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Osteria del Beuc in
the town of Cernobbio,
a few minutes' stroll
from Lake Como

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Twenty years after the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans is more compelling—and resilient—than ever

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Amid China's relentless modernization, an old trade route in the southwestern province of Yunnan is a window onto the past

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Even with an influx of influencers and a slew of new hotels, Australia's beloved Byron Bay is still groovy

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The Tamina Therme at Grand Resort Bad Ragaz in Switzerland

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WORD OF MOUTH

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From the first certified Blue Zones retreat in Costa Rica to a hotel in Switzerland that promises better sleep, here is a sampling of new wellness experiences that aim to help you live longer and better. Plus: longevity-focused hotel openings and offerings around the world

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A TRAVELER'S TALE

Actor Leslie Bibb, star of the new season of *The White Lotus*, on witnessing the mother-and-child bond on safari in South Africa

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editor's letter

EVEN IF you've only dabbled in wellness travel, you probably know how hard it can be to bring the wellness home with you. You get a killer massage that releases weeks of stress and anxiety, then board a long, difficult flight and return to your life feeling like you could really use a good massage.

Lately, the wellness world has become preoccupied with longevity, the loose theme of our special package starting on page 45. While the topic has a whiff of faddishness (and the obsession of certain Silicon Valley founders with living forever doesn't exactly lend it credibility), I think the longevity discussion is useful because it shifts the focus from getting pampered (though that's certainly still allowed!) to acquiring positive life habits—many of which are simply about rediscovering natural rhythms that the modern world has a way of disrupting. Whether it's rethinking your approach to sleep (page 64) or prioritizing making deep connections with others in nature (page 46), these are ideas you can easily incorporate into your everyday existence. All it takes is a little mindfulness and intention. For me, it's a bit like food or decor: While you're on the road, you can pick up recipe ideas and cool ingredients, objets and design inspirations, and weave them into your life later on.

But why, you might ask, do I need a pricey vacation to start doing this stuff? Couldn't I just read a book? Well, yes, but I find that turning to travel—and friendly guides who can point me in the right direction—is the best way to practice the changes I'd like to make back home. I don't know about you, but writing as I am on January 2, I could sure benefit from some models for healthy living right now!

As I said, it's January 2, less than 48 hours since the horrific New Year's Day attack on Bourbon Street. The scars will surely linger, but as Leslie Pariséau's lovely story about New Orleans two decades after Hurricane Katrina (page 68) shows, the city is an incredibly resilient place, and it will bounce back. Be sure to include it in your travel plans this year.

A handwritten signature of the name "Jesse Ashlock".

JESSE ASHLOCK
DEPUTY GLOBAL EDITORIAL DIRECTOR
AND HEAD OF EDITORIAL CONTENT, U.S.



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on the cover

A historic home on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans's Garden District
Photographed by Maya Visnyei



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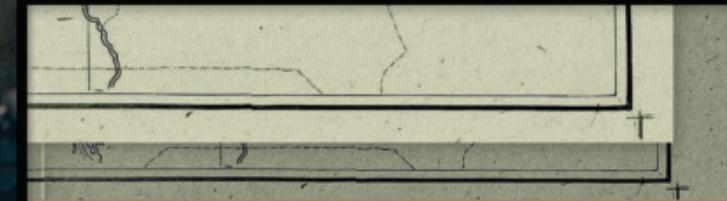
The Baja sun shines on Club Regina, an oceanside resort in San José del Cabo, Mexico
Photographed by Stephen Alkire (@stephenalkire)

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THE PEOPLE, PLACES & IDEAS WE'RE TALKING ABOUT RIGHT NOW

LITTLE WONDER

The latest under-the-radar surf town to catch on?

El Zonte, a mellow enclave on El Salvador's west coast with chic hotels, laid-back restaurants, and a legendary right-hand break

The rugged, ocean-carved cliffs near Al Suave House



Clockwise from bottom
Left: The outdoor space at Al Suave House; El Zonte's epic right-hand break; the art gallery at Wave House; an evening surf check



THE CRASH AND HUM of the ocean is everywhere in El Zonte, a small town on the lush Pacific coast of El Salvador about an hour's drive from the capital, San Salvador. For years the destination has been a magnet for surfers and backpackers, who come for affordable tranquility and a perfect, rolling right-hand break. Now, as the country enters an era of greater safety and stability under the much-scrutinized, Bitcoin-powered presidency of 43-year-old Nayib Bukele, the beach town is shifting upmarket, luring wellness seekers, digital nomads, and families with its recently opened boutique accommodations and a fresh food scene.

"It's a little community of like-minded people," says the Cuban American hotelier Pedro Querejeta, who is married to a Salvadoran and has been visiting the country since 1992. "We're in it for the long run." In 2017, Querejeta opened the



oceanfront Puro Surf Hotel, which has triangular thatched palapa roofs that collect and recycle rainwater. Last year he added the family-friendly, apartment-style hotel Wave House, which has an ocean-facing infinity pool, an art gallery, and common spaces filled with regionally made textiles and ceramics.

Another stylish new place to stay is Al Suave House, a stunning five-bedroom villa with a dramatic slatted-wood façade, opened last year by the Los Angeles-based entrepreneur and surfer Matt Schapiro. Cincopatasalgato, the forward-thinking Salvadoran architecture firm behind the hotel, created a light-filled mezzanine yoga and meditation space, and a snakelike pool—designed to echo El Zonte River—that winds through the property. The town's laid-back feel is also on display at the white-washed Garten Hotel and the more bohemian El Xalli resort, both of which offer experiences like sound baths and dawn yoga sessions.

Not surprisingly, surfing lessons are plentiful in El Zonte. Two places to find excellent instructors and good gear are Querejeta's hotel Puro Surf and Palo Verde Sustainable Hotel, owned by local entrepreneur Camilo Menéndez. For those who need a little TLC after an intense session, there's Lua Massage, a spa owned by local therapist Sabrina Hernández that's tucked away on a verdant side street. The food scene includes longtime favorites such as the tree-house-like Canegue Cafe, which does one sweet and one savory dish a day, and a host of new arrivals, including La

Cajita Kitchen, which serves French crepes prepared by Brittany-born local Fabrice Allain, and Nan Tal, which is a breezy all-day spot beloved by the surf crowd for its shrimp aguachile and bottles of cold Suprema beer.

For all of its recent transformation, El Zonte still feels refreshingly low-key. Pickup trucks roll along its unpaved streets night and day, while announcing over a megaphone that corn cakes, fresh fruit, or pupusas are for sale. Surfers, sometimes families of them, dot the horizon from sunrise to sunset. Many of them speak lovingly of spending the lull—the calm before the next set rolls in—lounging on their board and chatting with others in the lineup. “This town is undergoing enormous change right now,” Schapiro acknowledges but adds: “It still has a slow, chill vibe. That remains the same.” FLORA TSAPOVSKY

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INSPIRED BY HOTEL DEL CORONADO

Cast your eyes across the Victorian façade of Hotel del Coronado and you might recognize it as the place where Marilyn Monroe strummed a ukulele in *Some Like It Hot*. This spring the iconic San Diego resort, which has hosted

11 presidents and been designated a National Historic Landmark, unveils a head-to-toe restoration that breathes new life into its 137-year-old finishes. The original stained glass windows are back, and a veranda, designed to replicate

the 1888 original, will host cocktails. There will also be plenty of contemporary bells and whistles in the guest rooms, as well as a brand-new Nobu. Style yourself accordingly by packing a wardrobe of earth tones to complement the mahogany of the storied lobby; add a simple flash of gold to invoke the glamour of hotel's past and present day.



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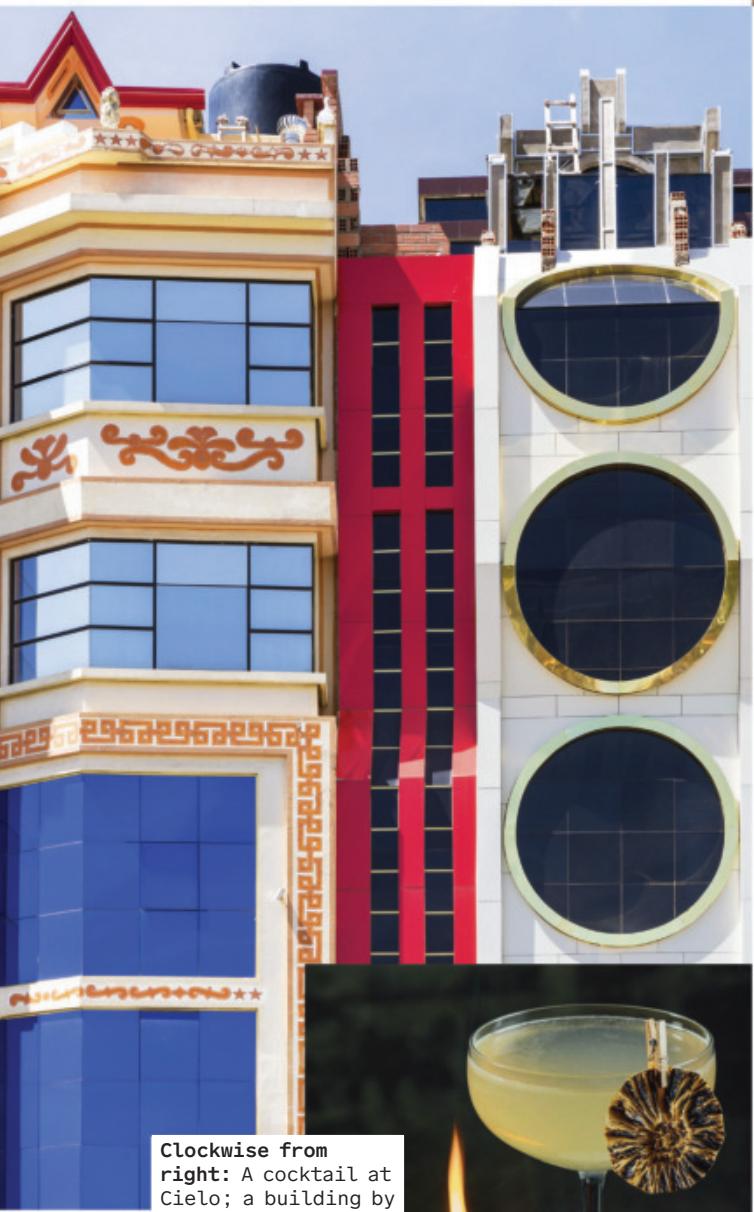
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ELEVATED DINING

The food scene in La Paz, Bolivia's mountain capital, might be the most exciting in South America



Clockwise from right: A cocktail at Cielo; a building by the iconic Bolivian architect Freddy Mamani; vegetables at Ancestral

FOR YEARS, well-heeled foodies had only one reason to put La Paz on their bucket lists: Gustu. Opened by Noma cofounder Claus Meyer in 2013, the fine-dining restaurant focused on indigenous ingredients like oca tubers, llama, and fermented yucca. The first of its kind in the city, it proved that an appetite existed for creative interpretations of traditional Bolivian flavors.

In the decade-plus since, Gustu alumni and other rising chefs have created a restaurant scene that's uniquely their own. Marsia Taha, Gustu's former head chef (Latin America's 2024 best female chef, according to World's 50 Best), opened the three-floor Arami in the buzzy Achumani neighborhood, near the four-year-old Phayawi. Meaning "piece of heaven" in the Guarani language, Arami focuses on the rainforest. Freshwater fish such as paiche and palometa are the menu's stars, along with lagarto (yacare caiman), the product of a collaboration with Indigenous hunters. Local sommelier Andrea Moscoso Weise, a veteran of Spain's El Celler de Can Roca, is a leading advocate for Bolivia's criolla grapes.

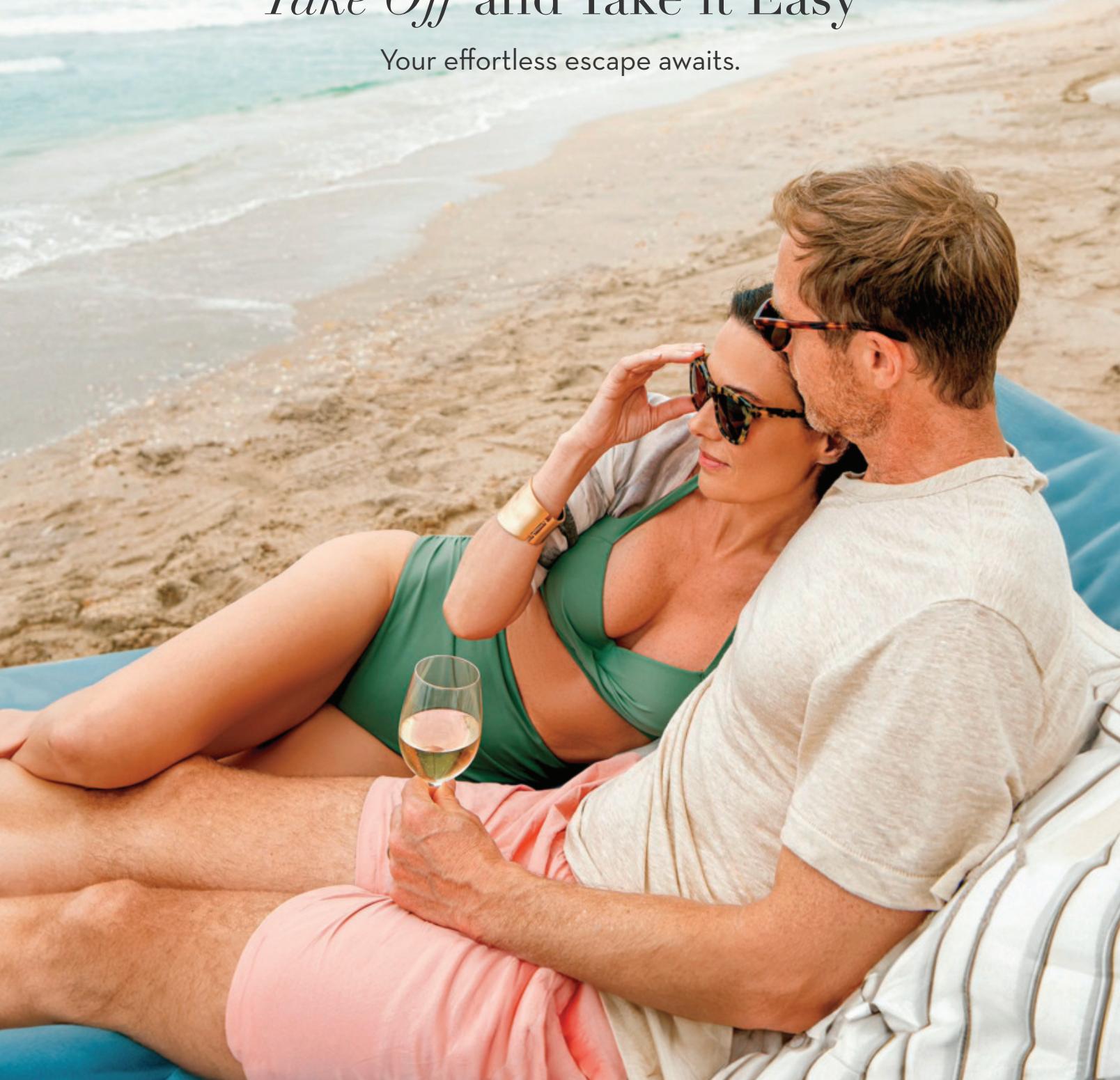
After winning international recognition (and awards) for their elegant comfort food at Ancestral, chefs Mauricio López and Sebastián Giménez have taken a more casual approach at their burger joint Omuh (slang for *humo*, meaning "smoke"). Though this type of fare is less common in La Paz than beloved street foods like anticuchos (chargrilled beef heart skewers), it has conquered the taste buds of paceños (La Paz locals). In January, Christian Gutiérrez, who, after working at Gustu, opened the dessert and coffee shop Lolo, launched Bushaka, where homestyle dishes are cooked over open fire; the offerings include tachacá, a little-used spiny whitefish from the Amazon, which fishermen catch to order using traditional nets.

Cocktail aficionados are also in luck: JP Caceres leads the all-female service team at Cielo, located inside Green Tower, La Paz's tallest building. Order a Beso en Las Nubes or an Achacha Royale; both use singani, a type of brandy that is considered Bolivia's national spirit. The speakeasy Hammam and the bohemian jazz bar El Bestiario Teatro are great spots to try chuflay, a singani-and-ginger-ale concoction. When you stumble back to street level, keep your eyes peeled for a stall slinging anticuchos. SORREL MOSELEY-WILLIAMS

La Paz, Bolivia, is one of our Best Places to Go in 2025. For the full list, visit cntraveler.com/best-places-to-go

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SO SEDUCTIVE IS THE BEAUTY of quaint Savannah that General Sherman famously spared it from destruction at the end of his infamous march. Travelers have long adored the town for the mossy live oaks that arch over brick-lined streets, the comforting cuisine, the mix of gingerbread Victorians and stately Greek Revivals. But most visitors probably wouldn't have called it hip, at least until lately. A flourishing creative community—much of it connected to the renowned Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD)—has ushered in a new current of cool marked by adventurous chefs melding global flavors with Low Country ingredients, chic hotels with swoon-worthy interiors, and art-filled neighborhoods that offer an alternative to the usual tourist destinations. Few places offer a more satisfying balance of the storied past and the thrilling future. LIA PICARD

The 1935 Forsyth Park Fountain is one of Savannah's most beloved landmarks

PHOTOGRAPH: JAMIE BECK

The wild nature here
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surprising, not seldom surprising.

jane gilliher



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Uncommon Comforts

Savannah has long been one of America's great food towns. But recent openings have brought in more global flavors and laid-back spaces to complement the Southern classics and the traditional dining rooms. The intimate minimalist bar **Late Air** offers natural wine by the glass and bottle and a tight menu of small plates that have international flair, like olives dressed in the Yemenite hot sauce zhug, oysters with a shiso mignonette, and fluke crudo with kimchi paste. Downtown, in an industrial space warmed up with colorful vintage furnishings, **Savoy Society** (pictured) serves inventive cocktails, like the Roku, made with toasted rice matcha and ginger, as well as fun pub grub that ranges from a Korean meatball banh mi to a sweet potato slider with feta cream and harissa. A more refined option is **Common Thread**, inside a Victorian house on a residential street south of downtown, which turns familiar flavors on their head—see the yellowfin tuna topped with lemongrass and coconut milk, the sweet potatoes with salsa macha, and the Southern-style cacio e pepe with collard greens and squash. Not far away, in the Victorian district, **Shuk** is a counter-service spot dishing Mediterranean staples: Israeli salads, whipped feta with crushed pistachios and pomegranate honey, and pita stuffed with roasted butternut squash and grilled Halloumi cheese.

ASK THE LOCALS

Three Savannah natives share their tips for where to shop, connect with local history, and pick up art



THE DESIGNER

EMILY MCCARTHY

Founder of her namesake fashion label and boutique

HANNAH E.

"For women's clothing I love this small boutique. Hannah has a keen eye for great style and fabrics, and it resonates in her store. It's a great place to drop into."



THE HISTORIAN

RAY CHRISTIE

Guide with local tour company Genteel & Bard

FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH

"This was the first permanent Black church in Savannah. They designed the church in a way that they could actually hide escaped slaves in there at night. So it became a stop on the Underground Railroad."



THE ARTIST

JULIANA LUPACCHINO

Muralist

THE PARIS MARKET

"This is the dreamiest spot you can go to right now. It's a home mercantile with amazing window installations, and they sell local art—it's where I go when I want to be inspired."



HERE TO STAY

A once-ordinary hotel scene has taken off over the last few years thanks to these recent arrivals

< HOTEL BARDO

This year-old 149-room hotel occupies a stately 19th-century mansion on the edge of iconic Forsyth Park. The aesthetic is 1960s coastal fantasy, with a preponderance of coral hues and funky furnishings. The restaurant, Saint Bibiana, is one of the city's top draws for its house-made pastas and stiff martinis. *From \$450; staybardo.com*

THOMPSON SAVANNAH

Long a popular daytime destination, the Savannah waterfront became a nighttime draw as well when this art-filled hotel opened three years ago. The neon-bathed lobby, adorned with fossils and other curiosities, is an experience unto itself. But locals love the Thompson for its restaurants, including Bar Julian, where diners watch the riverboats glide by. *From \$279; hyatt.com*

THE DRAYTON HOTEL

For a taste of old Savannah, book one of the 50 dreamy rooms full of earth tones and vintage furniture at this petite six-year-old property. Located in one of the city's oldest buildings, it feels like a full-service bed-and-breakfast. Grab a drink at the moody Vinyl Room and hit St. Neo's Brasserie for the raw bar and note-perfect fries. *From \$330; thedraytonhotel.com*

< PERRY LANE HOTEL

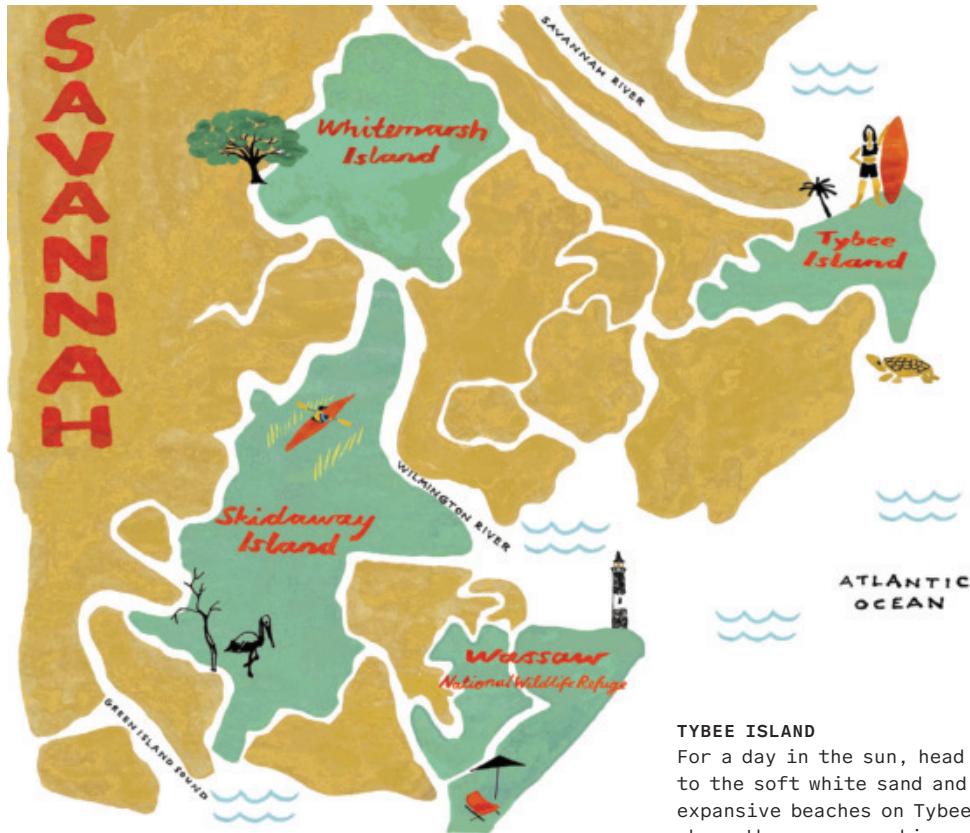
When it opened in 2018 among the town houses and tidy squares of the Historic District, this 167-room hotel, with its eclectic retro decor and 3,600 artworks (including pieces by former SCAD students) immediately became the pulse of Savannah. Head up to Peregrin, the rooftop bar, for cocktails at sunset. *From \$449; perrylanehotel.com*

ISLAND TIME

Bucolic getaways abound in the marshlands just beyond Savannah's city limits

WHITEMARSH ISLAND
Pretty, tranquil Whitemarsh is one of the closest places to get a quick dose of nature. The dense oak and palmetto forests of the island's preserve are laced with biking and hiking trails so quiet that you won't believe the city is just 15 minutes away.

SKIDAWAY ISLAND STATE PARK
Trails on this slice of land along Georgia's Intracoastal Waterway cut through maritime forest and past salt marshes, but the best way to see it all is from a boat. Moon River Kayak Tours leads expeditions where you're likely to spot dolphins, crabs, raccoons, and egrets.



WASSAW ISLAND

To visit Wassaw Island's wildlife refuge, you'll need to travel with a company like Sundial Charters, which offers boat tours that can accommodate up to six guests. It's worth it for a chance to while away the afternoon on the pristine beach or follow the wooded trails, where you're more likely to encounter a deer than another person.

TYBEE ISLAND

For a day in the sun, head to the soft white sand and expansive beaches on Tybee, where the waves are big enough to surf. (Rent a board from High Tide Surf Shop.) Locals love coming here to comb the shores for shark teeth or feast on a fried shrimp basket at the funky Deck, which has views of the sea.



Kevin Bongang (right), with fellow SCAD alumni in front of the mural he created as part of the Starland Mural Project

The Neighborhood to Know

Savannah is famed for its history, but the city has a modern edge, fueled in part by SCAD. To best explore its creative side, spend an afternoon in **Starland**. The once-industrial area a few blocks south of the Historic District is full of independent boutiques and cafés packed with locals. Start the day by checking out the ceramics, digital installations, and paintings from local and international artists at **Sulfur Studios**. Then head through the bubble-gum-colored façade of **Starland Strange & Bazaar** for vintage apparel, gifts, and ice cream; shop for old records at the legendary **Graveface Records & Curiosities**; or browse crafts at **Superbloom**. When you get hungry, drop into **Brochu's Family Tradition**, helmed by the former Roister chef Andrew Brochu, which serves possibly the best fried chicken in town. The recently opened **Flora and Fauna** sells pastries and biscuits by day and a seasonal prix fixe menu by night. The food truck park **Starland Yard** slings a wide array of casual bites.



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Clockwise from left:
Rahel Stephanie,
founder of Spoons,
an Indonesian supper
club in London;
a Campari and
strawberry tipple
at Equal Parts;
outside Hector's,
a bar and wine shop



WORLD ON A PLATE

London-based chef Rahel Stephanie shares her top indie and multicultural spots around her adopted hometown

“THE INCREDIBLE THING about London is the diversity of the people, and that’s also reflected in the food scene,” says the Indonesia-born and Singapore-raised chef Rahel Stephanie. But when she first moved to the capital, in 2013, to pursue a degree in fashion, she found it lacking in Indonesian options. To cook the food she wanted to eat in the city, Stephanie began hosting dinner parties for her friends and sharing dishes she grew up with, such as nasi campur (rice with meats and veggies), as well as innovative recipes of her own creation, like pandan blackberry blondies. Eventually these feasts evolved into the Indonesian supper club Spoons, launched in 2019, which has branched out into culinary residencies and pop-ups throughout London at esteemed restaurants including Orasay in Notting Hill and The Sea, The Sea in Chelsea. When she’s not cooking, Stephanie pursues the less touristed sides of London, away from the city center: mom-and-pop shops, avant-garde music venues, and a bar that serves her favorite tomato-flavored tipple. NOO SARO-WIWA



» MELTING POT

In a city with endless dining options, Stephanie says the best food is at **Singburi**: “It’s run by a Thai couple and their son. I want more of these small family-owned businesses to be preserved. That’s where London’s culture shines most vibrantly.” She’s also a regular at **Viet Rest**, an unpretentious Vietnamese spot in southeast London where she always orders the vermicelli fish soup and the lemongrass chicken. There’s also a hot culinary scene at The Standard, London, near King’s Cross, Stephanie says, which hosts events like a barbecue series with a lineup of rising South Asian chefs. “I did a barbecue there last year too,” she says. “Being culturally relevant is what keeps that place cool.”

» ON THE SCENE

To get her film fix, Stephanie goes to **Atlas Cinema**, an experimental cooperative that runs screenings in a disused railway arch at Loughborough Junction near Brixton. “The community curates screening series, like an Indonesian-cinema season or movies about food and the diaspora experience,” she says. For music, she enjoys the shows at **Cafe OTO**, a spacious coffee shop on Ashwin Street that hosts mini concerts. “They champion left-field, up-and-coming acts,” she says, such as the Danish composer ML Buch, “who does dreamy, gorgeous experimental pop.”

» WATERING HOLES

For a classic wine bar, Stephanie heads to **Hector’s** in hip De Beauvoir, where the cellar boasts old and rare vintages. “The atmosphere is really nice,” she says. “It’s an adorable place to have a date.” When she’s in the mood for a proper drink, she goes to **Equal Parts** on Hackney Road and has the Flor, a cocktail made with distilled tomato, olive oil, fino sherry, and East London Liquor Co. vodka. “Imagine a transparent gazpacho,” she says. “It’s stunning, fresh, and light—my favorite cocktail in the world.”

STORIES & SOUNDS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



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Clockwise from left:
A sari sold at
Barefoot; inside the
Fort Printers hotel;
hand-painted plates
at Barefoot



IN BLOOM

Just off the beaches of southern Sri Lanka, a design-forward lifestyle district is flourishing

RECENTLY, SRI LANKA'S Southern Province has become a favored destination for neophyte surfers—a laid-back alternative to the less forgiving waters of the eastern coast—and a lively hospitality scene has risen in tandem. It is centered in the Galle district, famous for its monumental Galle Fort, a 16th-century Portuguese stronghold where shops and sleek stays like the Fort Printers hotel now buzz behind the ramparts. But follow Matara Road to the town of Ahangama and the surfing hot spot of Weligama Bay, and you'll start to see the bigger picture: a growing Sri Lankan design movement informed by heritage crafts, spiritual traditions, Dutch colonial roots, and the easy-breezy vibes of the wave riders who are driving change—in the water and on dry land. AKANKSHA KAMATH

GOING DUTCH

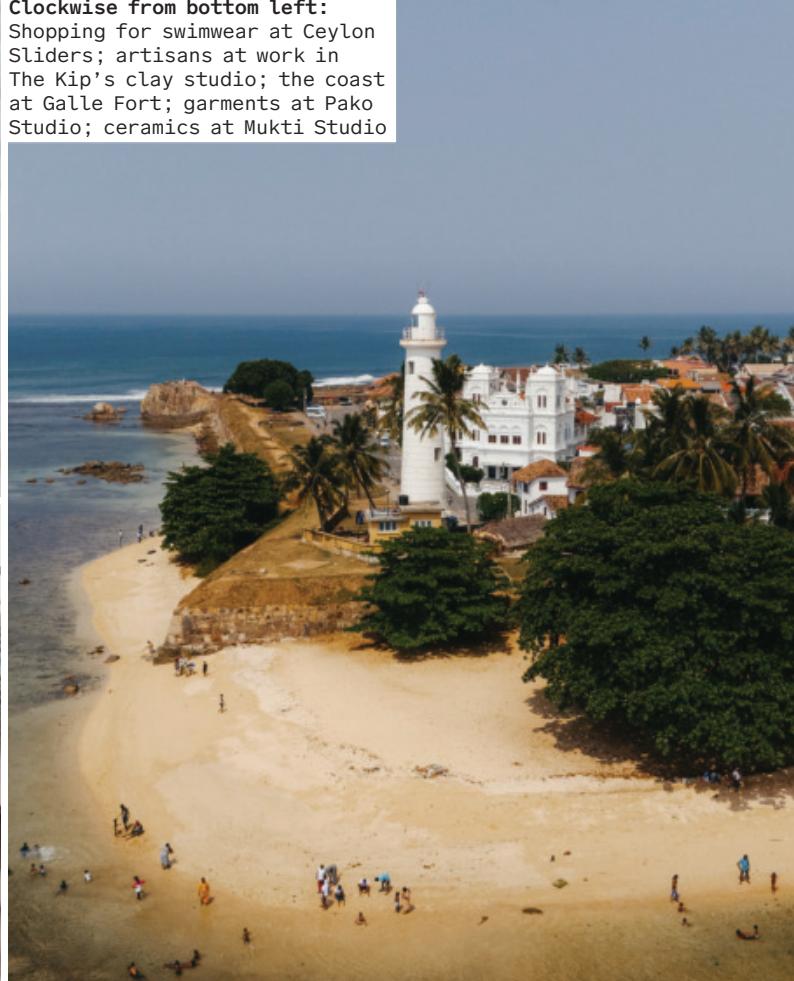
In Galle Fort, **Exotic Roots** taps into the site's history as an outpost of the Dutch East India Company by selling porcelain wares from the 17th and 18th centuries and curiosities like traditional Jaipur blue pottery and antique bells. Founder Catherine Hewapathirana opened the store in 1996 to support local artists by stocking souvenir-friendly prints of their works. Nearby, **Barefoot** offers a well-curated selection of woven placemats, painted bowls, books, and children's toys. exoticroots.com; barefootceylon.com

SUIT YOURSELF

Founded by Ukrainian designer Lucy Konstantynova in Galle Fort, **Pako Studio** is a waste-conscious label whose goal is to reduce the need to buy more outfits by creating pieces, from beach clothes to eveningwear, that work in varied settings. There are loose kimono blouses, silk sarong skirts, backless trapeze dresses, and mix-and-match shirting. The highlight is the swimwear, including bikinis that can be styled in multiple ways and a one-piece that can be worn beneath a jacket. pako.studio



Clockwise from bottom left:
Shopping for swimwear at Ceylon
Sliders; artisans at work in
The Kip's clay studio; the coast
at Galle Fort; garments at Pako
Studio; ceramics at Mukti Studio



SPIRITUAL GEMS

In the coastal town of Ahangama, **Olive Yu Jewellery**, cofounded by Kate Becker, creates handcrafted accessories with natural gemstones like Sri Lankan sapphires and tourmalines. The pieces, all made at the on-site workshop, are informed by spirituality; the Navaratna collection, for example, takes inspiration from the nine sacred gems of Vedic astrology. Jewelry-making workshops are held regularly, accompanied by the sound of ocean waves crashing nearby. oliveyu.com

YARNS FOR YOGA

At **Mukti Studio**, launched in 2023 by yoga teacher Evy Ferraro, you'll find a collection of traditional and contemporary Sri Lankan clothing made from pure linen and hand-loomed organic cotton (ideal for yoga in hot climates), as well as locally made swimwear, organic skin-care products, serpent rings, and home goods. The shop alone is worth a visit: Sunlight illuminates the polished concrete, and an alleyway leads directly to Ahangama's shore. mukti-studio.myshopify.com

LAND OF NOD

Just off Ahangama's main coastal thoroughfare is **The Kip**, a café, yoga venue, and three-bedroom villa (with additional studio rooms). In the garden, guests sit for communal dinners of ceviche, fresh juices, and jamu, an Indonesian herbal drink. There is also a store selling homegrown, ethically made finds, from batik garments designed on-site to ceramics and delicate lacework. Many pieces in the villa, including wrought-iron candlesticks and miniature sculptures, can be purchased. thekipsrilanka.com

SURF AND TURF

Ceylon Sliders, facing Weligama Bay, is an airy, multifunctional space made of breeze blocks that houses an art gallery, restaurant, music venue, beach club, and surf shop. Swimwear from Sri Lankan brands Cruise Culture and Wave Vision sit next to international favorites such as California's Bing Surfboards and the Paris-based sunglasses brand Izipizi. Visitors can rent surfboards and equipment and book lessons certified by the International Surfing Association. ceylonsliders.com

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ROLLING ON THE RIVER

With the launch of *Viking Mississippi*, American cruising enters its next chapter

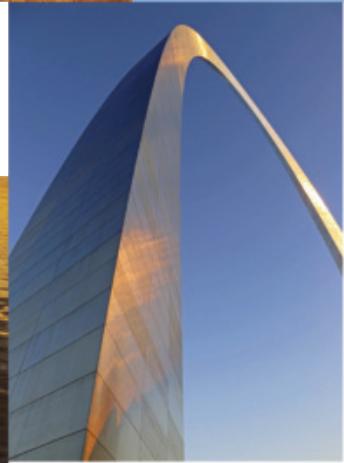
I'M SITTING ON THE 360-degree promenade deck aboard a Viking river cruise, with a glass of wine and a paperback, taking in the silver maples in the high afternoon sun on a bright August day. The water, blue-green and more beautiful than I had expected, hums with steamboats and pontoons. Staff members flit about, delivering cocktails and greeting guests like old friends. With its plentiful blond woods, the stylish ship has the kind of opulence you'd expect on the world's great waterways, from the Nile to the Seine. But I'm on board the 386-passenger *Viking Mississippi*, custom-built to traverse America's most famous river. Interest in sailing along it has been on the rise since the pandemic, but Viking is the first major luxury liner to offer a trip.

I'm a Midwesterner who grew up mostly in Ohio. As such, I'd long thought of towns like Hannibal, Missouri, or Burlington, Iowa—if I'd thought about them at all—as ordinary places, hardly worth a schlep. But both are ports on this Viking sailing, one of a series of itineraries along the 2,300-mile waterway that aim to let guests walk in the footsteps of some of the region's greatest historical figures, like Mark Twain. On other routes the vessel takes passengers into the music scene of New Orleans and the southern estates of Natchez, Mississippi. Most of my fellow cruisers were Americans who, like me, had yet to explore this corner of their own backyard; they lit up while admiring the elegant Victorian-style homes in Burlington and the majesty of Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's legendary house and studio in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Taking in the sheer scale of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, Eero Saarinen's homage to Lewis and Clark, I realized that monument is every bit as impressive as the great attractions cruise ships visit in Europe and Asia. In Hannibal I felt glee when I encountered Mark Twain's childhood home and the whitewashed fence made famous in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. American treasures, right there for all to see. JAMIE SPAIN

Viking Mississippi's eight-day *Heartland of America* sailings start at \$5,499; viking.com



Clockwise from left:
The *Viking Mississippi*
docked at sunset;
Elmer Petersen's Eagle
Landmark in Riverside
Park, Wisconsin;
Gateway Arch, St. Louis



MORE NEW RIVER CRUISES

Ama Waterways

In March the 60-passenger *AmaMagdalena* will become the first luxury ship to access the rich biodiversity and native villages of Colombia's Magdalena River.

amawaterways.com

Sanctuary Retreats

Pure Amazon, the latest ship from this Abercrombie & Kent subsidiary, will sail the Peruvian Amazon starting in mid-2025; depending on the season, guests can go on guided rainforest treks.

sanctuaryretreats.com

Windstar

In September the *Star Pride* will begin sailings from Reykjavik to Montreal, partly following Canada's St. Lawrence River. windstarcruises.com

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From left:
An array of slices at the Pizza Bar on 38th inside the Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo; the floral façade of Gucci Osteria da Massimo Bottura, in the fashionable Ginza district

CUTE COUPLE

Japan's long-standing romance with Italian food is playing out in inventive ways all over Tokyo

THERE ARE ABOUT 1,500 Italian restaurants in Tokyo, but Alter Ego is one of the most legendary. Here the tajarin pasta is a tangle of delicately thin noodles bathed in a silky butter sauce; the minced duck is grilled on a skewer like a tsukune meatball and drizzled with a balsamic glaze. When Alter Ego opened in 2019, its popularity prompted the world of Japanese fine dining to more seriously consider the appeal of Italian fusion, which had until then been mostly the realm of chain eateries. Half a decade later, Tokyo's finest chefs are taking inspiration from Italy and beyond to whip up creative fare served on both white tablecloths and at casual counters.

During Japan's "bubble economy" in the 1980s, many Japanese visited Europe and returned home with a taste for Italian cuisine. Soon chefs at home began cooking Italian food, swapping in local ingredients like shiso (a substitute for then hard-to-find basil). The term itameshi, a portmanteau of *Italy* and the Japanese word for food,

soon entered the lexicon and became a culinary genre. But when imported products became widely available in 1990s, Japanese cooks focused instead on precisely replicating Italian recipes. Yet echoes of itameshi's legacy live on in Tokyo's current scene.

Alter Ego was first helmed by the chef Yoji Tokuyoshi, who honed his skills at Osteria Francescana in Modena, Italy, as Massimo Bottura's right-hand man. His successor is his former deputy, Hidehito Hirayama, who explains, "The idea is not just to make typical Italian food with



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Clockwise from left: Outside Pizza Marumo, in Tokyo's Shibuya ward; amuse-bouches at Gucci Osteria da Massimo Bottura; the wood-fired pizza oven at L'ombelico, inside Trunk Hotel Yoyogi Park

Japanese ingredients. We want to create Italian cuisine that can only be found here.” Inspired by both countries, Alter Ego serves tuna sashimi in a soy-based marinade draped with ribbons of prosciutto, after the Italian pairing of mountain and sea, and tender beef tongue simmered with daikon, a twist on Italian bollito misto and oden, a Japanese soup.

The haute-itameshi trend got the Michelin glow in 2022, when a star was awarded to the Tokyo outpost of Gucci Osteria da Massimo Bottura, where the grilled ayu sweetfish comes with a lardo-infused fennel sauce. Then in 2023 came the stylishly minimalist Peace, where the chef, Takahito Oshima, builds on the tradition by combining Japanese, Italian, and French influences: Pasta comes in a chilled kombu kelp dashi with raw sardine and shiso flowers, and bruschetta is topped with pistachio butter and cured ham from France. More recently, in March of last year, the Venezuelan-born and Italian-trained chef Kensuke Okano opened Unito in the residential Meguro ward, where the tasting menu reveals Japanese, Italian, and South American influences, with dishes like arroz con pollo arancini and seafood courses with ceviche, uni, and cold capellini.

Though the reinvigorated interest in Japanese-Italian fusion is more evident in Tokyo’s destination restaurants, it extends to the city’s top pizzerias. The monthly

pies at Pizza Studio Tamaki include the “taco-style” Bismarck, layered with cumin-spiced ground beef, cheese, lettuce, and a gooey egg; the Japanese Umami pizza at Pizza Marumo has pecorino and mozzarella cheeses, shiitake mushroom purée, bonito flakes, and emerald green shavings of kombu; and the Nojiri pie at L’ombelico, inside the Trunk Hotel in Yoyogi Park, comes with a pile of plump clams from Hokkaido. At the Pizza Bar on 38th, a Michelin Bib Gourmand spot inside the Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo, Roman-born chef Daniele Cason crafts omakase menus with pizzas bearing duck salsiccia and marbled slices of Wagyu beef. Just a few blocks away is Ciel Pizza, opened last July by the team at Michelin-starred French restaurant Lature, in Shibuya, which features toppings like shirasu (baby sardines), citrusy sansho peppers, and lemons from the Setouchi region of western Japan.

As Japanese-Italian cuisine continues to take on new flavors—serving increasingly as a calling card for ever more cosmopolitan Tokyo—the chefs behind it welcome the style’s evolution. “Diversity is a good thing,” says Hirayama. “I’m excited to see how others approach it.” MELINDA JOE



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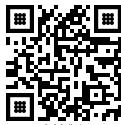
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LIVE LONG AND PROSPER

A photograph showing a close-up of a person's arm and hand reaching into a shallow, dark blue stream. The hand is positioned palm-up, and as it enters the water, it creates concentric ripples that spread outwards. The water is clear enough to see small pebbles and debris at the bottom. The lighting is natural, suggesting an outdoor setting.

Seemingly overnight, *longevity* has become the biggest buzzword in the \$6.3 trillion global wellness industry. Can travel really help you live a longer and healthier life? From a hike in the desert with a group of strangers and a seated meditation at a Zen Buddhist monastery to a hotel room that cracks the code of a good night's sleep and a retreat that unlocks the secrets of the blue zones, here are a few experiences that will make a believer out of you.

WELLNESS



IN GOOD COMPANY

For Jen Murphy, a group hiking retreat in the California desert shows that community and connection are cornerstones of a healthy life

THE PRICK TO MY FINGER was fast and sharp, but my blood wasn't being drawn by a nurse. Instead, the outstretched arm of a cholla cactus was the culprit. I had come to California's Coachella Valley for Sensei Porcupine Creek's inaugural longevity-focused hiking retreat, and I'd been stabbed by the plant's barbed spine while furiously pumping my arms to keep pace with my group's extremely fit guide, Anthony Purnel, 37, a tribal council member of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

Purnel, 37, was leading our group on the trails of Indian Canyons, his ancestral land just



Guests at Sensei Porcupine Creek, in Coachella Valley, can visit nearby Ladder Canyon Trail

survival by nearly 50 percent. Sensei's new holistic approach to aging well aims to cultivate community, purpose, and a positive mindset. Longevity has been the buzzword of the wellness space for the last few years, and our fixation with living longer, healthier lives shows no sign of waning. The life-optimization market is predicted to reach \$44.2 billion by 2030, and tech billionaires, including Jeff Bezos and Sam Altman, are pouring fortunes into age-extending diagnostic technology and cellular reprogramming therapies. Hotels and resorts have jumped on the trend too, with offerings that cater to our culture's obsession with data, tech, and biohacking. AI and diagnostics are the foundation of the Estate, a new longevity-driven hospitality brand from hotelier Sam Nazarian that's set to debut in Los Angeles later this year, while longevity vacations rooted in cutting-edge treatments like stem cell and ozone therapies are commanding eye-popping price tags. Trailblazing wellness retreat Canyon Ranch, for example, recently introduced Longevity 8, a four-day

SENSE OF CRAFT

Research shows that creative activities like sewing and whittling have the same stress-busting benefits as meditation. Thread Caravan offers retreats around the world spotlighting textile traditions, like embroidery in Panama and knitting in Iceland. And on the Greek island of Andros, the sculptor Tom von Kaenel leads guests in carving marble to learn patience.

outside Palm Springs. In a first for Agua Caliente, the tribe has partnered with Sensei to offer exclusive immersive cultural experiences. Our three-mile trek was strenuous, but this wasn't a tough-love boot camp in the vein of the cult hiking retreat Ranch Malibu. We had come because we wanted to feel good, not just look good. After the group stopped at a spot overlooking a rocky outcrop, a mindset coach from Sensei encouraged us to take out the journals we'd been given. We were instructed to scribble down our feelings and recast negative thoughts (*I'm not fit enough to be here; I dislike journaling*) into positive affirmations (*I'm challenging myself in new ways; What an amazing experience to have with others*).

We've long known that movement, particularly in nature, is good for our physical and mental well-being. But mounting data also shows that our attitudes and beliefs about getting older can impact our health. And social connection can increase the odds of long-term

\$20,000 program that packs in 15-plus diagnostics, such as electrocardiograms to assess heart health, 18 one-on-one sessions with medical experts, wellness activities, and three months of postvisit virtual consultations.

Silicon Valley tech wizard Larry Ellison was ahead of the curve when he opened the first Sensei retreat on the Hawaiian island of Lanai in 2019. Cofounded with the renowned biomedical researcher David Agus, MD, the wellness brand was born out of the desire to give people scientifically proven tools to live longer, healthier lives. Before I attended one of the inaugural programs on Lanai, I was mailed a fitness tracker that gathered data like my nightly hours of REM sleep. Upon my arrival, a blood test measured my fasting glucose and cholesterol levels. More tests and review sessions in sterile offices dominated my week on Lanai. (I've had similar experiences at the handful of longevity retreats I've visited since.) I barely got to enjoy the lushly landscaped grounds. And meals were mostly solitary affairs. I left Lanai craving nature and community. Guest feedback indicated I wasn't alone. As more resorts go the medical route, Sensei is intentionally supplementing its more clinical approach with programming that fosters purpose and belonging.

On the second morning, as our group shared journal musings over breakfast, it became obvious that a yearning for connection was what had brought most of us here. A 30-something woman from Orange County said that her addiction to her phone had left her feeling disconnected from nature. Another guest confided that she felt →

WELLNESS



Joshua Tree National Park, a 45-minute drive from Sensei Porcupine Creek, has close to 300 miles of hiking trails

untethered since becoming an empty nester. She finally had time but didn't have a passion to invest it in. A recent widower said he and his wife had been avid hikers, but he had abandoned the hobby, no longer having a partner to hit the trails with.

Over the next three days our group's members encouraged one another up a 1,000-foot climb to the summit of Ryan Mountain above Joshua Tree National Park. We let ourselves feel like kids as we scrambled up and down the metal ladders within Painted Canyon in the Mecca Hills Wilderness. Our exhausted muscles were revived each day with unique recovery modalities: Sensei's patented thermal body-mapping technology precisely guided my massage therapist to inflamed muscles, and our group giggled through a rope-facilitated wall yoga class. We made vision boards as well as collages that included our personal mantras and images that spoke to our passions and emotions.

The final morning, we conquered a steep trail that climbed high above Sensei's impeccably manicured golf course. Usually I'd charge ahead for the added cardio burn, but instead I found myself hanging back, chitchatting between deep lungfuls of air. It turns out making connections with strangers is its own unique endorphin high. And unlike with a solo hike, the buzz lingers. ☀

The next hiking retreat will be held in fall 2025. Four-night retreats start at \$13,200 per person or \$9,200 per person in a shared double room. A third Sensei retreat is set to open in Baja, Mexico, in early 2025; sensei.com

NEW & NEXT

WILDERNESS MOMBO, BOTSWANA

This is one of two wellness centers that the safari brand Wilderness will debut this year (the other is at Rwanda's Bisate), bringing hydrotherapy, treatment rooms, and a gym to Africa's farthest-flung reaches. *Opening April 2025*

SIX SENSES LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

The global wellness powerhouse's latest sits north of Hyde Park in the historic Whitley Building. It will have a fabulous spa, of course, with a relaxation room beneath a vaulted ceiling, but it will also house Six Senses Place, the brand's first social and health club for residents and members. New properties will follow in Milan, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia later in the year. *Opening 2025*

KIMPTON TRES RIOS, MEXICO

On a white-sand beach along the Riviera Maya sits Kimpton's first all-inclusive. The resort, which doubles as a sanctuary for more than 200 plant and animal species, has hidden cenotes, a native-plant nursery, and hiking trails. Its Kej Spa looks to Indigenous traditions with offerings like temescal ceremonies, for the purification of the spirit as well as the body. *Opening March 2025*

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TECH SUPPORT

With cutting-edge treatments increasingly jostling for space with traditional therapies, Kelsey Eisen ponders our recent obsession with all things science-backed

LIKE A LOT OF US, I often find myself fried from days spent staring at my computer screen and nights circling back to emails I haven't answered. So when I heard that the Sanctuary Beach Resort in Monterey Bay, California, offered a package known as the Burnout Recovery Journey, I had to try it. When I arrived, I was happy to find the kinds of treatments on the spa menu I've been seeing more and more of lately: science-based offerings like infrared light therapy, IV drips, and electromagnetic pulse therapy. My outstanding massage took place on something called a Pulsed Electromagnetic Field mat. I was grateful that the hotel offered signal-blocking phone bags for the ultimate unplugging experience. Then I realized the irony: I was treating my burnout with...more tech. One has to wonder: How did we get here?

In Europe, spa traditions have blended health and wellness for centuries, as evidenced by a long-standing enthusiasm for homeopathic medicine and a predilection across the continent for "taking the waters" as a cure for ailments. Hungary's health insurance reimburses citizens for using the country's legendary thermal baths; France's covers many herbal remedies and acupuncture; Switzerland's allows for traditional Chinese medicine procedures. But the US has historically emphasized the individual's responsibility for their own health, eschewing Europe's more community- and environment-based models. Much of this tendency can be traced to the 1910 Flexner Report, a notoriously sexist and racist document, backed by the Carnegie Foundation, that encouraged medical schools to educate future doctors solely on treating pathologies, completely ignoring overall wellness.

"The US system is built all around disease care," says Darshan Shah, MD, a board-certified surgeon and the founder and CEO of Next Health, a Los Angeles-based chain of medical health optimization centers that provides treatments for the Four Seasons Resort Maui spa. "Anything outside of that does not get approved by the FDA." Such a system rewards advancements like easily patented pills and surger-

ies over preventive wellness, which is unprofitable by comparison—a fact that's less an issue for Europe's publicly funded health care systems.

So why is America hopping onto the preventive health trend now? Shah believes, to use a well-worn phrase, that Americans are sick and tired of being sick and tired—and of the endless game of whack-a-mole they so often have to play to get health problems treated. "Americans see that European destination spas are places to actually get healthy and want to find that for themselves," he says. I can't help but wonder whether our uniquely American culture of avowed techno-optimism is also partly responsible: We embrace the driverless car, the soy-protein-based meal replacement, the Kim K-endorsed salmon-sperm facials—and we love keeping up with the Joneses. This past summer I got a poolside vitamin IV treatment, and instantly two people who'd seen me receiving it called the nurse over to book their own.

Twenty years ago it might have been confusing to hear that some of the most famous people in tech and science, like Larry Ellison and Dave Asprey, the "father of biohacking," had gotten into the spa business; nowadays it sounds par



for the course. From the most exclusive resorts to neighborhood spots, many spas seem less like the lavender-scented, Enya-pumping spaces of yore and more like futuristic medical labs. Several of the biggest names in the game, like Sha Wellness Clinic, have built their popularity on such offerings as genomic testing and biofeedback therapies. Spas can biohack your trauma with psychedelics in the morning and map your personalized genetic wellness plan in the afternoon. Americans no longer visit spas only for a hit of temporary relaxation, but to invest in our long-term well-being, because the health care we have—“disaster care,” as Shah calls it, for its focus on accidents and cancers—doesn’t do it. We want to live longer, age more slowly, and learn to manage our own mental health more effectively. Americans aren’t looking to just survive. We want to optimize and thrive.

Getting into science-based wellness can be intimidating. I asked Shah how to cut through the marketing noise and find legitimate establishments that suit your needs. He recommends going only to facilities that employ someone with a medical license, such as an overseeing doctor or medical director; conducting your own research on a provider’s claims; and speaking to someone in the scientific community, like your physician, about whether the treatment is effective, safe,

and—importantly—worth the often high cost. Maybe someday these science-based treatments won’t be categorized as luxury services. But until then, they just might be worth the investment. ♦

UP AND ATOM

Quantum healing posits that illnesses can be overcome by directing harmonizing energy to help the body recover, via methods like playing tones with different sound frequencies and utilizing hyperbaric technology. NYC's Equinox Hotel promises to optimize sleep with quantum harmonics; Abu Dhabi's Kintsugi Space uses quantum diagnostics to improve organ function; and Mexico's Zadún, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, employs quantum healer Agathe Fay.

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RESORTS

An aerial photograph showing a dense, lush green forest covering a peninsula or headland. The forest is thick and varied in texture, with many different types of trees. To the right of the forest, the ocean is visible with its characteristic blue-green color. The water appears relatively calm with some subtle ripples. In the top right corner, a sandy beach area is visible where the land meets the sea.

WELLNESS

BLUE ORIGIN

At a retreat on Costa Rica's Papagayo Peninsula, one of the world's longevity hot spots, Maria Yagoda remembers the importance of living well

An aerial view of Andaz Peninsula Papagayo Resort in Guanacaste Province, on Costa Rica's northwest coast



I WAS FLOATING in the private plunge pool of my villa, embedded in a lush slope of Costa Rican jungle overlooking a bay. The entire scene was animated by butterflies, birdsong, and monkeys rustling in the treetops. *Take it all in*, I reminded myself, then reflexively grabbed my phone to check the weather app before placing it back on the towel, scolding myself for my lapse in mindfulness. Moments later I did the same thing all over again.

This impulse, I rationalized, came from wanting to know how to best optimize every moment I spent at the serene tropical wonderland of Andaz Peninsula Papagayo Resort, which hosted the first official Blue Zones-sponsored retreat this past summer. It sits a stone's throw from the Nicoya Peninsula, an 80-mile stretch just south of the Nicaraguan border that is home to an unusually high concentration of centenarians, making it one of five geographic “blue zones” identified by the journalist Dan Buettner and a team of researchers as places where an exceptionally large percentage of residents live past the age of a hundred. I suspected that few of them were addicted to their weather apps.

Ever since getting diagnosed with advanced-stage Hodgkin lymphoma in early 2023, I've been glued to my phone, living in perpetual fear of test results but also of being alone with my thoughts. My body is not the same after cancer. Bulky IVs of high-dose chemotherapy pumped through my veins for nearly a year. Bouts of immobility, often in hospital beds, weakened the muscles I'd been dutifully strengthening over a lifetime of joyless exercise and healthy eating. My painstakingly balanced lifestyle hadn't delivered the benefits I was promised: lasting health and wellness. I controlled everything a person can control and still hadn't been able to outsmart cancer, rendering pointless thousands of tedious salads. Could a Blue Zones retreat offer me the tools to reconnect to my body after I'd spent months learning how powerless I was to control it? Could it help a person who has already entered that state everyone works so hard to avoid—chronic sickness—and is thus already disqualified from the possibility of achieving centenarian status? I wanted to try it, because this stretch of Costa Rica seemed like a tranquil backdrop for relearning how to live well.

The concept of blue zones originated from the work of demographers Gianni Pes and Michel Poulaïn, who in 1999 identified Sardinia's Nuoro Province as having the highest concentration of men living beyond 100 years old. Buettner zeroed in on other longevity hubs as well as the lifestyle principles they had in common, which he calls the Power 9. These include moving naturally, eating until you're only 80 percent full, having a sense of purpose, and “downshifting” after work or stressful events. Oh, and lots of beans.

Since the release of the popular 2023 Netflix documentary *Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones*, wellness tourism to blue zones has

PHOTOGRAPH: ANDAZ PENINSULA PAPAGAYO RESORT, COSTA RICA

WOMEN IN FOCUS

Menopause was last year's biggest wellness topic, as spas added treatments targeting this life phase. Now they've finally begun addressing other concerns, from postpartum health to endometriosis. At Bvlgari Hotel Tokyo, a bespoke therapy balances hormonal cycles, while Ananda in the Himalayas has launched fertility-enhancement programming.

exploded, making it one of the biggest travel trends of last year. So the organization Blue Zones, founded by Buettner in 2008, brought in the health coach Céline Vadam to help design retreats in longevity hot spots, which, in addition to Nicoya and Nuoro, include Okinawa, Japan; Ikaria, Greece; and Loma Linda, California.

My dreamy week at the Andaz Peninsula Papagayo Resort, which included Reiki and sound healing, was the first official Blue Zones retreat. Vadam, a bubbly French woman who founded the wellness consultancy We(i) Think and the health coaching brand Retrouv'l, planned intimate hour-long workshops on topics such as happiness and purpose, focusing specifically on the healthy attributes identified in this Costa Rican blue zone—like a cultural emphasis on social interactions and family ties.

As Vadam explained to me, Blue Zones the company isn't selling an individualized view of health; the whole point of Buettner's research is that our environments have an outsize impact on our well-being. If you live an hour from a store selling fresh fruits and vegetables, of course your diet will never amount to that of a Sardinian goat herder. As someone who works hard not to blame herself for her cancer and chronic illness, I was pleased to hear that the organization works with more than 75 cities in the US to help make people's environments healthier, rather than scold them for their bad choices. One of its community assessments is walkability, which determines how well a city enables families and disabled people to stay active in their environment. “We also work with companies on how to have healthy options in their cafeterias,” Vadam told me. “We work with restaurants on portions. We work with supermarkets to make sure that the healthy vegetables are in a more prominent place than the chocolate bars. We organize walking groups.”

Retreats, by definition, are more individually oriented. Before my first session, over a breakfast of fresh fruit and excellent local coffee, I took the Blue Zones online “vitality test” to determine my life expectancy. It asked questions about my diet and exercise →

WELLNESS

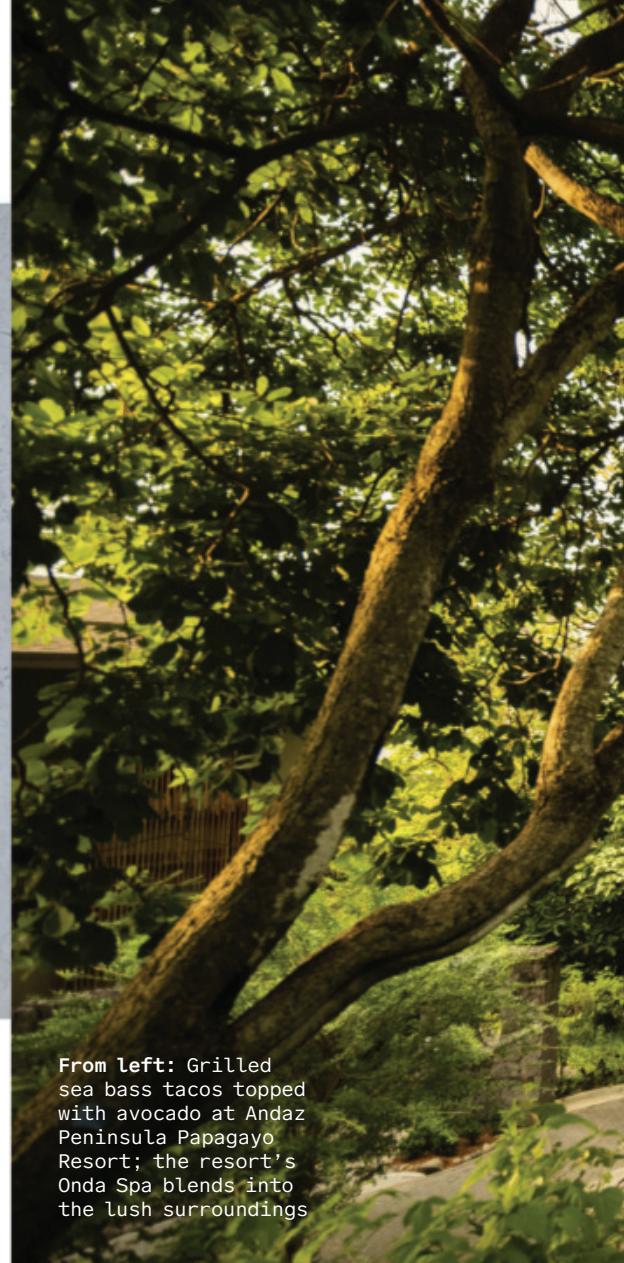


habits, but also how many days out of 30 I was sad, and whether I'd had any major illnesses, like cancer. At the end, my life expectancy flashed on the screen: 50.3. There was an option to click on a button that said, "Add 37.2 more years." I laughed. My first 30-something years hadn't been so fab: Was tacking on three more decades really so desirable?

At the introductory workshop in one of the property's opulent two-story suites, with sweeping vistas of the bay, Vadam had our group of six examine a wheel of the Power 9 principles. She asked us to identify how we felt we were faring on each, drawing a dot either close to the circumference (great) or close to the center (bad), and then connecting all the dots. If you felt you were excelling in every area, from 80% Rule (the fullness goal) to Loved Ones First (maintaining family connections), your dots would connect to a perfect circle; if you felt good about just a few, your shape would have a zigzaggy perimeter.

My shape was a chunky star, with four main points indicating my strong suits: Plant Slant (all those salads), Right Tribe (my social circle), Move Naturally (engaging in regular physical activity outside the gym), and Downshift (being able to unwind). I felt satisfied to see I was doing well in those areas, which almost compensated for the Purpose dot at the center of the circle; I essentially gave myself a zero. I reflected on how many hours a day I watch *90 Day Fiancé*, and I challenged myself to consume slightly less in favor of activities that are more aligned with my values, like hanging out with my dog. I felt a sense of progress.

"Wellness programs today are very exclusive, while Blue Zones principles are inclusive," said Vadam. "They are strong enough to make an impact but flexible enough to ask, 'How does it move into your life?'" I leaned into that flexibility, because there were certain lifestyle suggestions I knew were not for me. For example, I would never want to live a life in which I ate until I was only 80 percent full. I feel strongly that anyone who has endured chemotherapy deserves to enjoy exactly as much food they want to.



From left: Grilled sea bass tacos topped with avocado at Andaz Peninsula Papagayo Resort; the resort's Onda Spa blends into the lush surroundings

I was happy to start eating more beans, but Dan Buettner would have to pull the Cheez-Its from my cold dead hands. On the topic of movement, I've learned that the amount I do or don't exercise should be dictated by how my body is feeling, which changes on a day-to-day basis. While I wish I could make a pledge about walking more to pick up groceries, instead of getting them delivered, I know that's not realistic.

In the session on happiness, Vadam went over the three p's vital to emotional well-being—pleasure, purpose, and pride—and asked us to consider how our environments impact our happiness. I reflected on the heaps of unnecessary stuff in my apartment and the fact that I rarely see grass. I scribbled "bad" in my notebook. As soon as I started to feel deficient, I was reassured to be among a small group of people who also had trouble accessing happiness on a



daily basis. The workshop helped to alleviate some of the shame we can feel for living our lives wrong, or not well enough, because no beings on Earth, save perhaps the monkeys in the treetops, have it all figured out.

When it comes to medical advice for my illness, I have ears only for my team of doctors, nutritionists, and surgeons. Unfortunately, no amount of beans or good vibes can stave off a recurrence of my cancer. But I thought about the little things that actually are in my control: being more intentional about scheduling time with friends, carving out more of my day to decompress, and pursuing activities that fill me with a sense of purpose. Strolling to dinner on my last night, I chose to release the “living long” tenet of Blue Zones philosophy and to embrace the “living well” part. Rather than instill a specific doctrine, the retreat reminded me of what I liked

about life, such as the sense of wonder I get when I travel and the feeling of being surrounded by natural beauty.

These little shifts in perspective, of course, were easier to come by at a luxurious eco-resort with a great spa, awe-inspiring biodiversity, and exceptional restaurants committed to local sourcing. At Chao Pescao, the hip pan-Latin tapas bar, I ordered some blue-zones-inspired dishes made with indigenous ingredients. Between sips of a gorgeous nonalcoholic margarita, I dove into a plate of seared local mahi-mahi, garnished with culantro (an herb in the same family as cilantro) and crispy pejibaye, the sweet and nutty fruit of regional peach palm trees. For dessert, I sank into a slice of dense cake made of native purple corn, topped with a floral honey ice cream. For maybe the first time, I wanted to live forever.

NEW & NEXT

LAYAN LIFE BY ANANTARA, THAILAND

This 19,020-square-foot wellness retreat within the beloved Anantara Layan Phuket Resort marries modern technology, like 3D body scans, with ancient Thai healing traditions. Layan Life offers bespoke programs, built by a team of medical doctors and practitioners, that run between 3 and 10 days, incorporating nutrition, guided fitness, and epigenetic testing. *Open now*

MIRAVEL THE RED SEA, SAUDI ARABIA

One of the foremost wellness brands in the United States will celebrate its 30th anniversary by opening its first international location on Shura Island. It will include a wellness center with four yoga studios overlooking the water and a 39-room spa offering Watsu treatments and salt rooms. *Opening late 2025*

AMAN ROSA ALPINA, ITALY

When one of the most prestigious names in luxury hospitality partners with a beloved property in the Dolomites, it's big news. Planned improvements include doubling the size of the spa, incorporating an outdoor pool and hot tubs, and rolling out holistic treatments geared toward active ski-bunny guests. *Opening 2025*

GUT FEELINGS

At one of Europe's most renowned medi-spas, Cara Schacter gets serious about her digestive health

AT GRAND RESORT BAD RAGAZ, a five-star Alpine spa, guests can book something called My Microbiome. This bespoke gut-focused retreat starts with a breakfast that is lactose-, fructose-, fructans-, galactans-, and polyols-free and is selected based on each guest's lab results. For me, that meant two eggs, 140 grams of papaya, two rice crackers, and a glass of 97.7-degree water.

The historic resort, 60 miles southeast of Zurich, is famous for its thermal baths fed by a spring that was discovered by medieval hunters. But it also has restaurants with six collective Michelin stars, \$11,000-a-night penthouses, doctors who service the Swiss Olympic team, and the Newyou Method, a patented program of

Fresh-pressed juice at Grand Resort Bad Ragaz

Opposite page: Looking out at the Alps from Grand Resort Bad Ragaz in eastern Switzerland

ambitious wellness offerings, including the one promising to refresh guests' intestinal flora.

Gut health is a trendy topic. Last year, digestive aids grossed \$51 billion. Podcasts with names like *Butts & Guts* (hosted by a Cleveland Clinic colorectal surgeon) and *Take a Stool* (by an at-home gut-health supplement company) have proliferated. "Hot girls have IBS" was a viral tweet, a TikTok trend, and a billboard campaign for BelliWelli, makers of "zero-bloat" oat brownie bars.

Still, much remains unknown about the causes of and cures for our many digestive woes. After years of dealing with my own, I was more than ready for a gastrointestinal intervention. Four weeks before I left for Bad Ragaz, I received a package with a sample collection kit and a prepaid label addressed to a high-tech lab in Zurich. Needless to say, by the time the resort's Mercedes dropped me outside the lobby, the staff had already carefully considered my gut and how to best serve its flora.

A dysbiosis index of seven is "very, very rare," Sonja Ricke, the hotel's head nutritionist, said upon my arrival. She gently divulged the dire state of my butyrate-producing bacteria. My klebsiella were not good. Pancreatic elastase—technically fine—could be higher. "It's not that you'll die from this," Ricke said. "Absolutely not." In short, I had bad bacteria, an underachieving pancreas, and a parasite. She sent me to my room with unpasteurized apple cider vinegar and arranged for 100 capsules of Creon (pig-derived digestive enzymes) to be dropped off at my room.

"Parasites can be good," Jürgen Albrecht, the fitness trainer, said during a 1 p.m. power walk



along the Rhine River, pointing out the clusters of mistletoe clinging to the oaks. "If they are in a good relationship, it's good for the tree and for themselves." Back at the hotel gym—one of two—he introduced me to a machine that mimics the earth's 7.3-hertz vibrations. He explained that wobbling on a Power Plate might benefit my gut-brain axis. So could stimulating the tongue or teeth during isometric exercises, all aimed at toning the vagus nerve and improving brain-gut communication. "Maybe your stomach's signals aren't quite reaching your brain," he posited.

Meals involved precise amounts of protein and tight portions of complex carbohydrates, like 150 grams of roasted guinea fowl, 75 grams of grilled cabbage, and three tablespoons of gluten-free pasta. The kitchen favors "not so big" servings, Ricke said, explaining why she makes sure to specify large dollops of dairy-free potato foam. One thing I got a lot of was tea made with yarrow, an astringent herb used by ancient Greeks to treat battle wounds. Some guests get yarrow compresses administered by on-site physiotherapists. I didn't get one of those, though I did have a Chi Nei Tsang, or "internal organs chi massage," a Taoist therapy that targets the navel.

The practitioner worked her elbow into my abs. "Normally, people are afraid to press," she said, pumping my belly button. My stomach was so loud. "Is this normal?" I asked. She offered a neutral *hmm*, and then, "There is no such thing as normal." I'd had an unsanctioned protein bar in the elevator ride down, probably poorly timed. Overall my organs were emitting a "smooth energy," she told me, though they did have "a bit of a wall up." She suggested letting go: "Deep surrender is maybe a topic for you."

The last few days were for food-intolerance tests, which included consuming a mango meant to spike fructose and yogurt to probe lactose. I passed them all. Sometimes Ricke is surprised by what she finds. She mentioned a client who had been inexplicably fainting. Ricke thought she might be reactive to steak and prescribed her a mammal-free diet. The woman hasn't blacked out since.

At the end of the week, I left with 40 sachets of probiotic powder and a list of suggestions, like trying cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia and crushing my own linseeds for colon health, plus Ricke's WhatsApp info for follow-up calls. As the Mercedes pulled away, I looked back at the huge neon sign on the resort's roof burning bright against the mountains: EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT.

BOOT CAMP FOR THE BRAIN

A strong body is nothing without a strong mind. Clinique La Prairie in Switzerland has debuted a weeklong Brain Potential program that includes a cerebral MRI, DNA tests, and neuro-nutrition coaching, while Kamalaya in Thailand is adding a dedicated cognitive wellness facility.

HOLD THAT THOUGHT

At a big-hearted temple retreat in rural Japan,
Zen rituals fused with mindfulness
practices teach Kate Crockett to be more present



Clockwise from top left: A stone path through a Zen garden at Dairyuji, a temple in Japan's Tohoku region; a purification basin at Dairyuji; maple trees near the temple's entrance; geta, or traditional wooden flip-flops



I'M SITTING SILENTLY in seiza, a kneeling meditation position, watching the morning sun catch the eaves of the bell tower outside the window and bathe its copper tiles and vermilion columns in crisp light. The glow spreads to the garden below, over the azaleas, stone lanterns, and a lotus pond, filtering through maple leaves about to turn yellow. I wonder if my kids have done their music practice and whether I should have opted for a crossed-leg position. Certainly not lotus, or even half lotus. I take a deep, intentional breath, sensing the stillness of those seated beside me. I cast my eyes down and let my thoughts come and go as the garden fades from my consciousness.

Soon, a bell chimes. I shake out my legs and follow the head priest, in flowing brown and black robes, as he pads barefoot across the tatami into the ceremony hall, which is noticeably cool at this early hour. He prostrates himself before the altar before breaking into a haunting, discordant ritual chanting that fills the hall, offering blessings: to Buddha, to his teachings, and to the temple family, which, for now, includes me. I make my own offering, and we leave the hall for breakfast.

This is how days begin at Dairyuji, an 800-year-old Zen temple—a place of ancient beams, lofty halls, and deep, deep time—in Akita prefecture, in Japan's Tohoku region. But Dairyuji is also the vibrant temple-home of the 38th head priest, Keno Miura; his American wife, Gretchen, a certified meditation teacher and grief educator; and their four adult children. Twice a year the family welcomes a small group of participants (seven in our case, a mix of travelers and Tokyo expats) for a two-night Zen mindfulness retreat based around the Soto Zen tenet that we all have within us the ability to become enlightened, and that peace can be found right here, right now, in our daily lives. The retreat incorporates practices that focus on self-compassion, slowing down, breathing, and being present.

Habitually frazzled by work and parenting-related guilt, I need precisely this to recharge and to learn how to reduce stress back home. Happily, the retreat is unlike a typical (and typically austere) Japanese temple stay. Morning and evening zazen (seated meditation) at Dairyuji are by no means compulsory, nor the point. Rather, these and other scheduled activities, like yoga, walking meditations, and mindful crafts, are options for guests to take up as they wish.

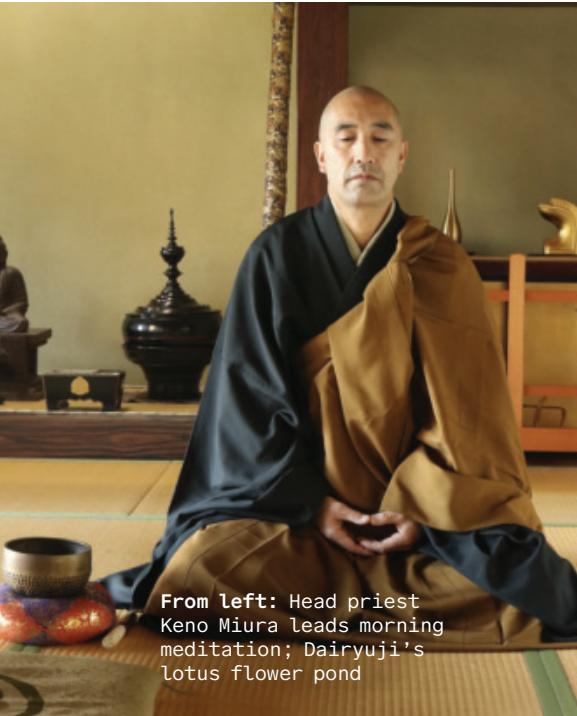
Later that first morning, I find myself stretched

out on a yoga mat in Dairyuji's lofty Memorial Hall, surrounded by bodhisattvas and butsudan altars belonging to the temple's member families. In this extraordinary setting, instructor Aiko takes our group through stretching, held postures, and breath work exercises that are difficult to master but energizing. Afterward, we climb the bell tower to view the mountains and the Sea of Japan before sitting down together for a lunch of hearty donburi. Later a fellow solo traveler and I stroll down to the nearby city of Oga, falling instantly into a conversation about purpose, grief, mental load—and how things might be different after this weekend.

Finding peace in the moment is a start, and it comes later that afternoon as we place seashells, acorns, and other small objects into circles to create mandalas. "This creative expression can get you to a place of nonthinking," explains Gretchen, who is leading this activity. "The mandala represents wholeness, the idea that you can have sorrow *and* joy at the same time." She reveals how, after her mother died, she made a huge mandala on the beach and watched as it was eventually washed away by the tide. The process helped her to accept her grief as part of herself. Our collective gut response to our own mandalas is to wonder at how such a simple activity could be so engrossing and so freeing, and, crucially, to ask ourselves how we might be able to nurture similar moments in our everyday lives.

I turn this over in my head as I walk in the hillside cemetery and along Dairyuji's wood hallways, and at night as I lie on my futon in a tatami room decorated with calligraphy quoting the Heart Sutra. My fellow participants and I discuss this, and much more, with Keno and Gretchen over openhearted, convivial meals that include fantastic homemade kiritanpo (Akita hot pot). Further revealing conversations take place during an evening trip to a hot spring, where we soak naked (and gender-segregated) beneath the stars.

The morning of our departure, Keno chimes the bell to wake us for sunrise. The sky is a cloudless deep orange as we sit with him for zazen, then stand for a guided walking meditation. Morning service and breakfast are followed by closing activities based around the three jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, his teaching, and community. We craft goshuin, or temple seals, using calligraphy and ink stamps and write letters reflecting on what we will take away with us. For me it is to →



From left: Head priest Keno Miura leads morning meditation; Dairyuji's lotus flower pond



try to “accept without judging”—a lifelong challenge but one that is at least now at the forefront of my consciousness. I will also take with me a deeper understanding of Zen culture, renewed energy, and the intention to permit myself guilt-free quiet time for meditation.

Our hosts’ generous spiritual and practical advice continues right up until departure, when Gretchen shares one more valuable insight: the Japanese saying *ichi-go, ichi-e*, which means “to notice and treasure the present moment.” I’ve

been hanging on to it ever since returning home. In fact, I’m channeling it—with Zen-like calm—right now with dinner on the stove and my youngest hollering from upstairs about missing ballet tights. *Ichi-go, ichi-e.*

A two-night, three-day retreat at Dairyuji temple starts at \$635 per person, including accommodations and meals, plus a trip to a local onsen and a taiko drum performance. The next retreat is May 23–May 25, 2025; dairyuji-oga.com

CRYING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS

Screaming, according to American psychotherapist Arthur Janov, can alleviate everything from anxiety to asthma. As with sound baths and temescals before it, yelling your heart out in nature is migrating from the fringe to the mainstream. Several notable examples are in the UK, including at the Lake District favorite Armathwaite Hall Hotel & Spa and at Wales’s The Dreaming, which will offer vocalization-focused Song of the Soul retreats in 2025.

NEW & NEXT

ROSEWOOD

MIYAKOJIMA, JAPAN

Located on the largest of the Miyako Islands in Okinawa, this new property is the brand’s first in Japan. The wellness programming at Asaya Spa looks to the long-living people of the area for inspiration and incorporates rituals from the regional Ryukyu faith, such as blessing ceremonies. *Opening March 2025*

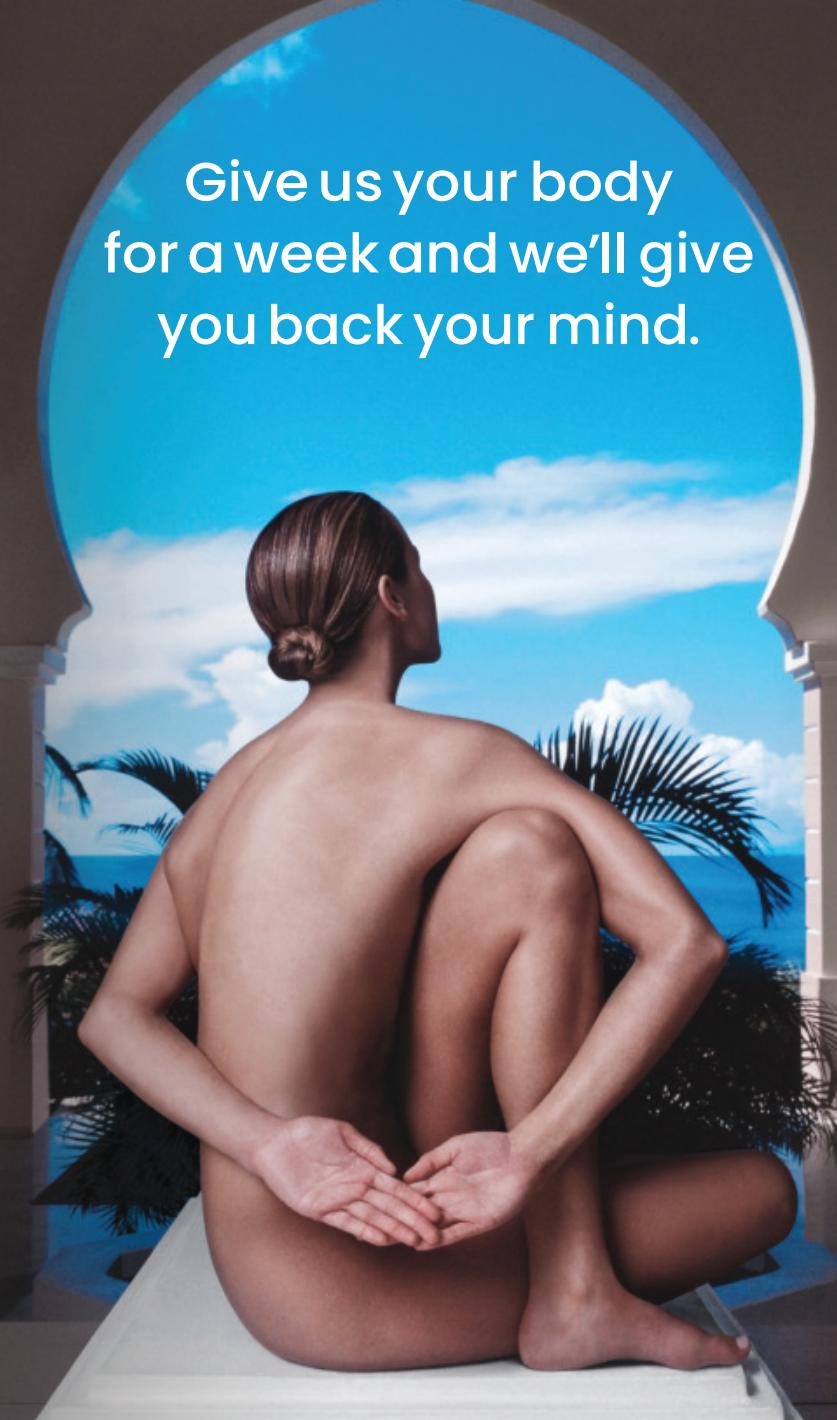
BRENNERS

PARK-HOTEL & SPA, BADEN-BADEN, GERMANY

This storied Black Forest resort-town spa has been in operation since 1872, so it needed the epic 18-month renovation and modernization that will come to a close this spring, bringing redesigned suites and a host of new health-centric experiences to one of Europe’s original wellness destinations. *Opening mid-2025*

INNESS SPA, NEW YORK

Former Aman New York spa director Sanali McFadden has headed upstate to lead the brand-new wellness center at this Catskills hotel. There’s a bathhouse, an outdoor deck with a cold plunge, a heated indoor pool, and treatment rooms for Ayurvedic massage and facials using Biologique Recherche products. *Open*



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A photograph of a woman sleeping peacefully in bed. She is lying on her side, facing right, with her head resting on a dark pillow. Her body is partially covered by a dark blanket. Sunlight streams in from a window behind her, creating bright rays and long shadows across the scene. The overall atmosphere is calm and restful.

WELLNESS

GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK

Chronically sleep-deprived Mary Holland test-drives a new spa program designed to help you get your 40 winks, before returning home with some new strategies for getting enough rest

PHOTOGRAPH: MATHIEU RICHER MAMOUSSE

A close-up, low-angle shot of a person sleeping in a bed. The person's hands are visible near their head. Sunlight streams in from a window on the left, casting bright rays and long shadows across the bed and the person's body. The scene is warm and peaceful.

WHEN A MEMBER of the hotel team showed me around my sleep-optimized room at Switzerland's Chenot Palace Weggis, I got the sense I would not sleep very well at all. "You set the alarm for the morning and it will play for 20 minutes," she explained, pointing to a panel on the wall. "Then you put on the eye mask and play this for another 20 minutes." She gestured toward a smartphone on the other side of the bed that contained the app I would need. There was also a smart thermostat, which had to be set between 66 and 68 degrees, bedsheets coated with infrared-emitting minerals, and temperature-regulating pajamas. I was tired, jet-lagged, and in no shape to comprehend the complicated contraptions that were meant to help me do what's supposed to be the most natural thing in the world.

While consistently getting enough shut-eye seems like it should be easy enough to achieve, it's not. More than one third of adults sleep fewer than seven hours per night (below the recommended minimum), and between 50 and 70 million Americans have sleep disorders. I myself am perpetually tired and consistently wake at 3 a.m. With so many people struggling to slumber, and growing research linking sleep deficiency with obesity and heightened cancer risk, it's no wonder that the global market for sleep aids reached nearly \$64 billion in 2023. Nor is it a surprise that hotels have begun offering a variety of tools to help guests get better rest. Six Senses' Sleep with Six Senses program includes pillow menus and sleep tracking, which monitors movements and oxygen levels; the Penthouse Suite at Equinox Hotel New York blocks out sound and light pollution.

More comprehensive is the new Sleep Cycles offering I'd come to Chenot Palace Weggis to experience. Its goal is to reset guests' circadian rhythms, which for many of us are totally off-kilter thanks to various factors, including artificial light from our screens. "It's designed to fine-tune your internal clock," said George Gaitanos, chief operating and scientific officer of the Chenot Group. Gaitanos, a metabolic specialist and acupuncturist, is versed in Western and Eastern medicine, both of which informed Sleep Cycles. "We're trying to build a lot of adenosine [a molecule that slows down neuron activity] in the body, because the greater the adenosine in the brain, the greater the →

pressure to sleep," he explained. Putting the body through moderate physical stress and mild sleep deprivation makes successful sleep more likely.

When I arrived at Chenot, I was informed that the purpose of Sleep Cycles is not to cure insomnia. "We try to synchronize your circadian rhythm with the day," said Gaitanos. This happens through daily treatments meant to have a lasting impact. Your day begins when you wake each morning in your Sleep Room, swathed in FDA-approved Nanobionic bed linens that contain minerals activated by body heat. The sound of birdsong drifts from a speaker for 20 minutes, while lights that mimic natural rays flash from a panel on the ceiling. This is followed by another 20 minutes of neuroacoustic sound therapy, during which you put on headphones and stream calming sounds from an app. I found the idea of lounging in bed for so long sans coffee deeply anxiety-inducing, but Gaitanos assured me that the acoustic environment cuts off disruptive (i.e., low and high) frequencies, which in turn helps us to sleep better later on. Next came a trip to the spa for a few treatments: first, cryotherapy—I did three minutes at minus 166 degrees inside a chamber—followed by a mud wrap and then light therapy.

After a few days of swishing through Chenot's hallways in a bathrobe, bouncing from detoxing baths to energetic massages and acupuncture, I had the confidence to skip my nightly sleep medication. The next morning I woke up at 5 a.m.,



but, to my relief, I felt rested. I had slept through the night. Yet I had to wonder how sustainable all this was. Is it worth traveling somewhere to reset and fix your circadian rhythm only to potentially mess it up again on your flight home? Who has a cryotherapy chamber and a specialized ceiling panel in their house? "What we're trying to do is kick-start you into creating habits," Gaitanos said. Many of Chenot's treatments and technologies can't be replicated, but there are substitutes for some—like the ceiling panel: "Wake up, open your curtains, absorb the sunlight," Gaitanos said. And there are ample ways to improvise. When an unlikely snowstorm dumped two feet of snow outside Chenot, I turned to nature for my afternoon cold fix and took a dip in the ice-covered lake. While I can't pack the Nanobionic linens in my carry-on (though guests can purchase them), I can travel with the pajamas and stream the neuroacoustic app from my phone. When I told Gaitanos my sleeplessness is likely linked to stress, because I wake with swirling thoughts in the wee hours of the morning, he suggested an easy solution: Grab a pen and piece of paper before going to bed and write down what's worrying you.

Another solution for the inevitable 3 a.m. jolts requires a simple change in thinking. One day an acupuncturist explained that, according to the Chinese body clock, 3 a.m. to 5 a.m. is the optimal time for meditation because it's the hour of the lungs. This is when monks chant because they believe their prana, or energy, is at its most powerful. Now, back in regular life, rather than engage in my usual predawn sweat and swirl, I re-create the sounds from Chenot through an app and do breath work, which in turn helps me fall back into a deep and sweet slumber. It's certainly no kitted out Sleep Room, but I consider it the perfect souvenir.

SOAK IT UP

From cold plunges to emotional showers, full-service spas are upping their water options, while more hydrotherapy-focused establishments are opening: Cascada Thermal Springs & Spa in Portland, Oregon, has five underground pools, a hydrotherapy circuit, and a waterfall walk. Othership, in New York's Flatiron district, has a 90-person sauna.

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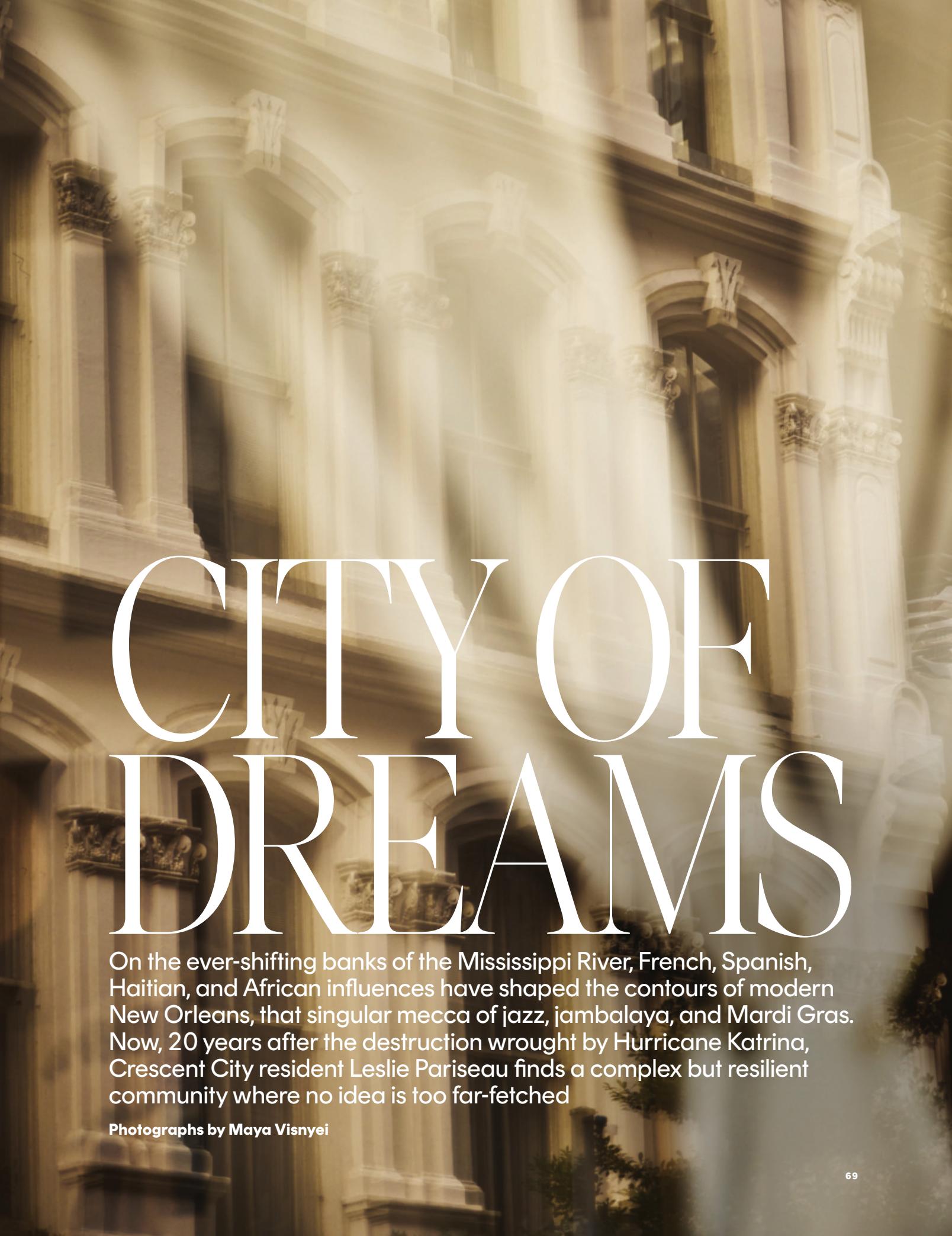


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Clockwise from top left:
The stage at storied French Quarter jazz club Preservation Hall; Lagniappe Bakehouse owner Kaitlin Guerin; pastel de nata and an espresso martini at 34 Restaurant & Bar; outside Café Du Monde, a saxophonist plays

Opposite page: One of the grand historic homes that line Canal Street



CITY OF DREAMS

On the ever-shifting banks of the Mississippi River, French, Spanish, Haitian, and African influences have shaped the contours of modern New Orleans, that singular mecca of jazz, jambalaya, and Mardi Gras. Now, 20 years after the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina, Crescent City resident Leslie Pariseau finds a complex but resilient community where no idea is too far-fetched

Photographs by Maya Visnyei

10

New Orleans is a city of mood," chef Serigne Mbaye tells me one Wednesday morning in September. We've been discussing the merits of Parkway's po'boys and the old-school kitchen at Commander's Palace. While growing up in Senegal and New York City, Mbaye cooked with his mother, and his Uptown restaurant, Dakar NOLA, braids his memories of this time with his haute restaurant experiences and the deep-rooted African heritage of New Orleans.

"New Orleans is a woman," declares Biba Islah. We're talking in her studio, tucked away on the ground floor of an old bread factory in the Irish Channel neighborhood. An eighth-generation French, Spanish, and Haitian Creole New Orleanian, Islah does hair, makeup, and healing, and she reads tarot at Patron Saint, the wineshop and bar that my husband, Tony Biancosino, and I opened a year ago in the Lower Garden District. The night before we debuted our restaurant and tavern, St. Pizza, a couple of doors down from Patron Saint, she cleansed it with sage and rum. "New Orleans is empathetic. She feels everything," offers Islah.

"New Orleans is a two-way embrace," says Ben Jaffe, the director of historic French Quarter jazz-club institution Preservation Hall, when I ask him what it takes to endure here. "It comes with what I call the 'New Orleans tax.'" This manifests not in the form of dollars, he explains, but in the responsibility to love and understand the city as it is.

It would be impossible to love and understand New Orleans without knowing its irrational, insouciant origins: a colony built on a swamp by three different countries; a yellow-fever-ridden, opera-obsessed port city central to the slave trade between Africa and the Caribbean; the fecund ground where jazz, America's most original art, sprang forth from



merill's
restaurant

Clockwise from top left: Celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse and his son, E.J.; fried catfish with collard greens and sweet potato at Café Reconcile; the dining room at the Chloe hotel

Opposite page, clockwise from top: Coffee and beignets at the 1862-established Café Du Monde; the throwback marquee at renovated Dew Drop Inn; a painting by Jessica Strahan at the New Orleans African American Museum

EAT & DRINK

New Orleans is a menagerie of culinary institutions, from **Dooky Chase** to **Briggsen's** and **Clancy's**, but it also has room for newcomers likely to stand the test of time: Melissa Martin's deeply felt **Mosquito Supper Club**, one of the few true homes of Cajun cooking; **Dakar NOLA**, Serigne Mbaye's modern ode to traditional Senegalese cooking that opened in 2022 and won a James Beard Award; **34 Restaurant & Bar**, Emeril Lagasse's first stand-alone in eight years and a temple to his Portuguese heritage; the **Little House**, a West Bank cottage café and wineshop-bar in Algiers Point; and Martha Wiggins's **Café Reconcile**, a teaching restaurant on Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard that serves New Orleans cuisine—red beans and rice, catfish, smothered chicken—in an everyman lunch canteen.

Then there are the new neighborhood mainstays that visitors will want to leave the French Quarter for:

Lagniappe Bakehouse, hidden in a breezy cottage where New Orleans native Kaitlin Guerin's pastries nod to Southern and African tides with benne-seed toffee cookies and corn-husk-wrapped honey-butter-adorned cornmeal muffins; **Queen Trini Lisa**, whose jerk chicken, oxtail, and pigeon peas and rice illustrate the city's close ties to the Caribbean; and **NightBloom**, a Bywater cocktail bar from the Bacchanal team that serves seasonal drinks and hosts DJs late into the night. And indulge me for mentioning my own wine-shop and bar, **Patron Saint**, and pizzeria and tavern, **St. Pizza**, which my husband and I created to feel like extensions of our own home.

the minds of Buddy Bolden, King Oliver, and Louis Armstrong; a mecca of both seafood and oil. A beyond-American place of portals waiting to be opened by pirates, pioneers, and anyone curious to dig beneath the oyster-shell-strewn surface. It would also be impossible to love and understand this city today without recalling the blazing hot days of late August 2005 and all that has happened since.

Twenty years ago Hurricane Katrina ravaged this sleepy, subtropical place of creaky cypress porches and pastel clapboard, scattering its citizenry, as if in a snow globe, every which way. "Ninety-six different zip codes," chef Emeril Lagasse says he counted when mailing out post-hurricane checks to employees in 2005. Two decades later New Orleans has changed in ways both good and difficult, having become a shiny object in the lenses of an iPhone-wielding American public hungry to consume an exceedingly affordable city. It is today, like many American cities, pricier, hotter, and more riddled with infrastructural issues than ever before. And yet it persists as a city of singular reputation, whose name casts a universal spell; say "New Orleans" in Tokyo, Lagos, São Paulo, or Paris, and watch as eyes light up with the recognition of all that this watery, crescent-shaped peninsula of fewer than 400,000 residents can mean. Burrow beneath the surface layer of mass tourism and you'll find yourself in a resilient community deeply committed to its long-term health.

"I don't know another city our size that has as much consequence in the food and beverage space," says Joaquin Rodas, an owner of the legendary wine oasis Bacchanal and the new NightBloom cocktail bar, which sit at opposite ends of the Bywater neighborhood. Originally from El Salvador, Rodas moved here by way of Los Angeles as a helicopter mechanic with the Marine Corps in 1995. He credits GPS and smartphones for the eventual "12-year-overnight-success" of Bacchanal, which is located on a sleepy corner across from an abandoned naval base that is wrapped with chain-link fencing and barbed wire. In the years after Katrina, new hospitality folks and hurricane refugees who'd fled to cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco trickled back, eager to rebuild the city's dining scene with the food, drinks, and techniques they'd learned elsewhere. As with the Spanish and French and Africans and Irish and Caribbeans who had come before them, they infused this fresh material into the city's DNA.



The city's Garden District has some of the country's best-preserved historic mansions in the Victorian, Italianate, and Greek Revival styles



SHOP

The city is full of old and beautiful things. There are the storied antiques emporiums on Royal Street, of course, but also highly curated shops like **Century Girl** (impeccable women's vintage and jewelry),

Webb's Bywater

Music Store (records and instruments),

Lucullus Antiques

(cookware and interiors), and **Anthology** (a trove of cool vintage gems). New Orleans is also peppered with the imaginative collections of local minds:

Baldwin & Co., an independent bookshop and café committed to community-based action and literary accessibility; **Freda**, which brings together labels like Baserange and body oil from Mount Sapo; **Lekha**, a showcase for luxurious clothing handmade by women artisans in India;

Jamboree Jams/Bar

Pomona, a shop meets neighborhood café with a rotating offering of pastries and preserves; and

Haus of Hoodoo, a Lower Garden District apothecary and botanica that curates a beguiling collection of remedies and spiritual services.

"Funny enough, the whole country kind of leaned into New Orleans," says Rodas. Katrina drew focus on the city while reworking it into a kaleidoscope of new voices and ideas.

New Orleans's consequence has indeed attracted the world to its sea-level streets; in the last six months we have hosted Taylor Swift, Super Bowl LIX, and Prospect.6, the sixth edition of an art fair that highlights local talent including L. Kasimu Harris and Abdi Farah and international artists such as Venuri Perera and Myrlande Constant. We throw legendary parties like Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest, which attract 1.5 million people annually. But for every main event and decades-old institution, there are dozens of projects, pop-ups, and local businesses roiling with their own grassroots life.

"People here have the vulnerability to run with the experiment—to take a risk," says Melissa Martin, the James Beard–decorated chef, writer, and owner of Mosquito Supper Club, an Uptown Victorian cottage offering bayou-born Cajun food five nights a week; her business started as a pop-up out of a space in the Bywater in 2014 with borrowed furniture and her mom's and grandmother's Magnalite pots. Here it's possible to test-run a business without private equity but with the community's full investment. "We can bootstrap it in a way New York would never dream of," Martin says.

New Orleans is a city of flow, shifted and shaped by the wandering Mississippi River and the swampy alluvial soup of the Gulf of Mexico. A place where it's possible and common to create informal and temporary businesses: a roving grill that specializes in Puerto Rican yakitori; an ad hoc vintage shop that sells old Jazz Fest posters and Venetian glass; a sourdough bread salon that traffics in democratic socialism. Patron Saint found its proof of concept as a pop-up in the late days of the pandemic on a sunny corner of the Lower Garden District, which my husband and I built into a brick-and-mortar establishment. Later we added St. Pizza during the thick of Mardi Gras and sold slices to feathered, bedazzled, painted passersby, experimenting to see what worked because in New Orleans such a thing is possible. "You can still be a dreamer here," Rodas told me. Before moving here in 2019, I had no immediate plans to open a business, but New Orleans can change a person's ambitions.

Someone recently described the city to me as an "economically depressed town with outsize cultural value." This tension results in businesses that



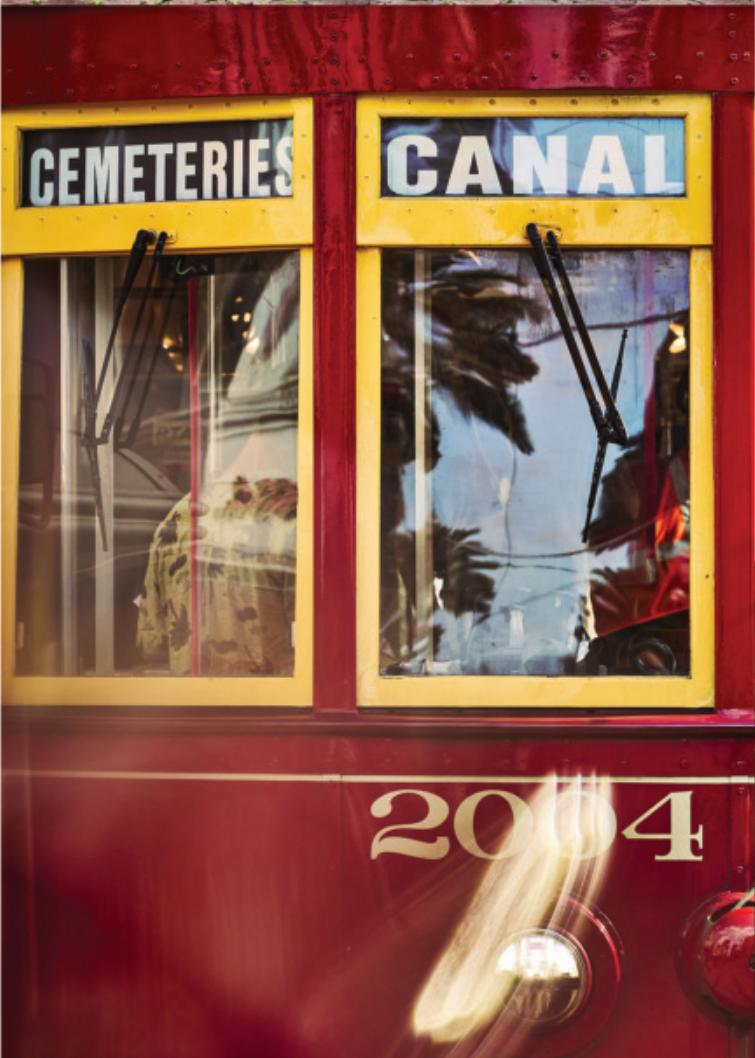
From top: The Ray Charles-themed guest room at Dew Drop Inn; Biba Islah reading tarot at Patron Saint wineshop

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: An art installation by Blas Isasi for the Prospect.6 international art fair; Gia M. Hamilton, executive director and chief curator at the African American Museum; 34 Restaurant & Bar; a trolley on the historic Canal Streetcar line



STAY

Imagine what life could be like living in a Garden District Victorian at **The Chloe**, an Uptown Queen Anne on the St. Charles Streetcar line. Each room is its own treasure chest of detail, with claw-foot tubs, cane rocking chairs, and the bathroom hidden through a wardrobe door, as in room seven. **The Hotel St. Vincent** on Magazine Street offers Lower Garden District luxury to a jet-set crowd, while the **Hotel Peter and Paul** in the Marigny is a quiet oasis arranged around a lovingly restored 19th-century church and school. To mingle with ghosts of Central City past, rest your head at **Dew Drop Inn**, a live music venue and hotel that's been revived and channels the years when Irma Thomas, Fats Domino, and Little Richard played there.



SEE & DO

There is no place more atmospheric than the old groves of live oaks at **City Park**. Scattered among these century-old Spanish-moss-hung curiosities are the **New Orleans Museum of Art**, the **Botanical Gardens**, and acres upon acres of grounds that include bayou trails, fields of wildflowers, and weekly farmers markets. Born of the tradition of Black brass-accompanied funerals and hosted by the city's many social aid and pleasure clubs, **New Orleans's second lines** are one of the most moving ways to understand the city's African roots as translated through public dance, community participation, and unabridged joy. A celebratory street parade is held nearly every Sunday (except in summer).



couldn't exist anywhere else, including musical institutions owned and run by musicians themselves: the Mother-in-Law Lounge, a cornerstone jazz dive owned by trumpet player Kermit Ruffins; Tipitina's, a legendary venue owned by the band Galactic; Preservation Hall, which is ground zero for the living memory of New Orleans jazz, owned by Ben Jaffe, who plays bass and tuba in the house band and also serves as its creative director, continuing the legacy of his parents, who began managing it in 1961. In 2021, Jaffe partnered to rescue the Toulouse Theater, a shuttered French Quarter music venue that originally opened in 1977. These places, Jaffe says, "are a part of your childhood and your education. You think, This is where Dr. John and Professor Longhair and the Neville Brothers played—we have to make sure this place survives. It doesn't seem extraordinary, but it is extraordinary."

New Orleans is a calling, a vocation, a religion: It requires devotion, no matter the storm that strikes. New Orleans is an accidental invention, a corrupt little hotbed of seafood and cocktails and jazz, and a true bastion of regional character. And it is important to know all of this if you are going to visit, to truly see the place that has been dubbed the Big Easy, but which is neither big nor easy, as the local quip goes. Everyone here, if you listen hard enough, has their sayings and their own set of beliefs about this almost-island hanging off the heel of Louisiana. Each resident is a guide who will take you down streets both well trodden and hidden, to tourist sites (some of which residents also frequent) and seemingly abandoned buildings that light up on Sundays during second lines with crowds of neighbors, \$2 beers, and smoking grills. The same locals' list of recommendations might include McHardy's black-pepper-flecked fried chicken, served from a counter in Mid-City; or the fried chicken pop-up at Pete's Out in the Cold in the Irish Channel; or the golden fried chicken on a white-linen-swathed table at Dooky Chase in Tremé.

You must set aside judgments and preconceived notions, leaving behind what you know to be true in other places. This is what chef Serigne Mbaye means when he calls New Orleans a city of mood. That it depends on the day and what you need. Some days it's a po'boy from Parkway other days it's jerk chicken from Queen Trini, and others still it's a martini lunch at Commander's. "It's not fair," he says, "to compare New Orleans to anywhere else."



LISTEN

On any given day you can see a hundred different musical acts in dive bars, hotels, and venerated music halls. Tune in to WWOZ, the best radio station in the world, for traditional jazz, Brazilian samba, 1950s R&B, or rare soul, plus the day's live-music lineup recited every hour (the radio station's website also give the week's second-line parade route). You'll never regret attending a show at famed trumpet player Kermit Ruffins's **Kermit's Tremé Mother-in-Law Lounge** ("I'm sitting right where jazz was born," he'll tell you in his characteristic rasp) or a show at the standard-bearer

Preservation Hall in the French Quarter and the newly revamped **Chickie Wah Wah**. You also won't regret going far afield to **Bullet's Sports Bar** for live-music night, **Saturn Bar** for a mod dance night or a Cher-themed party, or just wandering right down the middle of **Frenchmen Street**, where jazz pours from every open doorway.



Clockwise from top left:
An accordion player in the French Quarter; a weekday wine tasting at Patron Saint; Tarah Douglas, communications and story telling manager at Prospect New Orleans; Café Beignet on Bourbon Street; a French Quarter street sign; NightBloom cocktail bar

Opposite page, clockwise from top:
The exterior of Mother-in-Law Lounge; a slice of Bianca from St. Pizza; uncorking at Dakar NOLA





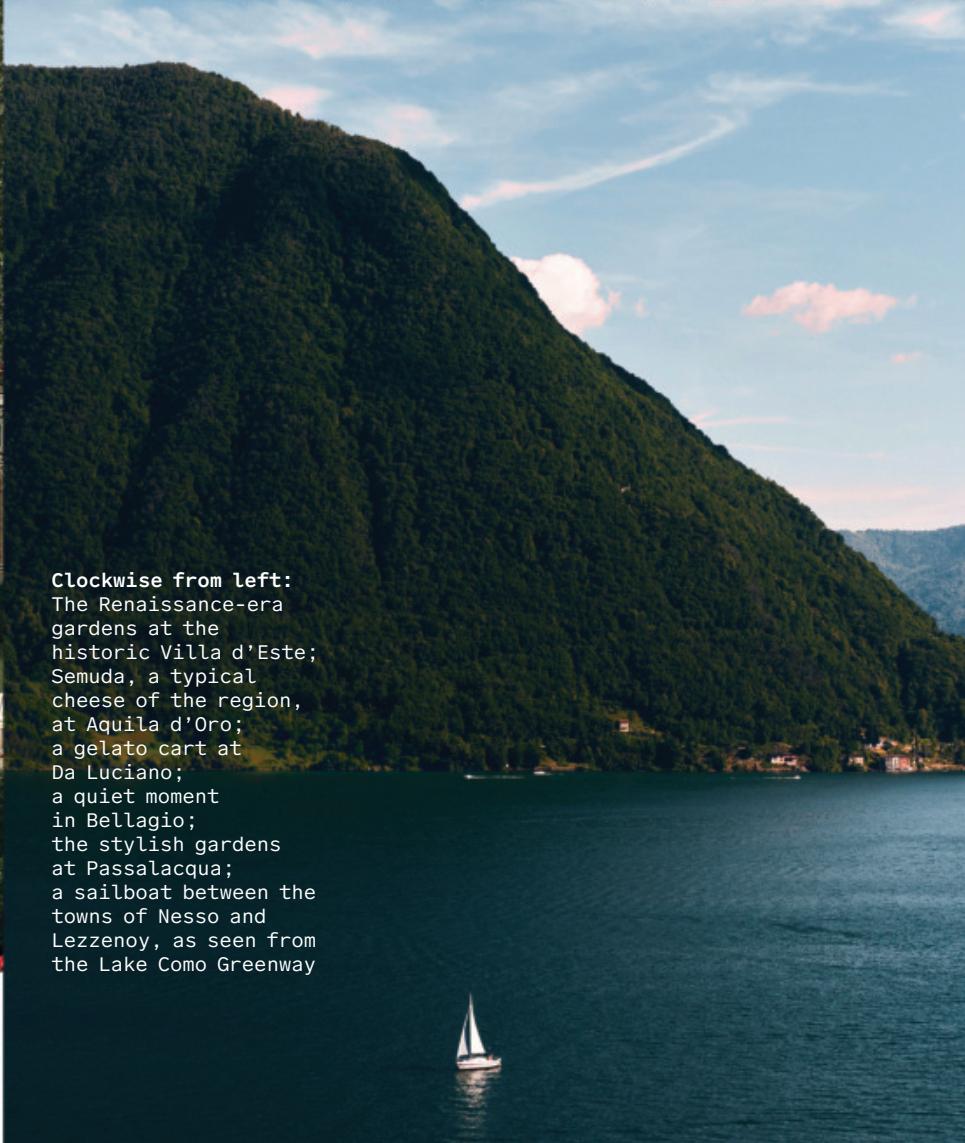
The view from the village
of Cernobbio, on the west
coast of Como, during
the early morning hours

be cool

Outside the summer months,
Lake Como hums with a slower, more local rhythm.

Now travelers re getting wise to the appeal
of the legendary Italian vacation spot in all seasons

By Lee Marshall Photographs by Phil Hewitt



Clockwise from left:
The Renaissance-era
gardens at the
historic Villa d'Este;
Semuda, a typical
cheese of the region,
at Aquila d'Oro;
a gelato cart at
Da Luciano;
a quiet moment
in Bellagio;
the stylish gardens
at Passalacqua;
a sailboat between the
towns of Nesso and
Lezzenoy, as seen from
the Lake Como Greenway



it's

a cloudless December day on Lake Como, the kind that would make anyone want to bottle up the blue and keep it as a cure for rainy Mondays. I'm on board *Lord Byron*—the unromantic hydrofoil ferry, not the Romantic poet—with skipper Giorgio Cantaluppi, and the only thing moving faster than us is a cormorant cresting the ripples in the direction of George Clooney's villa, its wings skimming the water.

We remain gloriously alone when we stop by the picturesque bridge and waterfall of Nesso, where, come summer, a flotilla of tourist boats will face off against an army of selfie sticks. The waterfall is sublime, but so is the sun warming my back as I turn to the north. Somewhere over there, beyond those snow-dusted peaks on the border between Italy and Switzerland, people are skiing. Me, I'm wondering if the hotel pool is still open.

When resort towns such as Cannes and San Remo began attracting visitors from the colder climes in the second half of the 19th century, they were seen as wintertime destinations only. Not so with Lake Como. The great villas built around its shores from the 16th century onward were intimately linked to the summer ritual known as *villeggiatura*. Like the Palladian villas of Veneto, these were places that urban aristocrats could decamp to, generally around mid-June, with a platoon of servants, lapdogs, and candelabra in tow.

The *villeggiatura* season became hardwired into the Lake Como mindset. When smart hotels began offering ways of visiting the region without having to own a grand private villa (some of the best current hotels, including Villa d'Este, Passalacqua, and the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni, were stately private villas in a previous life), most chose to stay open from Easter through the end of October. But two thirds of foreign visitors still arrive between June and September.

Recently, however, a breeze of change has been wafting across the Lago di Como, especially the lower left arm of its inverted Y. Known as the Ramo di Como, or Como branch, this is classic Como—Clooney Como, *villeggiatura* Como—home to most of the lake's historical villas and gardens and nearly all of its high-end hotels. There are various reasons for this, but perhaps the most obvious is the area's sheer beauty. The mountains come down to the water in folds like drapery trailing a Botticelli angel. In the squeeze between Laglio and Careno, there's a wide bay dominated in the south by the great pale yellow façade of one of Como's greatest houses, the 16th-century Villa Pliniana, today a wedding venue and exclusive-use rental property.

The shift in visitation is captured in a buzzword that is a mouthful in Italian:

destagionalizzazione, which in effect means stretching the season at both ends and thinning the bump in the middle. Spring can be slow to arrive in this pre-Alpine setting, and the summer heat often lingers well into autumn. So the Lake Como spin on “deseasonalization” has been to open in mid to late March, push on through the winter festive season, and close in early January.

“I love late fall and the beginning of winter on the lake,” says Valentina De Santis, the hotelier behind the widely adored Passalacqua. “The light is incredible. Sometimes you get crisp days when you can almost reach out to touch the opposite shore. At other times there are romantic mornings when mist rises off the water and everything is hazy and indistinct.” Passalacqua occupies an 18th-century villa that De Santis restored with her family and launched in 2022 as a ravishing 24-room hotel to offer a 21st-century spin on *villeggiatura*. It stays open from some time in March until early January. So does the grande dame of Lake Como tourism, Villa d’Este, and Vista Lago di Como, a new town house hotel on the waterfront of the town of Como.

While most of the hotels still feel the need to shutter for a couple of months in winter, the restaurants do not. At Crotto dei Platani, which began as a local inn and evolved into a panoramic steel and glass pavilion restaurant with its own private jetty, the owner, Francesco Cavadini, recalls how in 2006 he made the against-the-grain decision to keep the place open all winter. The message took a while to get out, but now all it takes is a sunny January weekend for the restaurant to fill up.

Some patrons drive up from Milan for the day or across the border from Switzerland. But quite a few have houses nearby, including a small community of affluent Thais whom Cavadini counts as among his best customers. One day the restaurateur asked a Bangkok-based businessman why he always turned up in winter. “I like to wear a coat sometimes,” came the reply. The offseason is also a good time for those who like to be spontaneous. On a Sunday in March, I land a lunch table at Alle Darsene di Loppia, a creative trattoria by the entrance to Villa Melzi in Bellagio, with two hours’ notice. Good luck replicating that in July.

On a limpid winter day of strong winds and endless views, not long after that boat ride with Cantaluppi, I walk to Villa del Balbianello, which sits on a stretch of the Lake Como Greenway, a six-mile western shore route that follows sections of an old Roman road. Built by an 18th-century cardinal, Balbianello is the Xanadu of Lake Como, surpassing even those classic lakeside garden palaces Villa Carlotta and Villa Melzi as the ultimate waterside retreat. Open to the public apart from a break between early January and mid-March, it is one of those places where every twist in the path makes visitors reach for their cameras. The ilex tree on the front lawn, its crown trimmed into a green cloud, strikes an irresistible pose against the sunlit lake and a balustrade of classical statuary.

Another fine offseason activity is to go up instead of along. One Monday in March I find myself heading

up an ancient mule track from the town of Torno. Halfway up, I pass under a gate where locals have left small stones in a niche, honoring a folk memory from the days when a toll would have been paid here. Eventually I step into a steep flower-strewn meadow. Above is the hamlet of Piazzaga, a scattering of solid stone houses with pitched roofs. This is where the good citizens of Torno once came to farm, keeping pigs and cattle, making cheese and butter, and growing vegetables. Today many of the houses have become holiday rentals. The old village inn, or crotto, was relaunched as a bar-restaurant in 2020 by three friends from Como. I order the pizzoccheri: buckwheat pasta strips served with potatoes and seasonal vegetables. The view of the lake below is filtered through the trees and accompanied by birdsong.

Lake Como is a tête-à-tête on a restaurant terrace on a warm July night. It’s candlelight flickering on frescoed walls. It’s a dash across the lake in a sleek Riva runabout. But the charmed basin of water is also a cultural cradle, a geological marvel. You haven’t really “done” Como until you’ve explored its other worlds too, on the water and in one of the mountain villages high above the lake—experiences that give most generously outside the summer rush. ◐





Clockwise from far left:
A fresco in the mountain town of Piazzaga; Valentina De Santis, the owner of Passalacqua; at Aquila d'Oro; a charcuterie dish at Osteria del Gallo

where to sleep

Three of Lake Como's most elegant hotels stay open from early spring until the beginning of January, and each offers a very different offseason experience. With just 24 rooms and suites, **Passalacqua** (from \$1,575; passalacqua.it) is a grand historical villa where you can wander into the kitchen to fix a little something or take a spin on the lake in a vintage Riva. **Villa d'Este** (from \$850; villadeste.com) is the archetypal lakeside hotel, but in the winter festive season, it transforms into an enchanted palace. **Vista Lago di Como**

(from \$630; vistapalazzo.com) is for those who want to be on the lake but surrounded by the buzz and culture of one of Lombardy's most engaging small cities, Como itself. **Relais Villa Vittoria** (from \$275; relaisvillavittoria.com), just up the road from George Clooney's estate, is an elegant villa hotel with the heart and soul of a family-run pension. It opens for the season as early as mid-February.

At **Il Sereno** (from \$970; sereno-hotels.com), which has operated on the eastern shore of the Como branch of the lake since 2016, and its near neighbor, the **Mandarin Oriental, Lago di Como** (from \$998; mandarinoriental.com), which debuted in 2019, guests can experience the area's low-season appeal. With interiors by Patricia Urquiola, Il Sereno is about sleek, glamorous minimalism, which

lets the beauty of the lake take center stage. The Mandarin Oriental is the most urbane of all the storefront stays, a place where a guest might work on a novel over a Negroni before heading off to its sister establishment in Milan for Fashion Week.

Finally, two highly regarded off-piste spots: Romantic bolt-hole **La Civera-Nesso Lake Como** (from \$700; rentallcomo.com) is an apartment in an ancient stone building near the celebrated Nesso waterfall. The lake's most sophisticated accommodation is **Casa Brenna Tosatto** (from \$315; casabrennatosatto.com), an eclectic 1920s Liberty-style villa in Tremezzina. It's a charming four-suite guesthouse dedicated to the father-and-son artists who once lived there.

From top:
The magnificent
16th-century gardens
at Villa d'Este;
a room at Casa
Brenna Tosatto

Opposite page,
from left:
An assortment
of cakes at
Passalacqua;
a server at
Da Luciano;
the 122-year-old
restaurant
La Moltrasina



where to eat and drink

In the city of Como, family-run **Osteria del Gallo** is one of those good local trattorias that Italy does so well. It's great for soups, pasta, polenta, and osso buco risotto. At the sleek, light-flooded **Sottovoce**, on the top floor of Vista Lago di Como hotel, the kitchen transforms lake fish and other fresh local ingredients into beautifully plated culinary creations. Opened in March 2024, **Ceccato Garden Bar** is Villa d'Este's spot in town, a cocktails-and-light-bites reboot of a classic lakeside café, which offers an unmissable seafood salad.

On the western side of the lake, romantic foodies have to visit **Raimondi**, the dashingly renovated, slightly fancy waterfront restaurant of the Villa Flori hotel. Anyone staying at the global glamour palace Villa d'Este in Cernobbio will appreciate the buzz of two nearby restaurants: **Trattoria del Glicine**, in the high part





of town, is the kind of reassuringly old-school place elderly *milanesi* go for Sunday lunch; in the warren of lanes down by the lake, Cernobbio's cozy **Osteria del**

Beuc has an unreconstructed 1960s Italian trattoria interior, full of guys playing cards, that feels like it could be in a Wes Anderson movie. It serves comfort food such as crisp Milanese veal cutlet.

For a little high-low frisson in Moltrasio, walk out of Passalacqua and into **La Moltrasina**, the canteen of a village cooperative set up in 1902 which got a hip retro makeover in 2021. In Carate Urio, **Una Finestra sul Lago** is one of two glass and steel pavilions with stunning views along this stretch of the lake. Many *milanesi* make the hour-long drive here for Champagne and pizza. The other, farther north in the village of Brieno, is **Crotto dei Platani**, which sits on the shore with its own boat dock.

Clooney has not been spotted yet at **Da Luciano**, a lakeside butcher's shop in the actor's adopted town of Laglio, which has reinvented itself as the western shore's go-to alfresco lunch and aperitivo spot. But everyone else has, so diners should arrive early or be prepared to wait. Up the hill in Tremezzo is the joyfully unpretentious family-run trattoria **La Fagurida**, which has dizzying lake views and excellent hearty local cuisine, including a memorable mushroom risotto.

The places that offer the ultimate contrast between the lake's suave waterside modernity and its ancient mountain soul are the unfussy, rifugio-like **Crotto Piazzaga** and **Aquila d'Oro**, the "golden eagle." The latter, in a rural hamlet in the hills above Gravedona, is a slow-food paradise where the ruddy-cheeked chef Plinio Bossio forages for a rigorously seasonal menu that he pairs with a stellar wine list.



Starting back at Como and heading up the eastern shore, let yourself dally at **Giulietta al Lago** and then make a beeline for Careno, halfway between Como and Bellagio. In this ancient village, the friendly old-school **Trattoria del Porto** features a menu of local specialties, including fried missolino, a dish of lake fish that is salted and sun-dried before being placed in a wood press, where it can keep for months.

The restaurants of Bellagio have not been served well by the fact that most clients are tourists who will probably never return. Among the exceptions is **Dispensa 63**, a lively bistro in the old town, run by an Italian Welsh chef and his Milanese partner. If you visit the garden of Villa Melzi in the south of Bellagio, it's best to time it so you can take in lunch or dinner at **Alle Darsene di Loppia**. Despite the rustic pergola outside by the cute little harbor of Loppia, it is an artsy place with ravishingly presented mod Med cuisine.



The vivid colors and patterns typical of robes in Benzilan

Opposite page:
A woman in prayer outside the
350-year-old Ganden Dongzhulin Monastery



ANCIENT WAY

A centuries-old trading route through China's Yunnan Province unlocks a land of rice paddies and teahouses where tradition persists in the face of modernity's relentless push

Story and photographs by Chris Schalkx



hey'd come from there," said Qing Lao, pointing a leathery finger at the snow-cloaked mountains from where the caravans would appear. We were in Niding, a tiny hamlet cradled by the mountains of northern Yunnan, in the southwest of China, drinking yak-butter tea around Lao's kitchen stove. I was coaxing him to dive deeper into his memory.

He recalled shreds of those days in the 1960s and '70s when mule-drawn caravans plying the old trade route were still common, the copper clang of their bells and throaty giddyups of trailing porters echoing through the valley, and how he and his neighbors would jump into action upon the caravans' arrival. They'd relieve mules and porters of their backbreaking loads: black sugar, wooden bowls, and hundreds of pounds of pu-erh, the region's fermented black tea, tightly packed into bricks. They'd tend to blistered skin and frostbitten fingers, feed the animals, and send the men to the 12 village homes to rest up in advance of the monthlong trudge to Lhasa that lay ahead. Little was expected in return. "We're all Tibetans, mountain folk," Lao said, pouring me another cup. "We knew the hardships they'd been through."

Niding was one of the last supply stations for caravans traveling west along the

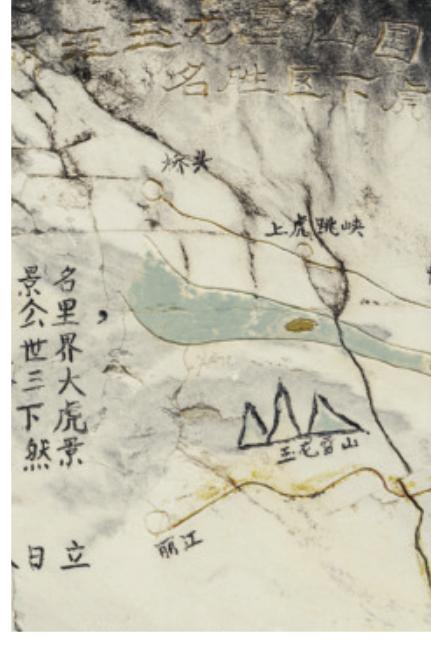
Tea Horse Road, a loosely defined tangle of trading routes between several provinces in southern China and Tibet that are over 1,200 years old. The branch in Yunnan winds through rivers and gorges, from the steamy, tea-rich valleys in the south to the barren highlands of the Tibetan Plateau. It was carved out to facilitate the exchange of pu-erh tea—at the time pricier than porcelain and silk—for hardy horses, musk, and medicinal herbs.

The last few caravans trickled through in the 1980s, when mechanical transport had begun to take over as the more economical option. These days the road, paved over in China's rush to modernize, lives mostly in memory. I had come with my Mandarin-speaking wife and our son, to find what's left of those old days, a period when Tibetan tea merchants, not tourists, thronged the streets of Yunnan. In a time when the influence of Beijing can reach even the farthest corners of mainland China,



Clockwise from top left: A storefront in Lijiang's Old Town; a tidy guest room at Lux Tea Horse Road Daju Village, in Lijiang; tangerines for sale at the market in Lijiang; horses in Yunnan, like this one in Yuhu village, are still used to cart goods

Opposite page, from far left: Outside the Ganden Dongzhulin Monastery; a view of the valley from Baoshan Stone Town



Yunnan—home to almost half of China's ethnic minorities, including the Naxi, who arrived from northwest China as well as much of Greater Tibet—is striving to keep its traditional culture alive. It's a bastion of preservation, even as China pushes to bring in additional tourism dollars. More than 20 years ago, the Chinese government renamed the village of Zhongdian to Shangri-La, after the fictitious Tibetan village in the English writer James Hilton's 1933 fantasy novel *Lost Horizon*, in the hopes of luring travelers. More recently, luxury infrastructure has arrived that seeks to honor, rather than exploit, the land and its history. This includes a new circuit from Lux hotels that helps bring alive stories from what's left of the Tea House Road, which runs from the bustling town of Lijiang in the south up to Benzilan in the north.

After stocking up on bags of sour mulberries and a salty pickled plum at Lijiang's morning market—a maelstrom of clattering mopeds and vendors hawking mushrooms, tea, and medicinal herbs in the dozen different Yunnanese dialects—we drove north. Once the city's suburban sprawl thinned out, the road snaked through pine forests and wide valleys where rice terraces seemed to ooze down the slopes like molten lava. Yulong Snow Mountain's peak occasionally appeared over the craggy hills. As the altitude increased with every turn, the packets of sunflower seeds we'd brought to snack on slowly began to inflate.

The road tapered to an end at Baoshan Shitoucheng (Stone Town), a Jenga-like

stack of houses designed in the Naxi style, with airy courtyards and tiled roofs, which tumbled downward toward the upper stretches of the Yangtze. We strapped our luggage onto a mule and continued on foot, down a jumble of steps polished smooth over centuries. The village's remoteness put it late in China's march to modernize, and seemingly little had changed since these stones were laid during the Tang Dynasty some 1,300 years ago. Piglets scurried around crumbling courtyards, and vats of sorghum bubbled on wood-fired stoves, ready to be distilled into throat-scorching baijiu, a local liquor. Electricity arrived only in the early 2000s. The village folk, their faces weathered by time and hard work, seemed to have been sitting here for ages, chain-smoking and playing cards under the trees.

Xiuyun Zhang, the sprightly caretaker of Lux's Tea Horse Road Stone Town outpost, welcomed us with tea and crab apple lemonade. With just six rooms, the Stone Town lodge feels more like a homestay than a



retreat. Zhang is well into her 50s but one of the younger locals in this time warp of a town. Courtyards stood empty, their gates locked by a generation that left to chase big-city dreams and bigger paychecks. The last of Stone Town's schools closed a decade ago. As in many of China's rural corners, kids are sent off to faraway boarding schools from a young age.

When she's not managing the hotel, Zhang works as a botanist at her farm, a 40-minute walk across the valley. Her expertise in heirloom seed varieties has brought her to conferences in Mexico, Italy, and Peru. Three rare types of corn bear her name. Would she ever want to follow the money and move to the city, I asked? "My father always told me it doesn't matter where you go, as long as you work hard," she said. "When you plant a seed and care for it, it'll grow. Even if it's in an empty place."

The next morning we traced the Yangtze downstream, passing more fir forests and rice fields until we reached the village of Daju, near a river bend where the tea horses used to cross. Tiny stone cats, believed in Naxi folklore to ward off evil, sat atop the upward-curving roofs of the buildings. Inside one of them, a dongba—a priestly wise man of the Naxi—named Guowei He received us with loquats from his garden, which we ate gratefully, the mouth-puckering juice dribbling down our chins.

Scrolls and sheer sheets of paper lay scattered on



the table. Dancing across them were inky dongba characters, an ancient Naxi script predating written Chinese and one of the world's last pictographic writing systems still in use. It takes a student at least 10 years to master, the dongba told me, and even though the local government promotes its preservation (look closely above the entrance of Lijiang's Starbucks to find dongba glyphs spelling out the brand's name in homonym), its legacy rests largely in the aging hands of masters like He. Given the layer of dust he had to wipe off the tools he showed us, it seemed likely that his classroom had seen busier days. When I asked how many students he still taught, he laughed. "A lot, but they rarely show up."

Halfway through our drive to Shangri-La, the style of the villages changed abruptly. Replacing the low-slung Naxi dwellings that had so far dotted the landscape were Tibetan farmhouses, with rammed-earth walls and ornate window frames, that rose from fields of barley and tobacco. Bone-white chortens lit

From left:
Stir-fried local vegetables at Lux Tea Horse Road Daju Village; a glimpse of the Yangtze from the old Naxi village of Baoshan Stone Town

Opposite page, from far left:
The dining room at dusk at Lux Tea Horse Road Daju Village; an old map carved into a slab of marble; a maker of baijiu, a Chinese grain liquor, in Baoshan Stone Town

up the distant hilltops. Signs on the identical storefronts lining the road bore Tibetan's spidery script.

Ethnic Tibetans make up 80 percent of Shangri-La's population, but on the cobblestone lanes of Dukezong, the city's temple-studded historic quarter, it's the Han Chinese who stroll around in Tibetan garb. These days digital clout, not tea, is Shangri-La's main commodity, and costume rental shops run a brisk trade of fur-trimmed chuba robes and bejeweled headwear. At the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery, a layer cake of whitewashed walls and gilded roofs, I met the head abbot for tea in his office and asked what he thought of the state-owned ticket booth outside the gate and the rabbles of cosplaying day-trippers using his temple, the largest Tibetan monastery in Yunnan, as a photo backdrop. He smiled and shrugged.

I preferred Benzilan, the town you enter just before Yunnan tips into present-day Tibet. Even though thickset Mandarin characters on every wall extolled the virtues of the Chinese Dream, Xi Jinping's campaign to rejuvenate Chinese nationalism, the town had a frontier feel, as if Beijing's hawk-eyed gaze hadn't yet crept over the moonscape mountains. (Still, cameras watch from every corner.) It was here that we met Lao in Niding, after we followed a road zigzagging up the mountains, past prayer wheels spinning into a rainbow blur and sagging tree branches.

One morning in the mountains of Benzilan, Tashi, a local guide with a floppy mop of ink-black hair and a giant Tibetan dzi ring on his finger, took us to the incense-perfumed Ganden Dongzhulin Monastery, which stands sentinel on a narrow cliff. Unlike at Ganden Sumtseling, we shared this riot of gold and silk and a hundred gods peering down from Thangka-painted walls with only a handful of others: burgundy-robed monks in flashy sneakers and Tibetan pilgrims who fingered prayer beads and murmured incantations. On the way back we stopped at a dusty corner store to buy bags of milk and unlabeled jars of baijiu rice liquor (in odd quantities, since even numbers are considered bad luck), which, for good fortune, we emptied over the head of a marble Buddha that sat among a thousand prayer flags.

Our journey ended where it had begun, in Lijiang, where I met Rongui Gu in a timber-framed teahouse crammed with pu-erh disks and lace-fine mahogany carvings. As the last tea trader in a succession of 18 generations, he had crossed the Himalayas seven times. On a map scribbled on paper made from tree



bark, he showed me the route he would take, which went from Lijiang to Lhasa, then southward to Kolkata. He said he often had to ward off tigers and bandits. His hands bore the scars of the rocky ridges he'd climb to forage medicinal herbs along the way.

These days his tea trade is less arduous, but he's determined to carry the Tea Horse Road's story onward with the small museum he operates above his shop. He gestured at the cafés around us, pointing out the Old Town's UNESCO designation and the costumed tourists moseying through. "All this wouldn't be here without the tea traders' perseverance," he said. "It's my responsibility to pass on the spirit of the caravan. It's not just a route, but a way of life. If nobody does it, its real history will fade." ©

**Clockwise
from above:**
A dongba priest
in Daju Village;
Baoshan Stone
Town, located
about 70 miles
from Lijiang;
dried flowers at
Lijiang market;
disks of pu-erh
tea for sale at
Rongui Gu's shop
in Lijiang



EXPLORING YUNNAN

GETTING THERE

Yunnan is located in southwest China, and many of its main cities, like Lijiang and Dali, have regional airports. The area has good high-speed rail between most major stops as well as solid infrastructure for driving between the villages, historical sites, and the countryside.

WHERE TO STAY

Lux Hotels' Tea Horse Road route takes guests through Yunnan on three-to-nine-night stays along the old trade route. Travelers overnight in up to eight different lodges, including **Lux Tea Horse Road Sangushui**, which has 15 light-flooded rooms overlooking the Yangtze and a restaurant in a century-old courtyard. At **Lux Tea Horse Road Shangri-La**, guests eat buckwheat noodles for breakfast while looking over the gilded temples. At **Lux Tea Horse Road Lijiang**, guests stay in the heart of the Old Town, immersed in Naxi culture. Excursions include intimate tea ceremonies with Tibetan priests as well as hikes through the countryside. Each of Lux's eight properties can also be booked independently. *Circuit stays from \$600 a day; luxresorts.com*

WHERE TO EAT

In the heart of Old Lijiang, **Tongxinfu Tea House** is crammed with paper-wrapped tea tablets from throughout southern China's growing regions. At the intimate, homestyle **Shanxun Yunxiang** in the historic Baisha village, beautifully plated tasting menus feature local, seasonal ingredients. In a meadow south of Shangri-La, the new **Pioneer Book Store**, which also includes a café and a souvenir shop, breathes new life into several traditional Tibetan dwellings. The 15,000-strong collection focuses on literature from the Yunnan region, while postcards, enamel pins, and charming figurines are also available for purchase. Not far away, **Ferme Liotard** doubles as a table d'hôte showcasing French-Yunnanese fusion dishes with homegrown ingredients. Don't miss the Cabernet Sauvignon aged in terra-cotta jugs. Finally, the decade-old **Flying Tigers Cafe**, in a quiet corner of Shangri-La's Old Town, offers an East-meets-West menu of blue cheese yak bulges, yak dumplings, and local craft beers.



happy days

As a new wave of tastemakers descends on Australia's fabled Byron Bay, Chloe Sachdev finds that this golden stretch of coast hasn't lost its special magic



PHOTOGRAPHS: TOMMASO RIVA, ANDY MACPHERSON, ELISE HASSEY, ANNA PIHAN

Clockwise from top left: The surf at Crescent Head seen from the new Sea Sea Hotel; a caravan at Swell Hotel; maritime birds at the quaint Tallow Beach on Byron Bay; Il Delfino channels Italian Riviera cool





From left: The chic pool scene at Sun Ranch, off the coast; diners beneath a laneway that connects the shops and restaurants of Jonson Lane in Byron Bay; rental surfboards at Sea Sea Hotel; the exquisitely designed check-in desk at Basq House, known for its expertly curated decor

It's dawn on Byron Bay's Wategos Beach. A steady stream of surfers are making their way across the doughy sand for their first paddle of the day. Out on the water, green troughs spread between blue ripples. A short amble away is the lighthouse marking Australia's easternmost tip, with views that stretch beyond the nearby banana and macadamia plantations. Since the Age of Aquarius, this jewel of the North Coast of New South Wales has attracted hippies, healers, and surfers caught between the beauty of the headland and the hinterland.

I fell for Byron Bay on a family holiday in the mid-1990s, at the age of 10, when I stumbled into the Rainbow Shop, a floor-to-ceiling store bulging with kaleidoscopic tie-dyed clothing in a dizzying spectrum of colors and patterns, a few steps from Main Beach. Byron Bay was a hippie haven then, a wide-eyed fever dream where shaggy barefoot locals

and salt-crusted backpackers slept in vans while processions of Hare Krishna devotees kept the air filled with the sound of clang-ing bells. There were no high-rise buildings or fast-food chains, and there were more hostels than hotels.

But around that time the tide of tourism in Byron Bay started to turn in a more glamorous direction. A well-known local named Ruth Harris sold her grand, eccentric Spanish-mission-style villa by the sea to Vincent Rae, who turned it into the waterfront hotel Raes on Wategos. While the rumors that Salvador Dalí designed either the garden or the pool remain unconfirmed, the spot has always held a certain mystique. Soon this hideaway in the hamlet of Wategos Beach became a discreet but legendary hangout for the rich and famous. Then, in 2014, Australian tycoon Antony Catalano took over the bright white building, and filled its sloped curves with colorful textiles, handmade tiles, and reams of marble. Today, with five suites and two penthouses, the hotel defines a certain kind of coastal chic. Linen-clad families picnic and play on the manicured grass out front while the ad hoc coffee van at the hotel's entrance sells velvety almond milk piccolos, gluten-free brownies, and organic, locally made sugar-free fruit ice pops.

Where cosmic travelers, then backpackers, used to toil in Byron's fields for free room and board just to be part of life here, the dreamers ultimately gave way to developers. These days the groovy surf town is a haute-boho utopia for touring Hollywood stars and



barefoot billionaires. On the long, thin road from the town center's main drag down to the privileged pocket of Wategos Beach, there are now three G-Wagons sporting anti-fracking bumper stickers for every creaking overstuffed Volkswagen van. Still, everybody pauses at the hairpin bend to glance down at the reliable right-hand swells at the Pass, a slice of frothy beach between Clarkes and Wategos that always has a lineup of bobbing surfers.

Every few years I hear whispers of "the new Byron," prompted by fresh openings on hitherto untapped swaths of coastline—in Noosa, over the border in Queensland, or even in far-flung Tasmania. Lately people have begun talking about a few sun-soaked, under-the-radar North Coast spots between Sydney and Byron, where the seas are as blue and the hinterland looms with subtropical rainforests, lost valleys, rugged mountains, flowing rivers, and magical waterfalls.

Sea Sea Hotel is a surf lodge in the quiet seaside town of Crescent Head owned by George Gorrow, the cofounder of fashion label

Ksubi, and his wife, Cisco Tschurtschenthaler, whose first hotel, The Slow in Bali, brought creative cool to the relaxed surf village of Canggu. For this latest project, Gorrow is hoping to channel the same vibrations with a hotel and creative commune where like-minded travelers can drop in and tune out. It's "a new version of a community center," he says. "The further I step into it, the further I fall in love with it."

Farther along the coast in Yamba, a sleepy fishing town an hour's drive from Byron, there's the supremely stylish inn Il Delfino. Carved into the cliff and seemingly snatched from the Mediterranean, it's owned by the well-traveled local Sheree Commerford. "We're honoring Yamba's legacy," she says, "while creating a space that welcomes both new visitors and those returning to relive cherished memories."

Meanwhile, over the last couple of years, Byron itself has done some additional sprucing up. The town just added Hotel Marvell and Basq House, both a skip from Main Beach, which is still a humdinger of a spot to watch the sunset. On the same strip, The Atlantic, a charming weatherboard hotel, has been refreshed with spacious new rooms and a magnesium pool surrounded by lush gardens that are filled with scampering lizards. Then there's the shopping precinct of Jonson Lane, which houses a coterie of next-gen makers and designers, including the leisure-sports label Nagnata and Deiji Studios, which blends floaty linen loungewear and sleepwear. There are restaurants that sling seasonal small plates and natural wine, where tables are packed with diners refilling one another's glasses to a soundtrack of clattering plates and Italo-disco beats.

In Banksia Drive, an industrial park on the other side of town, local designers can be found alongside beloved Aussie brands. St Agni and Zulu & Zephyr have their flagship stores here, and Comma, a newish design-forward modern bathhouse and spa, is a haven of saunas and magnesium hot tubs, cold plunges, and treatment rooms. "With so many inspiring people living and moving here, there's space for big ideas and the promise of dreams outside of major cities," explains owner Susie McIntosh.



visiting byron bay

where to stay



In the coastal village of Yamba, the recently opened **Il Delfino** (from \$570; ildelfino.com.au) offers stylish suites named after Italian seaside destinations like Ischia and Portofino. In the town of Byron Bay, the 16-room **Swell Hotel** (doubles from about \$255; swellhotel.com) has an earthy 1970s palette of crushed velvets and timber in a converted motel; there's also an ice bath, a cedar sauna, and a pink-marble-tiled magnesium pool. At the artsy **Sunseeker** (from \$170; thesunseeker.com.au), there's a kidney-shaped pool, spacious bedrooms, and two-bedroom bungalows for families. The **Atlantic Byron Bay** (from \$210; atlanticbyronbay.com.au) has bright and airy bedrooms. On the hinterland, **Sun Ranch** (from \$412; sunranch.com.au) takes inspiration from California and New Mexico ranch style. **Over at Hotel Marvell** (from \$317; hotelmarvell.com.au), ultracool crowds flock to the open-air rooftop bar for fruit cocktails and prawn rolls. The iconic **Raes on Wategos** (from \$475; raes.com.au) recently took over the nearby Victoria's, increasing its room total from 7 to 18 suites. The new **Copperstone** (from \$3,170 for exclusive use; therangeestates.com.au), in the country town of Bangalow, sits on 48 pristine acres, with stables and a dressage ring. **Basq House** (from \$250; basqhouse.com.au), in the middle of Byron Bay, has communal spaces like libraries and living rooms crammed with sculptures and sofas. Finally, **Sea Sea Hotel** (from \$290; seaseahotel.com), halfway between Sydney and Byron, has 25 rooms, sepia-toned concrete floors, and a clubby vibe.

Away from the coast, the hills hide the rambling homes of the one percent. Connecting inland towns such as Newrybar and Bangalow are charming villages that appear frozen in time but are lined with boutiques that sell everything from local ceramics to handmade knife sets, and pharmacies stocked with French night creams from the Marais. Cafés and low-waste restaurants helmed by rising local chefs peddle plant-based menus and herbal ashwagandha drinks. At Sun Ranch—the sprawling, 55-acre good-time ranch that opened in the hinterland in 2023—my evenings are powered by Van Morrison and spicy mezcal margaritas. “There’s a magic to the Bundjalung region,” says co-owner Julia Ashwood. “For many returning visitors it’s a place of inspiration, wellness, and freedom.” Everyone around me is still scruffy and freshly salted, fired up by sound healing and crystal-charged energy work. And the Rainbow Shop is still open and bursting with groovy colors. There’s still plenty of the old Byron Bay left, in and around Byron Bay, if you know where to look.



From far left: Small plates of tuna tartare, truffled dumplings, and more at Light Years; George Gorrow and Cisco Tschurtschenthaler at their Sea Sea Hotel in Crescent Head; the façade and archway of Il Delfino, which opened in April; the groovy interiors of Basq House



where to shop



In Byron Bay, **St Agni**, a chic, minimalist clothing and accessories label, has amassed fans all over the world. Steeped in '90s shapes and styles, it's a mecca for edgy but laid-back cool. Founded as a showroom for surfboard shaper Gato Herói, **Wild Things** now stocks a range of boards as well as the art, photography, design, and music of Herói's friends. At her gift shop **Puesto**, Sydney photographer Brigitte Clark stocks everything from jelly sandals and crocheted clothing to beach bags and wicker hats made in Mexico. **Tigmi Trading** is a meticulous showroom of furniture, art, rugs, and knickknacks by designers and makers from Australia and around the world. Down the road in Bangalow, **Bangalow Pharmacy** sells beautiful Japanese linen robes and Italian hairbrushes along with products from brands like Aesop, Astier de Villatte, Trudon, and Santa Maria Novella. Also in Bangalow, **Island Luxe** has international women's and men's fashion and accessories, including handmade knives, candles, and ceramics, all crafted by local designers.



where to eat



For fine dining with an ocean breeze, book a table at **Raes Dining Room**, which overlooks Wategos Beach and offers a Mediterranean menu with Aussie flair—think kangaroo-tail ragu and pasta with local lobster. In Byron Bay, **Kouzína** is a charming Greek taverna serving homestyle cooking—moussaka, lemony chicken, calamari skewers. It's warm and friendly, with checkered tablecloths and candlelight. For something a little more carefree, **Ciao, Mate!** is a fun-loving pizza place in Bangalow that serves a popular wood-fired menu with an Italo-Australian vibe. During the summer ask for an airy table in the courtyard. Stop in at **Bar Heather** for great tunes, an extensive organic-wine list, and small plates that have an Australian twist on French and Asian flavors—green prawns slathered in sambal, pork belly curry puffs, and fermented sausages. Start your day at **High Life** with the coconut-and-apple porridge; the kimchi rice fritters and plates of fermented veggies and wild salmon are as delicious as they are good for you. Finally, for punchy pan-Asian cuisine, head to the buzzy **Light Years** for hot and tingly barbecued lamb ribs, five-spice roasted duck pancakes, and BBQ king prawns. It's one of the best places to eat in the whole region.

a traveler's tale



ACTOR
LESLIE BIBB
On
SOUTH AFRICA



This past July I went to Sabi Sand Game Reserve and Kruger National Park for the first time. My boyfriend, Sam [Rockwell], was shooting a movie in South Africa, so I joined him and we spent five days on safari. The whole trip was magical, seeing zebras, giraffes—animals I'd dreamed of seeing since I first picked up *National Geographic* as a kid. I mean, on the first day, I immediately got to see lions. The male lion, with that huge mane, was awesome, but what was even more incredible was the lioness. She was feeding on a Cape buffalo that had died naturally, and she had these three adorable cubs with her. One of them seemed as if it was tattling on its siblings to their mom because they wouldn't let it feed on the buffalo too. And the mom was, like, huffing, almost talking back, telling her kid to grow up or keep up. It was insane how close we got to them. One of our guides—named Kruger, funny enough—said the only reason that the lioness let us get so near was because her cubs were feeding and she was full. She was so relaxed, just chilling with her babies. It was a majestic moment; the sun was setting and I felt so...I'm starting to cry just remembering it. That was the first of many mother-and-child moments I saw on the trip: a mama hyena roaming with her pups, an elephant with a two-month-old calf playing around and learning how to use its trunk. I saw the circle of life, how these mothers were teaching their kids, letting them learn to fend for themselves. It all reminded me of my mom. My father died when I was a small child, so my mother raised me and my sisters. She always listened, but she never mollycoddled us. She would be like, 'You've got to figure this out. You will.' She passed away in 2018, so coming to South Africa six years later, finding the mother-child bond everywhere I looked, and feeling connected to the bush and the land made that little girl in me who grew up in the Virginia countryside very happy. I was very happy." AS TOLD TO MATT ORTILE

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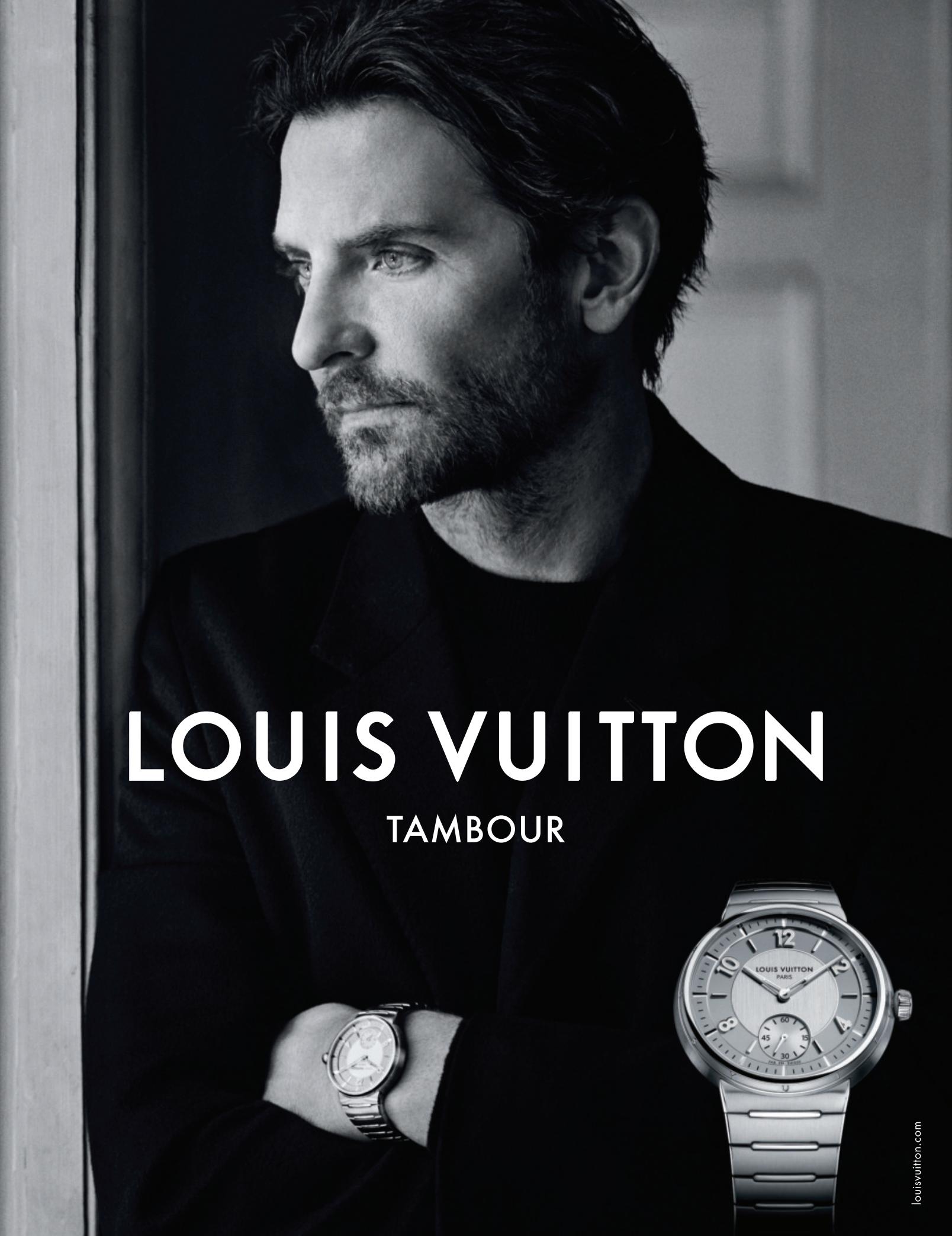


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