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On the cover, April Schmitt, CEO of Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons

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The fashion industry has to be one of the more nimble businesses around. Colors, shapes, sizes are in, and then they're out. Looks that are chic in March are déclassé come September.

But fashion retail is also an industry that's steeped in centuries-old traditions. Designers have forever shown fashions on the catwalk in February that will not be ready for purchase until the following fall or winter. September fashion shows preview looks for the impending spring and summer. In a world where we can now get anything we want whenever we want it, yearning for months to get your hands on a new look doesn't really feel right.

As a result, some designers have begun to implement the new "See now, buy now" strategy, which means their runway designs are immediately available for purchase. But at Milan fashion week in mid-February, the luxury Italian clothing designer, Moncler, played the disruptor's role by announcing it will release new looks every single month, rather than just twice a year. That's meant to serve a "younger and fickle clientele," whose use of social media spurs them to change their tastes constantly. Why bother? This group now comprises a third of the luxury market, according to a recent article in Reuters. The article cites Moncler CEO Remo Ruffini as saying that the company will now launch new collections once a month in boutiques, multi-brand stores and temporary pop-up shops. He's also using a variety of lead designers to constantly change the looks.

Luxury travel retailers are grappling with the same customer. A trip that might seem sexy and fulfilling one week could be completely out of vogue the following month to a consumer, after their friends have posted images of their much more amazing vacations on Instagram. Better yet,

that same customer may take a great trip and want to start planning another one immediately, which means you need to have a full, exciting supply of wares to entice them to make their next purchase.

The beauty is, you've got all the tools that Ruffini from Moncler has in your own toolbox. There's nothing keeping you from showing a fresh supply of vacation options constantly to this generation of travelers who want to purchase their vacations in an entirely new way. They don't want to look at brochures (although they still have their place), they want to peruse experiences and adventures.

You have access to this type of content from suppliers, whose photos you can repost on Instagram. You have your own images you can present, as well as those from your clients.

Remember, you're not just a purveyor of suites on a cruise ship or a seller of space on small exotic group departures, you're delivering days of unique destinations and special moments. Take a look at the many special itineraries that you've created and present them to your clients weekly or monthly. They are craving this consistent stimulation and if you are their go-to storyteller, whether it's on your Instagram, Facebook or blog, you'll also become their go-to travel advisor.

In keeping with the fashion analogy, don't give up on promoting your aspirational couture travel opportunities; those trips that are so mega, they're worth the wait. They're expensive, they're beautiful and they're out of this world. They're the Hermès Birkin bag worth getting on the wait list for, that takes forever to get and that simply takes your breath away when it's finally sitting on your lap and no one else's. There's still magic to be found in what's rare and exclusive and you may as well be the purveyor of those very good things as well.

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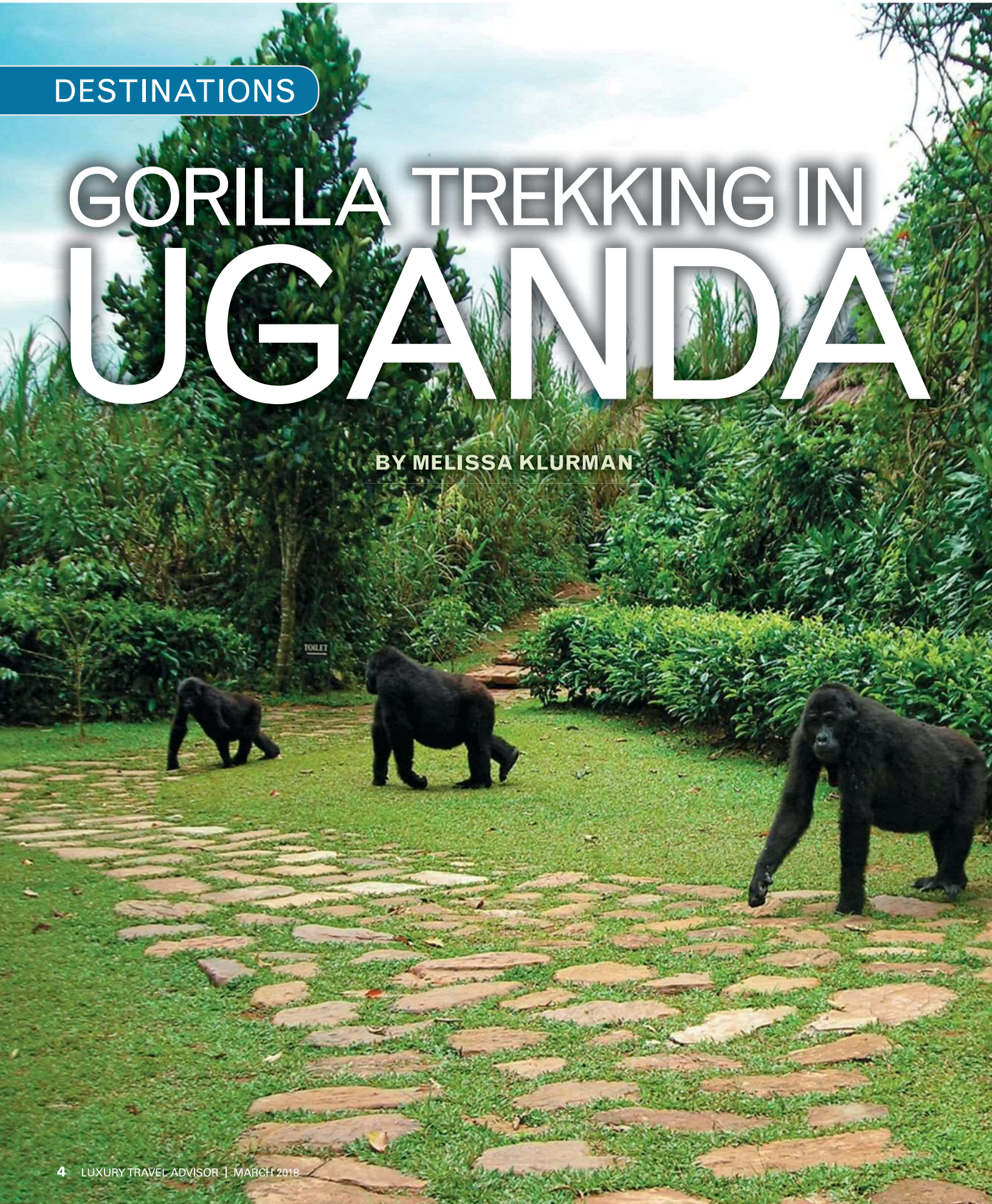
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DESTINATIONS

GORILLA TREKKING IN UGANDA

BY MELISSA KLURMAN





GORILLA FAMILIES often come over to the **Volcanoes Safaris Bwindi Lodge** to nibble on bamboo shoots and bark of eucalyptus trees.

Uganda may be called the Pearl of Africa, but it's another precious element that draws visitors to this peaceful, landlocked East African nation: Silver. Or more specifically, the endangered silverback mountain gorilla.

There are fewer than 900 mountain gorillas in the wild, just one for every 9 million people on earth, and the only place to see them is in the remote, and difficult to access, Virunga Mountains along the border of Uganda, Rwanda and the Congo (DRC), and in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park.

For those who crave authenticity and destination immersion, Bwindi is where to experience this once-in-a-lifetime adventure in Uganda. Although Rwanda has become heavy with tourist options recently (One&Only, Wilderness Safaris and Singita are all in the process of opening lodges there), fewer travelers are familiar with Uganda, making the destination a luxury travel must for clients who appreciate exclusivity.

Volcanoes Safaris Bwindi Lodge is the premier place to stay for gorilla trekking in the Bwindi region. Praveen Moman bought the land, which nestles against the rolling green hills of the national park, in 1998, and built the pioneering lodge in 1999. Its 20-year tenure offers a special draw not found elsewhere: Gorillas treat the longstanding lodge as though it's part of the national park, and often come to the property (about once every two months) to look for bamboo shoots nestled in the verdant grounds and nibble on the bark of the eucalyptus trees. While you can't guarantee this experience for clients, it's certainly a unique hook for a stay here. We visited recently and found that even though we had to wait to see gorillas in the park, there's a lot to recommend about the eco-chic lodge to luxury seekers.

THE BWINDI LODGE was recently renovated to include locally inspired furniture and four-poster beds.



Bwindi Lodge

A light tap at the door with a call of, “Good morning, good morning, it’s morning,” rising like birdsong outside our secluded safari chalet (called a “banda”) began our first morning at Bwindi. Standing outside was Sheilla, a lodge staff member, holding a serving tray with a silver plunge pot of Ugandan coffee and homemade sugar cookies. It’s 5 a.m. and still dark out, but Sheilla’s smile is luminescent as she asks, “Are you ready to see the gorillas?”

In the eight private bandas, there are no phones for a wake-up call, and gorilla trekking starts at sunrise. Instead, the staff asks before you turn in

for the night what time you’d like to wake up and your drink preference, and then delivers it on time and with a smile.

Each of the spacious thatch-roofed bandas are named after local gorillas; the “Bob” banda is the top option for VIP clients. A long, stone stairway leads down to Bob’s secluded setting overlooking a stream below. Surrounded by thick forest, the banda feels like a private treehouse (we even spotted a black-and-white colobus monkey peering in the window). The interior features a 20-foot-high A-frame ceiling and a canopied and mosquito-net draped four-poster bed. A sitting area with a local fabric-draped couch opens

onto a private deck with panoramic views of the forest, and the bathroom includes double sinks and a natural stone shower with an exterior glass window that frames views of the forest just outside.

Luxury advisors should contact Betty Nassuna (Betty@volcanoessafaris.com), Volcanoes Safaris Uganda specialist based in Kampala, for all special booking requests.

Stellar Perks and Service

Porters and housekeepers get guests ready for their gorilla trek, fitting them with gaiters (waterproof lower leg coverings) in the pre-morning dusk, delivering boxed lunches to backpacks,

and filling coolers with chilled bottled water.

After returning from their trek, guests are met at the resort entrance and the staff convenes to remove the damp gaiters and everyone’s mud-covered boots and then takes the footwear to be cleaned. Guests are then given Croc-like clogs for the short walk back to their room. Every guest then receives a complimentary massage to ease the muscle exertion of hiking through the forest. (Laundry service is also included for guests staying 48 hours.)

Note: By the end of first quarter 2018, Bwindi Lodge will open a new “Rejuvenate in the Forest” spa building featuring a couples massage suite and a range of Forest



Ritual treatments using lemon-grass, tea, eucalyptus and other aromatic plants grown on site.

Meals are served in the bright and airy main lodge building in the main dining room. Orders are placed the night before, when guests can confer with the chef about food allergies and aversions. Although meals are usually served at a communal table where travelers compare stories about their gorilla experiences, special private dining can be arranged on the lodge terrace or on the banda's private verandas. For special requests, advisors should contact Mariana Mary Nandawula (mariana@vspartnershiptrust.org), lodge assistant manager.



THE LODGE overlooks the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and provides views of the forest canopy.

On the entry road to the lodge is Bwindi Bar, an award-winning community service initiative by Volcanoes Safaris and overseen by Nandawula. It teaches local students hospitality skills and serves local tea and coffee, beer and snacks. It's a casual spot to relax and an opportunity for clients to support the local community if they're interested.

Getting Around

From Entebbe, internal scheduled and chartered flights are available on AeroLink, which flies 12-seat Cessna Grand Caravans to Kihikihi, the bush airport for Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Flight time is approximately 75 minutes. A Volcanoes Safaris guide can be arranged to meet clients at the airstrip for the transfer to the lodge, about a 30-minute drive.

Advisors should request Head Guide Francis Kiwanuka when booking. Kiwanuka has more than two decades of guiding experience, and is a gorilla expert who has visited every gorilla family in Rwanda and Uganda. He will accompany clients to the gorilla trek (although cannot join the hike), and can also guide

nature- and bird-watching walks along the river, and organize visits to the local community.

Advisors should note that gorilla trekking in Bwindi park, as well as staying at Bwindi Lodge, is only suitable for fit clients. Trekking in Uganda is more strenuous and difficult than in Rwanda; clients should be able to hike and walk on uneven terrain for an extended period of time. At the lodge, there are multiple rock stairs to reach rooms and common areas. Rainy season makes these extremely slick.

Note that no children under 15 are allowed on gorilla treks, and although there are no age

restrictions at Bwindi Lodge, there are also no services for children.

Getting There

Qatar Airways is a luxurious option to reach Uganda from the United States with flights from J.F.K. connecting through Doha and then on to Entebbe. Qatar just introduced its newly configured business class Q Suites on this route that offer moveable panels and adjustable TV screens to configure into private quad seating cabins as well as the first double bed in the sky. Some other highlights of business class include White Company London pajamas, Bric's toiletries kits, and à la



THE Bwindi Lodge's recently refurbished dining area brings the feel of the forest into the interiors.



THE LOUNGE at the Bwindi Lodge opens to the forest, allowing guests to spot fauna hidden in the foliage.

carte dining on demand. Business class privileges extend into the airport providing expedited passport and visa lines in Entebbe.

Gorilla Trekking

It's not called an "impenetrable forest" for nothing; the hike to see the gorillas here involves trekking through thick, dense equatorial rain forest. Our ranger literally hacked a path with a machete through the tangled mopane vegetation and stinging nettles for nearly two hours on our visit, and the mud during the rainy season in November seemed intent on sucking the boots off our feet. It was worth the slight physical discomforts, though, for the reward: A face-to-face encounter with one of the most endangered animals on the planet. The gorilla family we were assigned to, the Bitukura, comprises 12 gorillas, and we spotted eight members of the family, including the towering dominant silverback and the incredibly human-like baby of the family, a year-old Gift, who tumbled and played and nibbled on a bamboo shoot entralling our trekking group.

GORILLA PERMITS are regulated to protect the endangered animal from exposure to humans.

Gorilla permits are tightly regulated to protect the animals from too much exposure to humans. There are 12 gorilla families in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and only eight visitor permits are issued per group per day. After you reach your assigned family, visits are strictly limited to one hour. Note that since gorillas are susceptible to the same illnesses as humans, park rangers have the right of refusal for sick visitors, or may require that sick visitors wear surgical masks to protect the vulnerable animals. Advise clients to pack long pants and long sleeve shirts, a brimmed hat, gardening gloves (to protect hands from plants), hiking boots and bug repellent. Temperatures fluctuate,

starting colder in the morning and becoming hotter and humid, so layering is key to comfort. In rainy season, a raincoat is necessary.

Travelers can apply for permits with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), however they can be difficult to reach. For ease of booking, Volcanoes Safaris offers gorilla-trekking packages, a one-stop-shopping option for advisors that includes full accommodations, gorilla permits, transfers, services of a guide and driver (see above for recommendation), as well as local activities. For high season, plan on applying for permits and booking with Volcanoes Safaris at least five months in advance; for low season, three weeks out is sufficient.



Photo by Melissa Klurman

Visas are required for entry to Uganda; have clients apply for an East Africa multi-country visa for ease of travel — this allows multiple entries to Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya. Clients will need passports valid for at least six months to obtain a visa and will also require proof of yellow fever vaccinations.

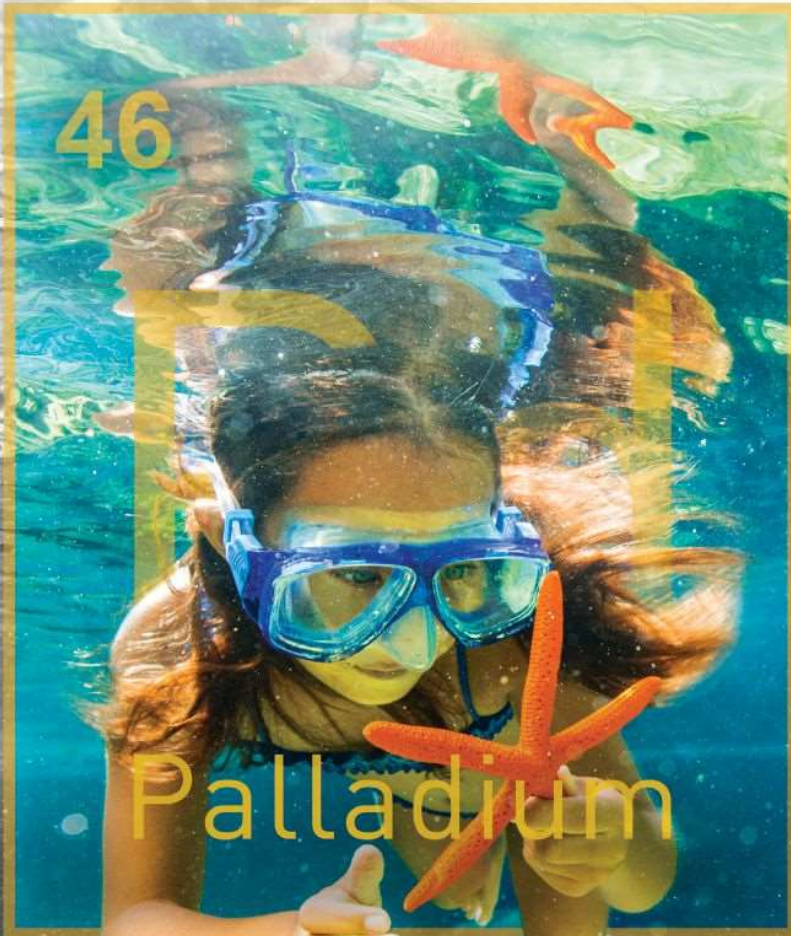
Each trekking group is accompanied by a ranger and two guards. Trackers head out earlier in the morning to locate the gorilla family and then relay information back to the ranger. Clients should be advised to bring U.S. dollars to tip the ranger (approximately \$10) and the trackers (\$5 per person). Porters are available for hire for \$20 (cash only) and they are indispensable. Porters not only carry bulky backpacks (clients should carry two liters of water, plus rain gear, camera equipment, bug repellent and the packed lunch that Bwindi provides), but on our especially muddy and physically exerting trek to see the Bitukura group, porters literally pulled us up over ledges, held us up so we didn't slip down hills, and even gave an occasional push up a vertical climb.

When to Go

Peak season corresponds with the dry seasons of June to September and December through March. During these periods, permits cost \$600 per person, per day. During the rainy, low season periods of October and November and February through May, permits drop to \$450. (By comparison, permits in neighboring Rwanda are \$1,500 regardless of the season).

For the ultimate in trekking, consider booking two days of gorilla trekking for clients, with a day to rest in between. Although the chances of seeing gorillas is near 90 percent, since you can only spend one hour with the gorillas, it will give you additional opportunities for photography. ■

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Lucerne's legendary lakeside resort gets a grand makeover befitting its glamorous past.

BY LINDSAY LAMBERT DAY

Audrey Hepburn married Mel Ferrer at Lucerne's **Bürgenstock Hotel** in 1954. If she were still living today, the film star and style icon would likely be more in love with the lakefront resort than ever thanks to a sweeping, \$565 million mega makeover, phases of which have been rolling out since last summer. Nothing was left untouched, including the resort's famous funicular, which transports guests from Lake Lucerne up the mountain and into the Bürgenstock Hotel's lobby in a statement-making style that's unmatched almost anywhere else.

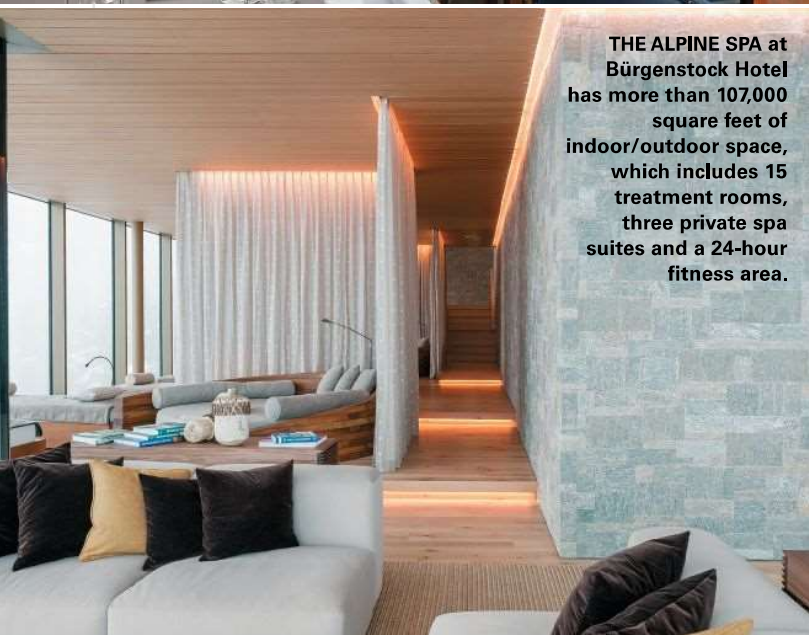
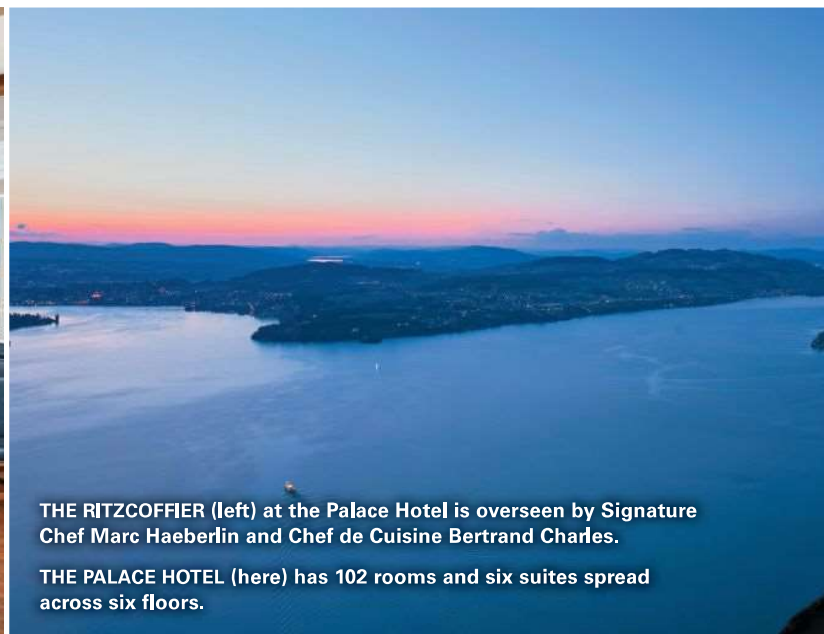
And that's just the beginning. Here's a peek inside the all-new complex.

BÜRGENSTOCK HOTEL guestrooms are equipped with modern amenities such as double bathtubs providing panoramic views. Shown here is a Deluxe Lake View Room.



THE RITZCOFFIER (left) at the Palace Hotel is overseen by Signature Chef Marc Haeberlin and Chef de Cuisine Bertrand Charles.

THE PALACE HOTEL (here) has 102 rooms and six suites spread across six floors.



THE ALPINE SPA at Bürgenstock Hotel has more than 107,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor space, which includes 15 treatment rooms, three private spa suites and a 24-hour fitness area.

Hotels

The resort comprises a handful of hotels: The five-star **Bürgenstock Hotel**, the four-star **Palace Hotel**, the wellness-focused **Waldhotel Health & Medical Excellence**, the cozy **Taverne 1879** restaurant and inn, and the two-story, residence-style **Blockhaus**. Each property is uniquely styled with different travelers' needs in mind, but the jewel in the resort's crown is its flagship Bürgenstock Hotel. The gleaming, glass-walled hotel houses 102 guestrooms and suites across seven floors. Options abound when it comes to room and suite types: Business travel-

ers, singles and couples will feel comfortable in a Bürgenstock Senior or Grand Suite — 785 square feet and 958 square feet, respectively — both of which are outfitted with king-size beds and rain showers. There's a Senior Suite on each floor (Nos. 1111, 1211, 1311 and so on), and the two Grand Suites (Nos. 1101 and 1201) are located on the first and second floors. Six 942-square-foot Family Suites can each accommodate two adults and two kids and can be configured to connect with neighboring rooms. For total R&R, book one of the three Spa Suites, which are located on

Floors 3, 5 and 6. They have private saunas and massage rooms, plus spacious bathrooms outfitted with double bathtubs and separate rain showers. When booking, remember that the higher the floor, the better the view.

All of the hotel's top suite offerings are, fittingly, located on its top floor. The Penthouse Suite, whose private terrace offers views of Mt. Rigi across Lake Lucerne, measures 1,820 square feet; the 3,315-square-foot Presidential Suite has in-room spa facilities and a spacious outdoor terrace; and the Royal Suite, which comprises the entire seventh floor, including two kitchens and a private library, clocks in at 7,230 square feet. All accommodations have amenities like Samsung and Bose electronics, American walnut hardwood floors and double bathtubs with panoramic views, to name just a few.

Combinations and options are many, so let Reservations Manager Bettina Lichtwald (bettina.lichtwald@buergenstock.ch) know exactly what you're looking for when booking, and she'll make sure to get it right. Hotel staff predict that the busiest periods will include Christmas, New Year's Eve, and from May through September, so book as far out as you can for a stay during those stretches.

Our September visit came just a few days before the Bürgenstock's grand opening, so we checked in next door at the Palace Hotel instead. Note that, although the hotel is designated a four-star conference hotel, we couldn't find anything stiff or boring about it. In fact, with natural light pouring into our smartly designed room, plus breathtaking views of Lake Lucerne and the hotel's terrace below, we were perfectly happy to post up there.

The six-floor Palace Hotel has 102 rooms and six suites. For the most spacious floor plan, stick to its five Palace Lake View Suites (Floors 1 through 5; 613 square feet) or its lone Palace Grand Suite (fifth floor; 860 square feet). Note, however, that while lower-category Deluxe and Executive rooms offer balconies, these suites do not.

Other lodging options at the resort include the three-star Taverne 1879, a cozy and traditional Alpine-style tavern with a 65-seat restaurant and 12 guestrooms; the private, residence-style Blockhaus, which can accommodate four adults and was renovated according to historic preservation standards; and the Waldhotel Health & Medical Excellence, an architecturally stunning wellness-



oriented hotel and clinical spa facility. Reservations Manager Lichtwald handles VIP room and suite bookings for all of the resort's hotels.

Dining

In keeping with the resort's underlying notion of abundance, dining options are also plentiful — and enjoyable. Perhaps the standout experience to be had is sitting down to dinner around the chef's table at Spices Kitchen & Terrace inside the Bürgenstock Hotel, where you'll watch as chefs prepare artful, Asian specialties in the restaurant's stunning show kitchen. Ask Assistant Food & Beverage Director Dominik Stalder (dominik.stalder@buergenstock.ch) to help secure it, and be sure to fill him in on any special occasions or celebrations. If the chef's table is booked, don't fret; views from the dining room are simply stunning.

During our visit, we blissed out over farm-fresh produce, pillowy pasta and a silky chocolate dessert at RitzCoffier, the casually elegant French-inspired eatery inside the Palace Hotel. Here's a tip: Before dinner (or after, if you're a night owl), head to the Palace Lounge & Terrace for a glass of sparkling rosé. Surrounded by regal, brocade

sofas and chairs and a posh marble fireplace, you'll feel like a star yourself. In warmer weather, views of turquoise Lake Lucerne from the terrace's outside tables simply can't be beat.

When the Waldhotel opened in December, so did its restaurant, Verbena, which specializes in lighter, more healthful fare. Book a table next to one of the restaurant's tall windows so you can enjoy views of the verdant hills as you dine. Be sure to consult Dominik Stalder, or Head Concierge Alessio Saulli (alessio.saulli@buergenstock.ch; 011-41-416-126-018), about

your dining desires so they can make the best bookings among Bürgenstock's 10 restaurants.

Spa

No stay in Switzerland would be complete without putting in time at the spa, and nor would a stay at the Bürgenstock resort. Its new, 107,000-square-foot, indoor / outdoor Alpine Spa is the largest in central Switzerland, featuring 15 treatment rooms; three private spa suites; a 24-hour fitness area; a yoga studio; wet areas with a hammam, sauna and whirlpools; and hydrotherapy facilities.

One feature you won't want to miss is the spa's 1,383-foot-long heated infinity pool, which wraps around two sides of the spa and offers jaw-dropping mountain and lake views.

Spa & Recreation Director Irena Staudenmaier (irena.staudenmaier@buergenstock.ch; 011-41-416-126-030) oversees the facility and can assist with VIP bookings, including services in the spa's extra-private spa suites. Ask her to recommend services based on your individual needs. We hear that any treatment incorporating Suzanne Kaufmann products delivers an authentically Alpine experience. Other product lines

include La Prairie and St. Barth, so it's impossible to go wrong.

For a comprehensive and immersive wellness experience, look to the newly opened, 160-room Waldhotel. It houses its own 14,000-square-foot spa, 45,000-square-foot medical facility, educational kitchens, herb gardens, three swimming pools and a multi-disciplinary team of doctors, therapist and nursing specialists. Collectively, it's an officially accredited hospital, making it a destination for travelers and locals alike with more intensive wellness needs.

Out and About

Bürgenstock Hotels & Resort is, practically speaking, a town in and of itself, so lean on Head Concierge Saulli to help make sure you get the full experience. He can book times for you on the resort's three Davis Cup tennis courts or its nine-hole Alpine golf course, and help map out a route along the property's 43 miles of hiking and biking trails. If you want to hit the town, ask Saulli to assist with restaurant reservations, a private driving or walking tour of Lucerne, or a private sunset cruise around the city's famous lake. ■

THE BÜRGENSTOCK HOTEL houses 102 rooms and suites with a view of Lake Lucerne.



Palazzo Seneca in Norcia, Italy, Bounces Back

BY SHARRI WHITING DE MASI



When natural disasters strike our favorite tourism areas, we're always eager to know which properties are open and welcoming guests. We recently revisited **Palazzo Seneca** in the gastronomical mecca of Norcia, Italy, to catch up with co-owner Federico Bianconi.

Norcia, located on the far eastern side of Umbria, was the only major Umbrian city to experience earthquake damage in 2016 and we wondered about the fate of this beautiful historic

property. We're happy to report that the 16th-century Palazzo Seneca withstood the shaking, due, in part, to the careful attention paid to anti-seismic building standards during the restoration completed in 2008. In fact, the Palazzo, which is a member of Relais & Châteaux, was honored as the Hotel of the Year by Virtuoso in 2017.

A culinary tourism destination, Norcia is rapidly rebuilding, and hungry travelers are returning, both to savor the

hotel's Michelin-starred Vespasia Restaurant and to attend the annual Black Truffle Fair, held every February, where the world-famous tuber and the region's fine cured meats, legumes and cheeses are on offer. The statue of St. Benedict, a native of Norcia, still reigns over the main piazza. The museum is open, as are many shops, while the cathedral is undergoing restoration. The monks are getting back to making their beloved beer, Birra Nursia.

Palazzo Seneca is operating at full capacity; its 24 rooms are among the 300 now available in Norcia. (Before the earthquake there were 3,000 rooms in the city).

Owner Federico Bianconi, who, with his brother Vincenzo, restored the old palace, says that visitors to the region are returning, not only for culinary tourism, but also for the trekking, rafting and fishing the area is known for. The Bianconi family has been in the hospital-



THE JUNIOR SUITE (here) has a terrace with breathtaking views of the mountains.

VESPASIA RISTORANTE (above right), a Michelin-star restaurant helmed by Chef Valentino Palmisano, sits besides an herb garden.

THE SUITE ROOM (right) has a wooden bed with spiral columns carved by the Umbrian artisans.



ity business here since 1850, and they are central to the city's rebuilding effort. The Palazzo Seneca, originally opened in the early 1900s, was the first hotel in Norcia and, though the building has been restructured several times, it retains the original vaulted-ceilinged rooms of the 16th century.

In 2017, Chef Valentino Palmisano joined the Vespasia Restaurant, which was awarded a Michelin star in 2016, one of only two restaurants in the area

so designated. Chef Palmisano has continued the theme of tradition and innovation, adding his own vision and using many of the ingredients the region is known for: cured meats, including the protected Prosciutto di Norcia; cheeses, especially ricotta and pecorino; herbs from the hotel's kitchen garden and Norcia's famous black truffles. Umbrian wines, especially from the nearby Sagrantino Wine Route, feature on the wine list. Note: Guests, especially

those traveling with children, may also wish to try one of the traditional Umbrian restaurants in the Bianconi portfolio, some of which are still under post-earthquake restoration. Ask for suggestions at reception.

The entire hotel has the feeling of a private villa and is filled with antiques that came from the original owners, the Seneca family, as well as many sourced from Umbrian artisans. The weathered stone floors and thick walls insulate visitors from

the hustle-bustle of the outside world; it's so quiet here it's hard to believe the center of town is only steps away.

Guests will find the sleeping rooms light and airy, despite furnishings that date to centuries past. As in most historic properties, every room is different. The *baldacchini* (four-poster) bed in the Suite Room has been painted in creams and golds, rather than left in dark tones. This, along with the flood of natural light from the windows, reminds



PALAZZO SENECA (here) has the feeling of a private villa and is filled with antiques that came from the original owners, the Seneca family, as well as many sourced from Umbrian artisans. Shown here is the reception.

THE JUNIOR SUITE (below) has an antique wooden canopy bed, and closets and writing desks belonging to the 16th and 18th centuries.



us that the mountains beyond beckon nature lovers.

The 540-square-foot Suite includes one bedroom, a living room with double sofa bed and a double entrance. There is a full bath with tub off the bedroom and another half bath.

Two Junior Suites connect for larger groups, such as families traveling together. There are antique wooden canopy beds, as well as writing desks from

the 16th and 18th centuries.

Floors are laid in vintage oak or traditional terracotta; the ceilings feature carved moldings, many of which are original. Room No. 210, named “Best Room with a View” by Italian magazine *Bell'Italia*, has a private terrace with a mountain view, which can also be seen from the “wet room”-style shower. The Junior Suites are about 400 square feet. Some rooms have bathtubs, while

others offer double showers.

Even the smaller rooms are attractive and spacious. Each Deluxe Room is spread over nearly 235 square feet of space and is decorated with antiques, as are the Superior Rooms. Room No. 107 (Superior) has a *ferro battuta* (wrought iron) bed and a brown leather sofa; the bath is fitted with a bathtub, not a shower. Various rooms have bathtubs; most have showers.

The hotel’s wellness center is evocatively located in the palazzo’s old dungeons, where there are treatment rooms, a quiet room, whirlpool bath, Turkish bath and sauna. Also available to guests is access to the Bianconi Sports Centre, with its indoor and outdoor pools, cardio fitness gym, tennis courts and more.

Among many possibilities in the eastern half of Umbria are itineraries that include the history, food, wines and natural wonders of Assisi, Montefalco, Spoleto and Norcia. Travelers may fly into Perugia and explore the region by car, beginning at Assisi or Montefalco, continuing to Spoleto, and then taking the

long tunnel under the mountains to emerge in the forested Valnerina (Valley of the Nera River) near Norcia.

Using Palazzo Seneca as a base, guests may choose activities in the town and surrounding area, including visiting the numerous food shops selling local products (cured meats, lentils and other legumes, cheeses and truffles); joining a truffle hunt in the nearby woods; trekking in the Monti Sibillini National Park on foot, or by mule, horse or mountain bike; white-water rafting; fishing; or taking a cooking or cheese-making class. An unusual opportunity for joggers, bikers and hikers is the former steam train track which runs 50 kilometers (31 miles) from Norcia to Spoleto — the track has been turned into a broad path through the countryside, making the journey traffic-free.

For more information or to request special services, contact Federico Bianconi (Federico@bianconi.com), Eros Bartolini (sales@bianconi.com) or Giulia Crippa (planner@bianconi.com). ■

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Avani Riverside Bangkok Hotel

BY PAMELA MCCOURT FRANCESONE



Avani's flagship Riverside Bangkok Hotel is on the same stretch of Bangkok's Chao Phraya River as many of the city's most posh properties and right next door to its sister, the five-star Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort.

The most striking thing about **Avani Riverside Bangkok Hotel's** slim silhouette is how unencumbered it is, with no other high-rise buildings around it, which means sweeping views and the pleasurable and somewhat surreal sensation of floating between the sky and the river. Also striking is the fact that all 245 rooms and suites

are river-facing, and the higher up you go the better the views, with the *ne plus ultra* from the 26th-floor Attitude Rooftop Bar and Restaurant and the dramatic infinity pool.

Although Avani is not in the heart of Bangkok, we discovered how easy it is to get into the central business and shopping districts via the river and the elevated BTS sky train. Bangkok is a sprawling megalopolis and has some of the world's worst traffic jams, but it took just 15 minutes on the hotel's complimentary river shuttle boat to

the Saphan Taksin station, and then a quick ride on the spotlessly clean air-conditioned BTS to be left smack in the center, with easy access to all the most important tourist attractions and sophisticated shopping.

The reception on the 11th floor has the property's signature ultra-high ceilings and windows and an abundant use of pale warm wood, conveying a light-drenched stylish luxury. We reckoned it has to be around 100 meters from one end to the other — and there are no divisions — from the all-day restaurant, Skyline, through the

lobby, past the deli-style Pantry at Avani, the Long Bar and the well-spaced clusters of comfortable casual seating.

The same fresh color palette is reprised in the contemporary guestrooms, which, needless to say, have soaring windows, fab views and bathrooms with sliding doors, making them private or part of the room. The 20 Junior Suites are 667 square feet each. The two River View Two Bedroom Suites have a separate living area, two bathrooms with showers and a full-size tub. Sleeping up to five, they



ATTITUDE Rooftop Bar and Restaurant at Avani is 26 stories above the Chao Phraya River and affords sweeping views of the river and the city.

are eminently family-friendly, although Sumitra Chimpiboon (sumitra_ch@avanihotels.com; 011-662-431-9100, Ext. 2500), director of rooms, says many families also like the 49 connecting rooms. The Avani River View Three Bedroom Suite on the 25th floor can accommodate up to seven. It has a living/dining area and a full kitchen; butler service can be arranged.

For VIP needs, reach out to Nikolaus Priesnitz (npriesnitz@minor.com; 011-662-476-0022, Ext. 1900), area general manager North Thailand. Chief

Concierge Napussawan (Tina) Suwansukhum (concierge.wriv@avanihotels.com) can advise on specialty luxury yacht and antique rice barge cruises on the river or the ancient archeological site of Ayutthaya, as well as point guests to the best shopping, art galleries and restaurants. Tina also arranges transfers in the Mercedes-Benz E 300 Hybrid from Suvarnabhumi Airport or from Don Mueang Airport, an international private jets airport. Tip: Guests should not miss the Manohra Cruise by Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort with a sumptuous Royal Thai dinner and great views of Bangkok's skyline at night.

The AvaniSpa has just two treatments rooms, of which one is a double suite, so advance reservations are a must through Spa Director Jingjai Wongarmart (jingjai_wo@minor.com; 011-662-476-0022, Ext. 1563). We enjoyed the Gentle Rhythm Calming Massage, and can highly recommend therapist Sunee Akaravakul, who understood just how much pressure we like. Good to know: Sporting types will enjoy the tennis court and lessons in the Muay Thai Boxing Ring.

A visit to the next-door gardens of the Anantara Riverside Resort, and to Bangkok's first designer-tented Tea Salon, is a must for tea worshippers. We relaxed in the atmosphere of the "days of the Raj" with an indulgent afternoon tea comprising finger sandwiches, fruit tarts, Victoria sponge cake, English scones and a seriously good cup of Assam tea from the extensive tea menu.

Attitude, one of Bangkok's hotspot rooftop bars, has a great vibe and attracts a trendy jet-setting crowd from cocktail hour until late into the night. We ate outside, but there is also a smart indoor restaurant, counter seating at the open kitchen and an intimate sunken area with daybeds beside the infinity pool. From the extensive cocktail menu we chose

the luscious Moulin Rouge with Absolut Raspberri, passion fruit and Prosecco, and from the Asian-inspired, molecular tapas-style starters we settled for the Smoking Caramel Duck, which arrived in a smoke-filled glass dome. Although we were tempted by the rib of 150-day grain-fed Angus beef, we went for prawn curry and finished it off with the Xtra Virgin, a refreshing apple mousse and sorbet, sitting on apple "hay."

Director of Marketing and Communications Elizabeth Dass-Brown (edassbrown@minor.com; 011-662-476-0022, Ext. 1915) told us advance reservations are recommended for Attitude and can be made through the Restaurant Reservations Desk (011-662-476-0022). She also said the most difficult times to book the hotel are November to February, and certain blackout dates such as Chinese New Year and Easter Weekend.

Shopaholics are well served in the area with the Riverside Plaza featuring 68 luxury and eatery brands and located on the first to third floors of the hotel building, while across the river, and just 10 minutes by river shuttle, there is Asiatique The Riverfront. This mall-cum-bazaar is open from 5 p.m. until late, and has covered and outdoor areas with 1,500 boutiques and shops selling artisan products, fashions and souvenirs, and 40 restaurants, many of which are on the riverside. We learned that this riverside area will get a major retail boost when the enormous new Icon Siam Shopping Mall, which has been called the "Mother of all Malls," opens this year. With 500 shops and a hundred restaurants, it is beside the Saphan Taksin station and will bring dazzling design and luxury big-brand shopping to this side of the river. ■



THE AVANI RIVER VIEW THREE BEDROOM SUITE (here) is on the 25th floor and comes with a dining and lounge area.

AVANI RIVERSIDE BANGKOK (below) has an infinity pool with daybeds on the top floor.



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KIMPTON HOTEL VAN ZANDT AUSTIN, TX

BY RUTHANNE TERRERO

When we were offered a welcome beer at **Kimpton Hotel Van Zandt** in Austin, we knew the programming of our very special visit had already begun.

The hotel, just off Rainey Street (home to much live music and food trucks), was built from the ground up as a Kimpton, so we had

no doubt the “lifestyle” element was always going to be at the forefront of the guest experience. We found that to be exactly the case, with something always happening inside the hotel, which opened in 2015.

Let’s start with the free wine in the very large, living room-style lobby each evening. On our first night, a local rising star serenaded us all with original songs on his

guitar. The following evening, management DJ’d music on vinyl records on the lobby’s vintage-style record player. In each instance, hotel executives handed out glasses of wine to guests who were either coming out of the hotel’s very high-tech meeting rooms or back in from a day out in Austin. Girlfriends on getaways lined the couches and toasted each other and a mix of business people sat



THE PANCHO'S SUITE is 900 square feet in size and has views of downtown Austin.

with colleagues in a relaxed manner, seeming pleased that they could now take in a bit of the local environment after a long day.

In our case, we'd just arrived from spending a day at the hotel's pool deck, which is furnished with lounges and cabanas facing a clear skyline and Lady Bird Lake. Food and drink is served from the adjacent restaurant, Geraldine's, where we ate several times for its Texas-style food (think barbecued short ribs and bourbon-glazed cauliflower) and cocktails such as the 24 Carat Magic (Tito's vodka, carrot juice, ginger, tamarind and lemon). Geraldine's also hosts live music nightly; it's a great chance to hear local talent for free. There's also a jazz brunch each Sunday.

We loved our Corner King room, which was 380 square feet in size, but made to feel all the more spacious with its full-size windows overlooking downtown and the lake. The hotel has five presidential suites; that's because the city has become quite the magnet for live events that draw a high-profile clientele. Lefty's Suite, in particular, is popular for its great views and its vintage upright piano. Nice Touch: There's also poker table (cards and chips included). The 900-square-foot corner suite also has kitchenette and a large bathroom with a soaking tub.

Note: We hear the Lakeview Spa Suite is the most requested room at the hotel, thanks to the lovely views of Lady Bird Lake from its own soaker tub.

For assistance navigating the variety of room types at the hotel, reach out to Erin Beck (erin.beck@hotelvanzandt.com).

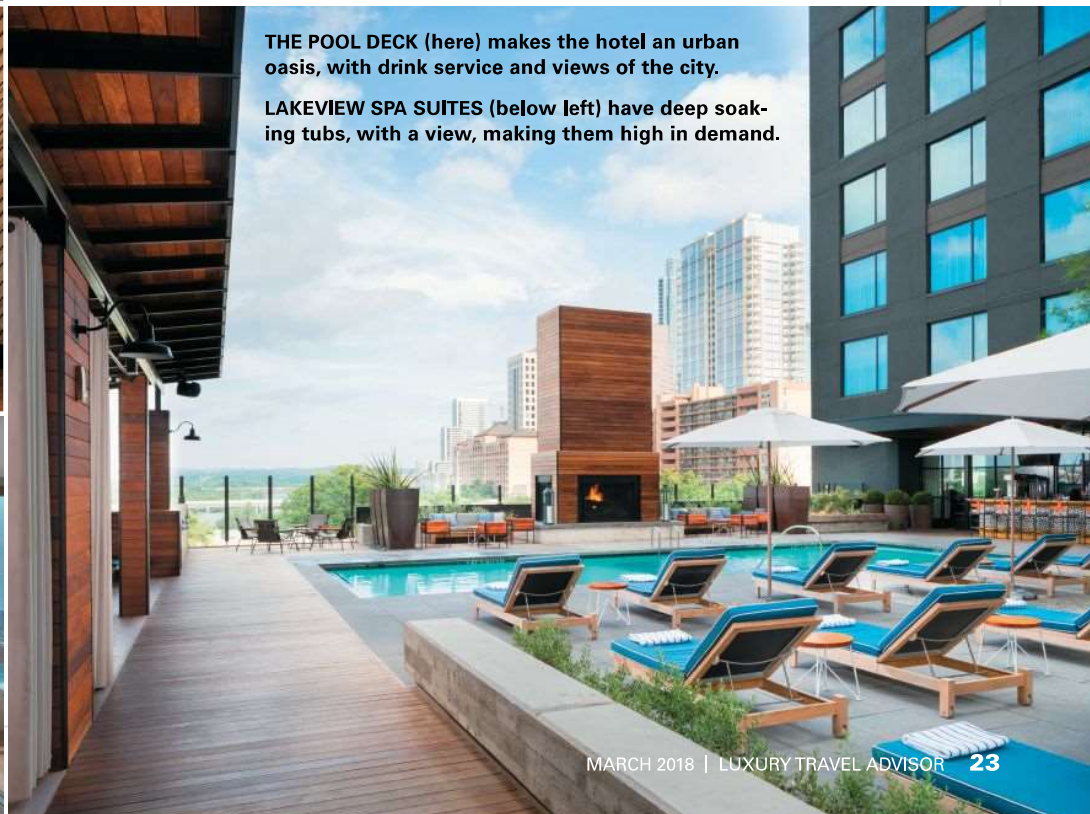
For those looking to dig in to the local Austin scene, the concierge, Adam Foraker (adam.foraker@hotelvanzandt.com) can point you in the direction of some of the city's most interesting building murals; he can also give you insider tips on what to do on Rainey Street. This new area of Austin developed when the houses along the block were zoned to allow commercial enterprises; what arose is a series of bungalow-style accommodations that now house restaurants and bars, and many of them have live music playing on their front stoops in the evening. This is true Austin, made even more special by its two food truck enclaves that serve seriously delicious cuisine of all sorts.

If you're a traveler in search of a wellness experience, Foraker can send you where the locals go, including Wanderlust Yoga and SoulCycle. He's also savvy on one of downtown Austin's top boutique shopping districts, just nearby on 2nd Street.

Did we mention that the hotel has a series of bikes in its lobby, yours for the taking (do sign up ahead of time as on certain days, they're quite popular). If you do decide to ride, two must-see stops are Lady Bird Lake and the Texas Capitol building. The hotel is also just a four-minute walk to the city's convention center and a 10-minute walk to the 6th Street Entertainment district. ■



GUESTS MAY BORROW BICYCLES to explore downtown Austin and sites nearby like Lady Bird Lake.



THE POOL DECK (here) makes the hotel an urban oasis, with drink service and views of the city.

LAKEVIEW SPA SUITES (below left) have deep soaking tubs, with a view, making them high in demand.

Warm Weather Wellness Included

THE WELLNESS SUITES at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit have a private terrace on the second floor, equipped with a Jacuzzi and massage beds.

Luxury Travel Advisor breaks down three all-inclusives in Mexico and the Caribbean for health and wellness retreats.

BY JOE PIKE

We profile three prime locations, from the Riviera Nayarit and the Riviera Maya in Mexico to St. Lucia in the Caribbean.

Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit

The 16,500-square-foot Se Spa at **Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit** is often considered the crown jewel of this all-inclusive resort in Mexico.

The spa's design includes a palapa-style entrance, furniture from Bali and a large marble wall with cascading water. The spa experience begins for guests with the Hydrotherapy Ritual, which includes a dip in the two-temperature lagoon, time in the Jacuzzi and a final multi-jet Swiss shower.

The Spa at Grand Velas has 20 rooms, more than 30 spa treatments, a modern gym and exercise room, a spa boutique and a beauty salon. Note: Treatments are grouped into seven ceremonies, namely Huichol, Water, Wind, Earth, Fire, Diamond and Beauty. Nice Touch: Many treatments feature organic elements, using coffee and chocolate, candle wax and sea shells, deep river stones and volcanic glass, tequila cream and aromatherapy oils.

For all spa requests, we recommend reaching out to Silvia Velasco (svelasco@velasresorts.com), spa director.

The best rooms for health-oriented travelers are the Wellness Suites at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit. These two-floor, 1,750-square-foot suites come with a per-

sonal Spa Concierge, who provides counsel on a wide variety of available spa treatments.

Nice Touch: These rooms also have a special soap selection and information on in-suite fitness amenities, which include an exercise kit comprising a yoga mat, dumbbells, resistance bands and a Life Fitness Activate Series Recumbent Lifecycle Exercise Bike.

For all room requests, we suggest connecting with Pilar Perciavalle (pperciavalle@velasresorts.com), managing director.

Vegan travelers are now offered new, curated tasting menus thanks to a collaboration with Mexico's leading vegan chef, Miguel Bautista. Substituting vegan-friendly ingredients and new cooking techniques, Bautista, co-founder and executive chef of Vegan Planet, has produced entirely original



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option called “Dreamcatcher Workshops,” which are meditation classes that introduce guests to the 2,000-year-old tradition of weaving dreamcatchers. Participants will learn about the meaning and history of dreamcatchers and then how to create their own. The handicraft is traditionally made with willow wood wrapped in colored yarn and decorated with various objects, most commonly feathers. Made to filter dreams, dreamcatchers are said to only allow positive dreams and visions to pass to the sleeper.

Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit also hosts a Wellness Week every October. Last year, some of the features were such fitness classes as Soul Yoga and Antigravity Yoga; a therapeutic concert; a Buddhist meditation; tea tastings by a Mexican tea master; a class specifically on wellness for cancer and aging, and juice therapy. Special guest instructors also lead classes.

To further customize a stay at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit, we suggest reaching out to Gina Jimenez (gjimenez@velasresorts.com), sales director.

BodyHoliday — St. Lucia

The **BodyHoliday** in St. Lucia encourages VIPs to indulge in a little serenity by including all spa treatments in its room rate.

We hear the most popular treatment is the “Lucian Lime and Ginger Scrub,” an exfoliation that, after a light body brushing, involves warm oil drizzled sparingly over

vegan tasting menus at the resort’s three restaurants.

Menus at each restaurant have four to five adapted traditional dishes of French, Italian and Mexican cuisine, as well as international favorites and comfort food for the specialty diet. Note: All dishes created at the property are free of processed foods and are made with healthy cooking oils and techniques. Culinary travelers can also enjoy these specialty dishes at any time of day or night thanks to the property’s 24-hour in-suite dining services.

Nice Touch: Presented with a menu upon arrival by the resort’s “Baby Concierge,” parents can select from a list of gourmet purées for their babies, prepared by Executive Chef Guillaume Morance. Hint: Options for the purées include Pio Pio Purée, made with cooked chicken breast, carrots, zucchini and chicken broth; Moo Purée, made with beef tenderloin, potato, sweet potato and

vegetable broth; and Little Shark Purée, made with white fish, celery, leeks, mushroom and vegetable broth.

For all other food and beverage requests, we recommend connecting with Alejandro Sanchez (asanchezg@velasresorts.com), food and beverage manager.

The centerpiece of the resort’s gardens is a three-tiered infinity pool, a preferred spot for catching sunsets at the hotel. The activities staff has daily activities prepared, from in the pool to out.

Antigravity Yoga is a new fitness experience for guests to try at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit. While suspended on the Harrison Antigravity Hammock, the combination of exercises is intended to decompress the spine and joints. The class also enhances posture by aligning the body from head to toe and increases overall health and physical agility.

Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit also has a new

THE SPA at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit (above) has 20 rooms and over 30 treatments. Shown here is the living room of the resort’s Imperial Spa Suite.





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BODYHOLIDAY IN ST. LUCIA has three freshwater pools, including the infinity pool shown here. The resort's Penthouse Suite (below left) has a living area, wet bar and master bedroom with views of Cariblue Bay. The Suite also has a private, in-room Turkish Hammam (below right), complete with rain-head shower and a heated massage bed.

the body. Lime and ginger are then used to cleanse and polish the skin.

The most popular room category is the "Rooms on the Ocean Front." Of these rooms, the Penthouse is the best. Occupying its own floor, this suite has its own Kinesis gym and includes butler service. Nice Touch: This room also includes a Turkish Hammam, a steam room decorated in marble and travertine mosaics, complete with a rain-head shower and a heated massage bed.

For all room requests, connect with Pascal Bertrand (pascal@thebodyholiday.com), general manager.

For the most interactive dining option, we

recommend the resort's new dining concept, I-Tal. It introduces the idea of conscious eating, which is less about declaring certain foods as "unhealthy" and more about being mindful of where the food comes from, how it's prepared and how the body will respond to it. I-Tal utilizes ingredients from BodyHoliday's onsite garden.

Guests looking for a more interactive culinary experience have the opportunity to take part in a guided tour with the resort's eco-leader and I-Tal chefs, while also harvesting produce from the garden. Nice Touch: VIPs can assist the chefs as they prepare a vegan feast.

To reserve a spot on a guided farm tour

of the property or for any other food and beverage request, we suggest reaching out to Morkel Brink (morkel@thebodyholiday.com), food and beverage leader.

The resort also has three freshwater pools and one Jacuzzi. Hint: The most impressive is the infinity pool. Note: Guests can partake in water volleyball and water aerobics. They can also coordinate their schedule when they arrive or in advance through BodyHoliday specialists.

To coordinate a schedule of activities at the pool, we suggest reaching out to Stephen Froggatt (stephenfroggatt@thebodyholiday.com), house leader.



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ZOËTRY PARAISO DE LA BONITA's Butler Ocean Front Master Suite Two Bedroom with Plunge Pool category has a large, private terrace with a double sun lounger and views of the Caribbean Sea.



THE CHEF'S TABLE (above) at Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita is exclusive to guests staying in the nine Impression suites and the seven Butler Suites. Shown here is the living room of the Impression Ocean Front Two Bedroom Presidential Suite with Private Pool.



Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita Riviera Maya

Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita Riviera Maya just unveiled a new villa concept that caters to the healthy traveler. Entitled, "Impression," the new collection marks the Zoëtry brand's first resort-within-a-resort concept.

Guests can choose from nine ocean-front rooms with private access and luxury amenities. Every suite includes dining rooms, terraces offering full sunset views, a plunge pool and an outdoor shower. Good to Know: Guests staying in one of the seven Butler Suites within the original Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita property will also have access to all the amenities available within Impression.

For all room requests, we suggest connecting with Claudia Rodriguez Bravo (CRodriguez@zoetryresorts.com), director of sales.

Note: Two dining options — Umami, an Asian fusion restaurant, and Chef's Table, a restaurant and show kitchen — are exclusive to the nine Impression suites and for guests staying in the Zoëtry Paraiso Butler Suites. Guests with specific dietary instructions can customize their own menus with a private chef as part of Impression's Chef's Table.

Other Impressions amenities include access to the resort's private marina and a 48-foot catamaran offering sunset sailings.

To further customize a health and wellness retreat to Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita Riviera Maya, contact Clara Morales (reservations.zopdb@zoetryresorts.com), reservations manager. ■



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The Yachting Lifestyle

Intimate-size vessels deliver a boutique-style vibe.

BY SUSAN J. YOUNG

When is a luxury voyage not a cruise? One good answer is “when it’s a yachting experience.” These more intimate voyages are on smaller ships with fewer guests. The itineraries call at remote coves, secluded lagoons and ports the bigger luxury ships just can’t access, along with signature destinations. They’re not cookie-cutter in style; some are traditional luxury, others have an expeditionary feel. Some unfold on ships of up to 300 passengers, others on vessels with only a few dozen.

Boutique Yachting in Style

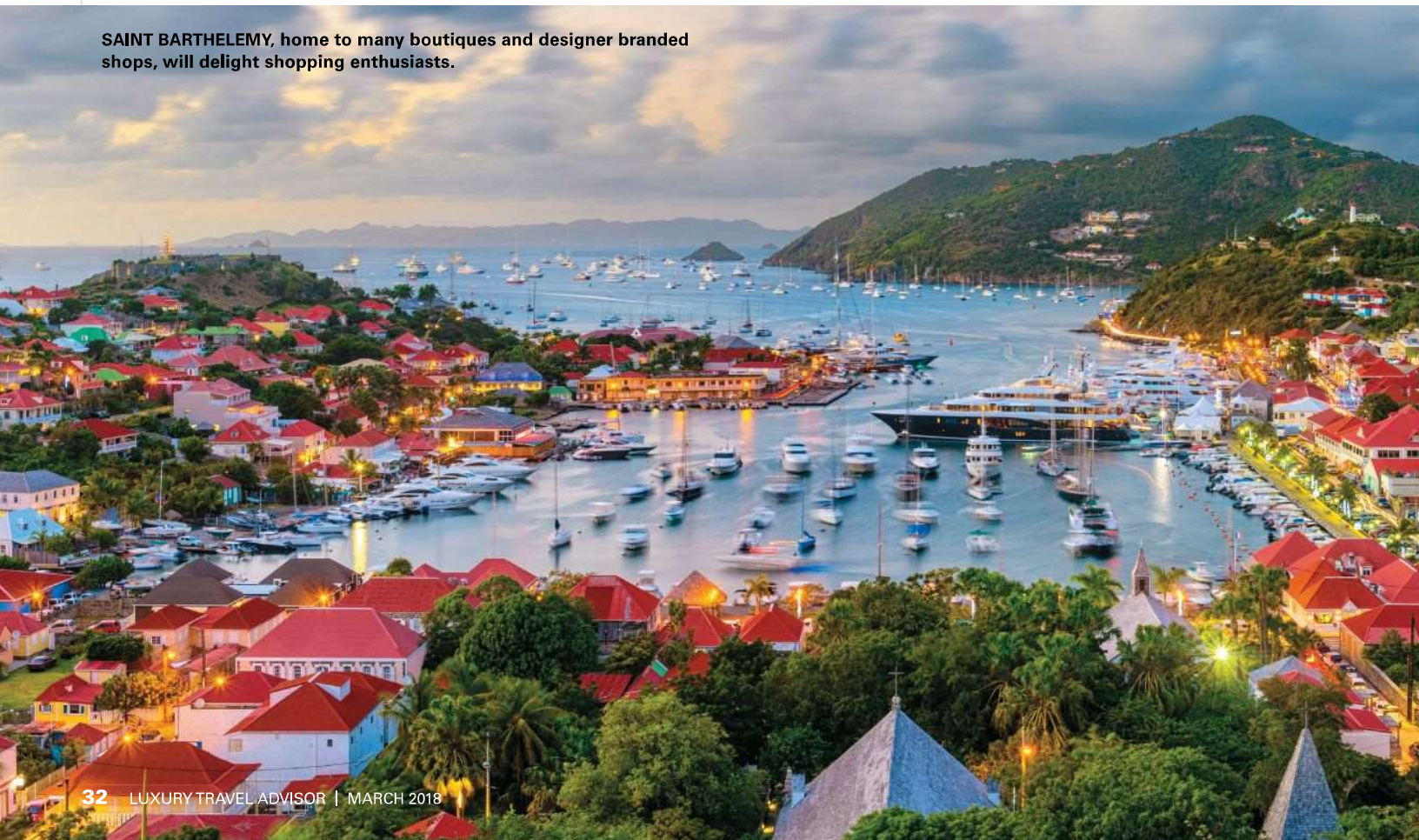
For those travelers eager for a **Crystal Cruises** ocean experience in a smaller package, the 62-passenger *Crystal Esprit* sails luxury yachting itineraries in the Caribbean and Adriatic Sea, while *Crystal Endeavor*, a new polar-class, yachting vessel, will launch in 2020. Top digs on *Crystal Esprit*: The 515-square-foot Owner’s Suite is twice the size of other suites. Its separate living area has a comfortable sofa, high-definition satellite TV, four-seat dining table, bar and refrigerator.

The bedroom has a king-size bed, custom-built storage bench, couch, high-definition TV and bedside iPad that — with a single touch — runs the lighting and electronics. Techies will appreciate the complimentary unlimited Wi-Fi and USB outlets. It’s easy to relax with soft robes, slippers and bath / shower amenities from Italian fashion house Etro. In addition, the Owner’s Suite bathroom exudes a spa-like vibe with its backlit mirrors, double vanity sinks, natural stone flooring, egg-shaped whirlpool stone tub with views to the sea and a separate

glass-enclosed rain shower.

Yacht guests choose from a portfolio of complimentary Crystal Adventures shore excursions in every port, dine casually on Michelin-inspired cuisine at the Yacht Club restaurant and are pampered with butler service in every suite. Another pleasure for yachters is watersports play, and from *Crystal Esprit*’s aft watersports platform, guests can go water skiing, jet skiing, kayaking, snorkeling or wake boarding. But it’s the ship’s larger “luxury toys” that truly impress. One is a deep-sea submersible, capable of div-

SAINT BARTHELEMY, home to many boutiques and designer branded shops, will delight shopping enthusiasts.



ing 1,000 feet; its certified pilot will take guests on an underwater ride to gaze at marine life and colorful corals. For a different experience, the ship's Wider 32 speedboat will whisk guests off to remote isles or take them on a relaxing Champagne cruise.

Back onboard, we'd head for The Cove to order a hand-selected, complimentary vintage or to the Sunset Bar to lounge in a Balinese day bed or basket chair. If guests get the munchies, the Patio Café serves light fare such as salads, small plates, charcuterie, cheeses and pastries, while the al fresco Terrace is popular for morning espresso.

Departing on January 27, 2019 roundtrip from Marigot, St. Martin, *Crystal Esprit's* "British Virgin Islands Escape" voyage calls at Gustavia, St. Barthelemy, and multiple BVI destinations, including Anegada, Scrub Island (overnight), Great Harbor Jost Van Dyke (three days), White Bay (for the Peter



RITZ-CARLTON's 298-guest mega-yachts will have 149 suites. Shown here is a rendering of an Owner's Suite.

Island Resort), Spanish Town, Virgin Gorda and Gorda Sound (overnight), and the exclusive Moskito Island, a 125-acre island retreat owned by Sir Richard Branson. Crystal's guests can enjoy a private Moskito beach with hammocks, cabanas and chilled Champagne.

In Gorda Sound, another perk for Crystal's guests is the ability to dine at the Azzurra Restaurant or enjoy a refreshment at Bar Aqua, both within the exclusive Yacht Club Costa Smeralda, a sister club to the Aga Khan's yacht club in Porto Cervo, Sardinia. How about a signature buffalo burger with Fontina cheese or a lobster roll with truffle butter on brioche?

Putting on the Ritz

Launching in late 2019 is the first of three 298-passenger mega-yachts for the **Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection**. That's a new business partnership between the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company and maritime experts Douglas Prothero and Lars Clasen (managing directors of the new venture), in collaboration with funds managed by Oaktree Capital Management. Cruise operations are based in Coconut Grove, FL. Ritz-Carlton will provide luxury hospitality service under a long-term operating agreement.

Individual reservations open in May for seven- to 12-night voyages calling at Mediterranean,

northern Europe, Caribbean and Latin American ports. Guests can expect a casual resort luxury and yachting product — one that definitely avoids the "cruising" label. So, these voyages will likely appeal to loyal Ritz-Carlton hotel guests who desire a similar vacation at sea, new-to-cruise guests and upscale travelers who want top-notch service in the Ritz-Carlton tradition.

Interiors for the sleek, modern ships are being created jointly by the Ritz-Carlton and Tillberg Design of Sweden. Guests can expect multiple dining venues, including a restaurant by Sven Elverfeld of Aqua, the three Michelin-starred restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton, Wolfsburg. The new ships also will have a Panorama Lounge and wine bar and a Ritz-Carlton Spa. The new yachts will have an aft infinity pool plus a marina platform equipped with a speed boat and kayaks.

Each of 149 luxurious and spacious suites will have its own terrace. We can't wait to see the ship's two opulent Penthouse Suites, each with 1,076 square feet of interior space, an 807-square-foot private veranda and a private plunge pool. If both Penthouse suites are reserved, eight guests can relax in the ultimate private complex as the corridor between the suites can become exclusive to the two units.

The new yachting product promises curated destination

experiences and onboard programming that reflects collaborations with local chefs, musicians and artists, as well as oceanographer Jean-Michel Cousteau and his Ocean Futures Society. Many guests will likely desire to couple the luxury yacht experience with pre- and post-cruise stays at Ritz-Carlton properties.

Yachting, Not Cruising

Operating the 112-passenger *SeaDream I* and *SeaDream II*, **SeaDream Yacht Club** is a veteran at the "yachting, not cruising" concept. Both vessels are equipped with a watersports platform and wave runners, kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and other watersports equipment so guests can "play" just as they could on a private yacht. SeaDream also has a full-service Thai-certified spa. We'd opt for the 90-minute, traditional Thai massage treatment with herbs as that comes with post-massage heated Thai herbal compresses from the Royal Project in Thailand.

Gourmet meals are served with open seating in both the Dining Salon and outside Topside Restaurant. Among the ship's creature comforts are a 1,000-volume library and a high-tech golf simulator. Travelers wishing to maintain a wellness regiment will discover a "raw food" menu and yoga and tai chi sessions that are offered daily at sunrise, weather permitting. One



Photo by Getty Images / Sean Pavone



SEADREAM guests can sleep under the stars on the Balinese Dream Beds on the upper exterior deck.



PONANT'S *Le Soleal* will sail a 12-night "Jewels of Latin America" itinerary this fall, during which guests can savor French cuisine at the Gastronomic Restaurant.

signature SeaDream experience? Why not sleep one night in a Balinese bed with turn-down service on the upper exterior deck? While not all guests stay the entire night (many return to their own suite after a few hours), it's a fun, fresh-air option with great "bragging rights" when one returns home.

Both SeaDream ships have all-oceanview suites and state-rooms. Top accommodations are the Admiral Suite (No. 400; AS category) with multiple picture windows, separate dining and living areas, a master bedroom, and one and one-half baths; and the Owner's Suite (No. 315; OW category) with separate living room, dining area, one-half guest bath, plus a master bedroom suite with a full bath that has a multi-jet shower and large soaking tub.

During spring 2019, *SeaDream II* will sail Cuba circumnavigation itineraries that depart from Havana or Cienfuegos, and call at Trinidad, Cayo Largo, Isla de Juventud and Maria la Gorda. SeaDream's summer 2019 itineraries to the Mediterranean often visit smaller yachting playgrounds that most large ships can't reach. One of our favorites is Puerto Banus on Spain's Costa del Sol, a lovely place to spot celebrities, sports cars and impressive yachts. We'd

head for the Spanish Galleon-inspired Astral Cocktail Bar Marbella to check out the harbor action while sipping the bar's signature daiquiri or another fruity concoction.

In 2019, *SeaDream I* will add calls to Bordeaux, France, and summer highlights on both vessels include Italy's Amalfi Coast and Taormina, Sicily; the Adriatic, including Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro and a Corinth Canal transit; Spain's Balearic Islands; Gibraltar and Tangier, Morocco; the Greek Islands, including Hydra, Patmos and Santorini; the French Riviera, including Corsica, St. Tropez, Antibes and Cassis, plus Monte Carlo; and Santander, Bilbao, San Sebastian, Marbella, Malaga and Motril, Spain.

French Style, Expanding Fleet

The French small ship line, **Ponant**, offers a luxury yachting and exploratory experience on the 264-passenger *Le Boreal*, *Le Soleal*, *Le Lyrial* and *L'Austral*, and several other vessels. This fall, *Le Soleal* will sail a 12-night "Jewels of Latin America" itinerary, departing October 22 from Puerto Quetzal, Guatemala to Callao, Peru. Complimentary excursions are included to such archaeological hot spots as the Mayan site of Tikal, Guatemala;

the ruins / monuments of La Antigua de Guatemala; the Chan Chan archaeological site, home to the largest adobe citadel in pre-Columbian America; and the Incan ruins at Machu Picchu.

On the ship's Guayaquil, Ecuador port call, guests can choose to visit Cuenca or Quito, both UNESCO World Heritage Sites. We particularly like this itinerary's port call at San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua, at which Ponant's guests will travel to Granada — at the base of the Mombacho volcano — to view Moorish, Andalusian, Baroque and neo-Classical architecture.

Ponant moves into an even more adventurous mode this year, as it launches the first two of four Ponant Explorer vessels — the 184-passenger *Le Lapérouse* in spring and *Le Champlain* this fall. Sisters *Le Bougainville* and *Le Dumont-d'Urville* will follow in 2019. They'll be expeditionary in nature but yacht-like in service and features. Highly anticipated is this ship's Blue Eye, a multi-sensorial underwater lounge designed in collaboration with architect Jacques Rougerie; lounge guests will see, hear and feel they're a part of the underwater world.

For repeat Europe cruisers, *Le Champlain* offers an in-

depth, seven-night "Treasures of Sicily" itinerary roundtrip from Valletta, Malta, on October 4, October 11 and also July 6, 2019. Circumnavigating Sicily, this itinerary has calls at Palermo (overnight), Taormina, Trapani, Porto Empedocle and Syracuse, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, plus Mgarr on Gozo, Malta. On Gozo, we'd sample traditional sheep milk cheeses or miniature Maltese pastries (pastizzi), or pop into the Gleneagles bar, adorned with fishing nets and equipment; it's a popular social spot for fishermen, locals and tourists alike. While ashore, one small gift to buy for family or friends is the famous Gozo sea salt.

Separately, Ponant just announced that it's building a new luxury expedition ship that's an ice-breaker and runs on LNG. It will have 135 staterooms and suites.

Yachting with an Expeditionary Flair

This summer, high-end luxury is being coupled with an expeditionary yachting experience as the new 228-passenger *Scenic Eclipse*, **Scenic's** first "Discovery Yacht," launches on August 31. One robust Western Hemisphere option is the eight-day "Panama & Colombia Discovery" itinerary, departing November 9 from Cartagena, Colombia

to Guayaquil, Ecuador with a Panama Canal transit.

What's special? On day five, *Scenic Eclipse's* guests will visit Colombia's off-the-beaten-path Utría National Park on the Pacific coast. They can soar over the park's jungle by helicopter, paddle a kayak or take a Zodiac ride through the tropical ecosystem, view marine life such as whales or fish from the ship's submarine, go scuba diving or snorkeling, or just relax on a beach with a chef-prepared picnic. An exclusive Scenic Enrich event is a private concert of Afro-Pacific music and dances by local El Valle residents.

Scenic Eclipse has 114 all-verandah suites, all with butler service. For the very best, though, choose an Owner's Penthouse Suites (OP category, No. 901 or No. 902) on the bow. They offer a separate living room, dining area and a master bedroom with a 60-inch flat-screen TV, a fully adjustable, king-sized Slumber bed, sofa and chair. The master bathroom has a dual steam shower with light therapy and therapeutic spa bath. Other OP features include a guest powder room, library (including Kindle library), spa day bed (each guest in this suite receives a complimentary, one-hour, in-suite spa treatment) and a curved private terrace with whirlpool, outdoor lounge and sun loungers.

Guests in these OP suites also receive unlimited complimentary laundry service, guaranteed specialty restaurant dining, VIP bookings for spa treatments and helicopter/submarine trips, plus a guaranteed preferred choice of shore excursions. Travelers can also reserve the Owner's Penthouse Suite coupled with an adjacent Spa Suite to create a two-bedroom, 2,660-square-foot suite.

Scenic Eclipse has 10 different dining experiences, multiple lounges and bars, a Spa Sanctuary, fitness area, indoor

and outdoor pools and a marina deck. This yacht also will carry two helicopters and a submarine, so guests can head out with an expert captain to explore from the air and under the sea.

Scenic also announced earlier this year that it's ordered a second sister vessel to debut in 2020; both ships have an Ice Class 1A (Polar Class 6) rating, ensuring the safest navigation through polar waters. *Scenic Eclipse II* will sail an Athens-to-Lisbon maiden voyage and then operate voyages to the European and Russian Arctic, including Russia's remote White Sea and the Northwest Passage, as well as southern Greenland, the Bering Sea, coastal destinations in Canada and the U.S., central and South America; a Cuba circumnavigation and more.

Yachting with Casual Elegance

Windstar Cruises' 212-passenger *Star Pride*, *Star Breeze* and *Star Legend*, the former Seabourn yachts, are casually elegant vessels with a relaxed onboard aura, no formal nights, and highly personalized service. All three vessels have been updated and refurbished over the past few years. Just recently,

Star Legend completed an extensive dry dock in Singapore with updates throughout the ship and retrofits in preparation for Windstar's new Signature Expeditions program in Alaska. That included upgrading of public restrooms, refreshing of the infirmary, extensive teak deck work, resurfacing saunas and refreshing steam rooms in the WindSpa, installing equipment for Zodiacs and kayaks, and gift shop remodeling.

On August 6, *Star Legend* departs Seward (Anchorage) for a 14-day voyage to the Kenai Fjords National Park, Sitka, Icy Strait Point (Hoonah), Haines, Juneau, Tracy Arm/Endicott Arm Wrangell, Misty Fjords, Ketchikan, Metlakatla, all in

Alaska, plus Prince Rupert and Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. While guests on larger ships typically transfer to tour boats to cruise Misty Fjords and Kenai Fjords, Windstar's guests enjoy a front-row seat from their own suite or a public space perch.

Top digs on the motorized yachts are two 575-square-foot Owner's Suites (OW category) with a private veranda, separate living room and dining area, bedrooms with queen bed, full master bath with granite countertop, tub and shower, plus a separate powder room. While that category showed "call for availability" at press time, space was available in the next high-end category, Classic Suite



WINDSTAR'S *Star Pride* (above) is seen in Mayreau, the smallest inhabited island of the Grenadines. The ship will sail a 14-day Caribbean itinerary in early 2019.

SEADREAM guests visiting Taormina, Sicily will be enchanted by the picturesque Mount Etna towering behind the Greek Theater ruins.



Photo by Getty Images / Sergidid

(CS category); forward-facing CS accommodations are 400 square feet while mid-ship CS suites have more space. All suites pamper guests with luxurious linens, waffle-weave robes and slippers, a flat-screen TV with DVD player, minibar / refrigerator, safe, L'Occitane bath amenities, fresh flowers and more.

In early 2019, *Star Pride* sails a 14-day "Star Collector: Comprehensive Lesser Antilles" voyage, a Caribbean itinerary roundtrip from Bridgetown, Barbados. Calls include Bequia, Saint Vincent & The Grenadines; Castries and Pigeon Island, St. Lucia; Basseterre, St. Kitts; Gustavia, St. Barthelemy; Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands; San Juan and Vieques, Puerto Rico; Philipsburg, St. Maarten; Little Bay, Montserrat; Roseau, Dominica; St. George's, Grenada; and Les Saintes, Guadeloupe.

One highlight for shopping enthusiasts is St. Barthelemy, home to many boutiques and designer branded shops. We'd browse the casually elegant, Bohemian-chic dresses, blouses and kaftans at Vanita Rose on Gustavia's Rue Oscar II. Parisien model Valerie Bourdin started this fashion line on St. Barths in the early 2000s. For cruisers



who love high-quality clothes in vibrant colors, textures of silk, linen, cashmere or Calais lace and unusual prints, it's definitely worth a look around.

Bigger Space, Pampering Style

Certainly at the upper end, size-wise, for a "yachting" vessel but with elements of that experience is **Silversea Cruises'** luxurious 296-passenger *Silver Wind*. It offers a relaxed ambiance with the space / amenities afforded by a bit larger vessel. Sister *Silver Cloud* became an expedition ship last fall after a multimillion-dollar refit and the addition of an ice-strengthened hull, but *Silver Wind* continues to sail for the line's classic fleet and was refurbished in 2017.

What's special itinerary-wise? Certainly, many luxury travel-

ers love London, and a series of *Silver Wind* voyages in summer 2019 depart directly from London's Tower Bridge, a major plus for travelers who don't want to make the trek to / from Dover or Southampton, where the larger ships must dock. The luxury ship operates both one-way voyages between Tower Bridge and Copenhagen, Denmark or Reykjavik, Iceland, or roundtrips from the bridge.

On May 16, *Silver Wind* departs from Tower Bridge to St. Mary's, Isle of Scilly; Waterford and Dublin, Ireland; Belfast, Northern Ireland; Tobermory, Isle of Mull (think dolphins and sea eagles); Stornoway, Isle of Lewis; Lerwick, Shetland Islands; Kirkwall, Orkney Islands; Invergordon; and Leith (Edinburgh), all in Scotland. At Invergordon, cruisers can choose

from many Silversea tours including "Loch Ness and Urquhart Castle," a distillery outing or a more lofty outing, "Tea with the Chief at Foulis Castle," in which cruisers will meet Hector Munro of Foulis, the 33rd hereditary Clan Chief, or another family member. They'll tour the castle, enjoy tea and refreshments and hear stories about the castle and the clan's history.

Silver Wind's Owner's Suite is a stylish 587-square-foot (including private veranda) one-bedroom apartment with separate living area, dining area, writing desk with personalized stationery and flat-screen TVs in both the living and bedroom areas. The master bedroom's queen bed is convertible to two twins and outfitted with Pratesi bed linens, down duvet covers and a choice of pillows. We'd opt for Suite 737, if travelers desire a marbled bathroom with full-sized whirlpool tub and separate shower; Suite 734 has the marble but a tub / shower combination. With the addition of the adjacent Vista Suite, with a separate living area, bedroom and bath, guests can also create a two-bedroom, 827 square feet (including private veranda) Owner's Suite complex.

One savory Owner's Suite perk is an included dinner for two, one evening per voyage in La Dame, the line's Relais et Chateaux restaurant. Other suite perks also include a Bang & Olufsen audio system; radio / alarm with iPod docking station; Illy Espresso machine; a refrigerator and bar setup; robes and slippers; European bath amenities; free Wi-Fi; laundry service; afternoon canapés and much more.

Whether travelers prefer a traditional luxury small-ship experience, a casual yachting product or a pampering expedition focus, the boutique ship approach is on a growth track. Increasingly, luxury at sea comes in many packages. ■

EXOTIC YACHTING

Upscale travelers can expect luxurious, all-suite accommodations on **Celebrity Cruises'** new Galapagos ship, the 100-passenger *Celebrity Flora*, sailing year-round from Baltra, starting May 26, 2019. Look for new dining venues, an open-air stargazing platform, a marina accommodating three Zodiacs simultaneously, and The Vista, an open-air hideaway with 360-degree views, cocoon-style loungers and private cabanas. Top digs? Two spacious Penthouse Suites have separate indoor and outdoor living areas, customizable lighting and shades, and a telescope for stargazing or sea lion-peeping.

In addition, **Tauck** has added **Silversea Cruises'** *Silver Galapagos* to its global portfolio of luxury voyages, while **Pandaw's** oceango-

ing *Andaman Explorer*, a classic 1960s motor yacht lovingly restored / refurbished by the line's founders, Paul and Roser Strachan, is adding a second Mergui archipelago option; its new, 10-night "Burma Coastal Voyage" option departs from Yangon on November 5 and November 18, and, early next year, January 5 and January 18.

Launching in 2020 is the first of three new 126-passenger polar vessels for **Lindblad Expeditions-National Geographic**. With a cutting-edge design, the sleek ship will offer a main restaurant, outdoor barbecue, bistro area, multiple observation decks inside and outside, new "observation wings," a spa / fitness area and two infinity whirlpools. Expect private balconies for 75 percent of accommodations.

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BY MATT TURNER

ISLA PARTIDA, located in the Sea of Cortez, is full of marine life and ideal for water sports enthusiasts.



BAHIA BONANZA, the largest beach on Isla Espiritu Santo, is a great place for hiking, kayaking, paddleboarding, and the occasional sighting of wildlife, such as mobula rays.

Looking to get in ship shape? **Lindblad Expeditions** and **National Geographic** debuted its new Base Camp Baja voyage in partnership with lifestyle brand Exhale this winter and we were able to experience the itinerary firsthand.

The new departures were a series of three- and four-day journeys in the Sea of Cortez, exploring Isla Espiritu Santo, Isla Partida and more. Sailings were aboard the 31-cabin *National Geographic Sea Bird*, and included activities such as guided hikes, snorkeling, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding, beach barbecues and bonfires, photography classes — and plenty of yoga.

Life Onboard: The approximately 60 passengers all met at Los Cabos International Airport; from there we were transported to La Paz via two coach buses. There were no children onboard, but passengers ranged from Millennials to Baby Boomers, with roughly an even mix of all generations. The trip takes a little over two hours, for which most of the travelers slept or enjoyed the views.

When we arrived at the boat, our luggage was brought to our cabins, which — being aboard an expedition ship — were rather small. The standard room setup has two beds,

aligned like an L, meeting at the feet, with the bathroom's sink and vanity located in the living space; the bathrooms themselves were just large enough to fit the essentials — a toilet and a shower. Storage in the room was more than sufficient despite the small space.

Good to know: Four of the 31 cabins — all located in the aft on the 200 Deck — can have their beds pushed together, with space for a third pull-out bed. However, with so many events planned each day, guests rarely spent more than the minimal amount of time in their cabins, so the size never proved to be a hindrance to the experience.

Rooms on the 200 and 100 level were accessed through an exterior walkway, which — although not wide enough for chairs or tables to be set up outside the room — provided the impression of having a balcony. With that said, the bow (located on the 200 level) had an observation deck with built-in benches, and the aft on the 100 level had a sun deck with plenty of chairs, loungers and tables. Both locations were the main hangout spots for guests at all hours of the day.

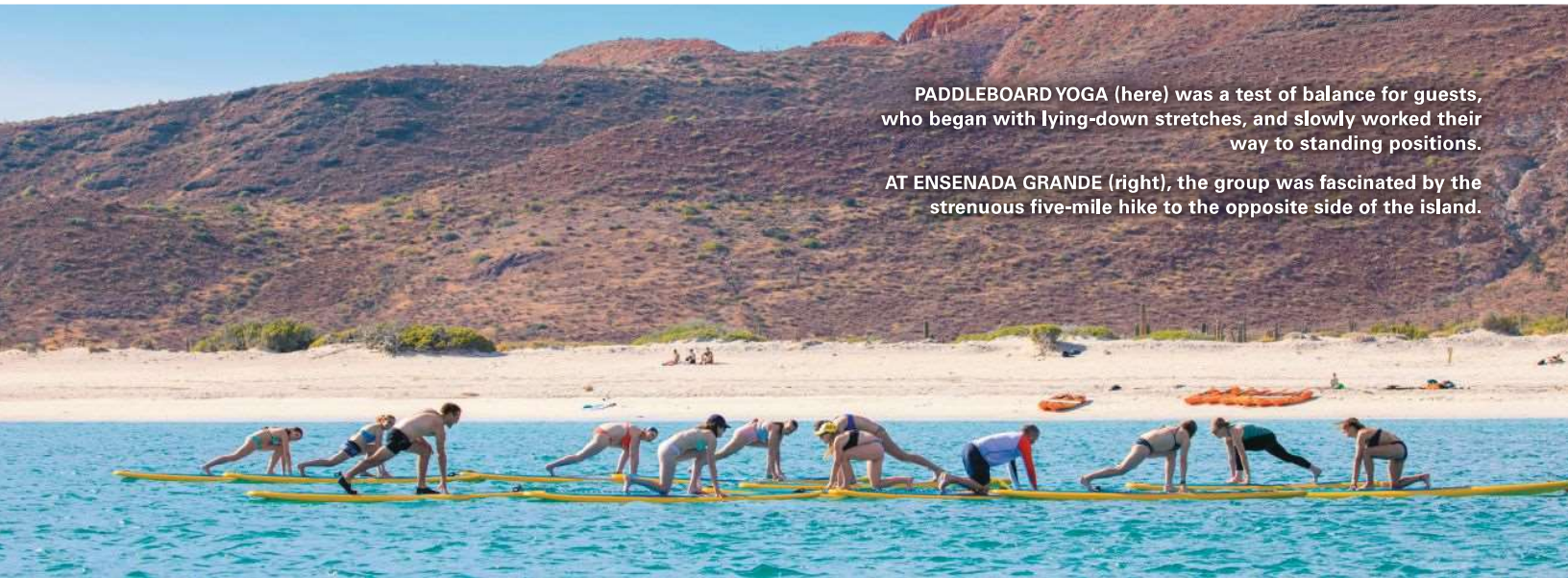
On the 300 level, which was entirely indoors, were several more cabins, the dining room and the lounge, where almost all guests,

expedition team members and off-duty staff spent time together after dinner for drinks. The first night included a cocktail hour in the lounge, followed by a dinner in the dining room. We noted that many of the guests weren't out too late in the lounge — perhaps due to the long day of traveling. That would change the following nights.

In some spots on the voyage, guests received cellphone service, but for those who needed Wi-Fi, two packages were available: \$50 for 120 minutes and \$200 for unlimited. Most guests enjoyed being “unplugged,” and only carried their phones for the camera.

Activities and Excursions: The itinerary didn't vary too far from a typical Lindblad / National Geographic excursion. Our expedition was led by Rab Cummings, and his staff included Adrian Cerda, Linda Burbach and Jeff Litton.

On the first full day (the second day onboard) of our four-day itinerary, we awoke in Ensenada Grande, a bay on Isla Partida. This bay, among several others along our voyage, was the center of the Sea of Cortez pearl fishery, which was functioning even before the Spaniards arrived in the 1500s. There were several excursions on tap for the day, but



PADDLEBOARD YOGA (here) was a test of balance for guests, who began with lying-down stretches, and slowly worked their way to standing positions.

AT ENSENADA GRANDE (right), the group was fascinated by the strenuous five-mile hike to the opposite side of the island.

most guests were intrigued — impressively enough — with the strenuous five-mile hike to the opposite side of the island.

Guests were warned that the hike would include climbing over boulders, which ranged in size from microwaves to refrigerators, and that if 10 people go on the hike, two or three may decide to turn back. With that said, nearly half of the boat set out on the hike. In the end, the hike didn't prove to be too challenging for anyone (despite varying levels of fitness among the hikers), and everyone made it to the end: a 400-foot-high cliff on the eastern side of the island, looking over clear-blue waters shimmering in the sun. The only thing we loved more than the view were the several minutes the entire group took to sit in silence, reflect and enjoy the moment. The photographs we took were certainly Instagram-worthy, but the mental photos were even more precious. In total, the hike took between two and three hours.

After lunch onboard, the group was back out on the water for more activities; this time for snorkeling, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding or simply relaxing on the beach. Lindblad provides all snorkel gear, but several travelers who had their own, brought it. Peak season in the Sea of Cortez is January through April, and although it's Mexico, the water was roughly 70 degrees, which is colder than you might imagine. Your go-to bathing suit may be fine for relaxing on the beach, but it may be a good idea to consider bringing a longer suit, especially if you know you get cold easily. In the water, a variety of fish, sea stars, clams, crabs and more were abundant.

Following snorkeling, we took a shot at stand-up paddleboarding — a first for us.

The good news is we didn't fall and that we would definitely recommend / do it again. The less-good news is it's pretty exhausting, having to focus on your balance at all times.

The third day — our second and final full day — began with a short trip from Isla Partida to Los Islotes, a group of tiny volcanic islands further north. This morning was, for most guests, the absolute best part of the trip and something every guest should sign up for. Right after breakfast, we set out in groups for snorkeling with adolescent sea lions. Dozens of California sea lions were relaxing and playing on the rocks. While the adults spend most of their time sleeping, the younger sea lions are apt to come play in the water. All you need to do is float in the water with your mask looking below you and sea lions will approach you — they're very curious animals. Some of the smaller ones, which weigh around 80 pounds, came up to us and played with buoys we had and some even bit at the floating straps from our life vests and flippers. Others tossed rocks to each other in the water. Their disposition was very similar to a dog's. It was an unreal experience. Several larger-than-human sea lions swam by, but they paid us no mind.

Top Tip: Bring a waterproof camera or case for your camera / phone. A photo of a large-eyed adolescent sea lion swimming below you is hard to beat.

During lunch on the ship, we traveled back south to Isla Espiritu Santo. We stopped just off of Bahia Bonanza, the largest beach on the island, where guests had the option of another five-mile hike (although much flatter and easier than the previous day's), kayaking, paddleboarding or just enjoying the beach. This afternoon most couples or small groups went their own way

and spent more time relaxing after a day and a half of pretty intense activities.

Wellness Options: Wellness activities were in partnership with Exhale Spa, "a well-being destination," according to its website. It offers barre, cardio, yoga and HIIT classes, as well as massages, facials, acupuncture and more. Our instructor was John Nelson. He led yoga sessions every morning on the sun deck. Classes began in the dark and ended with the sun in the sky. We're not early-risers but the ship-wide 6:15 a.m. wakeup announcement was more than enough to get us up and ready for yoga at 6:30 a.m. (If you so choose, you can turn off your speaker.) For those who haven't tried yoga, we suggest packing anything you would normally go to the gym in. It can be cool in the morning, but the sun and stretching will start to warm you up. We loved that the sun deck was filled with travelers opting for sunrise yoga — many of whom were far from yogis, some never having even done yoga before. There were plenty of great bonding experiences during the voyage, but something about exerting yourself that early with a bunch of other people who are also a bit out of their comfort zones was one of the best.

In the afternoon on the second day, guests had the chance to do barre yoga before dinner. This was definitely more difficult than the morning as it incorporated two- to three-pound hand weights. Nonetheless, it was a great opportunity to stretch and unwind after the day's activities before hitting the shower, and then dinner. On the third day, we had options of two different yoga sessions — beach yoga or paddleboard yoga. We, unfortunately, did not partake in the latter. There were only 12 paddleboards, and the class filled up almost instantly. To adjust to the paddleboard and the



uneven surface, the group began with lying-down stretches, and slowly worked their way to standing positions. The fear of falling in the water was an exciting element, we were told, but nonetheless most of the group still took a dip — on purpose or not. Beach yoga had most of the usual suspects back at it.

Yoga classes lasted about 45 minutes to an hour. Maybe it was just in our minds, but we could've sworn we got better by the end of the voyage, despite the short time onboard.

Lindblad also had two of their own wellness specialists onboard, Michelle Brugiere and Amy Sobesky. Massages, and body, facial, hand and foot treatments are all available. You can sign up for treatments once you're on board. Additionally, available on the sun deck is a small selection of exercise equipment, including yoga mats, exercise bands, light hand weights, stationary bikes and more.

Food and Beverage: Dining options were largely the same as standard Baja voyages. The good news is the offerings already include healthy choices such as a salad bar and vegetarian options with each meal. Lindblad locally sourced as many ingredients as it could. These included local produce and sustainably caught

fish. We were told by Hotel Manager Lindsey Murad that several farmers outside of Los Cabos always come to meet the Lindblad / National Geographic team with their latest harvests, and that the ship is stocked with items mostly from their farms.

At Ensenada Grande, we were treated to a beach barbecue and bonfire. Options included salad, rice and beans, barbecue chicken, salmon and more. Mexican beer and margaritas were served with dinner. Seats were arranged in a semicircle facing the bonfire with the bay as the backdrop. Tip: On our way back to the *Sea Bird* from the beach, our expedition leaders would turn off the Zodiacs and all the lights, so we could experience the bioluminescent phytoplankton. With the motor turned off, they let us get on our knees, hang over the side and drag our arms through the water, as the wake created glowing waves.

The final night was the only meal that wasn't served buffet style. Guests have to sign up during the day for the meal of their choice. Local wines were served with dinner. All of the food was great; however, our favorite was a skirt steak with chimichurri sauce we had for lunch the first day.

Guests on our voyage were treated to an open bar but we're told this isn't standard. Expect this to not be offered on voyages through the 2018-19 seasons. Joe, our bartender, made fantastic drinks and set a great mood for all the guests.

What We Loved: Simply, everything. However, we especially loved the availability and the genuine enthusiasm of the expedition staff. Whatever your question was, the staff was able to answer. And on the rare occasion that they weren't, they would check the library, located in the lounge, and take the time to look it up with you.

What to Pack: We had fantastic weather, averaging in the 80s, with almost entirely clear skies. Casual clothing such as shorts, jeans and T-shirts are great for time onboard or hiking, if you're comfortable doing so. Walking / hiking shoes are a must for those planning to partake in the hikes; backpacks — especially those with straps across your torso — are also great for hikes to hold water bottles, sunscreen, cameras and more. A bathing suit or two is also a good idea. Hats, whether baseball caps or sun hats, are recommended, as most of the days are spent off the boat in direct sunlight. Be sure to bring sunglasses and sunscreen. Binoculars aren't necessary as they're supplied onboard but cameras, GoPros and waterproof cases are definitely worth bringing along. Sandals are another good footwear option for transportation on the Zodiacs, spending time on the beach and kayaking.

Keep an eye out for additional wellness voyages in 2019. Lindblad tells us they are continually identifying opportunities to make wellness a larger part of the expedition experience. Next season, Lindblad Expeditions / National Geographic will offer five Base Camp Baja departures, all of which will be four days / five nights. However, from the sound of it, there may be a few other destinations to receive the wellness overhaul. ■



SNORKELING with sea lions (here and right) was one of the highlights of the Lindblad Expeditions and National Geographic voyage.



COVER STORY

APRIL SCHMITT, seen here with her dogs Stella Luna, left, and Scarlett O'Hara, says the desire to completely control her business was a major factor in opening her own agency.



Photo by True Love Photo

Divine Designs

April Schmitt serves up unique romance travel opportunities in style.

BY MATT TURNER

A week after resigning from her career in the investment industry to stay at home with her young son, April Schmitt, CEO of Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons, found herself looking for home-based businesses for sale. As a self-described Type-A personality, Schmitt couldn't just sit around the house all day while her son napped. Despite no experience in the industry, she purchased a travel agency.

Schmitt set a sales goal of \$50,000 for the first year, but after attending one bridal show, she reached \$300,000 in sales within the first three months. Her original plan was to find a hobby to work on at home, and wait until her son had grown to open a storefront near her home in Granite Bay, CA. Schmitt knew immediately that she couldn't wait that long before turning it into a full-time job.

"I didn't tell my husband yet, but I thought, 'This is going to be a real thing. This is going to be my business,'" she says.

Schmitt maintained her relationship with the original agency from 2005 through 2011. In January 2012, she opened her own fully independent agency — Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons. Schmitt tells us a major factor in opening her own agency was the desire to "completely control" her own business. "I wanted to determine what my goals and business model should be without restrictions," she says. "Which suppliers I sold, and how I handle my clients should be up to me."

In six years, Schmitt's agency has accumulated several impressive accolades. It has ranked No. 1 in Classic Vacations' group sales three times, is a member of The Knot's Hall of Fame and ranks among the top performers for WeddingWire. To boot, the agency, which comprises Schmitt, nine independent contractors and two management employees, has an annual volume of business of \$4.3 million. On top of her management responsibilities, Schmitt still pulls in about \$1.8 million per year in sales.

Schmitt tells *Luxury Travel Advisor* she chose the name Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons when she was still considering selling travel as a part-time job; she hadn't

seen any other advertising for destination weddings in 2005.

"When I got started, I thought, 'Oh well, that seems like something I could focus on, that's small, that's not going to take over my life, and that's what I'm going to advertise for,'" she recalls.

Her wedding and honeymoon clients are in their 30s and 40s, but are located all over the U.S. We're told that Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons has even planned high-profile weddings for several celebrities and professional athletes, many of whom continue to book travel through the agency. "I have been told that celebrities feel comfortable with me because I don't treat them any different than my other clients, and I understand and respect their desire for privacy," Schmitt says.

"My first-ever destination wedding happened to be for a bride that married into a very high-profile family," Schmitt tells us. "The guest list consisted of several celebrities. I retained a few of them as on-going clients, and have had several referrals from them." She even received a call from a pro baseball player's business manager, who told her she came at the recommendation of Tahiti Tourism. She coordinated his wedding group to Bora Bora and formed more relationships from that guest list.

This became a common trend for Schmitt. Through planning destination weddings, Schmitt gets access to a whole spectrum of travelers — from the 85-year-old grandmother down to the five-year-old niece. Schmitt says the name was never prohibitive of the type

of travel she sold, since the real thing she was pitching to clients was neither weddings nor honeymoons — it was herself. She adds that for most of the agency's existence group travel and her FIT business grew at a near-equal pace but recently FIT has actually surpassed group travel. Currently, Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons sells 58 percent FIT and 42 percent group travel. There's still plenty happening in the weddings sector, however.

While destinations like Mexico, the Caribbean, Hawaii and South Pacific remain strong options, Schmitt is seeing some transition to new destinations. Italy and Greece — as expected — continue to grow in

DIVINE DESTINATION WEDDINGS & HONEYMOONS

Headquarters: Granite Bay, CA

Top Executive: April Schmitt, CEO

Number of Agents: Nine independent contractors

Annual Volume of Business: \$4.3 million

Affiliations: Signature Travel Network

Advisory Board Positions: Signature Hotel Committee, Classic Vacations Groups Advisory Committee

Website: www.divinedestinationweddings.com

COVER STORY

popularity, but a destination Schmitt is really excited about is Ireland due to its beautiful castles and green fields. “Who wouldn’t want to get married in a castle?” she asks.

“Its proximity to the U.S. makes it an easy destination for flights — and the dramatic coastlines, beautiful landscapes, culture and historical relevance make it very attractive,” she adds. To learn more about the country, she will be spending two weeks there with her family this July. Other destinations she is bullish on are India, Bhutan, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Arctic.

Schmitt is also in the process of working with several luxury hotels in Mexico and Hawaii to create exclusive wedding packages for Divine Destination Weddings clients.

“Many luxury hotels and non-all-inclusive hotels offer a wedding package that leaves a lot of the pricing wide open,” Schmitt notes. “The hotel believes they are leaving the packages open for customization, but they are often too vague for the couple to really get a true cost of the final wedding. Couples like to know that they can afford the wedding they desire at the hotel they love. If there is any doubt, they will change hotels before they compromise their wedding wish list.”

For example, Schmitt says, a package may be listed at \$3,000++ with F&B minimums but doesn’t include all the components that a couple needs for a wedding. “The couple has to hope and pray that they can afford all the extras: décor, linens, centerpieces, photography, aisle runner, music, microphone and flowers,” she says. “The couple would rather see the package cost \$18,000 inclusive of the extras.

“We are working together to create these more inclusive packages that will help couples see a truer final cost and big picture — but they will still have freedom to make changes and to customize.”

Not only are wedding destinations changing, but what couples are asking for is also changing, according to Schmitt. While several traditions remain strong, such as the ceremony or a reception with dancing, many couples are looking for “something unique” to do the night prior to the wedding — such as catamaran charters, private tequila tastings or, in Mexico, taking the group to a temazcal to get cleansed by a shaman “and have this

MATT AND APRIL SCHMITT at the Montage. Experiencing destinations firsthand is also of utmost importance for the owner of Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons.



bonding experience together, that’s more spiritual,” as Schmitt explains.

This isn’t to say all weddings follow the same blueprint; some clients are asking for non-traditional ceremonies, as well. Schmitt tells us of a wedding she recently worked on where the groom was Jewish and the bride was “spiritual,” so he brought a rabbi and she brought her yogini to split the ceremony for both beliefs.

With destination weddings and honeymoons making up roughly half of her business, Schmitt says that Zika did pose some problems for her agency. In most instances, Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons was able to reroute the wedding to avoid certain delimitations if someone in the wedding party was pregnant or planning to be by the time of the wedding. There were a few cancellations, but Schmitt notes Zika had “a very minimal impact” on business.

Not Just Weddings

In 2017, Schmitt had set several goals for her business. The first was to increase her planning fees, which now range from \$50 to \$500 based on the group size and complexity of the itinerary. As she only has ICs, she couldn’t force any of them to add fees but strongly suggested it. “Our consultants are now successfully collecting those fees and strengthening their businesses,” Schmitt tells us. By charging fees, Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons is able to vet potential clients based on how serious they are — thus eliminating price shoppers.

“You want clients that value your planning and your expertise, so I’m a huge proponent of charging fees,” Schmitt says, adding that she must speak with clients on the phone before deciding to do business with them. “It’s a personality check,” she says. “I don’t take on all clients. I take on the clients that I feel I can add value to, and that value my services, have realistic expectations for travel and hear what I’m saying. There has to be a connection that this is going to be a successful relationship — even if I have to work really, really hard for it, I’m okay with that.”

Another goal of Schmitt’s was to see growth in FIT business, including safaris, private-driver vacations, river cruises and Signature hotel bookings. Schmitt tells *Luxury Travel Advisor* she gives plenty of credit in achieving this to Signature’s marketing platform, which she describes as “very focused, very targeted.”

Part of Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons is Travel by Divine, which Schmitt started four years ago. “We call that the after-the-wedding plan,” she says.

Once guests travel under Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons, the marketing converts to Travel by Divine. Because it’s the same faces and same umbrella, as Schmitt says, clients are comfortable making the branding switch. Currently, they both operate on the same Divine Destination Weddings & Honeymoons website, but Schmitt has her fingers crossed that she can get Travel by Divine operating on its own site by summer.

Schmitt tells us she recently completed a six-week itinerary through Europe, which ended up as a much different vacation than the one proposed to her by her clients — 60-year-old high-school sweethearts who recently reunited and are celebrating their one-year anniversary. The plan was to visit several European capitals, spend a week in each, and rent apartments where he could cook for her to save some money.

“I could see that was not at all the kind of trip that she envisioned,” Schmitt tells us.

“Part of the job is working as a mediator between two people with different ideas that love each other and bringing them together to agree on the same type of trip where each of them can have a bit of what they want and overall have the perfect experience together,” she adds.

After Schmitt’s input, the couple decided to abandon their plan almost entirely. Instead of apartments, they are now staying in four- and five-star hotels, and instead of a week in each capital, they will be doing more moving. The itinerary currently includes a stop in Paris, followed by a Viking River Cruise through France before a flight to Italy, where they will be visiting Florence, Siena, Rome and Sorrento. Stays in Athens and Santorini conclude the trip.

“They did come up in their budget quite a bit, but after showing them, ‘This is what you’re asking me for and this is what you’re telling me you want,’ and showing them the differences, they both came back and said, ‘Yes, what you’re showing us is what we want,’” she says.

Schmitt does have a bit of a secret when it comes to her clients — television, and, in particular, reality television. (Promise not to tell anyone.)

We’re told that she recently booked a \$26,000 vacation for a mother and daughter who wanted to tour “Game of Thrones” destinations in Ireland and Scotland. Schmitt wasn’t familiar with some of the destinations, so she had to rely on the knowledge of her destination specialists to guide her. In some instances, some of the suppliers weren’t sure of how to meet all the requirements, but they reached out to Schmitt as she said they would figure it out. (“I don’t like brick walls unless everything else has been knocked down first,” Schmitt tells us.)

Other shows that Schmitt, let’s say, does her “research” on are “The Bachelor,” “The Real Housewives,” “Survivor” and “Keeping

Up With the Kardashians.” When “The Bachelor” showed an engagement in Tahiti and filmed in Costa Rica, Schmitt points out it was a boost to the economies and for business to the destinations. When “The Real Housewives” filmed at Grand Velas, Schmitt had a booking directly because of the episode. And when “Survivor” filmed in Fiji, she had clients come to her asking, “What is it like? Does the water really look like that?”

Recently, U by Uniworld made an appearance on “The Bachelor.” Schmitt’s agency immediately began to strategize a social media and marketing plan to bring attention to the product. “I was thrilled to see the U by Uniworld on ‘The Bachelor,’” she says. “It is a fun, new product that was needed in this space. It will absolutely help close sales to the younger-than-45 demographic.”

Staying up to date on pop culture is more than just booking topical trips for clients; it’s about building a relationship with them, as well. “Sometimes people will ask for these destinations without saying where they saw it, and then if I say, ‘Oh yeah, well ‘The Bachelor’ just filmed there, did you watch that episode?’ Oftentimes, the client admits that’s where the idea came from, and it gives Schmitt and her client something to bond over.

Experiencing destinations firsthand is also of utmost importance for Schmitt. “I cannot imagine trying to sell the world having not experienced it myself,” she notes. Each year, she tries to visit a couple of new destinations. Most travel, including to new destinations, are self-guided educational trips that she puts together. Last year, Schmitt took her team to Fiji; the year before it was Saint Lucia. This year, the team trip will be to Hawaii, while other short trips include Mexico, Dominican Republic, Italy and Spain where the team will pack in as many hotel visits as they can, just to stay up to date.

“We can fit in six to nine hotels in one day,” Schmitt tells *Luxury Travel Advisor*. “We don’t mess around when we do an educational — there is no beach time, no feet in the sand; it is go down, get serious business done, come home and sell.”

She is also always on the lookout for new advisors to add but tells us growing in size isn’t extremely important to her.

“I am quite picky when it comes to working with people and expanding the company because our standards and our service goals are so high,” she says, noting service goals —

not sales goals — are the most important. “If I met a few amazing consultants, and that everything lined up with our business practice, then I would consider bringing on a few more high-quality people. But I would rather be small and mighty than large and average.”

Having control over her business is something that Schmitt is very proud of. “Being in travel is an amazing career but running my own business has been truly fulfilling,” she says.

“I was in the corporate world for a long time — in a man’s world in brokerage and investments, and when I left that world I thought: No. 1, I never want to work for somebody else, No. 2, I always want to choose who I work with, and No. 3, I’m never going to wear pantyhose again.”

That isn’t to say she takes her industry for granted. “I feel like a treasure hunter,” Schmitt says. “I wake up every day wondering what new discovery I can uncover. I am inspired when I learn something new, something special that can really make the client experience more memorable.” ■

APRIL SCHMITT: “You want clients that value your planning and your expertise, so I’m a huge proponent of charging fees.”



Photo by True Love Photo

THE PULSE

HOT LEADS



VISTA PALAZZO LAGO DI COMO is the result of a gut renovation of a 19th-century lakeside palazzo. Shown here and below are renderings of the rooms in the hotel.

New Lake Como Vistas

Opening just in time for your first extravagant summer getaway is **Vista Palazzo Lago di Como**. Slated to debut in June, the hotel will be the fourth from the family-owned-and-operated Italian hotel brand Lario Hotels.

The new project — born of a gut renovation of a 19th-century lakeside Venetian-style palazzo and located in the city of Como itself — will have 18 rooms and suites, each with large, Italian marble bathrooms with soaking tubs and separate showers.

As the name implies, the hotel will have views of the lake throughout — the best of which will be from the guests-only rooftop restaurant, bar and library.



At the 22-seat Sottovoce restaurant, the chef will serve traditional local cuisine; the bar will have an outdoor space, perfect for enjoying a prosecco or regional wine at sunset. For a quieter soiree, reserve a private chef to prepare dinner in your suite.

Guests get a personal concierge who can book the private dinners, as well as advise you on all the top cultural and social events, organize private visits to museums, book a table at Como's most requested restaurants and more. We say a visit to Como isn't complete without a tour of the lake from a Riva boat, so make sure you plan one with the concierge. For a twist, opt for a seaplane tour of the region. Just ask.

Vista Palazzo Lago di Como will become one of six hotels on Lake Como to remain open year-round. During the off-season, there are fewer tourists, but many lakeside hamlets remain open. For guests who are interested, several ski resorts are located within two hours of the resort, which can be reached by public and private transportation. Good to know: Milan is also a short, 30-minute train ride away.

For VIP requests, contact Managing Director Christina Zucchi (christinazucchi@lariohotels.com).

—Matt Turner

The Dominick Hotel, located in SoHo, New York, has named Dant Hirsch (dhirsch@thedominick.com) as its new general manager. The 15-year industry vet joins the New York hotel after time with COMO Hotels & Resorts in Florida and Turks & Caicos. Hirsch has also worked for both Ritz-Carlton and St. Regis, opening hotels for each, and Faena Miami Beach, which earned a Forbes five-star rating in its first year.

The Knickerbocker Hotel has appointed Karim Abdelhamid (kabdelhamid@theknickerbocker.com) as its new hotel manager. He began his career with the Plaza Hotel before holding executive roles in Egypt, Philadelphia and Qatar. Most recently, Abdelhamid served as resort manager of the Westin Savannah Harbor Golf Resort & Spa.

Sofia L. Vandaele (sofia.vandaele@ihg.com), a 20-year hospitality veteran, returns to New York, to take over the role of general manager of the **InterContinental New York Barclay** after a four-year stint in Paris, where she held the same title at the four-star Hilton Paris Opera. Here, Vandaele led its multimillion-dollar renovation and reposition. Her previous New York experience includes time as the GM at several W hotels, including W New York - Downtown.

The Lodge at Feline Fields

The much buzzed-about **Lodge at Feline Fields** in Botswana has just introduced its new luxury mobile camp in Mababe Marshes (located in the Khwai Community Concession). Up to eight guests are whisked away via helicopter to the camp, where they can explore the Okavango Delta by Mokoro canoe with a picnic in tow or venture to Chobe National Park. The camp itself, available year-round, is situated near the Khwai River, which is the only source of water for miles, and provides excellent game-viewing opportunities. Possible encounters include leopard, elephant, lion, buffalo, zebra, hyena, cheetah, wild dog, giraffe and hippo. Guests will embark on twice-daily game drives.

At the mobile camp, guests will have all the comforts. Tents include private en-suite bathrooms with a flushing toilet, copper basin and shower; while a waiter, chef, cleaner and host are at guests' disposal.



TENTED SUITES at The Lodge are positioned near one of the waterholes allowing guests to enjoy animal action, especially at night.

A stay at the mobile camp is combined with a stay at The Lodge itself, where there is a more relaxed atmosphere. Here, there are just six suites, and guests can opt for excursions such as sunrise safaris, hikes or bike rides through the Kalahari with experienced guides, visits to a Bushman village and more.

Good to know: There is an 80-foot lap pool, and outdoor spa treatments are available.

French cuisine is served daily, inspired by the French influences of The Lodge owners. For enquiries, contact founder Marjan Blom (info@felinefields.com). She manages all reservations. —Matt Turner

Photo courtesy of The Lodge at Feline Fields

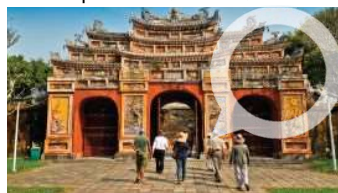


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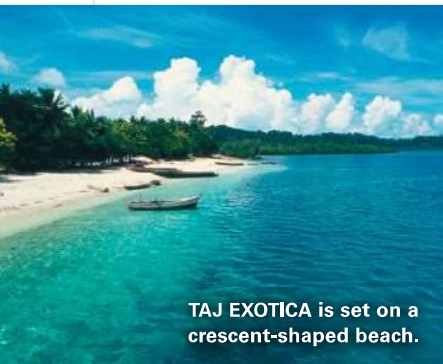


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Taj Exotica Opens in India

We know you've been keeping tabs on this one: **Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Andamans** has made its much-awaited debut on India's Havelock Island.



TAJ EXOTICA is set on a crescent-shaped beach.

Beyond the lobby, guests will find the crescent-shaped Radhanagar Beach and a 164-foot-long infinity pool. Fun Fact: Taj has set up an onsite bottling plant eliminating the use of plastic bottles, a waste disposal system, converting wet waste to gas and compost, and a sanitation treatment plant to limit its carbon footprint. Developers didn't remove a single tree during the construction of the 72 villas.

An in-house naturalist is available to help guests of the island with experiences such as snorkeling, scuba diving and night kayaking. What makes

night kayaking so appealing? The mangroves are filled with bioluminescence-phytoplankton.

Dining options include The Settlers, serving dishes inspired by the settlers who've made the Andamans their home; Shoreline, offering coastal curries from the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal; and The Turtle House, dishing Indian, Italian and Mediterranean cuisine.

The spa opens in April with three single and three double treatment rooms with Ayurveda, Indian therapies, body rituals, facials and meditation. The Soundarya Beauty treatment

includes a scrub and wrap, an aromatherapy massage, an hour-long facial and a mani / pedi.

Taj Exotica is open year-round but we hear that September to March is the best time to visit for outdoor activities; the other months get tropical rains.

Getting There: Fly in to Port Blair's Veer Savarkar International Airport. The flight is followed by a two-and-a-half hour ferry ride to the island and then a 30-minute drive to the resort. For unique requests, contact Ashish Dattani (ashish.dattani@tajhotels.com), director of sales. —Matt Turner



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Hotel Hassler Roma

This year, the iconic **Hotel Hassler Roma**, located atop the Spanish Steps, celebrates its 125th anniversary. In an effort to maintain “a perfect balance between the past, present and future,” according to the hotel, it has undergone several renovations to its public spaces, guestrooms and suites — all of which were personally overseen by President and General Manager Roberto E. Wirth, a fifth-generation Swiss hotelier.

After a three-week closure in January, Hassler Roma has debuted its updated Presidential Suite San Pietro, which received latest furniture and fabrics while maintaining much of its original style. The bed was shifted, so now guests can view the whole suite

without having to get up.

The property reduced the number of rooms from 92 to 91 but created eight suites (there were 13; now 21). The updated suites have elegant living rooms and bedrooms with walk-in closets and marble bathrooms.

Refurbished public spaces include the entrance and lobby, where new Botticino marble flooring and upholstery has been added. The concierge and reception desks also received a new look, now finished in brown with golden foil decorations. Salone Eva, the all-day dining bistro, and Sala Vietri, the lobby lounge / bar, received new mirrors, lighting and upholstery. The small gate at the entrance of Salone Eva, which has been part of the



hotel for over 50 years, has been gilded again with gold leaves, looking more opulent than ever.

—By Matt Turner

HOTEL HASSLER ROMA has updated its Presidential Suite San Pietro (above) and its bistro, Salone Eva (right).



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LUXURY TRAVEL ADVISOR (ISSN 2472 03180) is published monthly (12 times per year) by Questex LLC, 757 Third Avenue, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10017. Subscription rates: \$110.00 for one year, \$170.00 for two years in the United States. \$121.00 for one year, \$165.00 for two years in Canada and Mexico. All other countries \$150.00 for one year, \$210.00 for two years. Single copies (prepaid only): \$6.00 in the United States, Canada and Mexico, and in all other countries. For air-expedited service, include an additional \$75.00 per order annually. Include \$6.50 per order plus \$2.00 per additional copy for U.S. postage and handling. For current single copy of back issues on CD-Rom, call 866-344-1315. Outside the US, please phone 847-763-9594. **Periodicals postage paid** at New York, NY 10199-9651 and additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER: Please send address change to LUXURY TRAVEL ADVISOR, PO Box 1267, Skokie, IL 60076-8267.** Canadian G.S.T. number: 640033278RT0001. Publications Mail Agreement Number: 40017597. Printed in the U.S.A.

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