the cobblestone street where old-fashioned lampposts glow pale and gold.

For three days I've been trying to see the sunrise, but fog has thwarted me. As an Australian, I usually celebrate Christmas during the heat of summer with sunbathing, surfing, and barbecues, and though I've lived in the United States and enjoyed white Christmases before, this journey is unique. I'm here on Faraway Island—as Nantucket's Native American name is usually translated—to witness the extraordinary sight of snow falling on the beach as day breaks.

Passing The Bean café, I clap my gloved hands together to warm them and wish they were wrapped around a hot coffee. The Bean will soon be alive with an eclectic mix of locals: fishermen in beanies and oilskins, young couples with rugged-up babies, crusty old men playing chess by the windows where the sun streams in, and people sharing a joke, an opinion, or the news of the day. Yesterday I was among the crowd at the busy counter.

"Coffee, thanks," I called out as someone else did too. I turned to see a harried-looking



young man in a lumberjack coat and work boots, with tufts of brown hair poking out from under his woolen cap.

"You go," he said.

"No, it's okay, you go."

We both hesitated then ordered again simultaneously. Laughing, he ordered two coffees, paid for both orders, and handed me my cup with a beaming grin that belied his rugged appearance. As he turned to go, he said, "You

have a good day now, ma'am."

I press on down the street and see lights on inside the Petticoat Row Bakery. I've always loved being in the dark and looking into windows, imagining the lives and stories of the people within. I fancy the bakers are warm by their ovens, kneading dough, stirring pots of caramel, and preparing fresh bread, cakes, and macaroons. Perhaps it is that warmth that mists the windows so perfectly that the scene

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might have been painted by Norman Rockwell.

I hold that warmth close as I turn the corner and stop outside Nantucket Bookworks. The bookshop's bay windows are framed by fairy lights. One window display celebrates local writers, artists, and photographers; the other is a tribute to *Moby-Dick*, whose Captain Ahab hailed from Nantucket. Once one of the most prosperous whaling ports in the world, the island is rich with the history and legacy of those times. Weather vanes shaped like whales and three-masted ships sit atop beautifully preserved 19th-century houses, while the Whaling Museum is a treasure trove of artifacts, stories, and exhibits that include the skeleton of a giant sperm whale, currently sporting a huge Santa hat. Even the local ice hockey team is called the Whalers.

Nearby, a wooden sign clatters on its hinges in the wind. It has probably been doing so since the 1840s when the Brotherhood of Thieves was a whaling bar. I can picture whalers spinning seafaring tales over malty ales and brawls erupting onto Broad Street, though these days the experience is more genteel. Last night I ventured into the downstairs cavern with its rustic ambience and glowing fireplace. I thought I might feel awkward dining alone, but I found a gracious welcome, a robust local brew, and one of the best Reuben sandwiches I have ever enjoyed.

While whaling has certainly shaped the island, so too has Quakerism. From the 1700s, Quakers were prominent in business, gov-

**DENSE CLOUDS GIVE WAY TO A CLEAR BAND OF SKY STRETCHING ACROSS THE HORIZON, AND ALL AT ONCE BEAMS OF PINK AND AMBER LIGHT STREAK THROUGH AND RUSH ACROSS THE RESTLESS NORTH ATLANTIC, OVER THE BEACH AND THE LAND LIKE A TIDAL WASH**

ernment, and industry, and also advocated for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. Indeed, Nantucket became a refuge for anyone escaping slavery and persecution. Education was also valued, and I am inspired by the life of Maria Mitchell, a young Quaker woman who in 1847, using a telescope on the roof of the bank on Main Street, became the first American woman to discover a comet. Mitchell went on to become a professor of

astronomy and a groundbreaker for women in American science. Her house and observatory are preserved on the island, and though closed during the winter months, they make an edifying backdrop for a stroll around her orderly garden.

The biting wind brings me back into the moment. I detour past Children's Beach to the big house, whose widow's walk has a view across three points of the compass. A pretty little Christmas tree keeps a solitary vigil on the rooftop platform now, its decorations cheerful against the brightening sky. But I imagine a lone woman up there braving a savage storm, her long skirts billowing, her hair whipped by salt and wind. She is looking out to the maelstrom, waiting for her husband or son to return safely to port. As the mother of a seafaring son, this resonates deeply with me. A shiver passes through me, not just from the cold, and I hurry on.

I'm not far from the beach at Brant Point now. The snow is fleeting, but its presence thins the air, so that smells and sounds become more acute. I can hear the swirling waves; I can smell the sea. The dark expanse of ocean comes fully into view and my boots crunch down into thin crusts of ice on the sand. Dense clouds above give way to a clear band of sky stretching across the horizon. All at once beams of pink and amber light streak through and rush across the restless North Atlantic, over the beach and the land like a tidal wash. I lift my face to feel snowflakes falling as the sun rises.

Nantucket is unlike anywhere else: it is picturesque and rugged, congenial yet isolated. The past is so accessible it seems possible just to reach out and touch it. But the present is tangible too, wrapped in the magic of a wintery festive season.

A ferry's horn blasts into the dawn. On the dock cars will be loading, while workers heading to the Massachusetts mainland will be hunkering down into their parkas and exchanging greetings with misty breath. The ferry will soon round Brant Point where a sturdy lighthouse warns of dangerous rocks below, before speeding across the open water to Hyannis Port. Brant Point Lighthouse has stood on the sand here since 1746, and locals have decorated it with an enormous Christmas wreath finished off with a big red bow. "Independent and Out to Sea"—the Bookworks motto says it all. ©



**WHISKY BUSINESS** Pictured here in 1929, Yamazaki's early employees included master distiller Masataka Taketsuru (the mustached man in the third row), who later opened Nikka, now Japan's second largest distilling company after Suntory.

# 19 29

Sometime just before the start of World War I, a Japanese winemaker named Shinjiro Torii stored some alcohol in old wine barrels and then forgot about them for a few years. Upon rediscovering them, he found the alcohol had assumed an entirely new flavor. Torii was so enraptured by the barrel-aging process that in 1923 he took all of his company's assets and invested them in building Japan's first whisky distillery, Yamazaki. Location is everything, and in the mountains outside Kyoto, where the climate is damp and the spring water exceptionally pure, the conditions were ideal for achieving his goal of creating the perfect drink. Ninety-one years later, his mission has been accomplished for the umpteenth

time and counting. The parent Suntory brand Torii began when his first whisky was released in 1928—now the world's third-largest premium spirits company—is no stranger to awards, but one of the most prestigious yet came in November, when acclaimed connoisseur Jim Murray selected its Yamazaki Single Malt Sherry Cask 2013 as the world's best whisky in his annual *Whisky Bible* guide. It was the first time a Japanese whisky has won—and a massive blow to the Scottish. In this particular bottle, of which just 18,000 were made, Murray described the flavor as bold and fruity with a finish of “light, teasing spice.” Oh, and “near indescribable genius.”

—GABRIELLE LIPTON





MADE WITH  
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FROM PRE-WEDDING dinners to secluded honeymoons, city centers to island shores, these seven Southeast Asia locales offer heavenly backdrops for every wedding want and beautiful solutions for every nuptial need.

# THE HERMITAGE HOTEL

URBAN WEDDINGS SET IN ELEGANT INTIMACY

IN THE manicured Menteng neighborhood in the center of Jakarta, The Hermitage Hotel feels entirely secluded from the bustle of the city. Once a Dutch telecommunications office that dates back to 1923, now a Leading Hotel of the World, the building's colonial design dotted with Indonesian touches such as handmade batik wall art makes it feel elegant and warm, a one-of-a-kind setting for intimate weddings in the city.

Indonesia is known for its sizeable weddings, but The Hermitage lends itself well to couples wanting a smaller event for close friends and family. In its classic white ballroom, the hotel is able to accommodate 300 guests for standing receptions or 180 for

round-table dining. The stress of planning is relieved by the array of wedding packages on offer. Six options encompass every detail from flower arrangements and parking vouchers to pre-wedding food tastings and rounds of soft drinks, offered in different combinations depending on the bride and groom's desired size and feel for the occasion. Some are more suited for simpler receptions with food stalls and buffets, while others lend themselves to more fanciful affairs with seated three- and four-course meals.

Differences aside, every package includes a one-night stay with breakfast in a Junior Suite for the couple, a one-night stay with breakfast in two Deluxe Rooms for four family members,

one bottle of sparkling wine, a set dinner at its Indo-French restaurant L'Avenue for two, a bespoke wedding cake, and special rates for up to 10 additional guest rooms. With its stately design, gourmet fare, and rooftop bar and pool, The Hermitage is the kind of beautiful, inviting hotel that is difficult to leave. Luckily, in considerate foresight, two of the packages include a complimentary one-night stay with breakfast for the couple's first anniversary, so the bride and groom can look forward to returning and commemorating their special day.

*Jl. Cilacap No. 1, Mentang, Jakarta, Indonesia;  
62-21/3192-6888; jakarta.hermitage.co.id*



Clockwise, from above: A Hermitage bride; the ballroom; a floral centerpiece, the hotel at night; the Executive Suite.

# MEJEKAWI BY KU DE TA

ADDING CUTTING-EDGE DINING EXPERIENCES TO BALI WEDDING FESTIVITIES

BACHELOR AND bachelorette parties, rehearsal dinners, intimate catch-ups with friends and family—there's no shortage of reasons to have a party when there's a wedding at hand. And for weddings in Bali, Mejekawi by Ku De Ta is an excuse for an event in its own right. An intimate tasting kitchen and laboratory within the renowned Seminyak hotspot, it serves some of the most exquisite food in the region in a sophisticated dining room overlooking the Indian Ocean.



Set on the second floor of Ku De Ta with glass walls and an open kitchen, Mejekawi offers tasting menus of five and 12 courses designed by renowned chefs Ben Cross and Stephen Moore and executive pastry chef Nuño Garcia. Dishes such as coral trout ceviche with blackened eggplant, sambal, and betel leaf and Jimbaran seafood stew with candied fennel combine local cuisine with experimental cooking techniques, prepared in a kitchen and laboratory designed by Will Goldfarb, complete with high-tech equipment from Sub-Zero &



Clockwise, from left: Daybeds overlooking the ocean; Ku De Ta's main restaurant; a blissful sunset; an innovative rendition of Sop Buntut at Mejekawi; Mejekawi's exterior.

to the beach. With some of the best sunset views—and mojitos—in the area, the evening atmosphere is warm and lively, and come nightfall, world-class DJs regularly appear to spin into the late hours as revelers venture down to the beach and dance under the night sky.

*Jl. Kayu Aya 9, Seminyak, Bali, Indonesia; 62-361/736-969; kudeta.net*

Wolf. Cocktails are made with evaporators and ultrasonic homogenizers, and its wine list earned the restaurant an Award of Excellence from Wine Spectator. With “hidden” courses added in for an element of surprise, meals at Mejekawi are as entertaining as refined, ideal for celebratory gatherings.

Although the most progressive, Mejekawi counts only as one of nine sub-venues within Ku De Ta, any of which lend themselves well to pre- and post-nuptial activities. Elegantly designed both inside and out, indoor bar and dining areas transition into an outdoor dining deck, which backs up to manicured gardens and, beyond,



# NUSA DUA BEACH HOTEL & SPA

A PENINSULAR SETTING FOR TROPICAL WEDDINGS WITH A BALINESE TWIST

FOR AN unforgettable wedding on the Island of the Gods, the Nusa Dua Beach Hotel & Spa on Bali's southern sun-drenched peninsula is an ideal host. Sizing nine hectares, the resort's tropical gardens and ocean views offer a breathtaking backdrop for ceremonies, receptions, and, of course, photos capturing every beautiful moment.

With a history of hosting kings, queens, presidents, and dignitaries, the hotel is a prime spot for destination weddings, a place that wedding guests will be thrilled to have an excuse to visit. Nearly 400 guest rooms begin at 34 square meters, and each affords views of the gardens, pool, or ocean. There are five restaurants and four bars, a luxurious spa, a cultural theater with Balinese performances, and a kids' club for younger guests. Its 200-meter white-sand beach is the longest private stretch in the area, including a scenic jetty where the Wedding Bale serves as the theater for outdoor ceremonies. Garden weddings can be arranged in the Temple Garden adjacent to the on-site Balinese temple.

Couples have three wedding packages to

choose from to help them organize their big day, all with a distinctive Balinese feel. The simplest is the Bali Beach Wedding Package, which—in addition to a liturgy, document processing services and wedding certificates, and a one-night stay in a Premier room for the couple—includes aromatic touches such as fresh floral decorations, a showering of flower petals, and the couple's bouquet

Clockwise, from below: A Palace Club room; a Balinese wedding at the resort; a wedding bale; the resort from above.



and boutonniere. The Frangipani package further includes a Balinese procession of bridesmaids, Balinese musicians, a four-course candlelit dinner for the couple, 60-minute spa treatment, wedding photographer, and one-tier wedding cake, while the most luxurious Two Islands One Heart package adds in two Balinese footmen, a 90-minute signature spa treatment, and two-tier cake.

*Kawasan Pariwisata Nusa Dua Lot North 4, Nusa Dua, Bali, Indonesia; 62-361/771-210; nusaduahotel.com*

# AVILLION PORT DICKSON

EXCHANGE VOWS ON THE SOFT SHORES OF THE STRAITS OF MALACCA

A RESTFUL refuge of natural beauty, the multi-award-winning Avillion Port Dickson is a perfect love nest for nuptials and honeymoons. With an experienced team of wedding professionals, multiple venue options, and a breathtaking backdrop of the Straits of Malacca, the resort is a haven for easy-to-plan and impossible-to-forget destination weddings just an hour's drive from Kuala Lumpur.

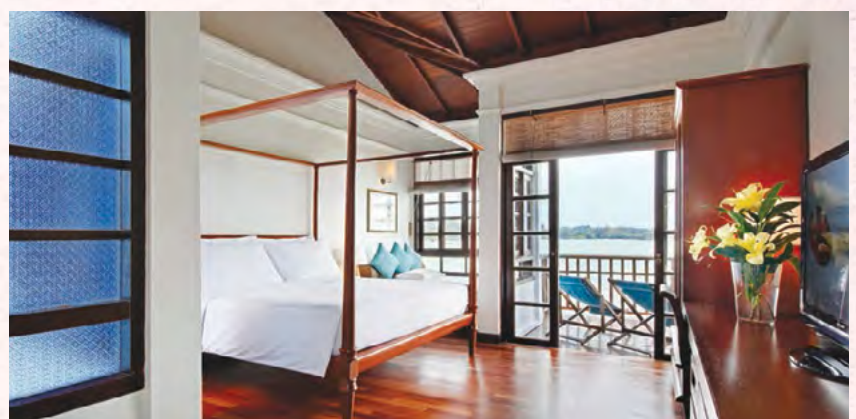
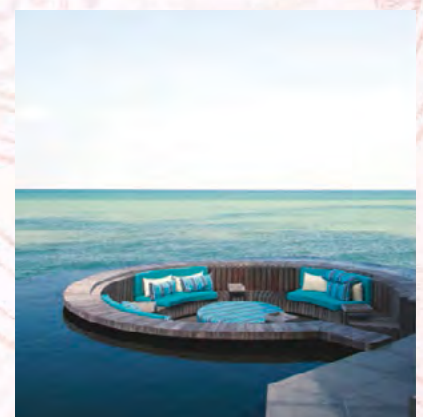
Two different sites ensure that there's a proper setting for weddings of different shapes and sizes. For indoor occasions, the elegant Pelita ballroom fits 180 guests, while for outdoor ceremonies set to the soothing sounds of the ocean, the stretch of Riau Beach which accommodates 200 people is now made even

more serene and romantic with new transparent canopies. After, the beach can seamlessly transition into the reception or party venue as well, where guests can feast and dance the night away under the stars. With the help of one of their wedding packages with a variety of décor and menu options, it's easy to ensure that wedding days will run smoothly.

Accommodations range from villas and chalets to rooms and studios numbering 240 in total, but following the festivities, newlyweds will do well to book one of the Water Chalets. Inspired by Malay fishing villages, the abodes are stilted in shallow waters, and each is outfitted with an oversized bed, private balcony, and an open-air bathroom with a rain shower and long bath.

The aVi Spa is also a highlight, which forgoes high-tech treatments for traditional Malay and Chinese techniques sure to leave guests glowing. For pre- and post-wedding services, there's a couples suite with a steam room, sauna, and private balcony. Or, for on-site bachelor and bachelorette parties, book up to 30 guests for serene celebrations with Avi's special party packages, which include four hours of head-to-toe treatments and a bottle of sparkling wine.

*3rd Mile Jl. Pantai, Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia; 60-6/647-6688; weddings@kul.avillion.com; avillionportdickson.com*



Clockwise from above: A beach wedding floral entry; the balcony view from a Water Chalet; a sunken lounge area; Avi Spa; the airy design of a Premium Water Chalet.

# KAMANDALU UBUD

ROMANTIC LUXURY IMMERSSED IN THE LUSH HEART OF BALI

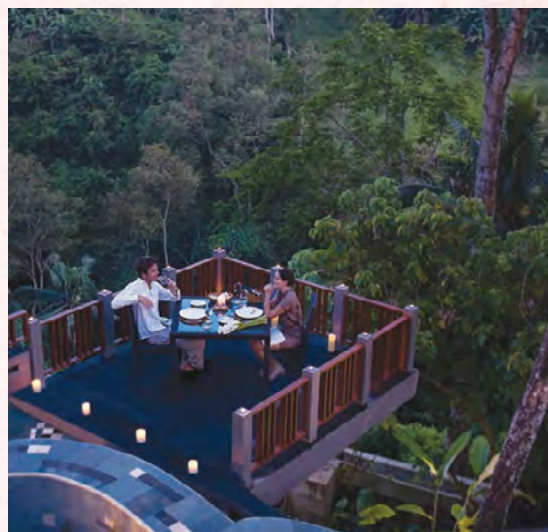
FOR COUPLES who want their special day to be set in quiet serenity, Kamandalu Ubud provides a tranquil escape that feels a world removed from the routines of daily life. Surrounded by terraced rice paddies in the emerald hills of Ubud, the five-star resort is modeled after Panglipuran village, one of the oldest settlements in Bali, in an attempt to embody all the exoticism and hospitality of the island's heritage. And after having recently undergone a property-wide updating, it's more luxurious than ever, making it a distinctive setting for island weddings.

Overlooking the valley of the Petanu River is the newly implemented Alun-Alun wedding venue. Aptly named after traditional Indonesian gathering places, the tropical swatch of land is surrounded by palm trees and flower-rimmed pathways perfect for photographic ceremonies and receptions. Indoor weddings can be held at the Rumah Yoga pavilion, or for an extra ounce of magic, the Wedding at Infinity Pool package—the most extravagant of the four packages on offer—lets couples exchange their vows on a floating glass stage. Each package includes pre-wedding planning services, floral arrangements, music, and use of the luxurious bridal villa, and wedding coordinators and full catering services are available to keep the day-of as effortless as possible.

For couples and wedding parties looking to check in for longer than just the wedding night itself, Kamandalu comprises 58 one- to three-bedroom villas, each individually designed to feel like home. Treatments at the Chaya Spa employ traditional healing arts to thoroughly relax its guests, and morning yoga sessions offer peaceful starts to days. And as the hotel is in close reach of the arts hub of Ubud and the ancient temples nearby, there's no shortage of attractions in the area, offering every excuse for a tropical vacation in the name of love.

*Jl. Andong, Banjar Nagi, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia;  
62-361/975-825; kamandaluresort.com*

Clockwise, from right: An in-villa dining setup; the Deluxe Pool Villa; a romantic couple's dinner; a luxurious bathroom; an Alun-Alun wedding.



# MAYA UBUD RESORT & SPA

WHERE LOVE IS SURROUNDED IN TROPICAL PEACE

OVERLOOKING THE dramatic Petanu River Valley between villages to the east and rice fields to the west, Maya Ubud Resort & Spa is a 10-hectare retreat of tropical gardens, thatched buildings, private pool villas, and luxury guest rooms. Outside of Ubud just an hour's drive from Bali's international airport, Maya is a secluded, tranquil haven for weddings.

Its wedding package eases the planning process by taking care of all formal paperwork and makes the day beautiful with traditional rindik bamboo music playing at the ceremony, preparing the venue with floral decorations, and come night, setting up a romantic candlelit dinner for the bride and groom. On surrounding days spent at the resort, three restaurants provide dining options aplenty, and nestled along the riverbank is The Spa at Maya, whose pavilions looking out over the swirling river waters below



Above: The resort's infinity pool. Right: The Petanu River as a beautiful backdrop for wedding photos.

are perfect for couples wanting to relax together, best done with the Pevonia Tropical Rejuvenation skincare treatments and wraps.

*Jl. Gunung Sari Peliatan, P.O. box 1001, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia; 62-361/977-888; mayaubud.com*



## THE EDGE BY MESA

FOR BREATHTAKING WEDDINGS IN THE UPMOST PRIVACY

FOR COUPLES who want both the amenities of a five-star resort and the privacy of a home, The Edge—an exclusive set of villas by Mesa Hotels and Resorts in Bali—plays the perfect chord. As suggested by its name, The Edge encompasses three villas set atop a cliff 80 meters above the ocean in Pecatu, a gorgeous hilly enclave in the Uluwatu area of Bali's southern peninsula. With its dramatic setting and 1.5-hectare size, The Edge ensures that couples can celebrate their love in beautiful seclusion.

Everything at The Edge is tailored to couples' wishes, from its no-menu policy that has them meet with the chef to design their cuisine to the staff of butlers and a wedding planner who helps arrange every wedding detail. Encompassing 10 bedrooms altogether, the villas will immediately feel like home away



from home for anyone who stays, replete with stunning pools, sun decks, entertainment systems, and fully catered kitchens. For The Exclusive experience, the entire property can be reserved, including the pool, fitness center, and spa.

*Jl. Pura Goa Lempeh, Banjar Dinas Kangin, Pecatu, Bali, Indonesia; 62-361/847-0700; mesahotelsandresorts.com*



From top: A cliff-top backdrop; floral decor at a ceremony setup.

# HU'U VILLAS

WHERE COUPLES COME TO INDULGE IN HONEYMOON BLISS

WHEN IT comes to honeymoons, there's perhaps no amenity more prized than privacy, and in the trendy area of Seminyak, there's no better place to find it than Hu'u Villas. Artful, beautiful, and discreet, the property is a perfect place for just-married couples looking to have it all: dining, nightlife, beaches just a short drive away, and, most importantly, some time for two.

Opened last year, the property comprises 10 luxurious villas designed by a team with Alvin Tan from Singapore's renowned Phunk Studio at its head. The villas range from one-bedroom lofts to a three-bedroom penthouse, all contemporary and airy with spacious open plans that fill during the day with island sunlight. Balinese crafts, Batik patterns, glamorous chandeliers, and polished stone floors mix local with modern decor, and the first-class comforts—Bosch-equipped kitchens, tropical garden surrounds, and master bathrooms with deep standalone tubs perfect for romantic baths—immerse couples in the best of everything. And with soundproofing in each room, they can rest assured that they won't be bothered by the outside world during their stay.

Service is impeccable all around, ensuring

that couples never have to lift a finger during their getaway. If it's a night out that they wish for, complimentary entrance to Hu'u Bar and priority table bookings is never a problem, while nights in are easily accomplished by texting their private butler on their Samsung Galaxy tablet and arranging for the bar's eclectic cocktails to be brought to their

Clockwise, from right: A private villa pool lit up at night; teak wood floors add an indigenous touch; contemporary L-shaped couches outfit the villas; a plush master bedroom.



villa. Baba, the on-site restaurant, serves delicious Peranakan fare by the tranquil infinity pool, though couples can also have chef Alfie Jerome Mossadeg's special menu of signature in-villa dishes brought to their teak patio, and after, enjoy a starlit dip in their private pool. With its prime setting and creature comforts galore, Hu'u Villas assures a blissful start to every couple's new life together.

Jl. Petitenget, Seminyak, Bali, Indonesia;  
62-361/849-9130; huu villasbali.com





CONTEST

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### Housed within the glassy pyramidal Parkview Green

building with an Andy Warhol *Giant Panda* screen print hanging in the lobby, Hotel Éclat Beijing exudes artistry from first glance. Since opening in early 2013, the design abode has established itself as exceptionally creative quarters in the Chinese capital, collecting and showcasing works by world famous artists throughout its floors. A dozen bicycles hailing from luxury brands such as Chanel and Ferrari are parked on floor 17, and scattered throughout are pieces from its private collection of Salvador Dalí's works—the largest in China.

The 100 rooms speak to high design, fitted with Philippe Starck chairs, Panasonic massage chairs, Bang & Olufsen speakers, 3-D TVs, and toiletries from Miller Harris of London. Some of the larger guest rooms are themed in their decor, such as the suites based on Harry Potter and Darth Vader, and for added luxury, book one of the 20 with a heated pool or 40 with a private terrace.

Simply answer the following questions and fill in your details for the chance to win a five-night stay in a Deluxe Room, including daily breakfast for two.

1. Dunhuang is located in which Chinese province?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Name the capital of Bulgaria.

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Which is your favorite Australian city, Sydney or Melbourne?

\_\_\_\_\_

Each entry must state the entrant's full name, address, and telephone number and be returned to DestinAsian by January 15, 2015.

Please send your answers either by post: DestinAsian, P.O. Box 08 JKPPJ, Jakarta 10210 A, Indonesia; fax: 62-21/574-7733; e-mail: [competition@destinasian.com](mailto:competition@destinasian.com); or via [destinasian.com](http://destinasian.com)

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**Congratulations to the winner of our Jun/Jul 2014 issue's draw, Vivek Goyal of Singapore, for a five-night stay at The Residence Mauritius. And to the winners of our Readers' Choice Awards Aug/Sep 2014 issue's draw: Wan Ling Yeo and Wai Jin The for the Lenovo Yoga Tablet; Rico Farren for the BOSE SoundDock Portable; and Jan Philip Dirkman, Peggy McDaniel, and Philip Ong for the Zero Halliburton luggage.**



# Beans of the Mountains

**UNDER THE VOLCANO**

Opposite: The sun rising over terraced coffee fields in the mountains of Garut regency, West Java.

BY  
RACHEL WILL  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY  
MUHAMMAD  
FADLI

JAVA—THE ISLAND'S NAME IS SYNONYMOUS WITH COFFEE, YET THE QUALITY OF THE BEANS HARVESTED HERE (LET ALONE THE LIVING STANDARDS OF THE PEOPLE WHO GROW IT) HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN WHAT IT COULD. ENTER KLASIK BEANS, AN UPSTART COOPERATIVE THAT IS CHAMPIONING SUSTAINABLE, SMALL-SCALE COFFEE FARMING IN THE MOUNTAINS OF WEST JAVA AND BEYOND



# T

THE COFFEE FARM I AM VISITING IS nestled on a terraced hillside in the Sundanese highlands of West Java, flanked by what looks like a wall of Dr. Seuss's truffula trees. It has taken me months to pin down a meeting with Eko Purnomowidi, a founder of the Klasik Beans Cooperative. But after a brutal seven-hour car ride from Jakarta to the Garut area during the biggest Muslim holiday of the year, I am finally face-to-face with the man who by many accounts is at the heart of Indonesia's burgeoning specialty-coffee industry.

"How did you find out about us?" is the first thing he asks me.

How didn't I find out about you? I ask myself. Was it when a coffee roaster in Jakarta referred to the man raising the quality of Indonesian specialty beans to export quality through education? When the owner of a hip Jakarta café told me about a hillside farm and guest-house operation in the mountains of Garut? Or perhaps the Balinese farmer improving his methods to meet your standard of quality?

We are sitting under the eaves of the farm's bamboo kitchen, the rays of the setting sun filtering through the surrounding foliage. Eko is making coffee from freshly ground Arabica beans with a basic French press; as we chat, he offers me fresh corn and Sundanese snacks like *nasi kuning* (yellow rice). When the coffee is ready, he pours it into a glass tumbler. I inhale the scent before taking a tentative sip—I can taste the forest in the mellow, aromatic brew. Oh yes, I remember, that's how I found out about you.

IT'S A RARE SUNDAY THAT I don't find myself posted up with a photogenic flat white at One Fifteenth Coffee in South Jakarta. The café, which takes its name from the ideal coffee-to-water brew ratio, is an oasis in Indonesia's bustling capital, outfitted with communal wooden tables and cozy couches and serving single-origin coffees from independent growers across the archipelago. It was here, during one of One Fifteenth's coffee-cupping sessions, that I first met Arief Said of Morph Coffee roasters. Arief shares the same indulgent weekend schedule as me, and during various subsequent meetings at the café he spoke of the Indonesian specialty beans that make the shop's brews so good.

"There's a man," he told me one Sunday, "who goes all over Indonesia teaching farmers about how to grow quality coffee. He's started a cooperative to raise up the livelihood of its members and help them gain the perspective needed to be a global player."

Lia Gunawan, the owner of One Fifteenth, was equally effusive when I mentioned Purnomowidi's name. "That's a great story," she said. "He has farms in Sunda and teaches international visitors about Indonesian coffee. You should interview him!"



**EKO IS MAKING COFFEE FROM FRESHLY GROUND ARABICA BEANS WITH A FRENCH PRESS; WHEN IT'S READY, HE POURS THE COFFEE INTO A GLASS TUMBLER. I INHALE THE SCENT BEFORE TAKING A TENTATIVE SIP—I CAN TASTE THE FOREST IN THE AROMATIC BREW**

#### MAN WITH A MISSION

Above: Klasik Beans' founder Eko Purnomowidi flashes a smile in front of woven bamboo baskets used for collecting coffee cherries. Opposite, clockwise from bottom right: Lia Gunawan, owner of Jakarta coffee shop One Fifteenth Coffee; facilities at the Malabar Mountain coffee plantation, on the forested slopes of West Java's Mount Puntang; Arief Said and Andrew Tang, co-founders of Morph Coffee, at One Fifteenth; coffee and Sundanese snacks start the day at the Klasik Beans farm near Garut.



**CAFFEINE BUZZ**

Sunday cupping sessions and industrial-chic design have made One Fifteenth one of Jakarta's top coffee haunts. Opposite: Beans before and after roasting on display at the Malabar Mountain plantation.



## JAVA JIVE

Below: A farmer at work in his field near Panawuan village, Garut. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Getting around the coffee-growing highlands is best done in Klasik Beans' Land Rover; Malabar Mountain's farm manager, Camat, shows off one of the tools of his trade, a *parang*, or machete; Doddy, a barista at One Fifteenth in Jakarta; coffee cherries ready for processing.



## WE WALK THROUGH THE FIELDS PAST ALTERNATING STANDS OF ORANGE TREES AND COFFEE PLANTS, WITH ARCA POINTING OUT HIS HEALTHY, STOUT BUSHES. HE HOPES TO BEGIN SELLING HIS BEANS TO KLASIK BEANS SOON, ONCE HE GETS THE QUALITY UP

So I e-mailed the man. And I waited. And waited.

It was almost two months before he replied, but in the meantime, my research into his cooperative had further piqued my interest. The Klasik Beans team has been building up the local specialty-coffee industry since 2008, counting cult coffee roasters like Chicago's Intelligentsia and Australia's Five Senses among its fans. Though Indonesia is the third largest exporter of coffee globally after Brazil and Vietnam, its Starbucks-ready commodity crop hardly encourages

quality or sustainability. Klasik Beans hopes to change that, to help encourage organic farming methods and improve the lot of coffee farmers. Ask any of the cooperative's 500-plus members, and they'll tell you about their children who can now attend school and about the fields they proudly call their own.

By the time I received Eko's response, I was already hot on his trail in Bali. Scottish chef Will Meyrick had offhandedly mentioned to me how his two restaurants in Bali, Sarong and Mamasan, were hosting educational coffee workshops and promoting sustainable farming methods. "We know how to order a latte and drink it, but we don't know the process behind the coffee," Meyrick told me. "This is where Eko comes in. He is incredibly proud of Indonesia, and of his Indonesian beans."

I AM ON THE SIDE OF A BALINESE VOLCANO looking for a red jeep. Its owner, I Wayan Arca, is taking me to see his family's hillside coffee farm in Kintamani, about an hour's drive northeast of Ubud. My driver spots the vehicle before me, and we caravan to the summit of Kintamani together, Arca's jeep never out of sight through the winding bends and switchbacks. The climb takes us through roads shaded by dewy vegetation until suddenly the mountains open up before me, and I can see a single road leading down through the steeply terraced fields.

Arca is the bar manager at Meyrick's Mamasan restaurant, but his family business is coffee. It was years before he revealed this fact to Meyrick, who had fortuitously just returned from visiting Eko's farms in Sunda. Neither knew of the other's aligning interests at the time.

The beans grown in Kintamani—a cross between Arabica and Robusta strains—have been the bread money of the community for more than three decades. Villagers also grow oranges on their land because of the lucrative harvest, but coffee remains their key crop.

"So, this is the farm," Arca tells me with a grin when we finally arrive. "Sometimes I have visitors who don't even know what a coffee plant looks like."

We walk through the fields past alternating stands of orange trees and coffee plants, with Arca pointing out his healthy, stout bushes. He tells me that he hopes to begin selling his beans to Klasik Beans soon, once he gets the quality up. Eko has already visited his farm and shared some growing techniques with him.

Our walk eventually takes us to a small farmyard teeming with pigs, chickens, dogs, and a skinny cow. An elderly couple approaches us and Arca introduces them as longtime family friends. Between my limited Indonesian and their local dialect, we don't get further than introductions. But a grin goes a long way in these parts, and they insist we stay for a cup of coffee. The wife busies herself with preparation while Arca sits down to chat with the husband.

Soon enough the wife comes back with two small glasses of *kopi tubruk*, a dark, course-ground coffee made in the traditional Indonesian way. The bottom is murky with raw grounds. I inhale deeply and smell the coffee, the rich soil, and the citrus. It starts to rain as we drink. Arca and I hurriedly gulp the rest down, but our hosts won't let us leave until I promise to come back and visit them again some day.

THERE ARE SOME MEETINGS YOU REMEMBER because of the conversation, and there are some you remember for the time and place. Chatting with Eko for the first time at the moonlit Klasik Beans farm in Garut proves memorable by all accounts. By now we are happily fed and Eko's eight founding partners, Robet, CONTINUED ON PG. 118







**MAKING TRACKS**

Chapel Street in Melbourne's Prahran neighborhood, where vintage trams still operate. Opposite: On the steps of the Sydney Opera House.

# Sydney or melbourne?

BY NATASHA DRAGUN

WITH THE AUSTRALIAN SEASON FOR EXPERIENCING BRIGHTEST. FOR TIME-PRESSED TRAVELERS LOOKING FOR A SOPHISTICATED URBAN BREAK, THAT WILL LIKELY MEAN A CHOICE BETWEEN THE CONTINENT'S TWO LARGEST CITIES—LONGTIME RIVALS FOR OUR AFFECTIONS. SO WILL IT BE HARBOR-SIDE SYDNEY, OR THE HIPSTER VIBE OF MELBOURNE? TO HELP YOUR DECISION MAKING, WE'VE ROUNDED UP WHAT'S HOT AND HAPPENING IN EACH ...



# Sydney

## THE VIBE

The first thing you will notice about Sydney over its warmer months is that nobody stays inside: parks brim with picnickers; beaches buzz; and restaurants, bars, and cafés push punters street-side or to the rooftops. The city packs in more than 8.6 million visitors every year, which is not to say that you won't find a patch of grass or sand to yourself. Jump on a seaplane, rent a kayak, catch a ferry, or hire a yacht, and you'll soon find hidden beaches with as many or as few people to share it with as you like. And if you want to work up a sweat, most coves and bays are ringed by national parkland, which you can explore on scenic walks. It's the complete summer cliché: sun, sand, and surf, with an enviable side of sophistication. Could Sydney be the ultimate hot-weather hangout?

## RESTAURANTS DU JOUR

Having cut his teeth at Copenhagen's Noma, Melbourne's Attica, and Sydney's Ormeaggio before opening **LuMi Bar & Dining** ([lumidining.com](http://lumidining.com)), chef Federico Zanellato knows a thing or two about of-the-minute cuisine. His eight-course Italian degustation begins with inspired dishes such as delicate spelt ravioli parcels filled with pumpkin, sea urchin, and chives before moving on to stinging-nettle spaghetti and a comforting pork jowl with buckwheat. • Young chef Jonathan Barthelmess can do no wrong—his mod-Greek restaurant Apollo a firm Sydney favorite, he has turned his attention to Japanese cuisine at **Cho Cho San** ([chochosan.com.au](http://chochosan.com.au)). Barthelmess takes inspiration from *izakaya* joints, dishing up unforgettable king crab omelets and pork-katsu steamed buns that give Momofuku's famed sliders a run for their money. • Mitch Orr's new **Acme** ([weareacme.com.au](http://weareacme.com.au)) revolves around fresh pasta—there are seven varieties to choose from, complemented by a handful of light bites such as deep-fried artichokes with a chamomile-infused whipped tofu sauce. Back to the carbs: the squid ink strozzapreti is tossed with octopus and has chrysanthemum overtones, while the malty linguine is lifted by black garlic with a gentle crunch thanks to crumbs of pangrattato. • Having left his Opera House digs behind, Guillaume Brahim has moved his eponymous French restaurant **Guillaume** ([guillaumes.com.au](http://guillaumes.com.au)) to Paddington. The menu is just as wow as it was when harbor-side. Expect the chef's pitch-perfect presentation to shine through in standout dishes such as the butter-poached marron (crayfish) served with braised pork cheek and the world's smoothest cauliflower puree.

## RETAIL THERAPY

Fashion fiends have long flocked to suburban strips such as Crown Street for retro boutiques, Oxford Street for homegrown labels, and King Street for vintage fashion and homewares. But Sydney's CBD is experiencing a retail revival, with big-name brands such as Uniqlo, Sephora, and Topshop all opening here recently. If you prefer a more bijou shopping experience, head to the historic **Strand Arcade** ([strandarcade.com.au](http://strandarcade.com.au)), with its elaborate Victorian-era facade and boutiques nodding to local design talent—the newest tenants include eponymous shops by Megan ▶



## SAVORING SYDNEY

Clockwise from above: The wharf-side LuMi Bar & Dining restaurant in Sydney's Pyrmont Bay area; *izakaya*-inspired dishes at Cho Cho San; a Moonlight Cinema showing in Centennial Park.



# melbourne

## THE VIBE

Melbourne's cool credentials keep getting better. Sydney may be the largest and flashiest city in the county, but its southern sister certainly delivers on the style stakes. Australia's capital of live music, galleries, and museums, Melbourne is a place of contradictions and hidden charms. It prides itself on nurturing a thriving arts scene, which sees it attract some of the world's top cultural events and festivals. But locals are also sports crazy, and flock to watch Australian Rules Football, cricket, tennis, and Formula 1 racing. Located on the leafy banks of the Yarra River and spliced by a network of clattery trams, Melbourne continually pips World's Most Liveable City awards, with stellar shopping, restaurants, cafés, and nightlife. The rumor that you can live four seasons in one day is true, even in summer. But with so much to keep you entertained indoors and out, you won't even notice the changes in the seasons.

## RESTAURANTS DU JOUR

Chef Dan Hunter is fast putting rural Victoria on the map. After moving on from the Royal Mail Hotel in Dunkeld, where he won culinary awards aplenty, he is single-handedly reinvigorating the Otway hinterland with **Brae** ([braerestaurant.com](http://braerestaurant.com)). The restaurant is set on 12 hectares of working farmland, and Hunter's dishes incorporate produce grown and raised on these fields, complemented by artisan produce from other Victorian growers. It's all organic, sustainable, and ethical, which means menus change regularly, according to what is growing. • Back in the CBD, chef Andrew McConnell's new Japanese-style diner, **Supernormal** ([supernormal.net.au](http://supernormal.net.au)), comes replete with a private karaoke room. Begin your evening upstairs with supremely fresh plates from the raw bar before moving on to twice-cooked duck *bao* or cold-rolled pork belly with white kimchi. • Billed as Australia's only ticketed dining room, **Prix Fixe** ([prixfixe.com.au](http://prixfixe.com.au)) comes courtesy of acclaimed dessert chef Philippa Sibley. The concept is simple: pay AU\$49 for two courses and a glass of wine at lunch and \$89 for four courses at dinner, and you'll receive dishes prepared to a theme: A Midsummer Night's Dream, perhaps, or the Spring Racing Carnival. • Adding to the revival of Collingwood's Smith Street, **Saint Crispin** ([saintcrispin.com.au](http://saintcrispin.com.au)) puts a contemporary twist on tapas. While you wait for a table, sink into chesterfields and sip inspired cocktails at upstairs bar Thomas Olive; in the dining room, dishes such as smoked-eel croquettes and quail with chorizo, polenta, and sherry steal the show.

## RETAIL THERAPY

There's a lot to love about shopping along Melbourne's atmospheric laneways (our favorites include Manchester and Flinders lanes for local fashion and Degraves Street to refuel on good coffee), and the graffiti-clad streets continue to reinvent themselves with new boutiques. The latest additions come from Sydney label **Bassike** ([bassike.com](http://bassike.com)), whose all-white warehouse-like store in Rankins Lane (originally a horse stable dating to the 1890s) is the perfect place to pick up cashmere and cotton essentials in a ▶



## MELBOURNE MOMENTS

A view of downtown Melbourne across the Yarra River, above. Left: A vendor at the city's historic Queen Victoria Market, a two-block fresh-food mecca that dates back to the 19th century.

# Sydney

► Park and Dion Lee. • Occupying the site of the former Carlton & United Brewery, the new **Central Park** ([centralparksydney.com](http://centralparksydney.com)) development features an eye-catching design by Foster + Partners as well as what's being billed as the world's tallest vertical garden. It's still a work in progress, but a handful of design and fashion boutiques plus a pop-up art space are already proving popular with students from the nearby university campus.

## CAFÉ CULTURE

Celebrating its first birthday, **Three Williams** ([threewilliams.com](http://threewilliams.com)) in Redfern remains a popular brunch hangout. The industrial space is family friendly with a kid's corner, which means you can enjoy bulging "narnies" (flatbread sandwiches) filled with wagyu beef brisket, gherkins, and slaw in peace. Don't leave without trying the peanut-caramel shake—it's heaven in an ice-cold glass. • Yes, **Pinbone** ([pinbone.com.au](http://pinbone.com.au)) is open for dinner Wednesday through Saturday, but the Woollahra restaurant's Sunday brunch offerings—indulgent baked tarts; scones with smoked cheese, sausage gravy, and fried eggs—are worth waiting for. If you do come in the evening, order fun bites such as chocolate crackles with liver parfait. • Newtown is known for its seemingly endless culinary options, one of the newest being **Cuckoo Callay** ([cuckoo-callay.com.au](http://cuckoo-callay.com.au)). Don't let the fact that it is part of the train station put you off; the quirky decor includes teal banquettes with pops of pink on the walls. Unexpected menu items, meanwhile, include pulled-pork baguettes and crispy hash browns with poached egg, pea puree, and bacon steak. There's also Aeropress and Chemex-style coffee. • In the same vicinity, **Brewtown Newtown** ([brewtownnewtown.com](http://brewtownnewtown.com)) occupies a converted warehouse, once the home of a much-loved bookstore. Locals can't complain too loudly about the replacement café, especially when there are glazed cronuts on offer. There's a long bar where you can watch baristas prepare everything from 12-hour cold-drip to espresso and filter coffee. Head upstairs to peruse pieces from retail collective O'Connell Street Merchants.

## MARKET VALUE

The **Sydney Fish Market** ([sydneyfishmarket.com.au](http://sydneyfishmarket.com.au)) is said to be the world's second-largest seafood market in terms of variety (after Tokyo's Tsukiji). Most people come here for fresh-off-the-boat oysters, prawns, and crab—pick up a loaf of sourdough and a bottle of chardonnay from the deli, order your seafood to go, and pull up a perch on the waterside promenade. Upstairs, the Sydney Seafood School holds classes on how to cook the perfect chili crab or host a summer seafood barbecue. • Every Saturday, top NSW producers and farmers converge on the heritage-listed Carriageworks buildings (part of the 1880s-built Eveleigh Rail Yards) for the popular **Eveleigh Market** ([eveleighmarket.com.au](http://eveleighmarket.com.au)). Chef Kylie Kwong mans the dumpling and pork-bun steamers at her Billy Kwong stall, the aroma of sausages and salamis from the Eumundi Smokehouse stand fills the air, and flavored nuts are cracked and scattered at Murrungundy Pistachios. • If you're ►



**SUBURBAN STYLE**  
Clockwise from left: Stepping out on Sydney's boutique-lined Crown Street; a perfectly poured martini at Gazebo; the Icebergs ocean pool at Bondi Beach, one of Sydney's most popular stretches of sand.



# melbourne

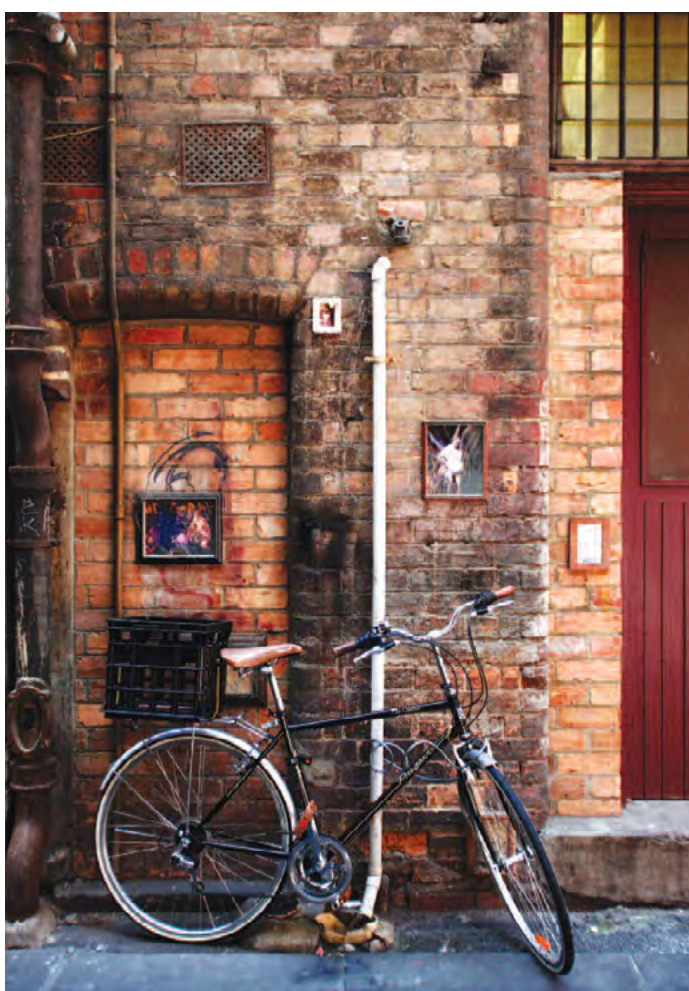
► crisp, neutral palette. • The new boutique from Swedish-owned **Acne Studios** ([acnestudios.com](http://acnestudios.com)) calls The Strand Arcade on Little Bourke Street home and features an eye-popping design of perforated aluminum, rolled out in L.A. and Paris before coming down under. There's fashion for him and her plus shoes and accessories—don't miss the "Stockholm Syndrome" scarf, created especially for Australian shoppers. • While Melbourne prides itself on its laneway shopping, the hottest retail ticket in town today is the **Emporium** ([emporiummelbourne.com.au](http://emporiummelbourne.com.au)). The seven-level complex is home to more than 225 stores, with Australian representation from the likes of sass&bide, Willow, and Zimmermann. Boutiques making their Australian debut in here include UCLA and youth brand Zoo York.

## CAFÉ CULTURE

Serious coffee connoisseurs will want to make a beeline for **Seven Seeds** ([sevenseeds.com.au](http://sevenseeds.com.au))—it's not new, but it continually wins awards for its dedication to the brew. And that's saying something in a city that prides itself on having forced Starbucks to close up many of its shops. The Carlton-based micro-roaster and café has a superb house blend as well as a selection of carefully sourced single origins and guest blends, which pair perfectly with a toasted Ryebean. • It has only been open a couple of years, but Collingwood's **Everyday Coffee** ([everyday-coffee.com](http://everyday-coffee.com)) is already widely regarded as the city's best brew bar. The casual space offers a rotating selection of beans and roasts, including Seven Seeds for black espresso and Market Lane Guatemalan Santa Isabel for pour-overs. There are croissants and cakes, plus coffee paraphernalia to take home. • Brunswick Street in Fitzroy has its fair share of good cafés, but few have people talking more than newcomer **Stagger Lee's** ([staggerlees.com.au](http://staggerlees.com.au)), where a coffee-lover's menu is dedicated to single-origin espresso and filter coffee. Pair this with a liquor license—try the Bucket of Blood, with peppercorn vodka, red wine, Vegemite syrup, and tomato juice if you dare—and dishes such as truffled polenta with in-season pine mushrooms, and you have all the ingredients for a winning formula.

## MARKET VALUE

Spread over two city blocks and heritage listed, **Queen Victoria Market** ([qvm.com.au](http://qvm.com.au)) sells everything from cheese to clothes, vegetables to souvenirs. The largest open-air market in the southern hemisphere, Queen Vic is the only surviving 19th-century market in the CBD. You could spend a day exploring the hundreds of stalls—just don't miss ordering a hot jam doughnut from the food truck, serving up the warm pockets for more than 50 years. • The **Camberwell Sunday Market** ([sundaymarket.com.au](http://sundaymarket.com.au)) remains Melbourne's most popular weekend haunt for secondhand knickknacks, with more than 370 stalls selling pre-loved clothes, accessories, furniture, and collectibles. A large number of stands are casual, which means that plenty of bargains can be had. • Closer to town in Fitzroy, the **Rose Street Artists' Market** ([rocestmarket.com.au](http://rocestmarket.com.au)) showcases the city's top emerging and established creative talent ►



### TOP TABLE

Above: An hour's drive from Melbourne, chef Dan Hunter's Brae restaurant is definitely worth the trip for its envelope-pushing food—the seasonal menu might include raw prawn and finger lime wrapped in nasturtium leaves, or squid-ink pretzels dusted with pork scratchings. Left: A quintessential Melbourne laneway.

# Sydney

▶ after vintage clothes, pre-loved homewares and general bric-a-brac, it's hard to look past **Surry Hills Markets** (first Saturday of every month). Don't let the buskers distract you from the Jam Bandits stall, where you can order gooey salted caramel on a stick.

## MAIN EVENTS

From classical music to circus and everything in between, **Sydney Festival** ([sydneyfestival.org.au](http://sydneyfestival.org.au); Jan. 8–26) is guaranteed to entertain. More than 500,000 people regularly attend free events—including live opera, symphony, and samba music in The Domain park—while ticketed highlights will showcase Aboriginal musician Archie Roach and director Kate Champion in the stage-show *Nothing to Lose*. • For waterside drama, **Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour** ([opera.org.au](http://opera.org.au); Mar. 27–Apr. 26) is sure to impress. In its third year, the event will see Verdi's *Aida* performed on the edge of the harbor at Mrs. Macquaries Point, backdropped by the Opera House. • One of the largest events of its kind in the world, the **Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras** ([mardigras.org.au](http://mardigras.org.au); Feb. 20–Mar. 8) is among the city's most popular draws. Thousands of visitors will descend on Sydney for a film festival, fairs, and, of course, the street parade on March 7—an extravaganza of lavish floats, spectacular costumes, and live music.

## AFTER DARK

Sydney's small bar scene continues to thrive thanks to the likes of **Kubrick's** ([kubricks.com.au](http://kubricks.com.au)) in Surry Hills, where bartenders spin vinyl when not mixing creative cocktails. Most of the wine is biodynamic, and the house drink is the Kubrick Fizz: a tart muddle of gin, grapefruit liqueur, rosemary agave, fresh lemon, ginger beer, and apple. • The decor at Redfern's **The Bearded Tit** ([thebeardedtit.com](http://thebeardedtit.com)) is as whimsical as the bar's name. Uniting an eclectic mix of taxidermy and ceramics, paintings and mirrors, the lounge is a cozy place to sip fun cocktails, with bites supplied by neighborhood restaurants. • Both owned by the Keystone Group, **Champagne Room** and **Gazebo** ([thekeystonegroup.com.au](http://thekeystonegroup.com.au)) have new looks in time for summer. The former sits atop Surry Hills hotspot The Winery and now offers a luxe cocktail list—try the Mary Antoinette, made with Tanqueray gin, apple bitters, lemon, and rose-milk syrup. You'll want to linger at Gazebo all evening, gazing over the park while nibbling seared venison tartare with shi-take emulsion and roasted kale. The cocktail list has been given a makeover along with the decor. • In town until January 23, the **Asahi Super Dry Extra Cold Bar** will pop up at 37 Blight Street, giving drinkers the opportunity to beat the heat and taste Asahi Super Dry and Asahi Super Dry Black in a room chilled to sub-zero temperatures.

## ALFRESCO OFFERINGS

Sydney shines in summer, so it comes as no surprise that everything that can be taken outdoors is taken outdoors, movies included. Pack a picnic and relax on the grass of Centennial Park for **Moonlight Cinema** ([moonlight.com.au](http://moonlight.com.au); Dec. 11–Mar. 29), showing a mix

CONTINUED ON PG. 119



### HIGH NOTES

Left: Attractions in the Blue Mountains—50 kilometers west of downtown Sydney—include the Cableway, said to be the steepest and largest aerial cable car in the southern hemisphere. Above: The brunch spread at Three Williams, a café in the inner-city Sydney suburb of Redfern.



# melbourne

► every Saturday and Sunday. Celebrating 10 years, the market is a great place to pick up one-off photographs, fashion and jewellery, homewares, collectables, and even vintage pieces—there's also live music and organic snacks.

## MAIN EVENTS

First held in 1905, the **Australian Open** ([ausopen.com](http://ausopen.com); Jan. 19–Feb. 1) tennis tournament is the first Grand Slam event of the year. While the world's best players often struggle with the summer heat—the average on-court temperature in 2009 was 34.7°C—fans keep cool at alfresco bars ringing Melbourne Park's many stadiums. • A celebration of Victoria's love of the culinary arts, the **Melbourne Food & Wine Festival** ([melbournefoodandwine.com.au](http://melbournefoodandwine.com.au); Feb. 27–Mar. 15) offers a diverse program of more than 200 events, with happenings in restaurants, along river banks, down laneways and deep into the state's picturesque wine country. Highlights in 2015 include Return to Terroir, a gathering of more than 40 of the world's leading biodynamic wine producers. • Melbourne is widely regarded as Australia's fashion capital, so it comes as no surprise that the city is the only antipodean destination to host **The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk** exhibition ([ngv.vic.gov.au](http://ngv.vic.gov.au); until Feb. 8). The first show dedicated to the playfully irreverent designs of the groundbreaking French couturier features more than 140 garments in addition to photographs, sketches, stage costumes, and excerpts from runway shows. Check out the first dress created by the designer in 1971 as well as haute couture dresses worn by Nicole Kidman.

## CITY SLICKERS

From above: Chefs Scott Pickett and Joe Grbac at Saint Crispin on Melbourne's Smith Street; inside Acne Studios' Little Bourke Street boutique; the kitchen at Cumulus Up, the new wine bar from chef Andrew McConnell.



COURTESY OF SAINT CRISPIN; COURTESY OF ACNE STUDIOS; COURTESY OF CUMULUS UP. OPPOSITE: GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF THREE WILLIAMS

## AFTER DARK

The spirit of choice at Smith Street's **Los Barbudos** ([losbarbudos.com.au](http://losbarbudos.com.au)) is rum—there are more than 90 labels to choose from. Taking its cues from Cuba's golden age, the suitably sultry bar is popular for its potent frozen daiquiris, along with other Caribbean favorites. In the courtyard, the Voodoo Jerk Truck does a roaring trade in jerk pork ribs and fried chicken. • Tasmanian whisky wins awards around the world, and now it has a dedicated home at the **Nant Whisky Bar** ([nant.com.au](http://nant.com.au)) on Driver Lane. Dedicated to the Nant label and the finest single malts from around the globe, it also serves Tasmanian wines, beers, and dishes using products from the Apple Isle. • He may have a clutch of restaurants across town, but that hasn't stopped chef Andrew McConnell from taking things up a notch—literally. Topping his restaurant Cumulus Inc., new wine bar **Cumulus Up** ([cumulusinc.com.au](http://cumulusinc.com.au)) features a charcoal canvas offset with the flash of mirrors and gently glowing blown-glass bells. The excellent list of craft beers includes the hard-to-find 961 Beer from Lebanon, complemented by the snacks that McConnell does so well—duck waffle, foie gras, and prunes, anyone?

## ALFRESCO OFFERINGS

It may not enjoy the near-endless summer sunshine of Sydney, but Melbourne puts on a brave face with its fair share of alfresco cinemas. Held on

CONTINUED ON PG. 119



# road to the peaks

FROM FRESCOED THRACIAN TOMBS TO BYZANTINE  
MONASTERIES AND SOVIET-ERA MONUMENTS, TEMPTATIONS  
ABOUND ON A JOURNEY INTO THE MOUNTAIN  
FASTNESS OF SOUTHERN BULGARIA, WHERE ANCIENT  
TRADITIONS MEET MODERN COMFORTS

BY WARREN SINGH-BARTLETT  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETAR PESHEV

**UP AT THE VILLA** The six-bedroom Villa Gella is perched  
1,700 meters above sea level in the Rhodope Mountains.  
Opposite: Detail of a mummer's costume for the Kukeri  
festival in nearby Shiroka Laka village.





## SHIFTING GEARS, DIMITR ADVISED

me to buckle up. “The snow’s still deep here but if we hit it hard, we should get across.” What we needed to get across was an icy saddle some 1,200 meters up in the Balkan Mountains. Our destination lay on the other side and a couple hundred meters farther up: Buzludzha, a massive saucer-shaped building made of concrete, behind which loomed a slender tower incised on either side with a red Soviet star. Even from here, it was clear Buzludzha had seen better days. Built at the apogee of Bulgarian Communism, under then general secretary Todor Zhivkov, this monument to the Party’s founders opened in 1981. Less than a decade later it was abandoned, as Bulgaria, along with the rest of Eastern Europe, began its transition toward democracy.

It took us a while to find what remained of the road up, a patchwork of asphalt and grass that rapidly disintegrated into a bumpy dirt track. “Hold on,” Dimitr cautioned. “If this doesn’t work, we might end up in that ditch down there.”

I wondered briefly if it was worth the risk. Buzludzha hadn’t been on our itinerary; technically, we were on our way to the village of Gela, up in the Rhodope Mountains that range along the old Iron Curtain border with Greece. But the drive from Sofia was littered with so much temptation that, rather than take the short route, we’d detoured through the town of Kazanlak and the Valley of the Thracian Rulers to marvel at 2,300-year-old rock-cut tombs, some still brightly frescoed. It was as we were on our way to Shushmanets, a temple turned tomb where ancient Thracian priests once locked themselves in the dark for three-day meditation sessions, that I spotted Buzludzha—a tomb, too, albeit of a modern sort. Even from below, the ridge-top monument was magnificent, lording over the wintry mountainscape. And inside it was more fascinating still, as I knew from photos I’d seen online of Buzludzha’s ruined, spaceship-like interior. Despite the post-apocalyptic splendor—fallen ceiling, gaping holes, crumbling seating—the main hall’s heroic mosaics were largely intact, as was the giant hammer-and-sickle emblem on the ceiling. Yes, I thought as I tightened my seat belt, it was worth a try.

Dimitr hit the accelerator. Kicking up a slurry of icy mud and yellowed turf, the Land Rover roared forward. Thirty seconds later, after sliding toward the aforementioned ditch a couple of times, we were



## WE SNAKED OUR WAY UP INTO THE MOUNTAINS ALONG THE COURSE OF THE CHEPELARE RIVER, PASSING BYZANTINE MONASTERIES, A 13TH-CENTURY FORTRESS, AND COUNTLESS SIGNS POINTING TO SOME RUINED CASTLE, CHURCH, OR TEMPLE

across. From here on, the slope was mostly bare, stripped of snow by the ferocious wind. A few minutes later, I was racing up the front steps toward the main entrance. Of course, it was locked. Chained shut. I circumambulated the building as though it were some kind of Communist Kaaba looking for somewhere I could climb up or squeeze through. To no avail. The windows, smashed in by vandals years ago, were all plated shut, and while a small platform halfway up one of the side walls looked promising, I needed a rope or ladder to reach it. In the end, the only glimpse I had of that ruined interior was through a small hole in the steel plating at the main entrance. I was tempted to linger, but the clouds were closing in and the wind was picking up. Freezing, I conceded defeat.

As we drove away, my disappointment was mitigated by the fact that

### EDIFICE COMPLEX

Above: A space-age temple to Bulgarian Communism, the Buzludzha monument has been left derelict since the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989. Opposite: Crowds descend on Shiroka Laka’s main street to take in the Kukeri festivities.



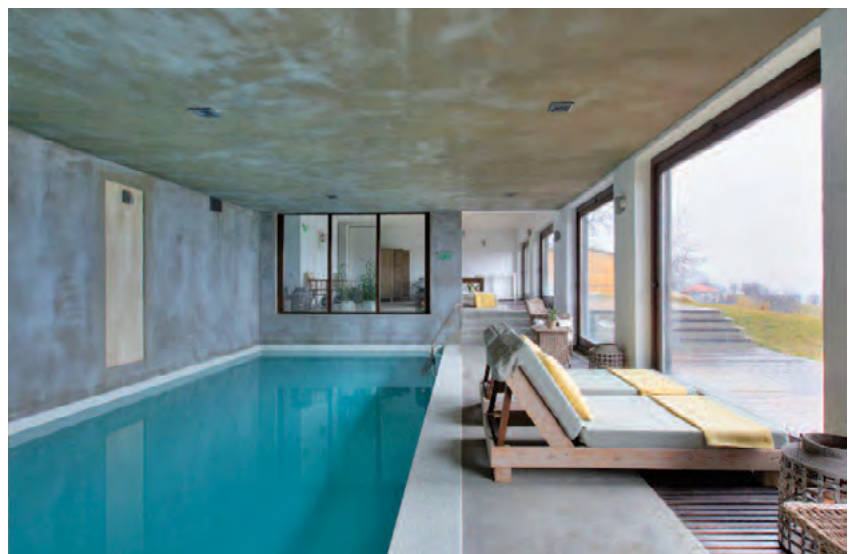
### COSTUME DRAMA

Clockwise from left:  
A Kukeri dancer on parade in Shiroka Laka;  
mountain scenery in the pine-clad Rhodopes;  
the sound of the cowbells worn by festival performers is meant to drive off evil spirits and bring hope for a good harvest.





**WHAT LIES BENEATH**  
Clockwise from above:  
Inside the Devil's Throat  
Cave, where Orpheus is  
said to have entered  
Hades; the indoor  
swimming pool at Villa  
Gella; a Kukeri performer  
unmasked; Thracian  
pottery on display at  
the Historical Museum  
in Kazanlak.





while I hadn't managed to get inside, there had been something about the whole experience—Dimitr's gung-ho approach, the trouble we had getting there, knowing that what we were doing was probably mildly illegal—that recalled the freewheeling sense of freedom I remember from my first years in Lebanon, where I've lived since 1998. So two hours later, as we drew into the garage beside our destination, an improbable oasis of luxury in most rural Bulgaria called Villa Gella, I was riding a high.

The drive had helped. Bulgaria is visibly poor and largely rural. You see the kinds of lined, weathered faces here that prosperity and rich diets have erased elsewhere in Europe. Buildings are dilapidated. Horse and donkey carts are still common; you even see them in Sofia, the capital. But this material poverty, an ephemeral condition, belies the country's historical, natural, and cultural wealth. Glorious churches with blazing icons; ancient cities that are architectural palimpsests, testimony to thousands of years of invasion and occupation; stately Sinan-esque mosques and Beaux Arts synagogues; thickly forested mountains harboring bears, wolves, wild boar, and eagles; and Black Sea beaches, beautiful despite the massive resorts built along them under Pax Sovietica. Bulgaria was a revelation—a "wild beauty," to borrow neighboring Montenegro's marketing slogan. A pocket of old Europe and of old European cordiality.

We left the plains at Asenovgrad and snaked our way up into the mountains along the course of the Chepelare River, passing Byzantine monasteries, a 13th-century fortress, and countless signs pointing to some ruined castle, church, or temple. According to Dimitr, this road has been used by travelers between the Balkans and Greece for the last 3,000 years, possibly longer. Gradually, the valley narrowed

#### **BULGARIAN VIGNETTES**

Above, from left: A Shiroka Laka dowager on festival day; one of the six individually designed bedrooms at Villa Gella. Opposite: The Trigrad River as it plunges into the Devil's Throat Cave and drops more than 40 meters to the cavern floor.

and the forest closed in. As night fell, often the only lights visible were those of passing cars.

Villa Gella, though, was aglow. Despite its traditional-looking exterior, the chalet was a sleek, white beauty inside, with modern furnishings, artwork from Bulgaria and beyond, roaring fireplaces, and six individually designed bedrooms. Public areas were organized to encourage mixing, whether in the library, the living room, on the terrace, or even in the sauna and swimming pool on the lowest of the building's five levels. And its position on a steeply sloping site afforded panoramic views of the surrounding mountains, including Mount Perelik, highest of the Rhodope peaks.

Managed by the unflappable Darina Dobрева, the niece of owners Dimka and Ivan, Villa Gella was the reason for my visit. That and Kukeri, a pre-spring mummer's festival with ancient roots set firmly (and visibly) in the pagan past. Celebrated all over Bulgaria, Kukeri is considered to be at its most traditional in the village of Shiroka Laka, a convenient 10-minute drive away. I'd seen some footage of the previous year's performances online and had been mesmerized. Dancers in shaggy goatskin costumes and outlandish animal masks, men in bad









#### ARTFUL LODGINGS

Left: At Villa Gella, whitewashed walls and unfinished concrete are offset by the owner's collection of modern art (including pieces by Craigie Aitchison and Dale Chihuly) and Asian and Bulgarian antiques and artifacts, including the threshing board displayed on this landing. Opposite: A young mummer in Shiroka Laka doffs his goat-head mask.

## WITH THE DANCER'S LAST TRACE OF HUMANITY HIDDEN BENEATH A CROWN OF WHITE AND BROWN GOAT HAIR, ONLOOKERS' SMILES BECAME EXPRESSIONS OF AWE. MAYBE EVEN FEAR. PRIMAL, ATAVISTIC, THIS GOAT-MAN-YETI SET AMYGDALAE ABLAZE

drag as peasant women, and women in even worse drag as Orthodox priests jingled and jangled their way through grotesquely funny performances revolving around death and childbirth—the end of one season and the beginning of another.

All that was still two days away. For this, our first night, we had an evening of eating and drinking ahead. Dimka and Ivan also own vineyards on the slopes of Mount Sakar and produce organic wines under the Terra Tangra label. I had sampled a bottle of their rosé in Sofia and was looking forward to trying some of their other vintages. I wasn't disappointed. Over dinner, a seemingly simple spread of country fare innovatively tweaked by Dimka and bordering on the gourmet, Darina popped the cork on a bottle of Yatrus, their syrah. Smooth but powerful, the tannin burn chased away the last of the day's chill.

The next morning, we drove to hell. Or perhaps more accurately, to Hades. Lake Avernus, Fengdu, Glastonbury Tor, Mount Osore—the underworld has various points of access, depending on whose mythology you're reading. For the ancient Greeks, the main gate to hell was a cave in the Rhodopes called Dyavolsko Garlo—the Devil's Throat.

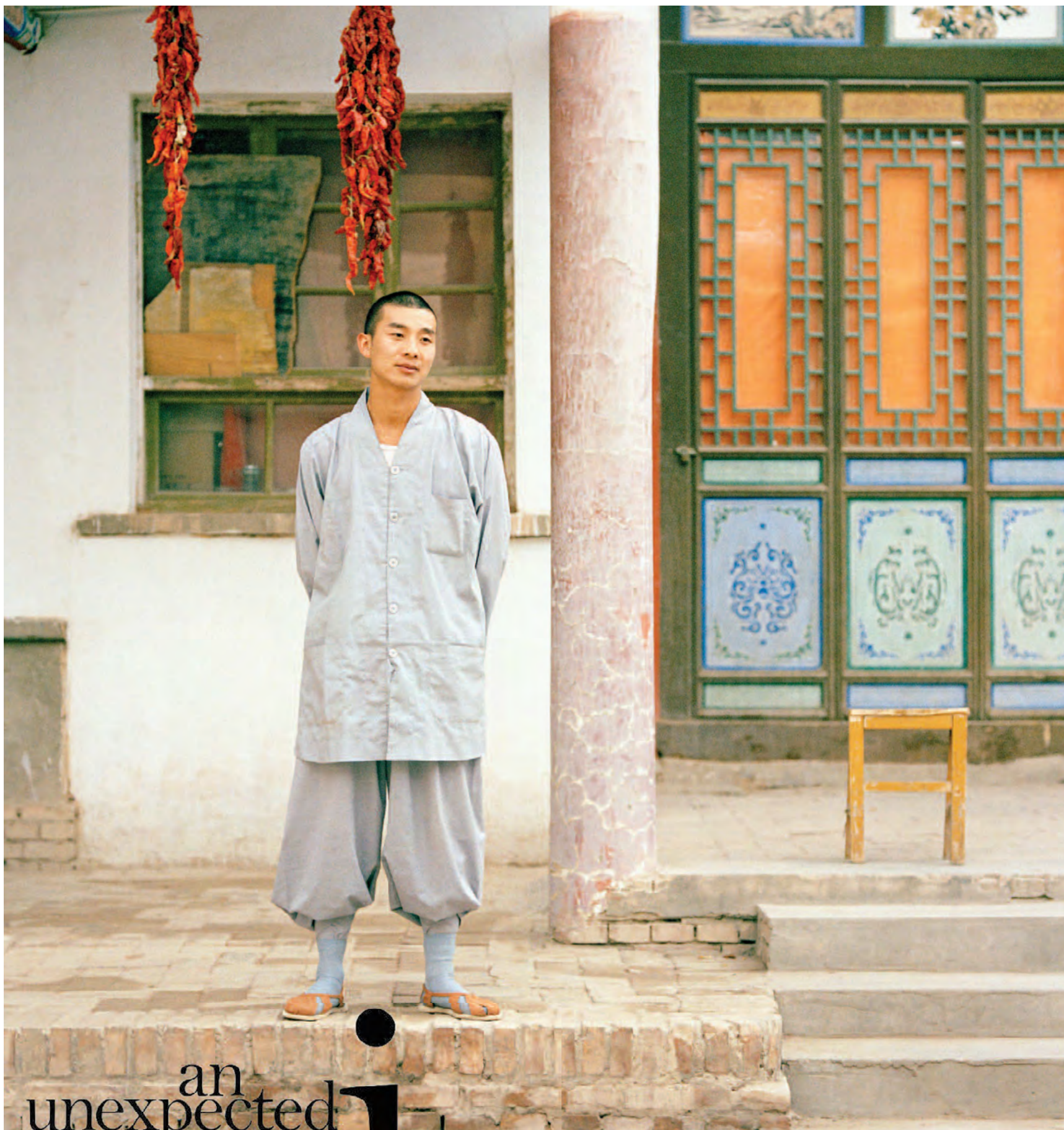
It was here that the mythical Thracian musician Orpheus came to persuade the lord and lady of Hades to bring his beloved wife, Eurydice, back from the dead. Orpheus was so skilled a musician that no one—even the notoriously hard-hearted rulers of the underworld—could resist the sound of his lyre. Moved by his music, Persephone, Hades' wife, told Orpheus he could lead Eurydice's ghost out of their realm. The only condition was that he not look at her until they both stood in daylight. But as he exited the stygian gloom ahead of Eurydice, Orpheus forgot Persephone's warning. Turning back, his words of longing withered on his lips as the shadowy form of his wife, who was still partially in the shadows, dissolved and blew away on the breeze.

My own descent into the Devil's Throat was via a rough-hewn tunnel cut into the mountain several decades ago. As it wound its way down to a terrace

above a massive cavern, the tunnel filled with the roar of falling water. On the terrace itself, that roar became a thunder, as the Trigrad River plunged in a fury of froth and foam 42 meters from its upper course to the cavern floor. From there, a narrow, switch-backing walkway punctuated by ladder-like stairs wound down and around the dark vault before rising steeply to the surface via the cave's natural entrance. This is where Orpheus would have made his descent, a treacherous wall of sheer rock with few visible handholds, bathed in slippery spray from the waterfall. Even from below, it seemed a challenge of Augean proportions. Without crampons and a harness? Suicidal. Orpheus's rescue attempt may have come to naught, but as she dissipated in the breeze, Eurydice must have marveled at the man's gumption.

Yet the cave's mysteries aren't all of the mythological kind. After plunging into the Devil's Throat, the river rushes across the cavern floor and disappears under a rock wall. Though it reemerges in daylight half a kilometer away, anything that falls into the water at this point is never seen again. Dye testing suggests that the river travels through more than 20 kilometers of subterranean tunnels before resurfacing. Somewhere along the way, anything solid gets trapped, perhaps in another cave. The Trigrad has swallowed up branches, tree trunks, soda cans, and, because several attempts have been made to map the underground network, people, too. According to my guide, a German diver, the last to try in the 1970s, is still

CONTINUED ON PG. 116



an  
unexpected

# Oasis

BY THOMAS BIRD  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIP LEE HARVEY

FOUNDED TWO MILLENNIA AGO AS A GARRISON TOWN ON THE EDGE OF THE GOBI DESERT, DUNHUANG IS RICH IN SILK ROAD HISTORY, CULTURALLY DIVERSE, AND HOME TO SOME OF ANTIQUITY'S FINEST BUDDHIST ART. ADD A CAMEL TREK ACROSS SAND DUNES TO THE MIX, AND YOU'VE GOT ONE OF THE MOST BEGUILING DESTINATIONS IN WESTERN CHINA



**HIGH AND DRY**

Above: A rocky desert landscape flanks the road into Dunhuang in northwestern Gansu province. Once a hub of the Northern Silk Road, the frontier town was built in the Han era to

guard the entrance to the Hexi Corridor, a strategic passage running between the foothills of the Tibetan Plateau and the Gobi Desert. Opposite: A young Buddhist monk outside a temple in Dunhuang.



#### FRONTIER DAYS

Clockwise from above: Local encounter; part of the Mogao Caves site, where hundreds of rock-cut Buddhist grottoes are filled with frescoes and hand-molded clay sculptures; incense

sticks burning at a local temple. Opposite: The teahouse complex at Yueyaquan, or Crescent Spring, a scenic oasis—and de rigueur tourist stop—in the shadow of the Mingsha sand dunes south of town.



**T**HOUGH I'D LIVED IN

China for years, work and inclination had rarely taken me far beyond the populous, pulsing east coast. And not once had I considered venturing into the country's desolate northern desert regions, the Gobi and the Taklimakan—the latter's Turkic name, popularly translated as "you can go in, but you won't come out," wasn't exactly the stuff of tourism slogans.

So when my friend Harvey Thomlinson, a Hong Kong-based translator and history-buff, suggested we team up for a visit to an ancient frontier city situated between both deserts, I needed some convincing. "Dunhuang is extraordinary!" he insisted. Harvey had visited Dunhuang a decade previously and was planning a valedictory tour before he returned to the United Kingdom. But I'd met my fair share of old China hands besotted with some obscure place they'd visited in the heady days of puerile Sinophilia. What could we possibly find in an arid corner of one of China's poorest provinces, Gansu?

All I knew of Dunhuang were the Tang Dynasty poems I had read in university. They described it as the end of the world. "I water my horse and cross the autumn river, the water is frigid, the wind piercing. Beyond the flat desert a weak sun sags," lamented the eighth-century scribe Wang Changling. "Let us finish another cup of wine, my dear sir, you'll have no chance to meet a friend beyond the Yangguan Pass," warned his contemporary Wang Wei.

Ultimately rationalizing that all travel, even the most arduous, has its rewards, I committed to enduring several hours of torment on a connecting flight through Xi'an. It was during the closing minutes of our final approach to Dunhuang, when I caught my first glimpse of a green atoll lost in a spellbindingly grand sea of yellow, that I felt my reservations dissipating like the plane's vapor trail.

In the days that followed, it wasn't just the beauty of the desert that enchanted me. It was discovering the role that Dunhuang, founded in antiquity as a small garrison town at the gateway to the Silk Road, had



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MY RESERVATIONS DISSIPATING  
LIKE THE PLANE'S VAPOR TRAIL



played in shaping China itself—and in the remnants of this illustrious past still visible in cave murals or softly fading from view along the sand-soaked imperial frontier.

IT WAS A LONG DRIVE THROUGH FLAT, barren terrain before we came upon a series of earthen mounds. Ninety kilometers northwest of Dunhuang, the 20 sand-scoured watchtowers that protrude from the wilderness are all that's left of this section of the Great Wall, built by Han emperors two millennia ago.

"You can see why it inspired such poetry," Harvey said, looking out across a dusty plateau to the rugged mountains beyond. "For the Chinese, civilization literally ended here." Indeed, it was easy to picture the Xiongnu—the first of many "barbarian" people to menace China—rushing into view across this savage landscape.

A rammed-earth fort still stands at the Jade Gate, an ancient pass that once guarded the eastern end of the Hexi Corridor. Known as the

Small Fangpan Castle, the roofless, thick-walled building is testament to the reach and sophistication of China's early bureaucracy. "During the Han dynasty, traders, envoys, and soldiers entering or leaving the kingdom would have their documentation processed here, just like in a modern customs offices," a chirpy guide explained.

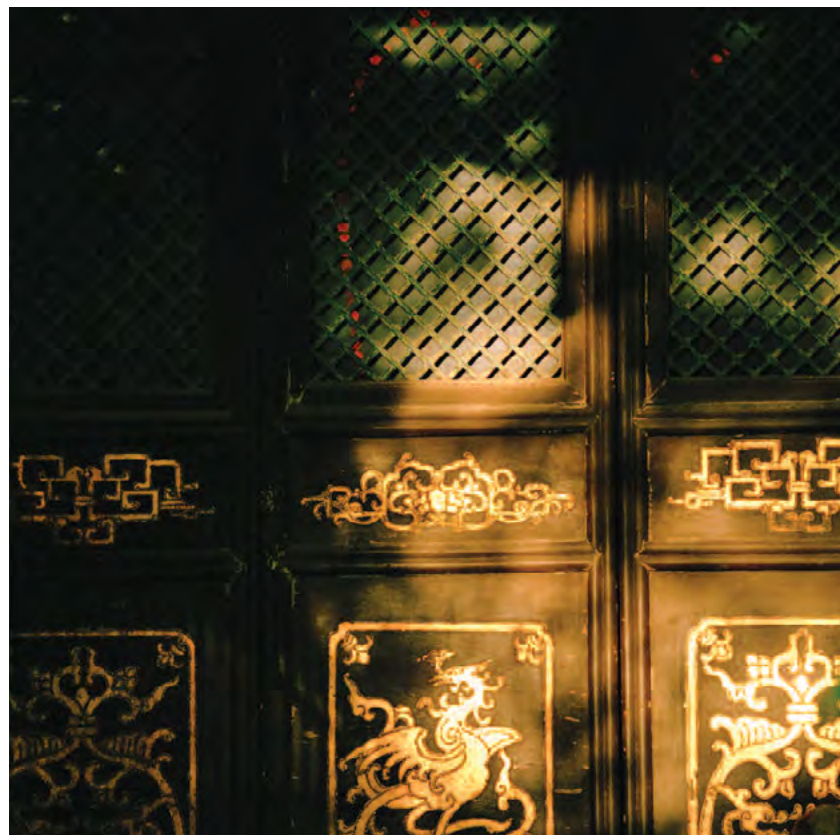
One notable individual to depart China by way of Dunhuang was Zhang Qian. At Yangguan (Sun Gate) Pass—another Han border crossing a few kilometers' drive to the southwest—a museum tells the story of Zhang's exploits. In the second century B.C., the expansion-minded emperor Wudi dispatched Zhang into the Western Regions (as the Chinese once called the lands beyond their realm) to try and establish trade links with kingdoms beyond the nomad-plagued wilderness. Zhang returned with the first reliable information the Chinese ever had about Central Asia, in essence opening up China to global trade. To give you a sense of what it would have been like to exit China via these ancient passes, a re-created fortress next





**CITY IN THE DUNES**  
Clockwise from above:  
Pedaling down a quiet  
Dunhuang road; detail  
of a Buddhist temple  
doorway; one of the  
town's Hui residents; a  
freight train crossing

the desert from Jiuquan,  
following the route of  
the old Silk Road.  
Opposite: A temple  
facade at Mogao Caves  
is set directly into the  
sandstone cliff face.



SEATED UNDER A GRAPE ARBOR  
IN LONGLE VILLAGE BESIDE  
STREAMS OF CRYSTALLINE  
WATER, THE SCRUBLAND HIDDEN  
BEHIND THE LEAFY VINES, WE  
COULDN'T HAVE FELT FARTHER  
FROM THE DESERT





#### SHIFTING SANDS

Clockwise from left: An ornate gate at the Mogao Caves; a farmer collecting hay in the countryside surrounding Dunhuang; the relative bustle of downtown, where a street market

unfolds against a backdrop of towering sand dunes. Opposite: Tourists saddled up on two-hump Bactrian camels for a trek across the “singing” dunes of Mingsha.



to the Sun Gate’s crumbling remains issues bamboo scroll passports to visitors, each inscribed with their name, or its Chinese equivalent. Sure, it’s touristy, but it does make for a nifty souvenir.

After a day admiring the ruins of imperial China’s first great epoch, Harvey and I were weary and famished. A few minutes later we were seated beneath a grape arbor sipping the local red wine and gorging on hearty bowls of noodles. The Han bureaucrats knew where to build their frontier fortifications—next to reliable water sources. The desert spring adjacent to the Sun Gate feeds Longle village, a.k.a. Grape Valley, a verdant settlement of farms, vineyards, and guesthouses. Seated amid such lushness beside streams of crystalline water, the scrubland hidden behind the leafy vines, we couldn’t have felt farther from the desert.

THE FABLED CARAVANS of the Silk Road navigated from oasis to oasis through some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth. We’d

already gotten an idea of what life might have been like for a soldier posted on the empire’s edge. But what about the caravan drivers whose business it was to stray far beyond civilization’s gaze? After a day spent walking around Dunhuang—a relatively low-rise and uncongested city by Chinese standards, set around the life-giving Dang River—we headed out to Dunhuang Yardang National Geopark before sunset to get a taste of the desert in its most pristine state.

“We call it the Ghost Town,” our sun-bronzed driver said after a half-hour of sliding and jerking our jeep across black sands. Exhibiting the wide-eyed excitement of a first-time tourist, he sprung from his seat to catch the sun setting behind a particularly bizarre collection of rock formations. A Dunhuang local, he told me he had worked in the park for several years. “I left Gansu to find work, but came back. I can’t give up all of this.”

“All of this” is 400 square kilometers of pure wilderness. Its only inhabitants are gigantic slabs of bedrock—relics of an ancient ocean



THE DISTINCTIVE HUI PEOPLE—  
THEIR WOMEN IN HEADSCARVES,  
THEIR MEN IN WHITE PRAYER  
CAPS—EVINCE ISLAM'S LONG  
PRESENCE IN NORTHWEST CHINA.  
BUT BUDDHISM GOT HERE FIRST,  
CHANNELED DOWN THE SILK ROAD  
DIRECTLY INTO DUNHUANG

## DUNHUANG

floor that more than 700,000 years of wind and sand erosion had crafted into strange and enchanting shapes. Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, who surveyed the Gobi in 1927, first reported on the phenomenon. It was Hedin who coined the name *yardang*, taken from the Turkic word for “steep bank.” Notable outcroppings have been named for their fanciful shapes—Peacock, Stone Bird, the Golden Lion Welcoming His Guests. The Uighur people native to neighboring Xinjiang province called this outlandish landscape Aisikexiaer, meaning “old city.” It was perhaps an ironic name, as many great cities of antiquity have been lost to the mercilessly shifting Gobi sands.

“If I spent too long out here I’d return to civilization having dreamed up a new religion,” remarked Harvey from one of the brittle mounds onto which he’d climbed. The sentiment was not lost on me. To feel alone in the most populous nation on earth is a rare sensation. Except for our small entourage, there was not a soul in sight.

The spectacle of the stars in the desert sky only enhanced the existential pondering that the yardang formations had provoked. Staring at such a firmament, it’s hard not to dwell on the cosmos and man’s relationship to it. No wonder the Judaeo-Christian faiths had come out of a desert to conquer the hearts and minds of Western civilization, I thought. For it was from here too, the gentle Indian religion Buddhism and later, sword-wielding Islam marched into China, leaving their indelible imprint on the Celestial Kingdom.

ISLAM IS THE FIRST RELIGION you’re likely to get a taste of in Dunhuang. I mean this quite literally, as the Hui people—China’s largest Muslim ethnic group—dominate the local food scene. Near the Dunhuang Mosque can be found the sizzling culinary center of the city. Most tourists gravitate there after dark to feast on skewers of halal lamb and beef, or to devour bowls of pulled-beef noodles, all washed down with Yellow River beer from Lanzhou, Gansu’s provincial capital. The open-air Food Street and affiliated Dunhuang Market resonate with music that recalls the souks of the Middle East, while the smells of grilled meats and spiced delicacies perfume the air.

The distinctive Hui people—their women in headscarves, their men in white prayer caps—evinced Islam’s long presence in northwest China. But Buddhism got here first, channeled down the Silk Road directly into Dunhuang, and though its impact is decidedly

less evident in the attire and eating habits of locals, it is the legacy of Buddhism that is Dunhuang’s principle draw.

Just outside the city limits stands a stony peak called Sanwei Shan, or the “Mountain of Three Dangers.” It was here in 366 A.D. that a monk named Yuezun had a vision. Yuezun likened the rocky crags not to anything dangerous but to the appearance of a thousand Buddhas. He went on to found the Mogao Grottoes in a cliff face opposite.

The cave-temples carved into the sandstone were originally intended to serve as humble meditation cells for wandering monks. Yuezun could not possibly have imagined what would follow. Over the next 1,000 years, countless anonymous artists would create some 45,000 square meters of exquisite cave paintings. By the time of the Sui dynasty in the sixth century, the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas had evolved from obscure places of worship into politically sponsored masterworks, expressing Chinese imperial power to the world.

“Cave 96 is one of the most famous in Mogao,” our guide, Lucy, explained. “It is sometimes known as the Big Buddha Cave because it contains a 30-meter-tall sitting Maitreya statue. China’s only empress, Wu Zetian, who considered herself to be the Buddha of the future, was the cave’s principle patron.” Almost every one of the grottoes had a similarly beguiling story, in addition to the remarkable sculptures and murals housed inside.

“It’s interesting to see the relationship between society, politics, and religion,” Harvey noted as we explored successive caves, observing the Buddha slowly transform from a skinny brown mystic into a chubby Chinese deity, and depictions of Indian sutras increasingly incorporate sacred Chinese mountains and even scenes from life in the ancient capital of Chang’an, as Xi’an was then known. My sharp-eyed travel companion had hit on a

major point. What resonated with us as we left Mogao was how the grander narrative of China—the ebb and flow of the empire’s fortunes and its relationship with the outside world (particularly India, Mongolia, Tibet, and Persian)—informed the frescos of the frontier.

THE SILK ROAD TRADERS believed the desert to be haunted due to the strange and disorientating wailing sounds they heard. We now know this sound to be caused by sand whipping across the dunes on the wind. This phenomenon can be experienced at Mingsha, or “Singing Sands Mountain.” Situated just south of Dunhuang, Mingsha offers travelers an archetypal desert landscape of epic dunes rolling to the horizon.

Alas, the area has been turned into the Mingsha Shan Scenic Area, something of a tourist trap. There’s a folk culture museum, quad bikes for rent, and sand sledging. It’s all a bit tawdry—desert tourism for those who don’t want to get too much sand in their boots. After the serene isolation of the Yardang geopark, the lines of snap-happy tourists waiting their turn to ride a camel appeared woefully contrived. Yet Harvey was insistent—Mingsha had something to offer, he said, and we were running out of daylight to see it.

Scurrying over the powdery dunes, we finally came upon the natural marvel that best encapsulates the mystique of Dunhuang. Indeed, the sight of a freshwater pool before us alluded to the very secret of survival in such a parched, sun-blasted land. For the stargazing ancient Chinese, the lake, shaped like a half moon, must have appeared as a gift from heaven; they called it Yueyaquan, the Crescent Spring. For me, the picture-postcard sunset falling across this unexpected oasis drew a curtain on our journey—a journey that had shown us the diversity and inspirational power of Dunhuang and the desert that defines it. ☺



### THE DETAILS OASIS ESSENTIALS

#### —GETTING THERE

Dunhuang’s airport receives regular flights from Xi’an, Chengdu, Hangzhou, Beijing, and a handful of other Chinese cities.

#### —WHERE TO STAY

In central Dunhuang, the unmistakably modern **Soluxe**

**Shazhou Hotel** (1339 Yangguan Middle Rd.; doubles from US\$125) is as comfortable and well equipped as it gets in the area, though service is geared toward domestic clientele. Highlights include views over the embanked Dang River (ask for an upper-floor room at the rear) and a popular Chinese regional restaurant.



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## BULGARIA

CONTINUED FROM PG. 105



down there somewhere. Nor has a technological approach succeeded. According to our guide, for some reason—possibly surge, possibly sediment in the water, possibly divine intervention—every robot camera sent into the network has stopped transmitting shortly after submerging.

DESPITE OMINOUS SKIES THE following morning, Shiroka Laka bustled in anticipation of the Kukeri festival. In a parking lot at the entrance to the village, mummers were shrugging into their costumes and practicing their moves. On the opposite side, the main street was jam-packed with festivalgoers browsing street stalls selling devil masks, shaggy sweaters, colorful wool carpets, and, as is the case in almost every market in the world, cheap and cheerful kitsch from China. The food stalls were also doing a roaring trade. At 10 in the morning, they were already busy dispensing cups of aromatic beef stew, foot-long sausages, plates of kebabs and fries, and Technicolor clouds of candy floss.

We'd arrived early to secure a space at the front of the square, where the dancers would be performing. With 10 minutes or so to spare and with Darina zealously guarding our space, I decided to lope off for a quick look around.

We had passed through Shiroka Laka several times over the last couple of days, including the night before, when we'd attended a concert by the students at the village's branch of the National School of Folk Arts. Milling around in the lobby of the distinctly mid-century building, an essay in optimistic concrete chic, the colorfully clad and heavily embroidered cast of peasants, beggars, farmers' wives, dashing horsemen, warriors, and gypsy queens had looked more like refugees from a previous era. The singing, though, was ageless, expert renditions of complex, haunting harmonics instantly familiar to anyone who turned on and tuned in to *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* during the musical wasteland that was the mid-1980s.

Just as I was about to set off for my recce

—there were a couple of functioning Roman bridges that I wanted to see, as well as a stone church that had been finished in just 38 days during Bulgaria's four centuries under Ottoman rule, when new churches were forbidden—the air suddenly smelled distinctly, but not entirely unpleasantly, of warm goat. One of the animal-spirit dancers had arrived, clad in what looked like a full-body version of those shaggy fur coats favored by rock stars in the late '60s. Clutching his fleecy, peanut-shaped "head" under one arm of his goat-hair costume, he seemed to be out for a pre-performance stroll of his own. Young and ruggedly handsome, he was immediately the center of everyone's attention. Phones were fished out. Cameras clicked.

Eyes flashing, the dancer popped on his head. The transformation was absolute. With his last trace of humanity hidden beneath a meter-high crown of white and brown goat hair, onlookers' smiles became expressions of awe. Maybe even fear. Primal, atavistic, this goat-man-yeti set amygdalae ablaze, triggering every single lizard brain in the crowd. As he knew it would. Ambling forward, he began to swing and shake his upper body slowly from side to side, turning his goaty ensemble into a pulsating whirlwind of long silky hair. Jaws—mine, at least—dropped.

That's when we heard the *kaval*, a flute played by mountain shepherds from Bulgaria to Azerbaijan. The first troupe had arrived. They were dressed in intricately woven wool kilts and aprons, thick stripy socks and embroidered shirts, and animal masks—goats, bears, eagles, bison, and other unidentifiable crea-

tures. Sporting layers of cowbells around their midribs, they were led into the square by a trio of gypsy musicians, piping and drumming a wild skirl.

Forming a large circle, the animal-men began to dance, filling the air with a shrill jangling. Darina leaned over and told me that this was to drive the evil spirits of winter away, permitting the spring to come. Devils, it seems, don't like the sound of cowbells.

Some of the performers carried Orthodox Christian icons, but the only other sign that today's festival was even nominally monotheistic was the disheveled, dusty-looking priest. Sporting an impressive (albeit fake) beard, he was a comic figure, his wooden miter topped not with a crucifix but with a crudely carved set of male genitalia. He leered at the crowd, showering us in "holy" water he dispensed with the flick of a leafy branch.

Behind him in the middle of the circle, a man dressed in drag as a peasant woman—blonde pigtailed, red-polka-dotted headscarf, smeared makeup—suddenly fell to ground. Clutching what looked like a hugely pregnant belly, he began to simulate going into labor. After much wailing and moaning, played for maximum comic effect, a plastic baby was "born" and paraded around the square by a man acting the proud father. The jangling stopped and the festival emcee, a burly woman who had been keeping the crowd amused between performances, took this as her cue to announce the blessed event. Winter, she told the happily clapping crowd, had been defeated. Spring had sprung, and the harvest, she said, would be very, very good. ☺



### THE DETAILS BULGARIAN RHAPSODY

#### —GETTING THERE

There are direct flights to Sofia from numerous European cities. From

Southeast Asia, the best bet—connections allowing—is to fly to Doha with Qatar Airlines ([qatarairlines.com](http://qatarairlines.com)) and continue onwards on the carrier's Sofia-via-Bucharest service.

#### —WHEN TO GO

Bulgaria's high season is the summer months, but to witness the outlandish costumes and carnival atmosphere of Kukeri, you'll want to aim for the tail end of winter; Shiroka Laka's version of the festival is held on the first weekend of March.

#### —WHERE TO STAY

In Sofia, the grandest accommodations—think chandeliered guest rooms and swaths of Italian marble—can be found at the **Sofia Hotel Balkan** (5 Sveta Nedelya Square; 359-2/981-6541; [starwoodhotels.com](http://starwoodhotels.com); doubles from US\$342), part of Starwood's Luxury Collection

brand. It is located within easy reach of the city's most noteworthy museums and monuments, and even wraps around one: the Church of St. George, a converted Roman rotunda that lays claim to being the oldest building in Sofia.

In the Smolyan region, **Villa Gella** (359-888/566-872; [villagella.com](http://villagella.com); doubles from US\$315, half-board), named for the nearby hamlet of Gela, is a hedonistic base from which to enjoy the rural charms of Bulgaria's southern mountains, not to mention the spectacle of the Kukeri festival. For skiers, the slopes of Pamporovo are a just short drive away.

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## INDONESIA

CONTINUED FROM PG. 86



Glen, Rangga, Kidaus, Dough, Don Yadi, and Uya, have begun trickling into the farm to join us. Several of them had served previously as volunteer rescue workers, witnessing mudslides and tsunamis. Eko used to build roads in Sumatra. But it wasn't coffee per se that brought the group together. Rather, it was a shared concern about Indonesia's rapidly depleting natural landscapes. In response to destructive agricultural practices, such as burning land to clear it and the rampant use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, Klasik Beans preaches sustainable and organic farming methods that assist in reforestation and renew depleted soil.

"When we first began teaching farmers how to grow good coffee, showing them these big polybags that we use to protect the roots, everyone laughed at us, because chili farming doesn't require the same attention," Eko says. "But slowly, they began to understand and join us."

The cooperative also stands against the predatory moneylending practices that are the ruin of so many subsistence farmers. Lenders will loan funds to farmers so that they can purchase the necessary seedlings and fertilizers, and repay with their harvest down the line. With no bargaining power once they've signed on for a loan, the farmers are at the mercy of arbitrary interest rates and pricing. Klasik Beans prides itself on its no-nonsense cash-and-carry model and paying farmers above-market rates for their specialty beans.

As Eko tells me about the founding and vision of Klasik Beans, his incredible patience and humanity become apparent. He is exceedingly polite, humble, and quick to laugh, something that all the founders share. They crack jokes about how one member, Rosman, looks exactly like Indonesia's then president-elect, Joko Widodo.

We nibble on goat satay and drink more coffee in the darkness. Arief of Morph Coffee once told me Klasik Beans' Sunda Hejo bean, in its many varieties, tastes mellow and is easy to drink with an aroma of pronounced chocolate. But to me, on that hillside, I taste some-

thing different—I taste all the years of patient nurturing and unyielding trust, of anticipation and hope. It's a complex flavor.

I bid the team goodnight and am led to my quaint bamboo guesthouse. Even after staying in some very nice hotels for my line of work, this was one of the best nights of sleep I've had on assignment. The woven bamboo floor creaks underfoot as I dress for bed, and soon I'm tucked under two quilts atop an impossibly comfortable mattress facing a window looking out on the dark hillside. I wake up to the sun warming my face and gaze upon the terraced landscape. It's even more beautiful in the early morning light.

WE BREAKFAST ON A MEAL of *serabi*, sweet Indonesian rice-flour pancakes topped with chili. Today we will visit the Malabar Mountain coffee plantation, one of the cooperative's members. Klasik Beans also counts farms in Bali and Aceh among its membership, with more in the works in Sulawesi and Flores.

The car we took to up to the plantation, a city sedan, was no match for the steep climbs of Garut. Thus in Eko's rugged green jeep, bedecked in bumper stickers (one of which reads KLASIK BEANS DOES SMALL THINGS WITH SINCERITY), we make the bumpy two-hour trek even higher into the mountains. I doze off at some point to the melodic crunching of tires. Finally, we arrive at Malabar Mountain. A gate slides open revealing rows and rows of plastic-covered shelters used for drying and sorting beans, along with trays for growing seedlings.

We start our visit with a trek around the property, passing a gargantuan pile of fragrant compost. I am then introduced to Camat, the farm manager. Eko warns me in advance how Camat's tours can go off the tracks, lasting

### THE DETAILS BEAN TOWN

Sampling Indonesia's specialty coffee close to the source is easily accomplished in Jakarta these days, where a growing number of cafés are getting in on the act. At **Giyanti Coffee Roastery** ([giyanti-coffeeroastery.com](http://giyanti-coffeeroastery.com)) in the Menteng area, owner Hendrik Haliyanto dedicates three days each week to roasting Indonesian-only single-origin beans, served along-

side his wife's pastries on the other four.

**Anomali Coffee** ([anomalicoffee.com](http://anomalicoffee.com)) has four locations in Jakarta and two in Bali, but its archipelago-sourced brews are far from chain-made. And for tasting classes and a great flat white, **One Fifteenth Coffee** ([1-15coffee.com](http://1-15coffee.com)) is the spot.

To follow the exploits of the **Klasik Beans** team as they roam across Indonesia, visit [facebook.com/KlasikBeans](https://facebook.com/KlasikBeans).

hours because of his enthusiasm for showing visitors every inch of the land. Camat leads us to a low-lying patch of plants and shows us how to pick the perfect coffee cherry. The process is simple enough: pick the reddest fruit, and don't take the limb down with you when you pick it off. We collect a few buckets before we learn how to prune, removing the nutrient-sucking fledgling twigs from branches so they grow straight and strong.

Camat begins scaling the steep hillside, stopping every now and then to tell Eko something about the plants in Sundanese. We rest for a while until Eko asks if we're fit enough to continue. Camat makes it look easy in his barefoot way. We pass a small wooden shelter where we are informed he often spends the night on the land. When I ask Camat what the toughest part of harvesting coffee is, he says, with Eko translating, "Convincing people to be patient with the process, because the results are not instant."

We come across a husband-and-wife team busily picking and pruning. Eko, ever the educator, decides to interview them for me.

"I asked the man, 'What is your hope?' He says they hope the coffee can grow well so they can have more income to spend on their children," he says. When I ask Eko what his hope is he answers simply, with an unassuming grin, "We want to occupy the global market."

When we later break for lunch, Eko apologizes profusely because, ironically, there will be no coffee to accompany our meal. He left his grinder at the Garut farm.

BACK IN JAKARTA, I'm on the coffee trail again. This time it's at Pasar Santa, the city's latest hipster bastion, occupying the second floor of a traditional wet market. Here, the World Barista Championship judge for Indonesia, Hendri Kurniawan, has set up a coffee laboratory of sorts called A Bunch of Caffeine Dealers, or ABCD for short.

The lab teaches private barista classes during the week and, on weekends, doles out the trainees' test products for a donation and a smile. While ABCD doesn't brew Klasik Beans—as Kurniawan explains, why would anyone sit in a sweaty, hot market when you can get the same coffee in a nice, air-conditioned café?—the stand is advancing the Indonesian specialty-coffee scene.

I chat with the master judge himself about the new venture, the coffee industry, and of course, Klasik Beans. When I ask Kurniawan about Eko, he blankly clutches his face in shock, or something like it, and then bellows excitedly, "How do you know Eko!"



## SYDNEY/MELBOURNE

CONTINUED FROM PG. 95



**(Sydney continued)** of all-time favorites and blockbusters; book Gold Grass tickets to get a bean-bag and premium spot. • Held beachside in Bondi, short film festival **Flickerfest** ([flickerfest.com.au](http://flickerfest.com.au); Jan. 9–18) showcases 100 movies across a diverse range of categories including documentary, comedy, and celebrity shorts. • While most campers pack up trailers and head for the hills, savvy Sydneysiders know that they can pitch a tent within easy reach of the city. A short ferry ride from Circular Quay, **Cockatoo Island** ([cockatooisland.gov.au](http://cockatooisland.gov.au)) is a summer favorite for its camping (BYO sleeping bag) and glamping (just bring clothes) options. You can rent basic and more up-market tents on the island, and either fry up sausages on the public barbecues or order pizza and beer from the bar as the sun sets over one of the world's most spectacular harbors.

## SIDE TRIPS

A magnet for its wineries, **Hunter Valley**—a two-hour drive north of Sydney—is also hosting **ADay on the Green** ([adayonthegreen.com.au](http://adayonthegreen.com.au); through March) outdoor concerts from the likes of Roxette and Billy Idol. If that doesn't grab you, head east to the **Blue Mountains**, a stunning chain of sandstone peaks and gorges beginning 50 km west of the CBD. Set amid the national park areas is Emirates **Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa**, recently taken over by the One&Only brand ([oneandonlyresorts.com](http://oneandonlyresorts.com)). The new managers have promised to introduce a number of unique guest experiences in 2015.

**(Melbourne continued)** the lawn at the Royal Botanic Gardens, **Moonlight Cinema** ([moonlight.com.au](http://moonlight.com.au); until Mar. 29) features a similar roster of films to its Sydney sister—there's also an L.A.-style food truck and fully licensed bar. • Atop Curtin House at 252 Swanston Street, **Rooftop Cinema** ([rooftopcinema.com.au](http://rooftopcinema.com.au); until April) sees you pull up deck chairs and watch the latest films back-dropped by the shimmering lights of the CBD. Bring your own blanket. • And the **Shadow Electric** ([shadowelectric.com.au](http://shadowelectric.com.au); until Mar. 16) outdoor cinema at Abbotsford Convent offers a packed program of documentaries, '80s classics, cult flicks, and the best new studio releases. • Balmy Fridays and Saturdays throughout summer see Melbourne Zoo host a series of outdoor concerts. The **Zoo Twilights** ([zoo.org.au](http://zoo.org.au); Jan. 30–Mar. 7) program features an electric group of talented artists, from the pop-stylings of Sarah Blasko through to the big band sounds of local favorite the Cat Empire.

## SIDE TRIPS

Surf breaks, dramatic coastal scenery, cozy homestays, and local produce—what's not to like about the **Great Ocean Road**? Stretching more than 240 kms along Victoria's southeastern coast between Torquay and Allansford, the scenic drive offers plenty of diversions, many of them around Apollo Bay. On the east side of Cape Otway, the laid-back town is the site of the annual **Apollo Bay Music Festival** ([apollobaymusicfestival.com](http://apollobaymusicfestival.com); Feb. 27–Mar. 1), paying homage to Australian folk, rock, and jazz artists. ©

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## Ginger Pomelo Margarita

## INGREDIENTS

- 45 mL Tequila Don Julio Reposado
- 15 mL Grand Marnier
- 22 mL Lemon juice
- 22 mL Grape syrup
- 1 Pomelo
- 1 piece Fresh ginger
- Salt flakes

## METHOD

Muddle the fresh ginger and all but one slice of the pomelo together. Mix with the spirits, lemon juice, and grape syrup, and shake well with ice. Strain in a martini glass rimmed halfway with salt flakes, and garnish with one piece of the pomelo.



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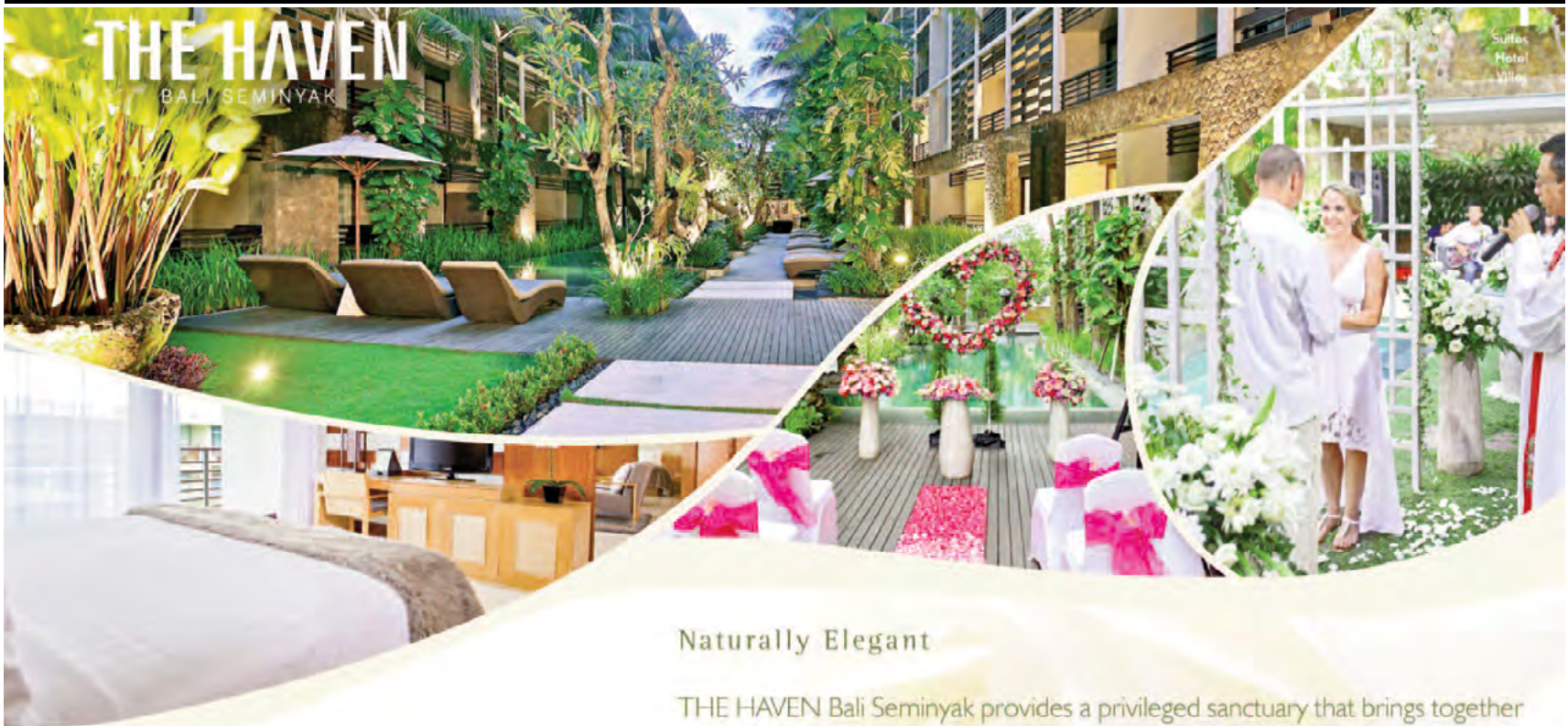


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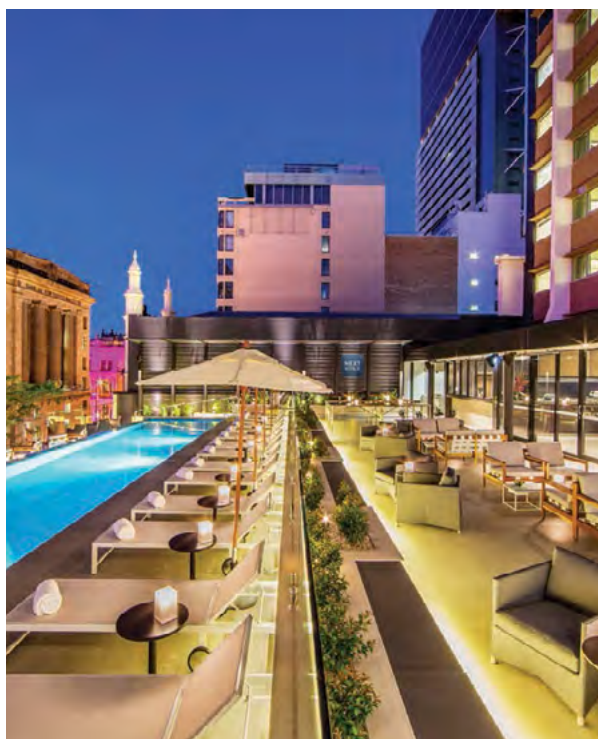
Eager to assume the role as the flagship hotel of the Alila Hotels & Resorts, Alila Seminyak is set to become an illustrious new addition to the chic Seminyak shore. Not only did it set a new high score for an Indonesian hotel in Australia's EarthCheck environmental certification program, but it also won three International Property Awards in 2014 including Best Hotel Architecture in Indonesia, Best New Hotel Construction and Design in Indonesia, and Best New Hotel Construction and Design in Asia Pacific. Offering beachfront and garden-view suites for investment, the property is set to open its doors in 2015.

■ For more information, call 62-821/1000-9888 or visit [alilaseminyak.com](http://alilaseminyak.com)

## PADMA'S NEW KITCHEN KING

Sushi lovers will be pleased to hear that Padma Resort Bali at Legian now has a master at the art of Japanese cuisine at the helm of its Tenkai restaurant. Chef Masahiko Morikawa's resume spans nearly two decades of experience working at renowned eateries in the Japanese culinary hub of Nagoya and in prominent positions at the Wasabi Bistro restaurants at both the Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur and the Mandarin Oriental, Singapore. Here, not only does he serve expertly crafted sushi and sashimi but also traditional multicourse *kaiseki*, *sukiyaki*, and *shabu-shabu* meals to visitors and guests of the paradisiacal beach resort.

■ For more information, call 62-361/752-111 or visit [padmaresortbali.com](http://padmaresortbali.com)



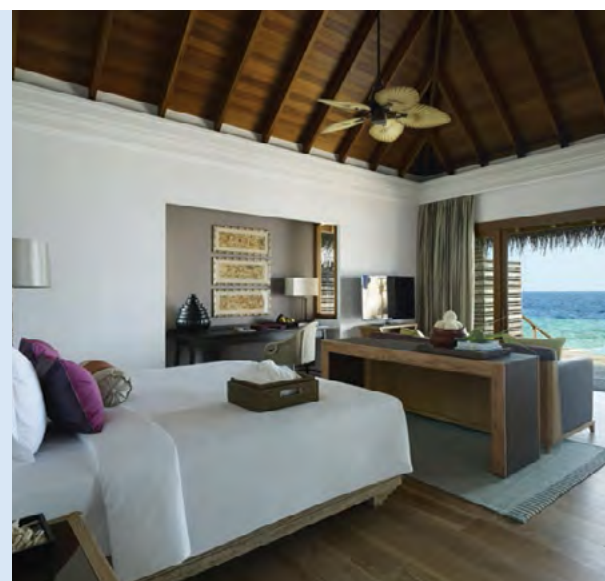
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■ For more information, call 61-7/3222-3222 or visit [nexthotels.com](http://nexthotels.com)

## ROOMS FOR TWO

Be it a honeymoon or a spur-of-the-moment vacation, lovers have a new reason to take some time for two with Dusit Hotels and Resorts' ongoing Couples Getaways promotion at a host of locales across Asia and the Middle East, such as the Dusit Thani Maldives, whose Ocean Villa is pictured here. Romantic gestures begin the moment guests arrive with in-room check-in and a welcome array of sparkling wine, flowers, and tea, and during their stay, couples can choose from a special romantic dining experience or a 60-minute aromatherapy treatment as well as breakfast in bed or at the resort's all-day dining restaurant. Nightly turndown service sends them to sleep with chocolate-covered strawberries and a rose.



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# CONNECTIONS

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■ For more information, call 62-361/294-357 or visit [bali-zoo.com](http://bali-zoo.com)

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■ For more information, call 60-88/797-888 or email [rrr@shangri-la.com](mailto:rrr@shangri-la.com)

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Travelers have more reason to see Southeast Asia from the rails with Eastern & Oriental Express' two new journeys launching in 2015. Beginning March 29, the ultra-luxe train will commence its five-night Fables of the Peninsula journey from Singapore to Bangkok, following a scenic route through Malaysia and Thailand with stop-offs in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, a night's stay in a tea plantation in the Cameron Highlands, and snorkeling in Koh Chang. And in mid-October, The Ancient Kingdom of Lanna trip spends two nights traveling north from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, with excursions to Lampang, traditional markets, and the Dhara Dhevi Cake Shop and tea salon adding to the Thai experience.



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■ For more information, call 82-32/741-3139 or visit [airport.kr](http://airport.kr)



## SAMALI HOTELS & RESORTS

WITH AN ASSORTMENT of locations in the works throughout Indonesia, Samali Hotels & Resorts is poised to become one of the country's premier hospitality groups. Sanskrit for "bouquet," Samali offers four brands that are accordingly named after different flowers, with a collective rooting in a philosophy of mirroring the regions and cultures in which they're planted.

The group's Allium Upscale Collection launched last January with the opening of the 157-room Allium Airport Hotel in Tangerang, about 25 kilometers west of Jakarta. A slanted, architecturally novel structure rising above the surrounding industrial area, the landmark property is highlighted by a bistro and lounge,

clean white rooms, and a rounded lobby where confetti windows play artful games with the light.

Opened in September in Central Java is the Ammi Cepu, a colonial-style hotel with tranquil views of rice fields. The flagship of Samali's five-star Ammi Luxurious Collection, it pairs the elegance of a chandeliered lobby and high-ceilinged suites with a relaxing tea lounge and a restaurant that serves authentic traditional Indonesian dishes and fine international cuisine.

Not an ounce of comfort is traded for affordability in the three-star Arum Traveller Collection and two-star Azara Bed & Breakfast, whose rooms are outfitted with flat-screen TVs

and rain showers, and whose facilities typically include pools and fitness centers.

Led by a professional and dedicated management team, the company's vision is a collective practice in experienced sophistication, practicality, and comfort. With multiple locations from each of the four brands staggered to open during the next couple of years, expect to see the Samali emblem—a chic take on fan-shaped palm leaves—on lobby doors around Indonesia. The palm tree is, after all, known as the traveler's tree: a classic symbol of exploration and as provisionary as it is beautiful.

[samalihotels.com](http://samalihotels.com)





## THE HILL VILLAS

THE HILL VILLAS is a perfect blend of romanticism and exoticism in a hideaway for couples and families. Perched on the peak of Mumbul Hill in Nusa Dua, each one-, two-, and three-bedroom pool villa has a distinct ambience, surrounded by beautiful Balinese gardens and breathtaking panoramic views stretching from Tanjung Benoa Bay and Jimbaran to Pecatu. A true example of luxury, The Hill Villas have butlers on-hand to attend to any need, and a private chauffeur awaits if you wish to further explore Bali and its many fine beaches, restaurants, and cultural attractions.

*Jl. Taman Giri, Banjar Mumbul, Nusa Dua, Bali; 62-361/847-8888; thehillvillas.com*



## OBEROI LOMBOK

WHEN IT COMES to island getaways, few things are more idyllic than a thatched-roof villa or pavilion on a private beach, which is exactly what The Oberoi, Lombok provides. Off the coast of Bali, the resort is set in lush seclusion surrounded by gardens, rain forests, and a stretch of golden sand. Relax with yoga sessions or at the Oberoi Spa, take a pony cart to the nearby town of Tanjung and explore its bustling traditional market, or go on a snorkeling excursion to the nearby Gili Islands for a chance to see an endangered hawksbill sea turtle.

*Medana Beach, Tanjung, North Lombok; kim.liew@oberoigroup.com; oberoihotels.com*



## DESIGN FEVER 39

INTERNATIONAL HOTEL and resort consulting firm Design Fever 39 is known for its interdisciplinary approach to design, presently exemplified in its major renovation and expansion of the XTD Resort in Santa Ana, Cagayan on the northern tip of the Filipino island of Luzon. "Capturing and interpreting local culture and character into stylish and modern exterior and interior spaces is the key for successful resort destinations," says vice president and creative director Haejin Kim, who is spearheading the project. Through services ranging from master planning and architecture to interior and landscape design, her teams are transforming the property into one of the region's premier beach destinations, establishing the XTD brand, and creating a new haven for domestic and international travelers to relax, refresh, and rejuvenate.

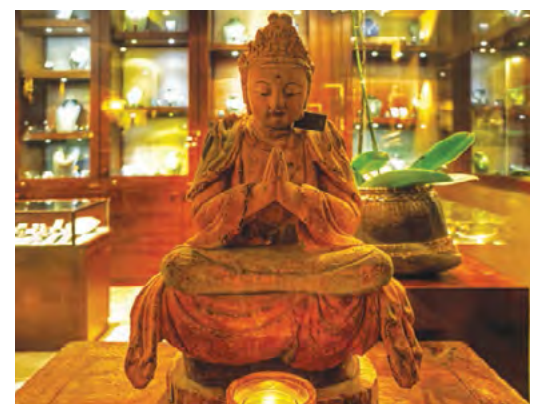
*34th floor, 77 Robinson Road, Singapore; 65/6809-2278; designfever39.com*



## MÉTIS RESTAURANT, LOUNGE & GALLERY

THE NEWLY OPENED lounge at Métis gives Bali visitors yet another reason to head to one of the island's most sophisticated settings. Overlooking a beautiful lily-pond garden and designed with a high-tech retractable roof, the space serves cocktails and Mediterranean-influenced tapas, making it a great starting point for a night out in Seminyak. Or, come earlier for one of its two High Tea Packages and sip carefully selected teas paired with exquisite bites. The well-established kitchen is always bringing new cuisine to the fine-dining restaurant, most recently with the Meat and Poultry menu, an expertly crafted list of seven new gourmet entrees and classic sides. Keep an eye on adjoining Métis Gallery as well, as it regularly unveils new collections of antiques, artwork, and home goods from around Southeast Asia.

*Jl. Petitenget No. 6, Kuta, Bali; 62-361/473-7888; metisbali.com*







# SCHOTT ZWIESEL

AS AN INDISPENSABLE brand component of renowned glassmaking company Zwiessel Kristallglas, whose legacy of craftsmanship dates back to 1872, Schott Zwiessel is the glassware provider of choice for the deluxe hospitality industry. Along with its internationally patented Tritan® crystal-glass trademark that upholds its much-deserved slogan, “the professionals’ glass,” Schott’s environmentally conscious practices, enduring quality, and contemporary designs have earned it repeated spots on the tables of the top restaurateurs, sommeliers, chefs, and hotels around the world.

Two of Schott Zwiessel’s newest products are continuing this tradition of excellence. In response to the growing trend of artisanal cocktails and mineral waters, the brand has

expanded its Viña range of crystal glassware, which specializes in clean styles serialized into different sizes. The first addition is a set of three tumblers, bringing a new shape to the line composed primarily of goblets. With rounded bottoms tapering gracefully up into smooth rims, the tumblers of different heights and volumes are perfectly suited as sleek holders for everyday beverages as well as tasting vessels for more complex liquors and cocktails. Though delicate in look, the durable Tritan® crystal-glass keeps them fit for use time and time again.

Taking a more aesthetically bold approach to drinking, the new Viña Spots line of colored tumblers brings dynamism to glassware for buyers looking for a presentation as splashy as the tastes they serve. Coming in two sizes and six colors—red, blue, green, gray, purple, and amber—the glasses maintain transparency, ensuring that they never overwhelm a table and can easily be set in combination with other clear glassware without demanding too much attention. Their goal is to accentuate the



drinks they hold rather than distract, which their serenely smooth and aromatic designs accomplish beautifully.

**40 Club Street; 65/6324-2931;**  
**info@zwiessel-kristallglas.sg;**  
**zwiessel-kristallglas.com**

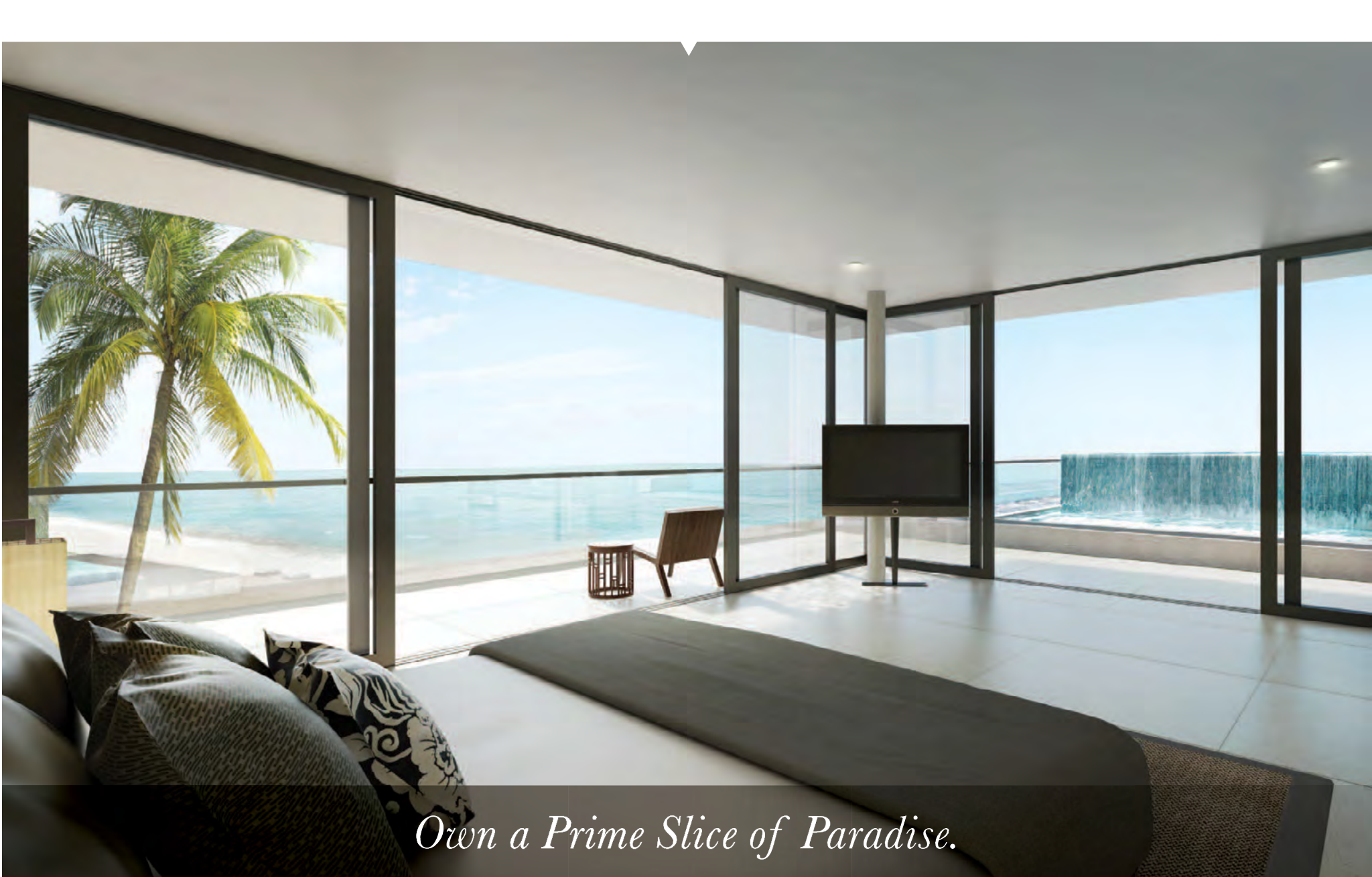
**CROSS EXAMINATION**

Modeled after St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, the multidomed Church of Our Savior on Spilled Blood is covered inside and out by more than 7,500 square meters of tile mosaics.



**—ST. PETERSBURG**

"As a student of architecture, I am fascinated by architectural history and the ways in which artists and architects have helped shape the national characters of their respective countries," says Fiona Miller, an Ohio-based Briton. "So when painting historical buildings, I like to attempt to feed some of this history back into the artwork. This watercolor, a detail of the Church of Our Savior on Spilled Blood, came from a family trip to Russia's second largest city a few years back. Situated just off St. Petersburg's main thoroughfare, the beautiful church draws the eye down along the narrow Griboedov Canal to where it sits on the site of Emperor Alexander II's assassination in 1881. Completed at the turn of the 20th century, it's a monument to him, and it's also an anomaly. Much of the rest of the city takes its inspiration from the architecture of the Italian Renaissance, but with its multicolored onion domes and decorated facade, the church's design instead looks back to medieval Russia and a romantic desire to restore a stronger national identity. During my visit, I spent a long time just looking at the building and trying to understand its construction, its detailing, the way the sunlight colored it at different times of the day, and the combinations of shapes. Finally, I chose this upper section to paint. It's an angle that captures the church's complexity and character—and perhaps a little of the vitality of the people for whom it was built." ©



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