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A scenic view of a harbor in Bermuda. In the foreground, a wooden pier extends into the water. A woman in a white dress is walking away from the camera on the pier. A man in a dark shirt is standing on the pier, holding a red flag with a white cross. A white boat with a wooden deck and a white canopy is docked at the pier. Two people are sitting on the boat. In the background, there are colorful houses (red, yellow, blue) and a hillside with more houses and trees. The sky is blue with white clouds.

# Out Here

YOU MAY NEVER MAKE IT BACK HOME  
THE SAME.

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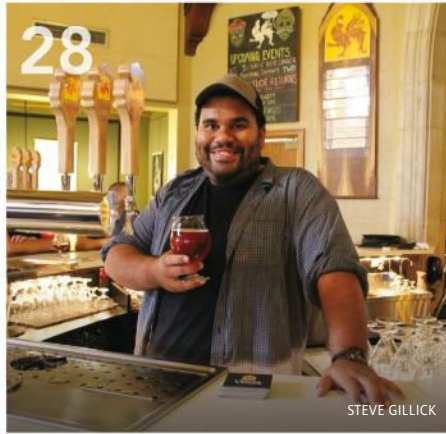


COVER: A couple waits to board a seaplane at the dock in Key West, Florida. (Courtesy of The Monroe County Tourist Development Council, The Florida Keys @ Key West)



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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We'd like to hear from you. Readers are always encouraged to submit emails to [editor@dreamscapes.ca](mailto:editor@dreamscapes.ca).

## PUBLISHING

PUBLISHER	Joseph P. Turkel
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHERS	Sandra Kitchen Valerie Saunders
EDITOR	Donna S. Vieira
EXECUTIVE EDITOR	Judi Scharf
COPY EDITOR	Anne Champagne
EDITOR-AT-LARGE	Jane Stokes
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR	Cynthia David
ART DIRECTOR	Mark Tzerelshtein
PRODUCTION MANAGER	Julia Wall
CONTROLLER	Gloria Mungo
PRESIDENT & GROUP PUBLISHER	Joseph P. Turkel

## CONTRIBUTORS

Ian Cruickshank | Cynthia David  
Steve Gillick | Larry Humber | Ilona Kauremszky  
Josephine Matyas | E. Lisa Moses | Chris Robinson  
Kat Robinson | Chris Ryall | Diane Slawych  
Jane Stokes | Donna S. Vieira | Steve Winston

## ADVERTISING SALES

### CORPORATE OFFICE

Globelite Travel Marketing Inc.  
3 Bluffwood Dr., Toronto, Ontario M2H 3L4  
Tel: 416-497-5353 or 1-888-700-4464  
Fax: 416-497-0871 | [dreamscapes.ca](http://dreamscapes.ca)  
Email: [dreamscapesmagazine@rogers.com](mailto:dreamscapesmagazine@rogers.com)

### ADVERTISING SALES REPRESENTATIVES

Jackie Boudreau | 647-668-1134  
[jackie@globelitemedia.com](mailto:jackie@globelitemedia.com)  
Collier Granberry | 408-857-3243  
[collier@globelitemedia.com](mailto:collier@globelitemedia.com)  
Vivian Hunt | 813-205-5607  
[vhuntglobelite@att.net](mailto:vhuntglobelite@att.net)  
Terry Jenkins | 865-247-7026  
[terryjenkins50@yahoo.com](mailto:terryjenkins50@yahoo.com)  
Sandra Kitchen | 1-866-600-5918  
[sandra@globelitemedia.com](mailto:sandra@globelitemedia.com)  
Bonny Mager | 954-454-6887  
[bonmlev@hotmail.com](mailto:bonmlev@hotmail.com)  
Shirley McIntosh | 416-920-2418  
[shirley@globelitemedia.com](mailto:shirley@globelitemedia.com)  
Valerie Saunders | 905-859-1372  
[val@globelitemedia.com](mailto:val@globelitemedia.com)  
Ian Scharf | 514-795-0193  
[ian@globelitemedia.com](mailto:ian@globelitemedia.com)  
Cheryl Solomon | 847-749-4875  
[csolomon@solomonspacesales.com](mailto:csolomon@solomonspacesales.com)  
Dexter Taylor | 310-545-8384  
[dexter@globelitemedia.com](mailto:dexter@globelitemedia.com)



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AS 2016 WINDS DOWN, SOME OF YOU MAY ALREADY be planning your vacations for 2017. So what are the hottest travel destinations for 2017?

My guess is Canada will be one of them as 2017 ushers in our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Confederation. You can bet every province, and especially Prince Edward Island, will be hosting a series of grand spectacles to attract visitors from far and wide to join in their celebrations. In fact, in preparation for the grand ballyhoo, 150 communities and organizations from coast to coast are each busily planting 1,000 red and white tulip bulbs in their gardens this fall so you can expect spring 2017 to be a blooming birthday card. I think it would be a great idea to continue the theme throughout the summer with red and white roses. A full list of "Celebration Gardens" across Canada can be found at [canadassgardenroute.ca](http://canadassgardenroute.ca).

So what else is happening in 2017?

Bermuda is hosting the 35<sup>th</sup> Louis Vuitton America's Cup 2017 in which the world's best sailors manoeuvre the fastest boats in a battle for the oldest trophy in international sport. Qualifying races start on May 26 and the top challenger meets the defending champions Oracle Team USA beginning June 17. And, let's face it, even if you're not an avid sailing fan, Bermuda is a pretty amazing place to visit.

Post-Brexit London is forecast to be among the most popular international destinations. With the exchange rate at a 30-year low, there are myriad deals to be had. And London's poshest neighbourhood, Mayfair, is set to experience a major renaissance. Mount Street has undergone a transformation and, with the opening of signature boutiques such as Marc Jacobs, Balenciaga, Lanvin, Simone Rocha and Sophia Webster, it is ready to compete with Bond Street as the city's main fashion thoroughfare. With these new kids on the block, you can expect a bustling dining and nightlife scene as well.

The area has already attracted the attention of celebrities such as Kate Moss and Amal Clooney.

Remember Frankenstein? Well, you can walk in his footsteps when on August 30, 2017, the 220<sup>th</sup> birthday of Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* (first drafted in 1816 in Lake Geneva), is commemorated. Explore how Switzerland inspired Shelley and then drive from Geneva to Evian Les Bains on the French side of the lake where the characters, Victor and Elizabeth, honeymooned.

The Center for Responsible Travel reports nature-based vacations now make up 20 per cent of all international travel. Adventure travel has become a whopping US\$263-billion industry, which grew 65 per cent each year between 2009 and 2012. If you're into adventure travel, you might want to check out some of these exceptional sustainable travel tours in 2017: a Rwanda Gorilla Trekking Tour, which introduces you to the last remaining mountain gorillas in the world, or, perhaps, a visit to a remote Amazon tribe ([gondwanaecotours.com](http://gondwanaecotours.com)); a Costa Rica Turtle Research expedition with biologists at the most important nesting ground of leatherback turtles in the country ([adventure-life.com](http://adventure-life.com)); a dog-sledging and trekking journey along glaciers in Greenland to explore and photograph fantastic Arctic landscapes ([bigchilladventure.com](http://bigchilladventure.com)); or a nine-day hiking and photography tour of Patagonia in the company of a celebrated photographer and nature documentary filmmaker ([travelvisionjourneys.com](http://travelvisionjourneys.com)).

What a wonderful world we live in! I urge you to get out there and explore it. **DS**



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# THE TASTES OF ITALY

BEYOND A TUSCAN VILLA,  
A WHOLE NEW WORLD  
BECKONS IN CHIANTI  
COUNTRY.

ABOVE: Enjoy beautiful views of the Tuscan hills and the Fattoria Dianella vineyards from the Villa Dianella.

OPPOSITE TOP LEFT: The Ponte Vecchio spans the Arno River in Florence.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM LEFT: The Holy Family or Tondo Doni (1503-4) by Michelangelo Buonarroti is displayed in its original frame at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Comprised of over four million bricks, Filippo Brunelleschi's famous dome crowns the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (the Duomo).

EDITORIAL AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ILONA KAUREMSZKY

There is a bounty of *vinifera* and other earthly delights that spill past the bosomy mountains in the Chianti-rich Montalbano landscape softened by centuries of farming. Surrounded by towering cypress trees and whitewashed walls draped in blossoming wisteria, the aromatic spring breeze of fruits and herbs lingers in a setting that has been virtually untouched since the days of its most famous son, Leonardo da Vinci.

## POETIC LANDSCAPES

For centuries the majestic hills of Tuscany have lured kings, popes and bank tycoons like the Medici family, all on a quest for respite. And there I stand wide eyed, scared

to blink at an enchanting hillside house in Italy that reminds me of the film, *Under the Tuscan Sun*, except there are no plumbing issues, no peeling paint and no leaky roof with which to contend. The scene is only part of my Italian fantasy offered by Insight Vacations, a tour operator cultivating trip itineraries for more than 35 years.

Lovingly restored by the current owners, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century country estate lies on the outskirts of Vinci, a medieval hamlet in Tuscany near Florence. The rustic borgo, named the Villa Dianella after the Roman goddess of the hunt Diana, was the private hunting lodge of the Medicis as well as the home of the famous Tuscan poet Renato Fucini who lived his final days in this land of poetry.

## CULINARY PURSUITS

Now the grand villa is a lavish getaway for culinary and wine lovers in pursuit of cooking classes and winery tours included in the new Luxury Gold by Insight Vacations Rome to Venice itinerary. It's at this Medici villa where I roll up my sleeves to tuck into the pasta *fresca all'uovo* (fresh egg pasta) in the ultimate Tuscan cooking class. My chef master is a brigade of local cooks, *nonnas* (grandmothers) and *mammas* (mothers), who are fine taskmasters as they whip out commands: "Knead harder," "flip over," and, "you're not done yet," in endearing instructional notes as we carefully master the fine art of hand-rolled pappardelle noodle-making and create a Mamma-approved meat sauce inspired by big glasses of rosé.

"Food is very big today. We know guests are looking for that kind of experience in travel and they want to learn and have authentic engaging experiences," says John Boulding, the CEO of Insight Vacations who is joining us on this taste of Italy.

A few hours later we toast our fine creations over a glass of the vintner's best and devour a fabulous four-course meal prepared by the guests in my escorted luxury motor coach tour.

## THE SWEETER LIFE

When I lived in Tuscany in the '90s, I had a tiny attic flat in Florence. Fiascos of Chianti and bowls of pasta were my daily dose of *la dolce vita* (the sweet life). I'd wander through ancient streets once frequented by the likes of Leonardo da Vinci, Dante Alighieri, and all the other greats of art and literature like Brunelleschi, whose great dome crowns the capital of the Renaissance.

But this past spring I went full-scale luxury for the first time. I returned to the boot-shaped country whose heel dips into the Mediterranean Sea and unlaced the centre, which, at times, seemed like a dance of seduction. With only eight days to spare, my wish list for this Italian quest

appeared unattainable. However, the fine attention to detail in my escorted tour itinerary, led by an ace travelling concierge, made it possible to see Rome, Florence, Verona and Venice, with day trips to the medieval towns of Calcata and Perugia.

For lovers of fine dining, luxurious hotels, and those who don't mind exploring local haunts in search of personal experiences, yet feel the best way to see renowned landmarks is on private tours with local experts, follow me in this bite of Italy. It begins like the old saying, "All roads lead to Rome."

## THE ETERNAL CITY

Everywhere is within walking distance from my temporary abode in Rome. The luxury landmark Baglioni Hotel Regina lies near the Villa Borghese on the famous Fellini street, Via Veneto, renowned for posh shopping and the rich leafy canopy immortalized by Sophia Loren in *La Dolce Vita*.





ABOVE LEFT: Local ingredients are ready for use in the Tuscan cooking class at the Villa Dianella.

ABOVE RIGHT: A basket of fresh zucchini flowers is held by one of the master chefs at the Villa Dianella.

OPPOSITE: Bottles of the finest Chianti were sampled in an unforgettable wine-tasting event held at the Ristorante le Maschere Enoteca in Mugello.

Crowds at the Colosseum and the Vatican can be overwhelming, however we thankfully bypass the queues. Before the daily opening of the Sistine Chapel our local expert takes us on a VIP tour of the exquisite Michelangelo masterpiece and the Vatican Museum, leaving free time in the afternoon, something I welcomed regularly throughout my trip.

Dining in Rome has its own cachet. Behind the Pantheon in a 16<sup>th</sup>-century vaulted chamber that is part of a palazzo and anchored by a pair of pianos at the entrance, the restaurateur welcomes us to Le Volte. This medieval frescoed restaurant with a

warm ambiance is simply furnished in white linen table settings. We sample the family-style platters of grilled and tempura vegetables and enjoy some fresh *insalata mista* paired with a classic fish *piccata* on a bed of thinly crusted potatoes, all of which, is accompanied with chubby glasses of Pinot Grigio as an opera duet sings arias from *Tosca* by Puccini.

A true Roman holiday indeed, Rome was a fabulous precursor to what lay ahead.

## TUSCANY

Imagine days filled with wine tastings at a local *vinoteca*, a cooking class, more wine tastings, and leisurely walks in a romantic park at a revived Medici villa that overlooks

the legendary Tuscan hills in the Mugello with an unforgettable visit to the birthplace of the Renaissance.

We take an easy taxi ride to the Palazzo Vecchio by the David statue. And on this visit my long-awaited reunion with an old friend at Florence's landmark Caffe Giubbe Rosse for lunch has become a cherished memory, thanks to my intuitive travelling concierge Daniele Nannetti who ensures details like this are possible.

In Florence our intimate travelling group slips past more lineups of David fans at the Accademia Museum and the Uffizi Gallery to explore the iconic masterpieces at both venues. We have an exclusive tour of the off-limits Vasari Corridor, a new Signature

## TRAVEL PLANNER

For Luxury Gold by Insight Vacations trip details, visit [insightvacations.com/ca/tours/ultimate-italy-preview-2017](https://www.insightvacations.com/ca/tours/ultimate-italy-preview-2017). Priced from \$6,323 per person, the 13-day Ultimate Italy trip includes luxury accommodation, most meals and drinks including a Michelin-starred dinner on the isle of Capri, a Tuscan cooking class, an exclusive behind-the-scenes visit to the Uffizi Gallery and Vasari Corridor in Florence and access to the Vatican City before it opens to the general public. Guests travel in a spacious Wi-Fi-equipped luxury motorcoach with the services of a professional travelling concierge and receive VIP door-to-door private airport transfers.

# A WINE LOVER'S DELIGHT



In the Ultimate Italy trip from Insight Vacations Luxury Gold guests enjoy wine pairings with Luxury Gold Signature dinners and experience wine tastings in Tuscany with fabulous surprises. We engaged in a new Signature experience consisting of a winery tour-cooking class combination at the Villa Dianella in Vinci led by a third-generation winemaker who escorts personal tours of the Fattoria Dianella, a restored wine cellar producing Chianti wine for over three centuries, and sampled some of his favourite Chiantis.

On another day we departed our posh historic hotel, the Villa le Maschere, which is a grand late-Renaissance country estate from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and conveniently walked next door to a family restaurant, the truffle-rich Ristorante le Maschere Enoteca, which specializes in Tuscan dishes. The Luxury Gold experience was an unforgettable wine-tasting lunch on the patio amid olive groves and ancient oak trees overlooking the Tuscan hills and Lake Bilancino in the heart of the majestic Mugello.

experience from Luxury Gold Insight Vacations, where priceless portraits flank the Medici's secret passageway over the Arno River by the gold shop havens along the Ponte Vecchio.

Afterward we return to our historic luxury hotel, the Villa Maschere, hidden in the bucolic Mugello and resume our Tuscan epicurean adventure at a family-run restaurant. Rivasud, a slow-food movement

establishment big on the one-kilometre diet, is fuelled by local products and helmed by a chef and his brother. We relax in this rustic farmhouse with its wood-burning oven that bakes pizza to perfection and dine on plates of roasted meats like sublime *bistecca alla Fiorentina*, homemade pappardelle with tender slivers of duck, and raise our Chianti glasses yet again.

*La dolce vita* indeed. 



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# VEGAS UPS ITS GAME



JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT LAS VEGAS HAD NO MORE TO OFFER, SURPRISE, SURPRISE, THE GAMBLING AND ENTERTAINMENT MECCA HAS FOUND A COUPLE OF MORE CARDS TO PLAY, AT LEAST ONE OF WHICH WILL SURELY APPEAL TO CANADIANS.

BY LARRY HUMBER

A few years ago, there were concerns about whether Vegas would make it through the economic downturn, when the country as a whole was reeling. Instead, like a champion fighter, it has hauled itself up from the canvas to score an impressive knockout. More than 40 million visitors will pay their respects—and maybe a chunk of their paycheques—to Vegas this year.

Early April 2016 saw the launch of two new MGM Resorts International projects, The Park and the 20,000-seat T-Mobile Arena, with more on the way. Then, short

weeks later, Vegas was welcomed into the NHL fold by commissioner Gary Bettman. The still-to-be-named team (the Knights, Black Jacks, Sinners, Outlaws and Cutthroats—after the state fish—are among the possibilities) won't commence play until the 2017–18 season, when it becomes the league's 31<sup>st</sup> entry. The icemen will be the prime tenants of the spanking new arena.

Vegas has had other pro teams in the past—even a Canadian Football League franchise known as the Posse if you remember—but never a team in a league like the NHL.





## PLACES TO CONGREGATE

As for The Park, it sits between the MGM-owned Monte Carlo and New York-New York resort-casinos, just steps from the Strip. At the opening, MGM chairman Jim Murren called it “a place to congregate with family and friends.” It’s a welcome change from the concrete and neon that so dominate the city, an “oasis,” as another bigwig aptly put it.

It fuses foliage with fun and fine dining, namely Beerhaus, Sake Rok, California Pizza Kitchen, Bruxie and Shake Shack. The entrance takes you through a double cooling water wall, where approachable on-site artists are engaged in their work. A mammoth sculpture of a swirling dancer, called *Bliss Dance*, can’t help but move you. It has quite a history already, as it debuted at the Burning Man festival in the Black Rock Desert north of Reno back in 2010.

The Park runs smack dab into the T-Mobile Arena, which the city sorely needed

for those blockbuster shows and sporting events it may have missed out on before, prompting a local politico to dub it a “game changer.” It will be hopping at least 100 nights annually, more when hockey arrives, with music makers of all bents slated to perform. Local favourites The Killers shared the bill with legend Wayne Newton on opening night, with Guns N’ Roses and Billy Joel following shortly afterward. October brought The Rolling Stones, Keith Urban and Kanye West.

For those who like to mix it up, there’s UFC aplenty on offer, not to mention the rough-and-tumble Pro Bull Riders World Finals. Hockey lovers had a sniff of what was to come in early October, when the two-time Stanley Cup champion L.A. Kings hosted the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche at T-Mobile. NBA and college basketball are also on the sked.

Adjacent to The Park, the 5,300-seat Park Theatre is opening in December 2016, featuring special engagements from celebrated performers such as Stevie Nicks.

## ALL-STAR HOTELS

MGM is the town’s biggest player, with a couple of handfuls of properties on the Strip (in alphabetical order, the Aria, Bellagio, Circus Circus, Excalibur, Luxor, Mandalay Bay, MGM Grand, The Mirage, Monte Carlo and New York-New York). Harrah’s, with its flagship Caesars Palace, is another big player, as are Trump and Wynn.

*OPPOSITE TOP: The music of the Beatles lives on at the Mirage where LOVE, a theatrical production by Cirque du Soleil, traces the band’s brief history.*  
Cirque du Soleil

*LEFT: Take in a spectacular water, music and light show at the Bellagio in Las Vegas.*  
MGM Resorts International

*TOP RIGHT: The 3,400-kilogram sculpture, Bliss Dance, created by artist Marco Cochrane, celebrates beauty, humanity and power.* Barry Toranto



# MORE TO DO IN VEGAS

## THE BEATLES AND CIRQUE AT THE MIRAGE

It’s been nearly 50 years since the Beatles last performed on the rooftop of their London offices and two of the four are long gone. But they live on at the Mirage in Vegas, where *LOVE*, a theatrical production by Cirque du Soleil, traces the band’s all-too-brief history and has thrilled audiences for a decade at two nightly shows from Thursday through Monday. There’s more for Beatles’ buffs at a fab gift shop next to the specially built theatre.

## AND SOON THERE WILL BE NHL HOCKEY

Team owner Bill Foley has high hopes for hockey in “Sin City,” telling the world, “Las Vegas is hockey ready. I’m convinced we’re going to be full every night.” He’s promising a “fast-skating” and “tough” team. As for the team’s prospects, one player who has made the rounds went so far as to suggest that it will be especially tough to be beat at home, with visitors falling prey to Vegas’s many distractions. Early odds of it winning the Cup in its inaugural season are 100 to 1. Don’t bet on that happening, though.

## PAWN STARS

Fans of the History Channel’s hugely popular program *Pawn Stars* will want to visit the Gold & Silver Pawn Shop, otherwise known as Rick Harrison’s place, where the show is filmed. It’s at 713 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily, it can get quite busy, so arrive early.





ABOVE: Weighing between 11,793 and 19,958 kilograms each, 16 iconic shade structures double as colour-changing art installations throughout The Park. francisandfrancis

The luxurious Aria is among the newer resort-casinos. Opened in 2009, it is noted for its use of the latest in technology. If you saw the film *Last Vegas*, with an all-star cast including Michael Douglas, Morgan Freeman and Robert De Niro, you've already had a taste of what it can offer. Speaking of which, it boasts a number of fine-dining choices, including the Herringbone for seafood lovers and the hip Italian-American joint Carbone.

It's a big plus for visitors when there are so many establishments under one ownership, as it makes accessing them so much easier. For example, there's a dedicated tram, dubbed "The Aria Express," which shuttles guests a little more than a mile from the Aria at Tropicana Avenue to the adjoining Monte Carlo and Bellagio at Flamingo Road.

A block-long section of the Strip still appeals to strollers. It overlooks the famed

dancing Fountains of Bellagio, a water, music and light extravaganza, with shows scheduled every half-hour during the day and every 15 minutes after 8 p.m.

Of course, if you wish to take the plunge, there are pools aplenty in Vegas, which is welcome news if you have kids in tow. The Aria has three pools, including an adults-only "playground" that's definitely not for toddlers. It gets a little spicier at the Mirage, which allows "Euro-style bathing." You'll have to ante up if you want to frolic at either, and men pay as much as four times as the ladies.

What happens in Vegas may stay in Vegas, but the memories will never fade. **DS**

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## CREATING A COMEDY EMPIRE

**ANDREW ALEXANDER, CEO AND EXECUTIVE PRODUCER** of The Second City, pulls no punches when he attributes the influence his parents had on him and his success. "In my case they gave me my neurotic drive for approval and deep sense of insecurity and somehow I converted that into the drive to succeed."

Succeed he has since taking over The Second City Toronto operation in 1974 after a series of eclectic jobs that included tree salesman, waiter, cab driver and magazine editor. In the 1970s, Second City generated incredible comedic talents such as John Candy, Gilda Radner, Andrea Martin, Dan Aykroyd, Eugene Levy and many more. In 1976, Alexander created a partnership with Len Stuart (now deceased) and formed The Second City Entertainment Company, which produced the popular SCTV television show. Later in 1985 they took over Second City Chicago and have since expanded to Hollywood. At first though, Alexander didn't have any empire-building expectations. "At that point in my life I didn't create lofty expectations, it was more about fun and a great lifestyle and hanging out with very funny people."

The company grew over the decades into a comedy empire producing television shows and movies, developing and producing revues in its comedy clubs, as well as operating training programs and schools for improvisation. Through the years Second City stages have featured such comedy icons as Tina Fey, Bill Murray, Jim Belushi, Bonnie Hunt, Shelley Long, Chris Farley, Steve Carell, Mike Myers and Stephen Colbert.

Born in England, Alexander's family moved to Toronto in 1951. He now divides his time primarily between Los Angeles and Chicago. He loves the weather in L.A. and the sense of community in Chicago. DS



PHOTO: JOHN BOEHM

### WHO WERE YOUR COMEDY IDOLS AND INFLUENCES GROWING UP?

Jackie Gleason, *Your Show of Shows* (a 1950s NBC network variety show hosted by Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner, etc.), and Wayne and Shuster.

### ARE THERE DIFFERENCES IN HOW HUMOUR IS PRESENTED AND BETWEEN AMERICAN AND CANADIAN HUMOUR?

Obviously political correctness influences comedy in a major way so it's all in the approach and nuance of sensitive subject material. We do not censor our casts. Humour today is about a character's behaviour and far less jokey. Canadians respond more to physical humour while Americans love political humour.

### WHAT TYPE OF HUMOUR APPEALS TO YOU?

I have a very dark, dark sensibility, so death has a very strong comedic appeal to me. I do love physical-based humour—that's the Brit in me I guess.

### HOW HAS COMEDY CHANGED SINCE YOU FIRST ENTERED THE BUSINESS?

It's a lot more diverse in its offerings. You can pretty well find any style and type of comedy that fits your tastes, from the silly to the cerebral.

### WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PLACE TO VISIT AND WHAT WAS YOUR FAVOURITE TRIP?

Paris and meeting my wife in Paris.

### WHAT WOULD BE A DREAM DESTINATION?

Egypt.

### WHAT BIZARRE OR EMBARRASSING THING HAPPENED TO YOU ON A TRIP?

I was jailed for a night in Buffalo for hiding in a trunk of a car coming across the Canadian border as a prank when I was 18.

### WHAT IS YOUR MUST-HAVE TRAVEL ITEM?

Anxiety medication and backup phone.

### WHAT THREE THINGS DO YOU MOST LOVE ABOUT CANADA?

Multiculturalism, gun control and the political system.

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# ART, BREWS AND THEATRE

BY KAT ROBINSON

**N**orth Little Rock's Argenta Arts & Entertainment District is a must-visit destination for art lovers. This area near the Arkansas River features galleries, theatres, entertainment and culinary experiences in a friendly, walkable neighbourhood.

The community includes the historic City Hall, Argenta Drug Store (the longest-running pharmacy west of the Mississippi) and an old fire station renovated into the North Little Rock Heritage Center. You'll find several art galleries including Greg Thompson Fine Art, one of the top art galleries and private dealerships in the southern United States. On the third Friday of each month, local artisans showcase their efforts during Argenta Art Walk.

For those who prefer live entertainment, the Argenta District has two venues. The Argenta Community Theater presents theatrical shows and hosts many of the area's film series. The Joint, a cabaret-style theatre and coffee shop, offers live comedy and small productions in its 105-person space. Cregeen's Irish Pub, Skinny J's, Four Quarter Bar and Reno's Argenta Café regularly stage live music.

Argenta recently became home to three breweries, including Diamond Bear Brewing Company, which houses the restaurant Arkansas Ale House. Arkansas's largest brewery, Core brewery, opened its first Central Arkansas location this year on Main Street. The new Flyway Brewing Company, Central



Arkansas's first mid-sized brewery, stands a block away on Maple Street. A host of cuisines—including Ristorante Capeo's Italian delights, Skinny J's steaks and Mug's Café's splendid sandwiches—are on the menu for culinary fans. **DS**

*ABOVE: North Little Rock's Argenta Arts & Entertainment District. Grav Weldon*

## TRAVEL PLANNER

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SPECIAL FEATURE SECTION

# AMERICAN BEAUTIES

TAKE IN THE WONDERS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. RETRACE HISTORY ACROSS SIX STATES ALONG THE OREGON TRAIL. FIND COMFORT IN ALABAMA'S SOUTHERN CHARM AND CULTURE. OR INDULGE IN MICHIGAN'S CRAFT BREWS AND CULINARY DELIGHTS. YOUR CHOICES ARE ENDLESS.

*BACKGROUND: View of the Pacific Coast from Crescent Bay Point Park, in Laguna Beach, California.  
Jon Bilous/Shutterstock*



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# The Oregon TRAIL

THE OPEN ROAD,  
THE ANTICIPATION OF  
WHAT'S AROUND THE  
NEXT CORNER—A  
ROAD TRIP SIMPLY  
THRILLS THE SOUL!

*ABOVE: The open road in Wyoming: Backcountry roads paralleling the Oregon Trail are gloriously uncrowded and offer countless grand vistas.*

*OPPOSITE LEFT: Pioneer wagon, Oregon Trail, Nebraska: Pioneers walked the entire Oregon Trail beside their wagons, which were only for their goods.*

*OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT: An 1860s cabin at Old Prairie Town, Ward-Meade Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas.*

*OPPOSITE BOTTOM RIGHT: Pioneer diary at the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, near Baker City, Oregon.*

EDITORIAL & PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRIS ROBINSON**

**M**y road trip has begun in Independence, Missouri. Inspired by the tales of westward-bound pioneers along the Oregon Trail, I want to share in their heroic journey.

The Oregon Trail was a 3,500-kilometre east-west wagon route that connected the Missouri River to Oregon. Originally only fur trappers and traders made this difficult journey on horseback. But by 1836, when the first migrant wagon train left Independence,

a passage for wagons was being cleared to the Pacific Coast.

Between the mid-1830s and 1869 around 400,000 families headed west with dreams of a better future; tens of thousands died on the route. The transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869, made the trip west faster, cheaper and safer and almost overnight the wagon trail was abandoned. However, the landscape still bears many reminders of the pioneers—even down to ruts created by their wagon wheels.





## MISSOURI AND KANSAS

The modern roads I travel for my Oregon Trail road trip still follow much of the same course westward, and pass through settlements originally established to service the Oregon Trail. Starting on the banks of the Missouri River in Independence I drive to Topeka, Kansas. Here I wander through the lovingly reconstructed Old Prairie Town at the Ward-Meade Historic Site, and really get a feel for mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century settlements.

The next day I drive on deserted back roads northward to Alcove Spring. Near the town of Marysville, this well-known spring marks the point where pioneers left the tall-grass prairie and entered the plains that beckoned them westward. The pioneers camped nearby and left their names carved into the rocks, to be read centuries later by travellers such as me.

## NEBRASKA AND WYOMING

The Oregon Trail enters Nebraska's southern border and continues northwest to Fort Kearny where the pioneers connected with the Great Platte River Road, which stretches across the state and became the pioneers' highway west. The Platte River, described as "a mile wide and an inch deep," guided not only emigrants headed for Oregon, but also those going to the California goldfields and Mormons aiming for Utah.

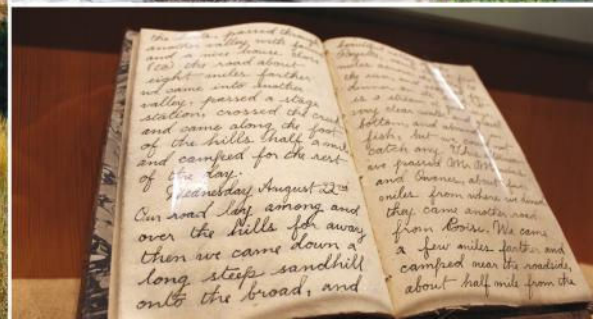
Fort Kearny was a military post established in 1848 to protect the emigrants and as a stop for Pony Express riders. It is part of a Nebraska State Historical Park that includes an interpretive centre, reconstructed buildings and replica Oregon Trail wagons. I am even able to dress up as a pioneer to get into the spirit of the place!

The emigrants didn't have the GPS I enjoy, so they used landscape features to guide them on their way. Jail Rock and Courthouse Rock are two such famous landmarks. A short distance south of the North Platte River and easily visible from U.S. Highway 26, Chimney Rock is perhaps the most famous of the trail's landmarks. I'm greatly rewarded as the slender finger of rock is bathed in the afterglow of another splendid sunset along the trail.

I spend time at Scotts Bluff National Monument. Here the wagons moved single-file and cut deep ruts still visible to today's visitors. I walk to the very top of the bluff, which provides a panoramic lookout on this section of the Oregon Trail as it winds into Wyoming. I am struck by the realization that my view is similar to that of the pioneers who passed here so long ago.

## IDAHO AND OREGON

Near Montpelier in eastern Idaho, the National Oregon/California Trail Center



*BELOW: The mighty Missouri River near Independence, Missouri—the right bank was the frontier in 1850 and the left bank was the start of the Oregon Trail westward.*

*RIGHT: Scotts Bluff National Monument in Nebraska is a pioneer landmark on the edge of the prairies.*



provides a real connection to the trail pioneers. The “Wagon Master” takes you back to daily life on the trail as you adopt a pioneer persona in a memorable and poignant reconstruction.

Around Montpelier are several other notable trail sights. The Big Hill is where pioneers had to slowly winch their wagons down to the valley floor below. Travellers likened the thermal waters at Soda Springs to sparkling beer and the soothing Lava Hot Springs must have seemed like heaven to the dusty travellers.

In Boise, Idaho, the Oregon Trail Reserve features the historic Kelton Ramp, a grueling rock cut above the Boise River that dates back to 1860. Here, more clearly than anywhere else on the trail, I feel the enormity of their physical endurance as I walk in the wagon wheel ruts of those Oregon Trail visionaries.

The trail enters Oregon northwest of Boise, where the pioneers headed northwest to meet the mighty Columbia River. I visit the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretative Center, just west of Baker City. Panoramic windows provide scenic vistas of

the Oregon Trail and the Blue Mountains. Another touch point: a pioneer’s diary is part of the exhibit, describing the exact same view from precisely the same point on the trail where I stand.

The Dalles is the point on the Columbia River where pioneers had a heart-rending decision to make: load their wagons on rafts to chance the destructive rapids of the Columbia Gorge or brave the snows of 3,353-metre Mt. Hood to the south. It was the last—and possibly greatest—hurdle on the entire trail before the weary folks reached their Promised Land.

I continue west through the Columbia River Gorge along the Historic Columbia River Highway. This oldest national scenic

highway in the U.S. takes me past glorious vistas and rushing waterfalls. I finally reach journey’s end standing in the roaring ocean surf at Cannon Beach on the Pacific Coast of Oregon.

My road trip has taken 50 hours to drive, travelling more than 4,400 kilometres through six U.S. states. And the pioneers of the 1800s travelled with me all the way. I walked in the ruts made by their wagons; touched the rocks where they carved their names; lingered at the springs where they camped; and gazed at landmarks they used to navigate their way. What an amazing, brave, exciting journey they made..and I have been privileged to follow their footsteps all the way to the Pacific Ocean. **DS**

## TRAVEL PLANNER

Air Canada operates flights into Kansas City, Missouri, where the Oregon Trail begins, and to Portland, Oregon, where it ends. Enterprise Rent-A-Car facilitates arrangements for pick up at one airport and drop off at the other. A range of accommodation is available along the route. I recommend The Woodward Inns on Fillmore in Topeka, Kansas; Barn Anew Bed & Breakfast near Mitchell, Nebraska; and the Columbia Gorge Hotel in Hood River, Oregon. To plan this and other U.S. road trips, log onto [visittheusa.ca/usa/road-trips](http://visittheusa.ca/usa/road-trips).

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# Craft Your Perfect MICHIGAN ESCAPE

AT THE KALAMAZOO BEER EXCHANGE, ONE OF THE CRAFT BEERS, AN IMPERIAL PORTER CALLED “PERRIN NO RULES,” SELLS FOR US\$15.50 A PINT.

ABOVE: Ben Darcie, Sales Manager at Brewery Vivant.

OPPOSITE TOP: A tasting flight of stouts and porters at Founders Brewery in Grand Rapids.

OPPOSITE CENTRE: Andy Hollyday, the Executive Chef at Selden Standard in Detroit.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: The ultra-creamy grits at Townhouse.

EDITORIAL & PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE GILICK

The unique atmosphere in this highly popular restaurant and craft beer emporium resembles a stock exchange. A large illuminated board lists the 28 featured beers for the evening along with the current “market” price for each. Every few minutes, the prices are raised or lowered to add some fun to savouring familiar craft beers and trying new ones. And then without warning, the market crashes. The board flashes warnings along with a countdown clock and prices are slashed by as much as 50 per cent for the next minute.

And that’s how we tasted Perrin No Rules for only US\$7.50. Made with a touch of turbinado sugar, this superb craft beer has strong coconut and coffee undertones, but

it’s not overwhelming. The taste is more like a caress on the taste buds. When we expressed our love for the taste of the Porter, Eric Fulkerson, the beverage manager, smiled: “That’s what makes the hair on my arms stand up—when people discover and appreciate the beers.” And we, in turn, discovered Eric’s comment was typical of the creativity, complexity and passion that define Michigan’s craft beer industry.

In Grand Rapids, voted Beer City USA for the past two years, visitors can collect stamps in a passport and become a “brewsader,” similar to a “crusader,” but denoting an enthusiastic imbiber of great beers—and one who is willing to travel for the experience. In Kalamazoo, we chatted with cicerones, also

known as beer sommeliers, who perfect the pairing of craft beer with food, and finally we journeyed to the incredibly revitalized downtown area of Detroit to experience the amazing food and drink scene.

## WHAT'S BREWING

As we explored the Pumpkin Ale and the Frosted Harbour Dark Raspberry Wheat fruit beer at Kalamazoo's Boatyard Brewery, chief executive officer Brian Steele spoke about the growing popularity of craft beer (a.k.a. artisanal beer), especially for wine and whisky connoisseurs. He noted the variety of beers, each catering to specific tastes; the "nose" of the beer that defines the aroma and bouquet; and the complexity of the beer that challenges the drinker to detect the ingredients, from the type of malt and hops used, to the quality of water and the esters (fruity flavours) produced during the fermentation process. Brian added, "There's a huge growing legitimacy in drinking craft beer," a statement backed up by the fact that in Michigan the brewing industry employs upward of 7,000 people and has a US\$600-million impact on the economy.

Hop Head Farms in Hickory Corners grows a wide variety of hops and has an international customer base. With the hops providing the flavours and aromas for artisanal beers, Bonnie and Jeff Steinman are continually seeking additional acreage to grow hops to fulfill the increasing demand. However Bonnie became very philosophical when we visited the chamber where the hop cones (seeds) are dried. She noted there are no manuals to perfect the drying process, just the sound of the cones rustling against each other, and she revealed that her favourite way to release stress was to sneak up to the drying room, close her eyes and listen to the peaceful cascade of tumbling hop cones as she inhaled the aromas.

The rationale for drinking beer ranges from the ultra-serious connoisseurs who collect brewery visits and record the



BELOW: Ordering the brisket at Arcadia Brewing Company in Kalamazoo.

CENTRE: One of the super-sized donuts for which Sweetwater's Donut Mill is famous.

BOTTOM: A treasure at the Gilmour Car Museum in Detroit.



number of beers tasted, while listing the ABV (Alcohol By Volume) and the IBU (International Bitterness Units) in each sample, to those who humorously make their selections based on the quiriness of the beer's name. And in that vein we tasted Dogfish Head Namaste, Fearless The Idiot, Right Brain Chubby Squirrel, Big Sky Moose Drool and Son of a Batch.

## CULINARY TEMPTATIONS

However aside from beer, Michigan is hopping with culinary delights. In Grand Rapids' Brewery Vivant, we devoured Duck Confit Nachos, a mellifluous concoction of brie cream, duck confit, tomato concasse, caramelized onions, duck cracklin' and citrus. In Kalamazoo's Arcadia Brewing Company, we savoured the perfectly smoked brisket that came with a side of tender tasty collard greens, and at the Kalamazoo Beer Exchange, we indulged in crunchy beer-battered fried pickles and the special college homecoming burger. A visit to Sweetwater's Donut Mill, rated as the fourth best donut shop in the country, is *de rigueur* for those who love their super-sized treats.

At Selden Standard in Detroit, executive chef Andy Hollyday's menus are inspired by the changing seasons, as they source locally grown foods and present truly delectable works of culinary art including beef tartare with quail egg, pork shank with cornbread crumble, rabbit ragu with ricotta and pista-

chio, and grilled lamb chops with eggplant, sweet peppers and yoghurt.

During breakfast at the Townhouse we practically swooned over the ultra-creamy grits, blueberry pancakes, scrambled eggs and house-made bacon and sausage, while at the Motor City Brewing Works, the hot, fresh, flavoursome pizzas were perfectly complemented by a cold pint of GhettoBlaster ("the beer you can hear").

## MOTOR CITY GEMS

A number of outstanding attractions tempt travellers along the craft beer route. The Gilmour Car Museum in Hickory Corners showcases the artistry of automobiles from 1899 to the present.

Detroit's sprawling Eastern Market, home to the Detroit Fall Beer Festival featuring 675 craft beers from 83 brewing companies, is also a great venue for buying fresh produce and listening to local blues buskers, while the nearby Motown Museum celebrates the sound that inspired the global music scene. Detroit's downtown features the art-deco Guardian Building, the iconic statue of the Spirit of Detroit, the impact of the Joe Louis Fist, the sculpture of the Gateway to Freedom and the meandering Detroit RiverWalk.

Crafting the perfect experience is the ideal for all travellers, with each adventure incorporating personal interests, culinary curiosities, engagement with the locals and a touch of serendipity along the way. Michigan definitely responds to this ideal. **DS**

## TRAVEL PLANNER

Air Canada ([aircanada.com](http://aircanada.com)) and United Airlines ([united.com](http://united.com)) offer scheduled air service to Detroit from various Canadian gateways. A full list of breweries and sites to see in the state of Michigan is found online under [michigan.org](http://michigan.org) (click on Play and Attractions). For more information on what to see and do in Detroit, log onto [visitdetroit.com](http://visitdetroit.com).

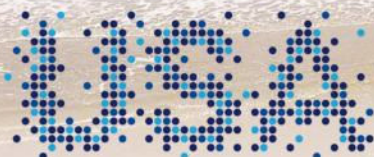
For accommodation, consider:

Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, Grand Rapids: [amwaygrand.com](http://amwaygrand.com)

Marriott Residence Inn, Kalamazoo East: [marriott.com](http://marriott.com)

Westin Book Cadillac Hotel: [bookcadillacwestin.com](http://bookcadillacwestin.com)

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# The California RIVIERA BECKONS

ON A DREARY FALL MORNING I WAS LAMENTING THE END OF A LONG, WARM SUMMER. LIKE THE LEAVES THAT CLUNG STEADFASTLY TO THE TREES OUTSIDE MY WINDOW, I WASN'T READY TO GIVE UP ON THE WARM WEATHER JUST YET. THEN, AN EMAIL LANDED ON MY DESKTOP SUGGESTING A TRENDY, LUXURY WOMEN'S GETAWAY TO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. QUICKLY I RESPONDED, "ABSOLUTELY!"

*TOP: Patrons enjoy a tasty lunch on the open-air ocean terrace at George's at the Cove in La Jolla.*

*OPPOSITE CENTRE: The magnificent Lodge at Torrey Pines in La Jolla is an excellent accommodation choice for golfers.*

*OPPOSITE BOTTOM: The exquisite Marine Room, a true San Diego landmark, promises a dining experience like no other. Max Whittaker*



BY **DONNA S. VIEIRA**

**O**ur Air Canada flight touched down in San Diego slightly ahead of schedule on a sunny December morning. Our ultimate destination was the beautiful oceanfront community of La Jolla, a quick 20-minute drive up the coast, for a tasty lunch on the open-air ocean terrace at George's at the Cove. The warm sun, a refreshing gentle breeze and the magnificent views of the Pacific Ocean were already doing their magic.

## **OUTDOOR LIVING**

I had visited La Jolla before and always longed to return. Blessed with pleasant temperatures year-round, it offers an enviable lifestyle.

Arts and culture play a huge role here. The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego was originally Ellen Browning Scripps's home (c. 1916), which she willed to artists and, in 1941, it evolved into a full-fledged museum, which was later





porary works by such artists as William Wegman and Fred Tomaselli. The outdoor exhibition is open around the clock and changes regularly. Free walking tours take place on the last Wednesday of every month from January through October and spots must be reserved in advance.

Since we were in wine country, we couldn't pass up a chauffeured wine tour with La Jolla Wine Tours, which included stops at three wineries and many five-ounce arm curls at the Cordiano Winery, the Orfila Vineyards and the Bernardo Winery (c. 1889), the oldest operation in

Southern California by far. The latter also includes an Old Western-themed village, featuring art galleries, fashions, accessories and, of course, a wine shop.

Our hotel choice was the 170-room AAA Five Diamond Lodge at Torrey Pines, designed to blend in with the adjacent Torrey Pines State Reserve—a perfect place for an early-morning stroll, jog or cycle. Amenities include two restaurants, a full-service spa, a pool and Southern California's most iconic golf course featuring the stunning La Jolla coastline as a backdrop.



reincarnated yet again by Irving Gill using Spanish architecture. The collection features periods of art by contemporary artists and works on display during our visit included creations by Warhol, Francis Bacon and Takashi Murakami, a highbrow artist who designed the Louis Vuitton pocketbooks.

In 2010, the Athenaeum Music & Arts Library introduced the Murals of La Jolla project, consisting of privately funded tem-





Dining is always an epic experience in California. On our first night, we dined at the dramatic Marine Room where Pacific waves crash onto the windows. Overseen by executive chef Bernard Guillas, the menu is equally as memorable. Educated in Vanne in Bretagne, Guillas incorporates French-style cuisine sourced from local ingredients. Our meal began with a glass of Louis Bouillot and a medley of appetizers consisting of lilikoi hazelnut-coated wild prawns; a trilogy of lobster, ahi tuna and caviar; and diver scallop and foie Rossini. Next, a classic Caesar salad was prepared tableside gueridon style. My main course, Togarashi Sesame Spiced Ahi Tuna served with sticky black rice, avocado and mango in a white port hibiscus reduction, was exceptional. A selection of desserts finished off the evening as Bernard shared his philosophy: "What I look for is the balance at the centre of the plate. If it looks good, it better deliver on taste, too. There needs to be great energy, otherwise it doesn't make sense. Needless to say, my world is really a lot of fun and my life is delicious!"

The following evening, we attended a

trendy, sold-out "signature artisan dinner" set up on a heated outdoor terrace at the Lodge at Torrey Pines. At this weekly four-course communal event, 10 to 24 diners sit at a long harvest table, on which farm-to-table dishes are placed and carefully paired with wines. Guests help themselves to portions much like family members would at a Thanksgiving dinner. It was a most pleasant way to meet and engage with strangers over food and wine.

### UPSCALE AMBIANCE

Time to move farther up the coast to Laguna Beach, with a slight detour to Newport Beach for lunch at the Cannery, a local seafood favourite. Nor could we resist a side trip to Balboa Island, a quaint island known for its shops and nightlife.

Our hotel was the very elegant Montage Laguna Beach resort. This former oceanfront trailer park has been transformed into a Montage-managed hotel where accommodation options range from spacious 46.5-square-metre guest rooms featuring private patios or balconies and marble bathrooms with deep-soak tubs to an exquisite 279-square-metre

*ABOVE LEFT: The Studio's executive chef Craig Strong adds a finishing touch to one of his culinary creations.*

*ABOVE RIGHT: Guests enjoy a magnificent view from the rooftop pool perched on top of the London West Hollywood Hotel.*

*BELOW: The Saban Theatre in Beverly Hills is considered a classic Los Angeles landmark.*  
Max Whittaker



three-bedroom beach villa. On-premise amenities include a spa, pool, shops and plenty of recreational activities.

And then there's the polished restaurant—The Studio—where executive chef Craig Strong holds court. Our food-and-wine-pairing menu began with a glass of 2008 Weingut, Bründlmayer Käferberg, followed by an appetizer of prosciutto green beans, mushroom purée and crispy shallots in a honey vinaigrette; a serving of Hudson Valley foie gras in a savoury Shitaki sauce; and, in my case, a roasted veal ribeye served with potato purée, charred lemon purée and crispy purple potatoes. Each serving was beautifully paired with a wine personally selected by sommelier Jesse Rodriguez. The meal finished with a medley of desserts.

While the meal was impressive, what caught my attention was the professionalism and knowledge of Jesse and our server who calmly explained each wine selection and dish in an almost Zen-like manner. I simply had to talk to Chef Strong who graciously invited me to tour his glistening kitchen where everyone

appeared to work quietly in perfect harmony. I couldn't help but share my observations with him. "The heart and soul of a restaurant is in the kitchen and it spills over into the restaurant to the guest. It's truly about everyone working together in harmony to create a collaborative, inclusive partnership," he explained. When I asked where he took his inspiration from, he humbly replied, "I have a very good staff. One sous chef has been here for 13 years. My motto is: 'Let's have fun!' I don't have to come up with every idea; I just have to implement the good ones. Also, I believe sauces make the difference. That's what makes a dish sing."

Needless to say, my spirit sang all the way back to my posh suite.

## HOLLYWOOD CALLS

It would be silly to come all this way and not take in the sights of West Hollywood. Besides, who can resist potential celebrity spottings? But first, an hour-long facial at the tiny, unassuming Ole Henriksen Face/Body Spa was in order.

Feeling shiny and new, we headed over to the Design District to browse through expensive boutiques, including the Elder Statesman for cashmere and Balenciaga for high-end ladies wear and shoes.

Our hotel was the nearby all-suite London West Hollywood—an excellent choice. My suite, the 67-square-metre London room, was the smallest available and the 130-square-metre one-bedroom Gate Suites featuring wraparound balconies and kitchens are palatial. Need more space? One- and two-bedroom suites connect to one-bedroom suites to create a three-bedroom, 2.5-bath suite. Then, there's always the 1,022-square-metre penthouse.

Later we dined at the VANDER PUMP on Santa Monica Blvd., a common setting for the housewives' antics on both *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* and *Vanderpump Rules*. Then, it was a quick Uber ride to the Saban Theatre for entertainment before heading back to my luxurious hotel suite for a relaxing bath and a good night's rest.

Could I get used to this? Of course! **DS**



## TRAVEL PLANNER

Air Canada ([aircanada.com](http://aircanada.com)) operates daily non-stop service from Toronto and Vancouver to San Diego and Los Angeles. For more information, visit:

San Diego Tourism Authority: [sandiego.org](http://sandiego.org)

Visit Laguna Beach: [visitlagunabeach.com](http://visitlagunabeach.com)

Visit West Hollywood: [visitwesthollywood.com](http://visitwesthollywood.com)

George's at the Cove: [georgesatthecove.com](http://georgesatthecove.com)

La Jolla Wine Tours: [lajollawinetours.com](http://lajollawinetours.com)

Murals of La Jolla: [muralsoflajolla.com](http://muralsoflajolla.com)

Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego: [mcasd.org](http://mcasd.org)

The Lodge at Torrey Pines: [lodgetorrey.pines.com](http://lodgetorrey.pines.com)

The Marine Room: [marineroom.com](http://marineroom.com)

Montage Laguna Beach: [montagehotels.com/LagunaBeach](http://montagehotels.com/LagunaBeach)

Ole Henriksen Face/Body Spa: [olehenriksen.com](http://olehenriksen.com)

Saban Theatre: [sabantheatre.org](http://sabantheatre.org)

The London West Hollywood: [thelondonwesthollywood.com](http://thelondonwesthollywood.com)

VANDER PUMP: [pumprestaurant.com](http://pumprestaurant.com)

# The Road to RICHES

IN THE THICK OF THE MOBILE-TENSAW DELTA ONLY 15 MINUTES OUTSIDE MOBILE, ALABAMA, THE BRACKISH WATERS ARE SHALLOW AND THE LORE RUNS DEEP.

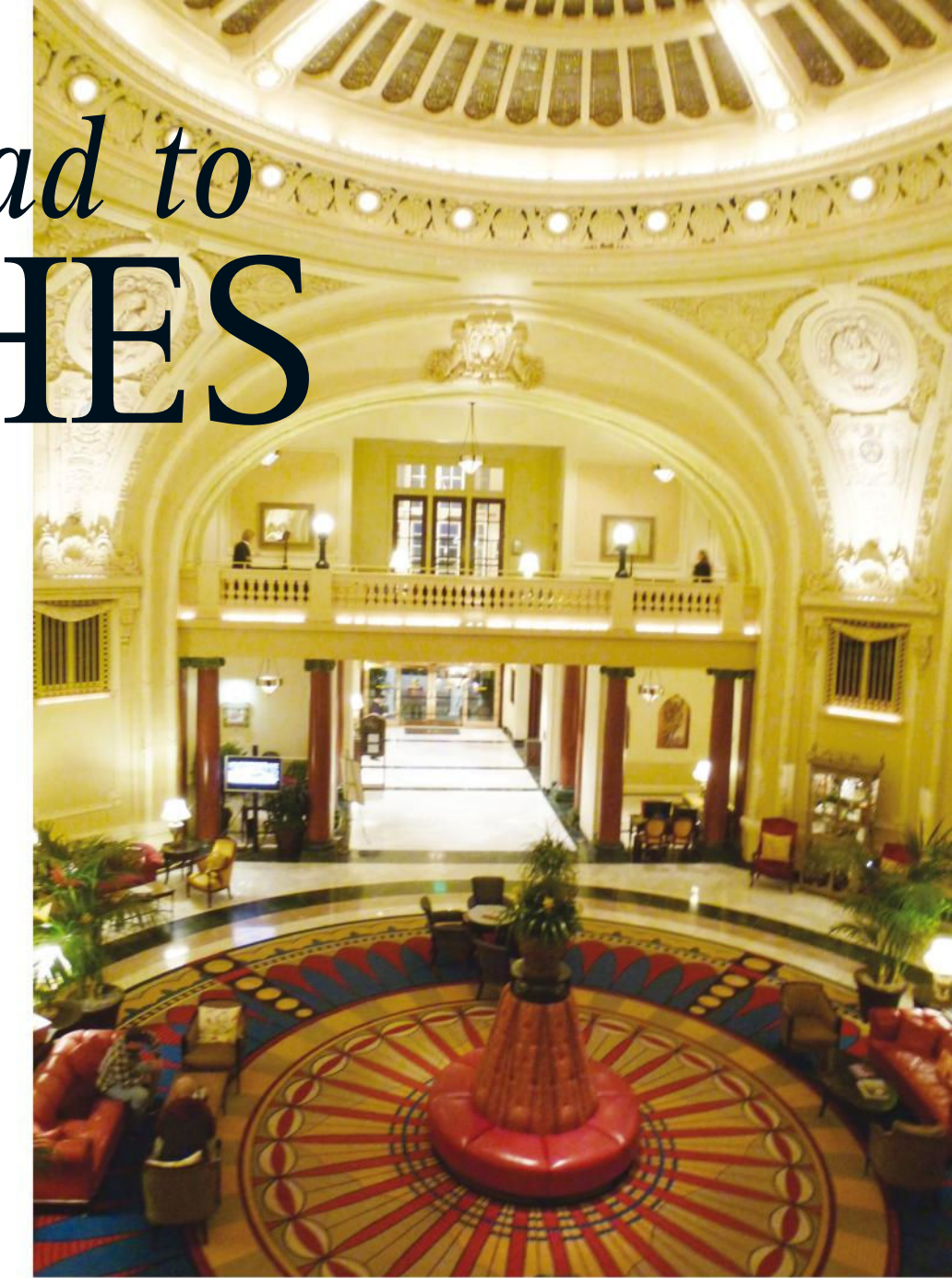
EDITORIAL & PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
ILONA KAUREMSZKY

Chris Wiber from WildNative Delta Safaris pilots his boat, *The Osprey*, over the flooded prairie wetland into this maze of Alabama jungle edged by sinewy cattails and alive with osprey, turtles and carnivorous pitcher plants. Along the way, the naturalist's wife Jami, his trusty deck hand, reveals the preventative uses of wax myrtle to thwart mosquitoes as Chris cuts the engine to search for alligator nests.

## TEEMING WITH WILDLIFE

Before you know it we leave behind the thick weedy alleys of coastal Alabama and hit the wide open waters of Mobile Bay passing under the longest bridge in the state. It's not every day you get to explore the second largest river delta in America with a local.

"The Alabama Gulf coast is the lifeblood of this country," says Captain Chris about the mostly undiscovered area teeming in



wildlife. The Mobile-Tensaw Delta spills into the Gulf of Mexico at breakneck speeds, leaving behind a seabed of riches that boasts one of North America's most biologically diverse habitats.

"We break all kinds of species records. One of my personal favourites: Alabama has the largest amount of freshwater fish of anywhere in the nation," he says in that warm southern twang describing the roughly 350 fish species, including a list of more critter superlatives living in America's Amazon. "This one is tough to measure but it's super

exciting. Alabama's new motto can be, 'Alabama, we grow on you,'" he snickers and adds Alabama might just have the most fungi varieties on the planet.

Welcome to Mobile, a world unto its own, affectionately dubbed "The Promised Land." Clay-rich, a happy accident where five rivers flow into Mobile Bay, the setting is blessed by patches of white powder beaches, an abundance of critter life, historic landmarks, and a culinary scene that basks in good old-fashioned Southern-cooking traditions.

## A SOUTHERN SHOWPLACE

Nestled off the Gulf of Mexico, Mobile is home to nearly 200,000 residents and makes a fabulous launching pad for day trips and city sightseeing. History runs deep here. The birthplace of America's oldest Mardi Gras, Mobile got its colonial start when two brothers from today's Montréal, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville and Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, created Mobile in 1702 briefly hailing the trading post as the capital of the Louisiana Territory. Mobile also has weathered turbulent times throughout its shaky past. Six flags once claimed the seaport powerhouse as their own while hurricanes have ravaged the area, the most recent one being Katrina in 2005.

Now post-Katrina, the city and surrounds are in the midst of a renaissance. "We are a blank canvas ready for an experience and an update," explains the mayor on Mobile's rebirth. With young artists and restaurateurs opening unique venues in heritage landmarks and outdoor adventurers offering sightseers thrilling safaris in the Delta, Mobile's attractions deserve a closer look.

Across Alabama discover championship golf courses in line with the best PGA-approved ones as the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail entices golfers to hit the links and save on the pocketbook. As one insider revealed, local golf courses are a real bargain, more affordable compared to similar courses elsewhere in America. "Golfers can play a week on the RTJ Golf Trail for the price of one round at Pebble Beach," says Bill Lang, the public relations director of RTJ Golf Trail and Resort Collection at the tony downtown Battle House Hotel located near two golf courses—the Magnolia Grove (25 minutes away) and the Lakewood Golf Club (a 35-minute drive).

I sussed out the old and new and took ample strolls through a compact, walkable

downtown that is a New Orleans shoe-in but without the Bourbon Street revellers, except, of course, during Mobile's Mardi Gras. Come February, the city morphs into a glitzy parade of bead-wielding celebrants who traipse down Dauphin Street past ornate wrought-iron-laced balconies and storefronts from yesteryear. There's Three Georges, a chocolate shop from 1917 with big-haired Liz behind the milkshake counter, and the city's crown jewel, the Saenger Theatre. Once hailed as "Alabama's Greatest Showplace" and "the most beautiful playhouse in all of Dixie," this exquisite vaudeville throwback (c. 1927) has been transformed into the city's finely restored concert hall where patrons can snag affordable tickets (US\$20-75) for class acts.

On my quest for the Old South in this changing landscape, it was evident how Southern hospitality remains front and centre. You hear, "Yes ma'am," as you hunker down at Panini Pete's for his "Famous Muffaletta Panino," pegged in a statewide list as among the "100 dishes to eat in Alabama before you die." It's no surprise slow and easy definitely reigns.

## ARTS WALKS

The Mobile Museum of Art is situated by Langan Park. Built with private donations, the largest gallery along the Gulf coast is devoted to international, contemporary and American art with 10,000 objects in the permanent collection, many representing the Deep South. On a gallery tour of contemporary ceramics at the American Master Crafts 1945–Present exhibition, I spotted a Dale Chihuly and a Peter Voulkos piece stacked in luminescent wood-fired stoneware entitled *Chubbs*, with other art displays from Robert Indiana to Norman Rockwell.

At the Alabama Contemporary Art Center in the heart of the city's historic downtown by Cathedral Square, gallery goers can

*OPPOSITE: The tony downtown Battle House Hotel is located near two golf courses.*

*TOP: The Alabama Contemporary Art Center is in the heart of the city's historic downtown by Cathedral Square.*

*CENTRE: The Old City Hall is now the History Museum of Mobile.*

*BOTTOM: The Mobile Museum of Art is devoted to international, contemporary and American art.*





contemplate sculptures and provocative folk art by local artists, some of whom, such as the late Thornton Dial, have rightfully gained prominence at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

From there, I popped into the Mobile Arts Council, a free gallery and cultural hub where organizations like ArtWalk, a popular downtown gallery event held on the second Friday of each month, and Alabama's Mobile Fashion Week are headquartered.

## AMERICANA

The Old City Hall houses the History Museum of Mobile where you can experience 300 years of Mobile history from the area's very first inhabitants to the present. The permanent exhibition has poignant topics devoted to Native American history, the Civil War, the slave trade and the Civil Rights Movement.

Then there were whispers of the early Canadian connection heard at Fort Conde across the street. The recreated French colony built to exact plans from 1723 shows

*TOP LEFT: WildNative Delta Safaris offers tours of Mobile's flooded prairie wetland alive with osprey, turtles and carnivorous pitcher plants.*

*TOP RIGHT: Enjoy a Muffaletta Panino at the popular Panini Pete's.*

the attention to detail of Mobile's founder, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville. "In a late-sixties dig to create the I-10 tunnel, artifacts relating to colonial life were discovered," says Scott Corcoran, a museum guide who adds that one-third of the site was rebuilt using original plans stored in Paris.

## MARITIME BASTION

With its fanciful ship façade appearing to sail into the busy Port of Mobile, the new GulfQuest National Maritime Museum is the first maritime museum dedicated to the Gulf of Mexico. A large waterfront complex, the size of nearly two football fields, it

showcases marine science and deep-sea exploration at its best.

There's a vast treasure trove of artifacts and plenty of interactive exhibits. I was fascinated by real-time shipping routes propelled on a spinning globe at the Ocean Planet Theatre and stood inside a hurricane simulator to experience wind gusts.

As the crowds dispersed inside the multi-levelled exhibits, I veered to the outdoor observation deck to see a lively scene of barges and tug boats. There, by the Mobile River's edge, stooped on wooden stumps, a flock of seagulls stood on patrol, waiting for the next big catch. Mobile is indeed a road to all kinds of riches. **DS**

## TRAVEL PLANNER

The average high temperature in winter hovers around a pleasant 17 C.

For more information on Mobile, Alabama, visit:

Alabama Tourism Department: [alabama.travel](http://alabama.travel)

Mobile Bay Convention and Visitors Bureau: [mobile.org](http://mobile.org)

Alabama Contemporary Art Center: [alabamacontemporary.com](http://alabamacontemporary.com)

History Museum of Mobile: [museumofmobile.com](http://museumofmobile.com)

Mobile Arts Council: [mobilearts.org](http://mobilearts.org)

Mobile Fashion Week: [mobfashionweek.com](http://mobfashionweek.com)

Mobile Museum of Art: [mobilemuseumofart.com](http://mobilemuseumofart.com)

Mobile Saenger Theatre: [mobilesaenger.com](http://mobilesaenger.com)

Panini Pete's: [paninipetes.com](http://paninipetes.com)

The Battle House Renaissance Mobile Hotel & Spa: [marriott.com](http://marriott.com)

Three Georges: [3georges.com](http://3georges.com)

WildNative Delta Safaris: [5rds.com](http://5rds.com)

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# Family-friendly farms and DUDE RANCHES

BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS

**F**ascinated with the American cowboy history and culture? Saddle up and hit the trails on a working ranch or dude ranch. Found in almost every state across the west, ranch experiences are also offered in states like Florida.



U.S. ranch and dude ranch stays involve a wide range of daily activities.  
Texas Tourism

## FLORIDA

Just south of Orlando, **Westgate River Ranch Resort & Rodeo** is an authentic dude ranch experience in an untouched piece of wilderness. Lodge in cowboy-themed rooms and suites, villas and spacious two-bedroom cabins, or try the new glamping sites. Activities include horseback riding, swimming, nature hikes, hayrides, cookouts and the Saturday-night championship rodeo with trick riding, bull riding, calf roping and barrel racing. Book at least seven days in advance to receive a discount of up to 25 per cent (valid until December 22).

## COLORADO

More than 30 dude ranches range from upscale resort-like properties to rustic, working ranches where guests engage in

everyday chores like herding cattle. Popular for weddings, corporate retreats and groups, **C Lazy U Luxury Guest Ranch**—the state's premiere guest ranch since 1919—provides personalized service, first-class amenities, gourmet meals and upscale accommodation. **Colorado Trails Ranch** near Durango matches guests with the perfect horse. In addition to trail riding there's fly fishing, hiking, rafting and dedicated children's programs. **Zapata Ranch** in southern Colorado combines gourmet cuisine, nature hikes, yoga sessions and guided fly-fishing excursions as well as hands-on activities like moving grass-fed cattle, monitoring bison herd health, mending fences, irrigating farmland and learning about land conservation. Check out their themed weeks on photography, calving, branding, horsemanship and painting.

## TEXAS

From traditional to sophisticated, Texas' ranch vacations entice any city slicker. The **Mayan Dude Ranch** is popular with families. Kids delight in early morning horseback rides to an abandoned ghost town where a cowboy breakfast is served. The **Silver Spur Guest Ranch** in Bandera—"the cowboy capital of the world"—offers great stays and guests love the herd of iconic longhorn cattle. For a fancy ranch experience make trails to **Dos Brisas** where guests are greeted with a bottle of wine and accommodation in plush casitas featuring beds topped with Egyptian cotton linens, well-stocked pantries and French doors opening to expansive patios. Near Houston, Texas ranch life treats guests to peace and quiet on **Lonesome Pines Ranch**, originally settled in 1823. This working ranch is home to quarter horses, American bison, abundant wildlife and one of the nation's largest registered Texas longhorn herds.

## WYOMING

Near Sheridan, **Eatons' Ranch** has helped city folk embrace the cowboy life for more than a century. This working cattle ranch is one of America's oldest dude ranches, family-owned and operated since 1879. **DS**



Discover more information on travel to the USA at [visittheusa.ca](http://visittheusa.ca).



# Seaside PLEASURES

BY STEVE WINSTON

From hip Key West and the swanky shores of the Palm Beaches to laid-back Fort Myers and Sanibel, the natural beauty of Martin County and the festivals of Daytona Beach, Florida delights all who visit.



**BACKGROUND:** Beautiful beaches on Sanibel Island are ideal for shelling, water sports and relaxation.  
*Stock Connection Blue/Alamy Stock Photo*



# Like Nowhere Else

## ON EARTH

ABOVE: A couple strolls around the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Fort Jefferson in Dry Tortugas National Park located about 113 kilometres west of Key West.

BELOW: Key lime pie is the signature dessert of the Florida Keys' culinary experience. Courtesy of The Monroe County Tourist Development Council, The Florida Keys @ Key West

If you imagine the Florida Keys as a 193-kilometre-long string of pearls, then Key West must be the crown jewel. Soaked in history, beautiful old gingerbread houses, dining establishments and family-friendly attractions, this colourful city “where the road ran out” is closer to Cuba than it is to Miami. As the coolest, funkier, most eclectic and offbeat little city in America, it promises experiences you won't find anywhere else.

### FUN AND EXPLORATION

Fort Zachary Taylor is a historic Civil War landmark. Ernest Hemingway's house is open to the public and his studio, where literary miracles were spun, is exactly as he left it. So are the “Winter White House” of President Harry Truman, and John James Audubon's residence, which displays his magnificent illustrations.

Family venues? The Key West Lighthouse and Keeper's Quarters Museum has lit the sea lanes since 1848. Kids love the Butterfly &



Nature Conservatory and the Key West Aquarium. The Key West Shipwreck Museum provides a fascinating peek into the past, when ships loaded with treasure routinely sank in the waters—some of them at the hands of local pirates. And you simply mustn't leave without photos of yourself standing at the “Southernmost Point” in the U.S.

Dining? The iconic, funky Blue Heaven serves Florida-Caribbean cuisine, and one of the best key lime pies in town. Harpoon Harry's is an old-fashioned American diner famous for its great “comfort food.” And Pepe's has been preparing delicious breakfasts and seafood dishes since 1909.

### QUINTESENTIALLY KEY WEST

The Conch Train Tour gets you around in a unique open-air vehicle. Located in Dry Tortugas National Park, on a small island in the Gulf of Mexico 113 kilometres from Key West, Civil War-era Fort Jefferson is a fascinating day trip. Then there's downtown's Duval Street, famous for its trendy shops and galleries during the day and lively music and bistros in the evening.

Perhaps the ultimate Key West experience happens at sunset at Mallory Square where locals and visitors gather at day's end for the most spectacular sunsets in America. As an iridescent sun changes colour by the minute and melts into the Gulf, fire-eaters, musicians, jugglers, stilt-walkers and other street performers entertain the crowds. **DS**

### TRAVEL PLANNER

Discover all Key West has to offer at [fla-keys.com/keywest](http://fla-keys.com/keywest) or call 1-800-527-8539.

[VISITFLORIDA.COM](http://VISITFLORIDA.COM)

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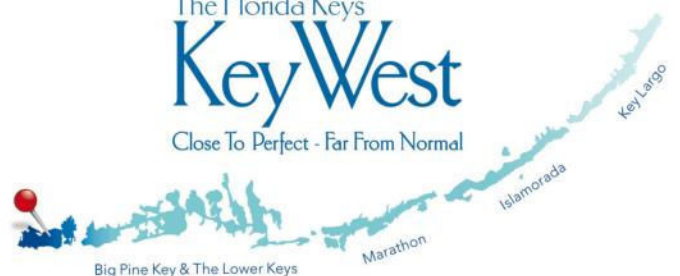


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The Florida Keys  
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# From the Beaches

## TO THE 'GLADES

**P**alm Beach County's 5,957 square kilometres encompass a stunning diversity of things to experience. Along the Atlantic coast you'll find 75 kilometres of world-class beaches and upscale downtowns such as Boca Raton, Delray Beach and Palm Beach, while the western edge of the county is dotted with rural communities along Lake Okeechobee, where fishing is outstanding. In between, there are 200 cultural attractions, 160 golf courses and a seasonal calendar bursting with exciting events.

### URBAN CENTRES

West Palm Beach is the county's urban anchor, where nightlife thrives along Clematis Street and at CityPlace. Across the Intracoastal Waterway, Palm Beach—perhaps America's swankiest address—has an array of shops, restaurants and artists' studios nestled within leafy courtyards on Worth Avenue.



Boca Raton, with its Mizner Park shops and restaurants, is undergoing a true urban renaissance. Delray Beach has already experienced a stunning downtown revival, and Atlantic Avenue overflows with bistros, interesting shops and a non-stop parade of people at night.

**LEFT:** The Palm Beaches features 75 kilometres of world-class beaches.

**BOTTOM:** CityPlace is the premier shopping, dining and entertainment destination in West Palm Beach. *Discover The Palm Beaches*

Lake Worth's downtown boasts trendy arts venues and street art. And North County has the vibrant towns of Jupiter on the beach and Palm Beach Gardens featuring the Gardens Mall.

### TAKE IT OUTDOORS

The Palm Beaches' natural side shines at places like Gumbo Limbo Nature Center, the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge and the Okeetee Nature Center, where you'll find wildlife, hike along nature trails and luxuriate in the beauty and silence.

The Palm Beach Food & Wine Fest in early December, followed by the Holiday Boat Parade, kick off a roster of exciting events. On December 20, the Marmot Boca Raton Bowl matches two great college football teams in Boca Raton. The colourful South Florida Fair runs from January 13–29. ArtPalmBeach and FOTOfusion also take place in January, which is when the Palm Beach International Polo Season begins.

In February, golfing legends compete at the Allianz Championship and the Honda Classic and the Delray Beach Open tennis competition takes place. Festival of the Arts BOCA, from March 2–12, and the Delray Affair, from April 7–9, are two of South Florida's signature cultural events. And SunFest, Florida's largest waterfront music and art festival, showcases world-famous acts from May 3–7. **DS**

### TRAVEL PLANNER

Explore all the options The Palm Beaches has to offer at [thepalmbeaches.com](http://thepalmbeaches.com).

[VISITFLORIDA.COM](http://VISITFLORIDA.COM)



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Search for natural treasures on Sanibel Island.  
[FortMyers-Sanibel.com](http://FortMyers-Sanibel.com)

The Great Calusa Blueway Paddling Trail features more than 306 kilometres of some of the best kayaking in the country. Paddle among tropical hammocks and mangroves and inlets as you observe wildlife in the water and around you.

There are more than 90 golf courses in the area as well and the fishing is world-class.

### TAKE IN THE SIGHTS

Fort Myers is also where two great geniuses (and best friends), Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, built adjoining winter homes on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River. Today, you can see their homes, gardens, Edison's laboratory and Ford's collection of (now) antique autos.

There are no stoplights on Sanibel and Captiva islands. Nor are there any buildings higher than the tallest palm tree (about three storeys high) on Sanibel. But you will find laid-back village centres with unique shops and restaurants. Hop aboard a sightseeing boat destined for offshore islands like Cabbage Key or Pine Island, where old-time inns and atmospheric restaurants await your arrival.

Winter ushers in a season of wonderful festivals and events. For instance, ArtFest Fort Myers takes place downtown on February 4–5. The 79<sup>th</sup> Annual Edison Festival of Light Grand Parade is happening in Fort Myers on February 18 and the 80<sup>th</sup> Annual Sanibel Shell Fair & Show on Sanibel Island is scheduled for March 2–4.

On the Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel, the pleasures are sweeter and the pace is more relaxed. A word of warning: you may never want to leave. 

### TRAVEL PLANNER

Start planning your escape to paradise at  
[FortMyers-Sanibel.com](http://FortMyers-Sanibel.com).

[VISITFLORIDA.COM](http://VISITFLORIDA.COM)

*Sweet*

# SENSATIONS

**T**he Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel is a place in Southwest Florida that isn't overrun by tourists. A place where timeless natural beauty still flourishes. Where history comes alive. Where surprising experiences are the norm.

### A NATURAL HAVEN

The area boasts 80 kilometres of beaches listed among the best in America as well as the

finest shell collection on Earth. In fact, during the early morning hours on Sanibel Island, you'll likely see people doing the "Sanibel stoop" as they search for treasures among the large collection of beautiful seashells.

Here, you can also still enjoy unspoiled natural surroundings, such as the 26-square-kilometre J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, teeming with some of the most diverse wildlife in America.

NO 50

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# Sun, Sand and SO MUCH MORE!

funky shops while the historic downtown also offers a bounty of special boutiques and restaurants.

Excitement continues to unfold. The area recently became a hotbed of innovative craft-beer brewers; follow the Daytona Beach Ale Trail to experience them. A new Tanger Outlets Mall is scheduled to open in November. And the Cici and Hyatt Brown Museum of Art—with its largest repository of Florida art in the world—recently opened.

This winter and spring, the event calendar overflows. The Holiday Season kicks off November 24–27 with the much-anticipated Turkey Run, showcasing thousands of classic cars. Then, from December 1–4, the Ferrari World Finals takes place here for the first time in America. On December 8,

the Smithsonian-affiliated Museum of Arts & Sciences stages its Roaring 20s Flapper event while the Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse, Florida’s tallest, holds its “Climb to the Moon” event on December 13. And the Stetson Mansion—built by the man who gave us the Stetson hat and open year-round—hosts Christmas Spectacular Tours through January 15. **DS**

Relax on Daytona Beach’s white sandy beaches during its festival season.  
Daytona Beach Area Convention @ Visitors Bureau

## TRAVEL PLANNER

Plan your next getaway to Daytona Beach at [daytonabeach.com](http://daytonabeach.com).

[VISITFLORIDA.COM](http://VISITFLORIDA.COM)

**R**enowned for its Speedway, colourful history, world-class cultural amenities and numerous year-round golf courses, Daytona Beach is gearing up for a non-stop slate of great festivals.

Blessed with 37 kilometres of hard-packed beaches, Daytona Beach’s famous Boardwalk is lined with amusement and



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# Untouched

## BY TIME

A surfer checks out the wave action at Hobe Sound Beach in Martin County. Discover Martin

**M**artin County—"Sailfish Capital of the World"—is a slice of authentic Florida. Here, you'll find colourful small-town festivals like Jensen Beach's Pineapple Festival and Port Salerno's Seafood Festival.

The county's largest town, Stuart, has a downtown restored to its original 1920s

look, featuring born-again art-deco landmarks such as the Lyric Theatre. Century-old buildings with balconies line Osceola Street. Nearby, you'll discover interesting art galleries—even one with hundreds of pennies forming part of the floor. You'll find art at the Stuart Coffee Company, and the Rare Earth Gallery sells innovative carvings, paintings,

pottery and antique-like kaleidoscopes. Afterwards, you'll probably find yourself indulging in mouth-watering treats at Hoffman's Chocolates. Turn the corner, and you'll come upon the Old Colorado Inn, a striking pastel-yellow-and-peach hotel.

At the Stuart Green Market, wander among aisles overflowing with local produce, home-baked goodies, natural soaps, artisanal cheeses, honey, wooden carvings, paintings, and, often, musicians. On warm evenings, saunter along the beautiful Riverwalk bordering the St. Lucie River to take in the lights and serene surroundings.

Yes, small-town America is alive and well in Martin County. **DS**

### TRAVEL PLANNER

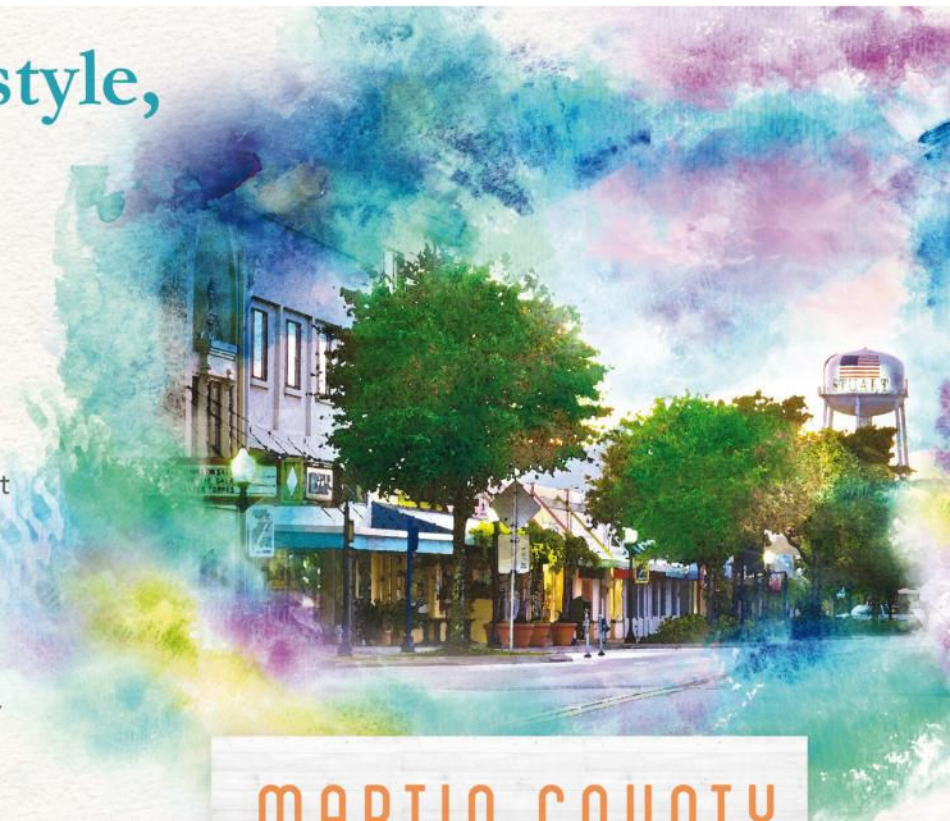
See what makes Martin County so special at [discovermartin.com](http://discovermartin.com).

[VISITFLORIDA.COM](http://VISITFLORIDA.COM)

## Of-the-moment style, Old Florida feel.

Named Coastal Living's **Happiest Seaside Town for 2016**, Martin County has natural beaches, picturesque parks, scenic drives, and stylish shopping and dining to match. From waterfront views to alfresco dining, art galleries to cozy cafes, delightful shops and charming boutiques, we've got fine dining and shopping to satisfy every whim, served with a side of laid-back southern hospitality. It's a hometown touch that can't be beat, and just part of what makes Martin County, Florida naturally quaint.

Plan your trip at [discovermartin.com](http://discovermartin.com)



MARTIN COUNTY

Florida



# CARIBBEAN CRUSH

NOBODY KNOWS FOR SURE WHEN  
AND WHERE GOLF WAS INVENTED.

BY IAN CRUICKSHANK

**B**est guess is about 700 years ago, somewhere in Scotland when a couple of windswept and rain-soaked farmers inverted their crooks and knocked sheep dung into sandy rabbit holes. Not very romantic.

Those early Scottish golfers would flip their kilts if they could see how the game has been transformed, especially in the Caribbean, home to more than 50 of the world's most stunning layouts. Courses in the Caribbean wind past jumbles of jasmine, through dense jungles, along sugar-white beaches edged in blue, blue seas, and all bathed in soothing sunshine. There are plenty of idyllic islands and courses from which to choose. Here are some of the best.

## DOMINICAN DELIGHT

For a small spot, the Dominican Republic is a big-time player in the golf world. There are more than 20 courses sprinkled across the country. The ominous sounding Teeth of the Dog course at the Casa de Campo resort is considered one of the best warm-weather layouts in the world.

For pure looks though, it's hard to beat the Punta Espada course at the Cap Cana resort on the eastern edge of the country. Designed by Jack Nicklaus, the course bends down to the edge of the Caribbean Sea, with white water spraying up across the jagged coral coastline. Make sure to have a chat with your caddie during the round. My caddie, Melvin, was a big fan of the Blue



Jays, especially slugger Edwin Encarnacion, a proud Dominican. However, even with the recent changes, Melvin wasn't so sure about the Maple Leafs' chances this year.

## A CANADIAN CONNECTION

Toronto golf course architect Tom McBroom has laid out golf courses from China to Finland. (He got the design job in Helsinki after

meeting some golf-mad Finns at one of his son's hockey tournaments.) His prettiest project though is Royal St. Kitts, which made its debut in October 2004 and is part of a Marriott hotel and casino complex, which is perched above the beach. Stretching over 6,900 yards from the tips, the course runs east to the water and then north toward the island's mountain range, rising up through

the foothills. A handful of fairways zigzag along the water, with a couple of holes on the front nine edging the Caribbean Sea and a series of holes on the back nine sitting on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean.

### DOWN BY THE BAY

Originally opened as a Four Seasons property, the Sandals Emerald Bay Golf, Tennis &



*ABOVE: The Sandals Emerald Bay Golf, Tennis & Spa Resort on Exuma Island in the Bahamas is home to a terrific Greg Norman-designed course.*  
Courtesy of Sandals

*RIGHT: The CuisinArt Golf Resort & Spa features the only golf course on Anguilla.*  
Courtesy of CuisinArt Resort in Anguilla

Spa Resort is now one of Sandals' most popular spots. It's easy to see why.

The Bahamian resort is fronted by a long, fluffy stretch of sand that overlooks an azure-tinged sea. The resort is also home to a terrific Greg Norman-designed course. It starts slowly, moving through a mangrove preserve but picks up momentum on the back nine with half a dozen holes clinging to the rocky cliffs that are pounded by the white surf. As a bonus, the resort can be reached by direct flights from Toronto.

### MONKEY BUSINESS

The No. 1 destination for golfing monkey business in the Caribbean has to be Barbados. After all, it's home to both the highly ranked Green Monkey course at the tony Sandy Lane resort and the popular layout at the Apes Hill Club.

Both courses sport dramatic settings, curling through the palm trees and jungle and across former quarries. Green Monkey takes its name from the colonies of fuzzy primates that chatter and scamper along the west coast of Barbados—they arrived on the island on board slave ships from West Africa. The monkeys thrive on the local fruit

and seem to take great delight in watching hackers slice balls into the bushes.

### KITCHEN COUNTER

Cuisinart is famous for its kitchen appliances—everything from blenders to breadmakers. More recently, it has expanded its menu to include a golf course.

The company owns the CuisinArt Golf Resort & Spa, on the tiny island of Anguilla, a British dependent territory tucked next to St. Maarten. The resort is home to the only golf course on the island, a very fine Greg Norman-designed layout that stretches more than 7,000 yards and zigzags between salt water lagoons. The first hole is a knockout—a par four that heads straight for the Caribbean Sea, with the mountains of nearby St. Maarten poking up on the horizon.

### CELEBRITY HANGOUT

Many members of the rich-and-famous set have homes in the Caribbean but you're not likely to run into Johnny Depp, who owns a private island in the Bahamas. You are, however, likely to bump into a paparazzi favourite on the putting green at the Ocean





**TOP LEFT:** The Abaco Club on Winding Bay in the Bahamas allows non-club members the chance to come and stay and play.

Courtesy of Spicers Balfour Hotel

**BELOW:** A couple of holes on the front nine at the Royal St. Kitts edge the Caribbean Sea while a series of holes on the back nine flank the Atlantic shores.

Courtesy of Royal St. Kitts

Cinnamon Hill Golf Course on Jamaica's Montego Bay. MoBay is dotted with terrific golf. Within a five-minute radius of Cinnamon Hill are another three courses—White Witch, Half Moon and Ironshore. A fourth course, Tryall is about 35 minutes away on the other side of the bay.

### CUBAN FLAVOUR

Good golf is all about rhythm so it was fitting to find a good course in Cuba. After all, this is the place where the cha-cha, mambo and bolero first crossed the dance floor and where such dreamy cocktails as the daiquiri, mojito and Cuba libre were invented.

The Varadero golf course in Cuba was designed by Canadian Les Furber. It begins gently but on the back nine, Furber turns the screws, making golfers hit ticklish shots over salt water ponds. Even if you don't play, check out the clubhouse. Built in the 1920s by the head of the wealthy DuPont family, Xanadú was a three-storey dream house perched on the crags overlooking the beach. The family lived in the home for more than 30 years and today it doubles as the clubhouse with a bar and restaurant, which is open to both golfers and non-players. **DS**

Club on Paradise Island in the Bahamas. The Tom Weiskopf-designed course is open to golfers staying at the adjoining One&Only Ocean Club Resort or the nearby Atlantis Resort.

Ranked as one of the very best courses in the Caribbean, this eye-candy layout juts out along a stunning peninsula. For several years the course hosted Michael Jordan's Celebrity Golf Tournament where guests ranged from Bill Clinton and Boris Becker to Wayne Gretzky and John McEnroe. If you have time, check out the local real estate scene. Last time I was in the area, I saw a listing for a US\$20-million home—fortunately the price included dockage for a 35-metre yacht.

### A PRIVATE HIDEAWAY

The Abaco Club on Winding Bay is another Bahamas location that boasts super model looks. A private, international sporting club and residential community that allows non-club members the chance to come and stay and play, the Club is home to a links-style layout designed by Donald Steel and Scott Mackenzie. (Steel is best known in Canada for his design of Redtail Golf Course, an exclusive layout tucked quietly away in horse and farm country around St. Thomas, Ontario. Guests at the Ontario club have ranged from Sean Connery to Queen Elizabeth.)

The course at the Abaco Club is strong all the way through and is punctuated by a



couple of stunning par threes on both nines. After the round, golfers unwind at the Club's glistening white beachfront, which stretches out for three kilometres.

### JAMAICAN JOY

The first time I went to Jamaica, I snuck away from my foursome, found a piece of virgin sand, snapped open a Red Stripe beer and cranked up Bob Marley on my iPod. Bob promised me that, "Everything's gonna be alright" and I believed him.

Eventually though, I did rouse myself long enough to rejoin my pals for a round at

## TRAVEL PLANNER

For more information on the Caribbean's classic courses and stay and play packages, try the following sites:

Atlantis, Bahamas: [atlantisbahamas.com](http://atlantisbahamas.com)

Cap Cana, Dominican Republic: [capcana.com](http://capcana.com)

Casa de Campo Resort & Villas, Dominican Republic: [casadecampo.com.do](http://casadecampo.com.do)

CuisinArt Golf Resort & Spa, Anguilla: [cuisinartresort.com](http://cuisinartresort.com)

Royal St. Kitts Golf Club: [royalstkittsgolfclub.com](http://royalstkittsgolfclub.com)

Sandals Emerald Bay, Bahamas: [sandals.com](http://sandals.com)

Sandy Lane, Barbados: [sandylane.com](http://sandylane.com)

The Abaco Club on Winding Bay, Bahamas: [theabacoclub.com](http://theabacoclub.com)

Varadero Golf Club: [varaderogolfclub.com](http://varaderogolfclub.com)

The Ultimate Caribbean

# BUCKET LIST: 5 ADVENTURES OF A LIFETIME

But where do you start? Get an expert guide! Pre-booking with a reliable tour company is one of the best tips for Caribbean adventure-seekers. With Island Routes Caribbean Adventures you don't have to worry about a thing. *The World's Leading Caribbean Attraction Company* always includes round-trip transportation, expert local guides, flexible booking policies and the highest safety standards in the industry.

Then it's time to create the ultimate bucket list! There's plenty to choose from in the Caribbean, but here's five must-do experiences to add to your list:

## 1. Time travel in Jamaica.

At the **River Bumpkin Farm** you'll feel like you've stepped back in time and totally disconnected. Explore the lush Jamaican countryside, discover 18th century sugar plantation ruins, enjoy eco-adventures along the Martha Brae River and sip on fresh coconuts.

## 2. Hike the Pitons in Saint Lucia.

**Hiking the Pitons** is not for the faint hearted. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Saint Lucia's famous twin peaks rise nearly 3,000 feet above sea level. The trek up Gros Piton, with its snaking, misty, jungle-covered trail, reveals the most breathtaking views of the island!

## 3. Go conch hunting in Turks & Caicos.

**The Provo Cays Exploration** takes you for some snorkeling, exploring, and hunting for Caribbean conch! Last stop is a secluded beach where you'll enjoy a seaside BBQ featuring delicious, fresh Caribbean conch.

## 4. Swim with pigs in Great Exuma, Bahamas.

You heard right! **The Exuma Cays Ocean Safari** takes you aboard a power-cat to explore spectacular sights, including 'Pig Beach,' (a secluded cay only accessible by boat!), where you can swim, feed and take selfies with The Bahamas' most famous inhabitants.

## 5. Cruise the coastline.

No matter which destination you're in, you can't visit the Caribbean without taking a **Catamaran Cruise**. It's what the islands are known for; sun, sand, sea, snorkeling and great vibes. It's an adventure not to be missed.

FOR MORE INFO ON THESE TOURS OR TO CREATE YOUR ULTIMATE CARIBBEAN GETAWAY, VISIT [ISLANDROUTES.COM](http://ISLANDROUTES.COM) OR CALL A CARIBBEAN SPECIALIST AT 1-877-768-8370.





TOP: Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota. Mall of America

ABOVE: Yorkdale, Toronto. Yorkdale Shopping Centre

OPPOSITE BOTTOM LEFT: Tysons in McLean, Virginia. © TimeLine Media, LLC

OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT: Aventura Mall, Miami. Aventura Mall

# SHOP 'TIL YOU DROP

Even if we're not looking to buy something, time spent browsing through shops, vendors' kiosks and market stalls away from home is an illuminating window into local culture. During such times we are likely to find a meaningful souvenir, the value of which is not measured only by cost, but also by circumstance.

Take the story, for example, of a now-favourite ski jacket that had to be purchased in Arizona when the visitor found out there are, indeed, February snowstorms in the higher elevations of the sun-baked state. Or how about those theatre ticket stubs, now treasured because they were purchased in Covent Garden for *My Fair Lady*, the very London neighbourhood where the story is based? Or from Israel, the simplest menorah brought back home will always have a deeper meaning, similar to those one-dollar candles from Bethlehem.

A different kind of emotion may also spring up, such as the utter thrill that comes from bargain hunting for luxuries and essentials on a shop-'til-you-drop excursion. Everything one brings back, after all, is a chosen souvenir.

Destination shopping trips, you may have noticed, are not in short supply. Mega-mall entertainment complexes are now a worldwide phenomenon, indeed with the

prototype West Edmonton Mall ([wem.ca](http://wem.ca)) originating here in Canada, followed a decade later in Minnesota by Mall of America ([mallofamerica.com](http://mallofamerica.com)). Here are a few other North American dazzlers worthy of your time:

## OTTAWA

Sales Tax: 13%

Explore: CF RIDEAU CENTRE

Just a few minutes' walk from the Parliament Buildings, the Cadillac Fairview-managed Rideau Centre is finishing up a glamorous redevelopment and expansion to now include a four-level experience with new quartz flooring, enhanced lighting, glass guardrails as well as a movie theatre, hotel, rooftop garden and an indoor parking garage. Its exclusive lineup of 180 retailers now includes the arrival of Nordstrom. Right next door, the ByWard Market is one of Canada's largest open-air city-centre bazaars with an abundance of lifestyle items. [cfshops.com/rideau-centre.html](http://cfshops.com/rideau-centre.html)

## TORONTO

Sales Tax: 13%

Explore: YORKDALE SHOPPING CENTRE

Just 30 minutes by subway (or highway) from any downtown location, Yorkdale's interior makeover features a soaring 18-metre-high glass atrium with so many oversized, eye-popping accents, the entire decor lifts the spirits with one step inside.

This year another wing opened on October 18 adding 30 new stores to its collection of 240 retailers—and this includes a 17,000-square-metre Nordstrom. [yorkdale.com](http://yorkdale.com)

## PENNSYLVANIA

**Sales Tax:** 6% (groceries, clothing, prescription and non-prescription drugs are exempt)

**Explore:** KING OF PRUSSIA MALL

Operated by retail giant Simon and accessible by transit, the King of Prussia Mall is located in a suburb of Philadelphia. Assuring shoppers of vast selections for every budget, under one roof and among almost 400 other retailers, you will find JC Penny, Nordstrom, Macy's, Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdales, Lord & Taylor, Jimmy Choo shoes, plus three food courts and several sit-down restaurants featuring a variety of international cuisine. [simon.com/mall/king-of-prussia](http://simon.com/mall/king-of-prussia)

## VIRGINIA

**Sales Tax:** 6%

**Explore:** TYSONS CORNER CENTRE

Located in McLean, Virginia, next door to Washington, D.C., this brand new shop-

ping complex is just one component of the developer's "mixed-use community." Tysons is a futuristic model that consists of 300 top-in-class retailers and restaurants, the Hyatt Regency hotel, an office tower and high-rise apartments. It is connected to the D.C. "beltway" by subway and is owned and operated by Macerich. [tysonscornercenter.com](http://tysonscornercenter.com)

## FLORIDA

**Sales Tax:** 6%

**Explore:** AVENTURA MALL

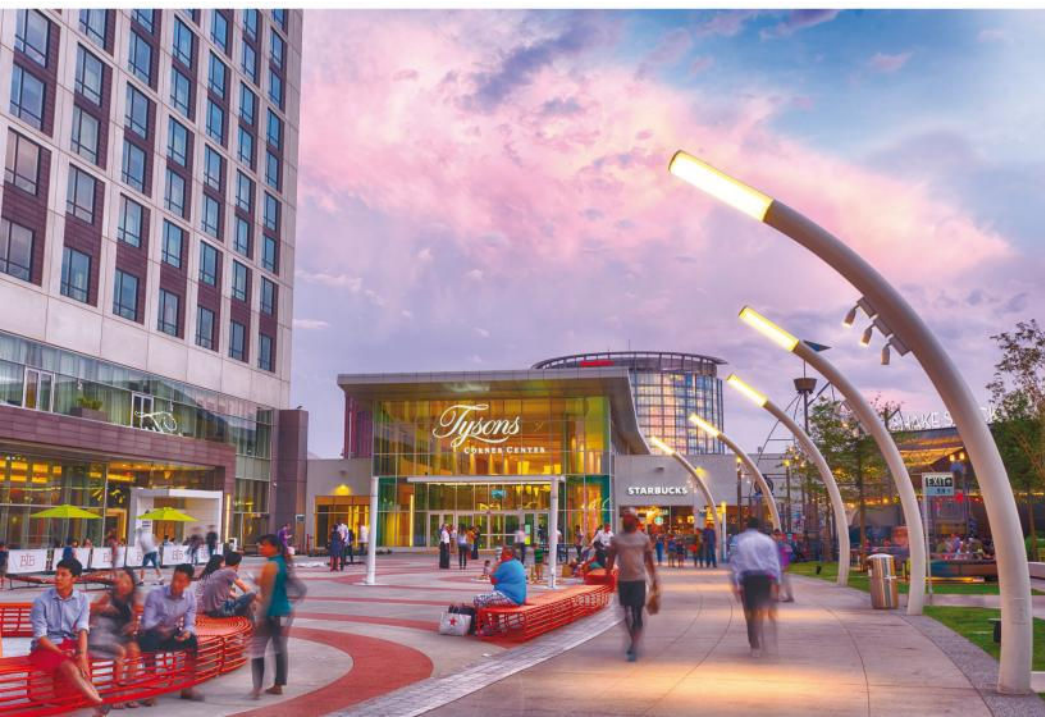
With an array of impressive brands, Aventura Mall has it all. Anchored by Nordstrom and Bloomingdale's, the centre features more than 300 of the world's most renowned retailers and a collection of luxury boutiques including Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Givenchy and Fendi. And Aventura Mall's about to get even better. Scheduled to open in late 2017, a new expansion wing will showcase more restaurants, additional retail stores, a rooftop terrace and more. Inquire about the MasterCard Visitor Center and valet service for VIP recognition and access to special promotions. [aventuramall.com](http://aventuramall.com) 



# USA SHOPPING TIPS

The buying power of the Canadian dollar may not be the best, nor is it the worst it's been in recent years. To determine the value of a deal south of the border, be sure to:

- Add the exchange rate to any U.S. price tag. If on the day you shop, for example, the Canadian dollar is pegged at US \$0.77, then an item priced at US\$100 would equal CDN\$130.
- Consider the sales tax differential, as well, to determine the value of any deal. There is no federal sales tax in the USA, only state and municipal taxes. On average, therefore, the tax is roughly half that charged in Canada. Unlike Europe, it is not common for U.S. states to refund sales tax to tourists, but specifics in your destination are online at [statelocalgov.net](http://statelocalgov.net).
- Know the terms of your allowances, exemptions and duty-free tax ceiling for re-entering Canada. Visit [travel.gc.ca](http://travel.gc.ca).
- Buy items with a tag that proves they were made in the USA, Mexico or Canada. As long as those items are for personal use, they won't affect your duty-free ceiling although you will have to pay the applicable GST/HST.





SAWGRASS MILLS

When it comes to shopping for bargains, Florida is hard to beat. A landmark in the city of Sunrise and convenient to anyone staying in Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Hollywood, the Simon-operated Sawgrass Mills is known as the “largest outlet and value shopping destination in the United States.” Among the resident 350 indoor and outdoor retailers are wholesale outlets for Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren, the Gap and more, as well as ongoing bargains on high fashion, electronics, jewellery, sporting equipment, beauty products and home furnishings. And the sales tax is only 6 per cent. [simon.com/mall/sawgrass-mills](http://simon.com/mall/sawgrass-mills)

The ancient seaport of Akko, located on Israel’s northern Mediterranean shore, has been restored as a place of beauty, history and culture. For centuries, the walled city was the main port between Europe and the Holy Land. Below the city stands the Crusader Fortress, now the site of concerts, theatrical performances and the new Knight’s Experience featuring a jousting tournament, feast and show. Stay in a 1785 Khan, once an inn for caravans that’s now a hotel. Walk along streets filled with shops and restaurants and explore the Old City, where Jews, Arabs, Muslims and Christians live and work together. [akko.org.il/en/](http://akko.org.il/en/)



ROSTISLAV GLINSKY/SHUTTERSTOCK



COURTESY DOMINICAN REPUBLIC MINISTRY OF TOURISM

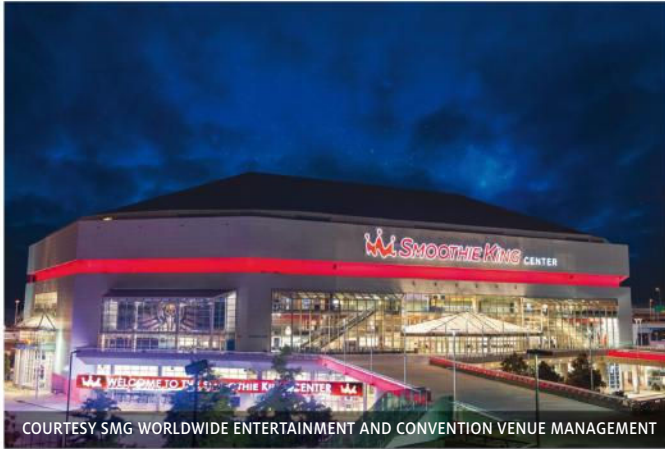
From trekking in lush mountains to scuba diving in turquoise waters, the Dominican Republic is the perfect place to reconnect with nature. The island is also famous for fresh seafood. The calm waters of the southwest are home to mackerel, mahi mahi and snapper, and don’t miss succulent local crab, shrimp served in rich coconut sauce, fried fish with fried green plantains and steaming hot boiled lobster, available all around the island. [GoDominicanRepublic.com](http://GoDominicanRepublic.com)

Ottawa’s lively ByWard Market area is home to a brand new Andaz Hotel, owned by Hyatt. The modern hotel features bright, spacious rooms that overlook the market, the Parliament Buildings and the Gatineau Hills. Special touches include local artwork on the walls, complimentary Wi-Fi and a minibar with snacks and non-alcoholic beverages, luxurious bed linens and unlimited local calls. Art museums, the Parliament Buildings, boutiques and restaurants are all within easy walking distance. The hotel itself boasts a farm-to-table restaurant and a rooftop bar and lounge with an outdoor terrace. [ottawa.andaz.hyatt.com](http://ottawa.andaz.hyatt.com)



COURTESY ANDAZ OTTAWA BYWARD MARKET





COURTESY SMG WORLDWIDE ENTERTAINMENT AND CONVENTION VENUE MANAGEMENT

New Orleans is set to host the 66<sup>th</sup> NBA All-Star game on Sunday, February 19, during Mardi Gras celebrations, at the Smoothie King Center, home of the New Orleans Pelicans. In addition to the game, the Center will host the BBVA Compass Rising Stars Challenge on February 17 and the State Farm All-Star Saturday Night February 18. The NBA All-Star Practice, NBA All-Star Celebrity Game and NBA Development League All-Star Game will take place at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome. This marks the third time the Crescent City has been the site of the league's annual mid-season celebration. [allstarweekendneworleans2017.com](http://allstarweekendneworleans2017.com)



COURTESY INSIGHT VACATIONS

Canada's favourite green thumb, Frank Ferragine, has partnered with Insight Vacations on a new 11-day tour in May 2017 with fellow Canadians to some of his favourite European cities and gardens. Stops include the Aalsmeer Flower Auction in Amsterdam (where Ferragine once bid for flowers), the gardens of Versailles, Monet's garden in Giverny, a canal cruise in Bruges and a full day at the Chelsea Flower Show in London. [insightvacations.com](http://insightvacations.com)

Beginning November 21, Celestyal Cruises, based in Greece, will sail year-round in Cuba. Over the next year, the *Celestyal Crystal* will sail seven-night all-inclusive cruises that include two days in Havana and a call at Punta Frances, a lush inlet on the secluded Isle of Youth, which is ideal for swimming, sunbathing and snorkelling. Passengers will also visit historic Cienfuegos and Santiago de Cuba. The cruise will embark every Monday from Havana, and every Friday from Montego Bay, Jamaica. [celestyalcruises.com](http://celestyalcruises.com)



COURTESY CELESTYAL CRUISES

Scheduled to open in November 2016 and just 35 minutes from Los Cabos International Airport, the US\$150-million Grand Velas Los Cabos luxury resort on Mexico's Baja Peninsula goes beyond all-inclusive with five gourmet specialty restaurants, 306 oversized designer suites with private terraces and personal plunge pools, dramatic ocean views and a Leading Spa of the World with a staff ratio of 3 to 1. Located between Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo, Grand Velas also features a Life Fitness Center with personal trainers, exercise programs, yoga, Pilates and meditation, plus separate programs for kids and teens. [grandvelas.com](http://grandvelas.com)



GRAND VELAS CABOS



COURTESY DISNEYLAND

Canadians heading to the Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, California, can take advantage of special savings on multi-day tickets and upgrades to Park Hopper, Water Park fun and more. Save 25 per cent on four-day or longer tickets and enjoy all four Disney theme parks. A four-day adult base ticket, regularly US\$325 (plus tax), is now US\$244. This offer is good until February 28, 2017, on tickets purchased in advance. To redeem, guests must present a valid Canadian passport or proof of Canadian residency. These discounted tickets won't expire and can be used any time. [Disneyworld.ca/Tickets](http://Disneyworld.ca/Tickets)



COURTESY CALGARY INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Hainan Airlines now offers non-stop service three times a week from Calgary to Beijing, the first direct air connection between Alberta and China. To inaugurate the route, the airline donated \$37,500 to the Fort McMurray Canadian Red Cross Relief Fund. The new route is expected to benefit the Alberta economy through increased tourism. Hainan has been flying from Toronto to Beijing since 2010. [hainanairlines.com](http://hainanairlines.com)

Mangos Jamaica, Jamaica's newest boutique beach resort, offers an adults-only, all-inclusive retreat for couples looking for an authentic taste of Jamaica or a great escape for friends. The 96-room resort, located 30 minutes from Montego Bay, features spacious guest rooms arranged in low-rise wooden buildings with either a pool, beach or lush tropical garden view. Four bars serve premium brand drinks, and four restaurants offer casual or more formal dining options. After dinner, sample local rums and enjoy entertainment at the Handbags and Gladrags Piano Bar. Spa services are also available at an additional charge. [mangosjamaica.com](http://mangosjamaica.com)



COURTESY MANGOS JAMAICA

Since the tragedy of 9/11, Lower Manhattan has been transformed into an exciting new destination. New hotels include The Beekman, a Thompson Hotel, and the luxurious Four Seasons New York Downtown, featuring CUT by star chef Wolfgang Puck. The Westfield World Trade Center shopping complex has also just opened, with more stores expected by year's end. The exciting and delicious Eataly NYC Downtown Italian marketplace is now open at 4 World Trade Center. The World Trade Center Transportation Hub, housed under the Oculus by Santiago Calatrava, connects visitors seamlessly to 11 subway lines. Towering above the area is the 541-metre One World Trade Center, the tallest building in the western hemisphere and home to One World Observatory. [nycgo.com](http://nycgo.com)



JULIENNE SCHAEER

# DOLLY PARTON, AHOY!

To some, being “the most honoured female country performer of all time,” would be accomplishment enough. However, for Dolly Parton, whose credits include 25 songs that reached No. 1 on the Billboard country charts, that’s no reason to slow down. Let’s just say she works beyond “9 to 5” (to borrow the title of one of her hit songs).

The singer has written books, starred in movies and even ventured into tourism. In her home state of Tennessee, there’s the Dollywood theme park, Dollywood’s Splash Country (a waterpark), and adjacent to it, the new Dollywood’s DreamMore Resort.

## AN ACTION-PACKED SPECTACLE

In Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Parton is behind something completely different—the Pirates Voyage Dinner & Show, which opened in 2011 and features epic battles between pirates like Blackbeard and Calico Jack who once sailed the Carolina coast searching for treasure.

Parton is impressed by the acrobatics and apparently so are hundreds of tourists who, each night, attend the performance, rated the No. 1 show in Myrtle Beach. The massive set includes two full-sized pirate ships and a lagoon, which I later learned was 4.6 metres deep. Good thing as there were plenty of high dives from the ship’s masts.

We took our seats in the front row as servers came around with a four-course feast that included half a roasted cackler chicken, BBQ pork and apple pie for dessert. Often I wasn’t sure where to focus my attention—dinner or the show, which delivered 90 minutes of



non-stop action ranging from aerial feats and sword fights to fires and the appearance of two enormous and crafty sea lions, one of which nearly splashed us a few times.

The show, judging by the audience, appeals not only to families but couples and groups of friends as well. Those with youngsters will want to arrive at least an hour early for the interactive experience in the Pirates Village (included in the price of admission).

Meanwhile Dolly Parton fans may be interested in knowing the singer collaborated with Mark Bryner to write the musical score for the show and wrote several songs including “Sailor’s Leave,” which plays as the mermaids perform on the trapeze above the audience.



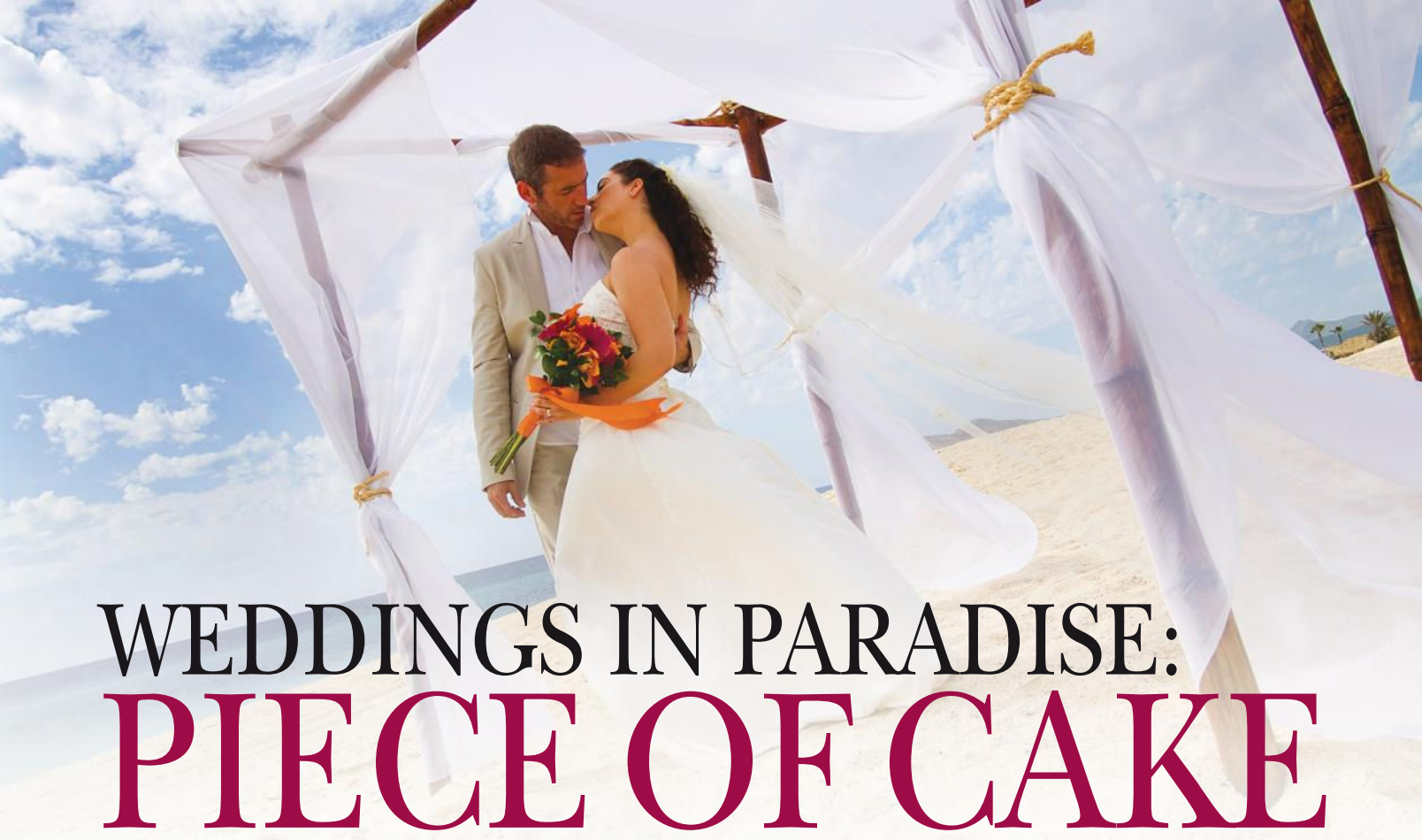
TOP: The Pirates Voyage Dinner @ Show is an action-packed performance for all ages. Pirate’s Voyage Publicity

ABOVE: The on-site souvenir shop sells a variety of items. Diane Slawych

On exiting the theatre, there was Dolly, or at least a large poster of her, dressed in authentic pirate garb and smiling with the greeting below that said: “Safe sailing!” DS

## TRAVEL PLANNER

The Pirates Voyage Dinner & Show ([piratesvoyage.com](http://piratesvoyage.com)) runs most nights throughout the year in a fully accessible theatre. Vegetarian meals are arranged with advance notice. Porter Airlines ([flyporter.com](http://flyporter.com)) flies from Toronto to Myrtle Beach up to five times weekly from February to May. At other times of the year, WestJet operates direct flights between Toronto and Myrtle Beach. Rates at the Springmaid Beach Resort start at US\$179.



# WEDDINGS IN PARADISE: PIECE OF CAKE

BY E. LISA MOSES

A SMARTLY DRESSED MONKEY WALKS A GROOM DOWN THE AISLE. IN ANOTHER WEDDING, A GROOM PARASAILS ONTO THE BEACH WHILE THE BRIDE ARRIVES BY BOAT. SEVERAL DAYS LATER, TWO BRIDES, BOTH HAVING SAID “YES” TO THE DRESS, SWISH DOWN A SANDY AISLE IN A CLOUD OF WHITE.

TOP: *Paradisus Resorts by Meliá* redefine romance. Meliá Hotels International

OPPOSITE TOP: *Couples can enjoy relaxation therapy at the resort’s signature YHI Spa.* Paradisus Cancun

OPPOSITE CENTRE: *Paradisus Resorts offer a spacious bridal suite for fittings, makeup, esthetics and bonding time.* Paradisus Playa del Carmen

**P**aradisus Resorts by Spain-based Meliá Hotels International bend over backwards to ensure couples win big in the romance department—whether it’s weddings, elopements, honeymoons or anniversaries. Packages with names such as Chill-Out Chic, Allure and Fantasy start the imagination rolling toward distinctive events. And the resorts’ romance managers and co-ordinators help make those visions come true.

On a recent girls’ getaway to the all-inclusive Paradisus Resorts in Playa del Carmen and Cancun on Mexico’s Riviera Maya, I met with several romance staff for a sneak peek into what’s happening and what’s possible.

## GETTING STARTED

Alain Velázquez Meléndez, romance manager at Paradisus Playa del Carmen, reports the most popular of their five packages is the Caribbean Sea-themed *Aqua*, with decor focusing on turquoise tones and water. “The most personalized package, however, is

*Tailor-Made Romance*,” he says. “It is ideal for couples who want to customize their entire experience beyond just the day.” This bespoke version has included supplying the groom with a horse to ride into the ceremony, hiring a rabbi, adding a Mayan blessing—and organizing special events before and after the day. “Our event planners are also certified in ethnic and cultural weddings.”

To help couples make their choices, the resorts offer a three-night *Love at First Site* package. On this visit, they can tour the venues, relax in the Meliá signature YHI Spa, sample menu options, and meet the staff and resort-approved vendors of flowers, photography and special items. If they decide to hold their wedding at that resort, the value of the stay goes toward their event.

Paradisus Cancun romance manager Pilar González Fernandez advises couples to begin the planning process by consulting with the people who are most important to

them, making sure they are onsite with a destination wedding. “It’s wise to book from eight to 12 months in advance so people can save for this important event,” she says. However, she cautions that “while we try to make anything possible for our guests, we have no control over the weather. We do have backup locations in case of rain or storms.” The resorts are also subject to environmental and other laws that may affect weddings. For example, because turtles are a protected species, beach weddings are limited to certain spots during turtle-nesting season. Drone photography, while increasingly popular, also comes with restrictions.

González Fernandez and Velázquez Meléndez see many blended families attending weddings, and note that both resorts have separate sections that cater to children and adults. The adults-only areas and the upgraded Royal Service, which comes with personal butlers, extra privacy and exclusive services, are popular with couples. Guests with children can roam freely around the “Family Concierge” section, where everyone is pampered and spoiled with treats and toys.

## GETTING TO “YES”

One policy at Paradisus Resorts is to make each wedding day feel like it is the only one in the world. To this end, Paradisus Playa del Carmen limits weddings to two a day; Cancun to one. Venues are sheltered from the public and guarded to keep uninvited spectators at bay.

Brides can also rent the spacious “bridal suite” to avoid crowding and cluttering up their rooms while getting ready. It gives wedding parties a serene space to put up their feet; have their hair, makeup and nails done; fit their dresses; and spend quality bonding time. Attentive romance staff serve sparkling wine and canapés, help calm any



jitters, run last-minute errands and strive to make all the details click seamlessly.

While some weddings follow the latest trends, traditional food (chicken, beef, fish), dresses (white gowns) and decor (roses) still win. “But there are opportunities to add cultural elements,” says González Fernandez. “For example, instead of a traditional ceremony, we can do a Mayan ceremony or incorporate themes.” Mexican-themed weddings can include a Mexican buffet and decor elements such as sarapes, maracas and piñatas. Throughout their stay, guests can also participate in scheduled activities such as tequila-tasting, cooking classes and tango lessons.

## NEXT STEPS

To ease into their new lives after an exciting wedding day, newlyweds can opt for additional amenities such as a couples’ spa treatment, a private dinner for two under the stars, rose-petal turn-down service and late checkout. Some may also qualify for a free honeymoon package, titled *Glow*.

Outside the resorts, romantic scenarios abound. I love walking hand in hand with my sweetie in Playa del Carmen’s pedestrian-friendly streets, which offer an outdoor Mexican market, quirky shops and street vendors. A range of restaurants tempt palates with local produce, meat and seafood. To stay cool and commune with



nature, splashing around in an assortment of *cenotes*—subterranean swimming holes—is an ideal pastime. Couples can also sign up for sunset dinners on small cruise ships or book an entire boat for a wedding cruise.

At Cancun's La Isla outdoor shopping mall, visitors can combine romantic evenings with hard-core shopping, then take a break at La Madonna, where I sampled some James Bond martinis from the bar's 150 variations. On the water, romance beckons on *Columbus*, the famous Spanish galleon's Lobster Dinner Cruise that sails at sunset to the sexy strains of a saxophone. And the Trimaran Cruise to laid-back Isla Mujeres will transport visitors back to simpler times.

Whether couples are marrying, celebrating or renewing, Paradisus Resorts and the Riviera Maya have something for everyone. It just takes a bit of forethought, a lot of love and expert help from the Paradisus romance specialists to kick-start the next phase of their lives. **DS**

*ABOVE: At Paradisus Playa del Carmen, romance co-ordinator Lucero Villegas (left) and her assistant Araceli Arenas Muñoz attend to every detail—from planning to hand-holding on the wedding day. E. Lisa Moses*

## TRAVEL PLANNER

Find out more about Paradisus Resorts at [paradisus.com](http://paradisus.com).

The Riviera Maya boasts attractions for every taste. These include Cirque du Soleil, Maya Museum, ecoparks such as Xel-Há and Xcaret, and plentiful Mayan ruins. For more information, log onto [visitmexico.com](http://visitmexico.com).

## DS WEB LISTING >>

Adventure Canada ..... <a href="http://www.adventurecanada.com">www.adventurecanada.com</a>	63
Aqua Hotels and Resorts ..... <a href="http://www.aquaresorts.com">www.aquaresorts.com</a>	15
Badlands National Park, South Dakota ..... <a href="http://www.travelsouthdakota.com">www.travelsouthdakota.com</a>	27
Beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel, FL ..... <a href="http://www.fortmyers-sanibel.com">www.fortmyers-sanibel.com</a>	47
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