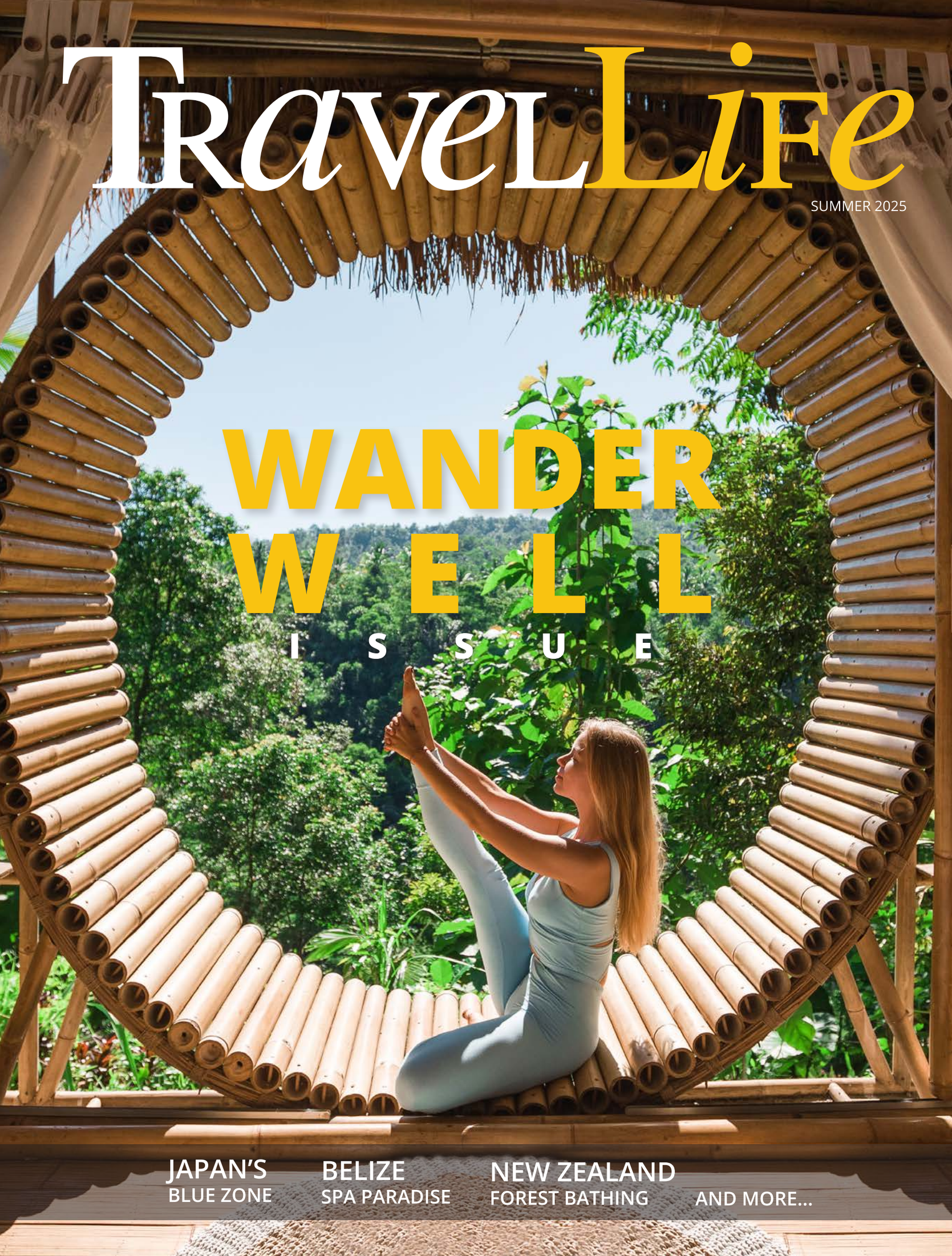
TravelLife

SUMMER 2025



WANDER WELL

ISSUE

JAPAN'S BLUE ZONE

BELIZE SPA PARADISE

NEW ZEALAND FOREST BATHING

AND MORE...



Fairmont MAYAKOBA | FAIRMONT SPA

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Discover a wellness experience like never before at the newly transformed Fairmont Spa, inspired by Mayan traditions and ancient techniques.

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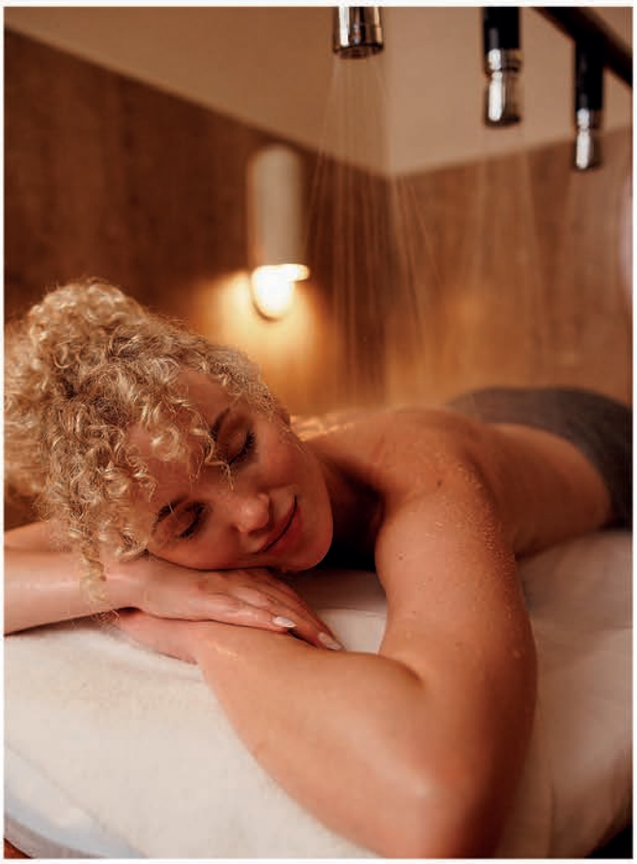
Tucked deep within a tapestry of mangroves and quiet waterways, the Fairmont Spa at Mayakoba invites guests on a journey for the senses, where you'll be nourished by the materials brought to us by nature. Reborn in 2024, the spa has been inspired by the mystery of Mayan cosmogony and the wisdom of ancient traditions. Evoking the soul of the Yucatán Peninsula, the architecture draws influence from the surrounding landscape as light flows from tall ceiling, casting gentle reflections on walls of smooth stone and rich native wood.

Four signature treatments, each inspired by a phase of the moon, will guide you through cycles of renewal. A room devoted to water therapy houses the Vichy shower, where a warm cascade flows in rhythmic precision, echoing the rains that have long enriched this land. As you venture into the rich greens of the jungle and discover newly found adventure, we invite you to join us for an experience that will be remembered for a lifetime.



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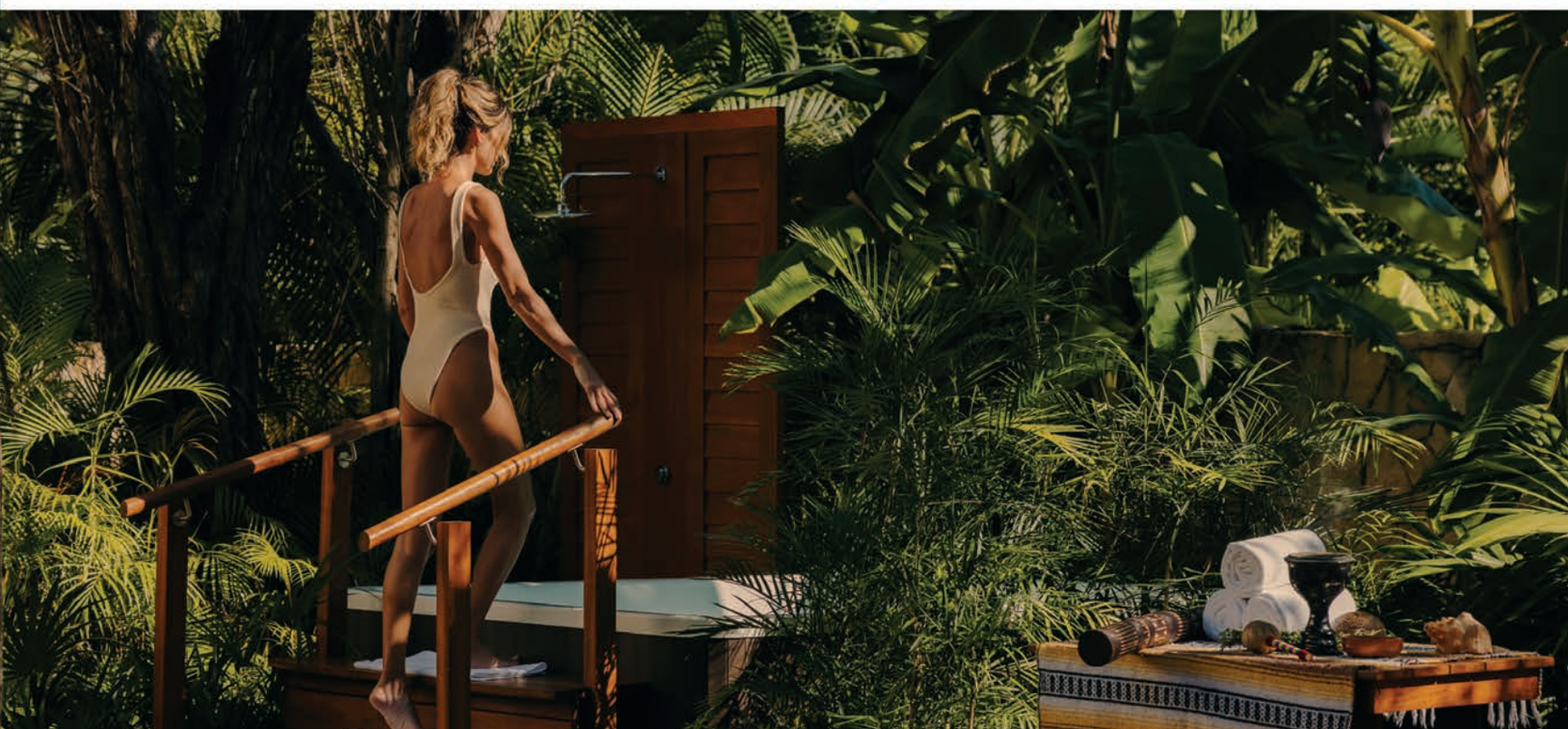
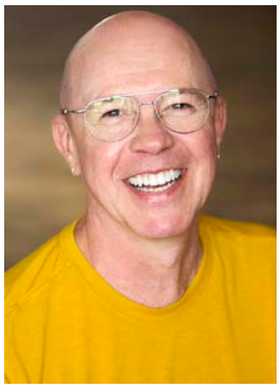


CONTRIBUTORS

For summer, we asked three of our contributors to tell us about how travel has influenced their personal definition of wellness.



DOUG WALLACE

POSTCARD FROM THE PALACE, PAGE 10

For me, wellness on the road means striking a balance: staying active, connecting with new people, soaking up the scenery—and then pressing pause. Nature is often the magic ingredient, whether I'm on or in the water, trekking the rainforest or hiking the hillsides. Walking and yoga are my go-to health habits, alongside an "early to bed, early to rise" mantra that keeps me energized.



CHLOE WILDE

WELLNESS THAT WORKS, PAGE 44

Whenever we choose a travel destination we prioritize a few things: great coffee, well-curated cocktails, contemporary art and wellness. Feeling energized and healthy while travelling opens up a world of possibilities no matter where you are, which is why we make it a must when saying yes to adventure.



MELODY WREN

WELLNESS AND CULTURE IN THE HILLS OF BOLOGNA, PAGE 58

When it comes to travel I find that stepping away from routine and immersing myself in new experiences boosts my creativity and improves my overall mood. Through travel, I'm exposed to various types of physical activity, which helps me stay grounded.

TravelLife



"You lose sight of things ... and when you travel, everything balances out."
– Daranna Gidel

Welcome to our wellness-focused summer issue, where we explore some of the many ways in which travel has the power to positively impact our lives and how we feel both inside and out.

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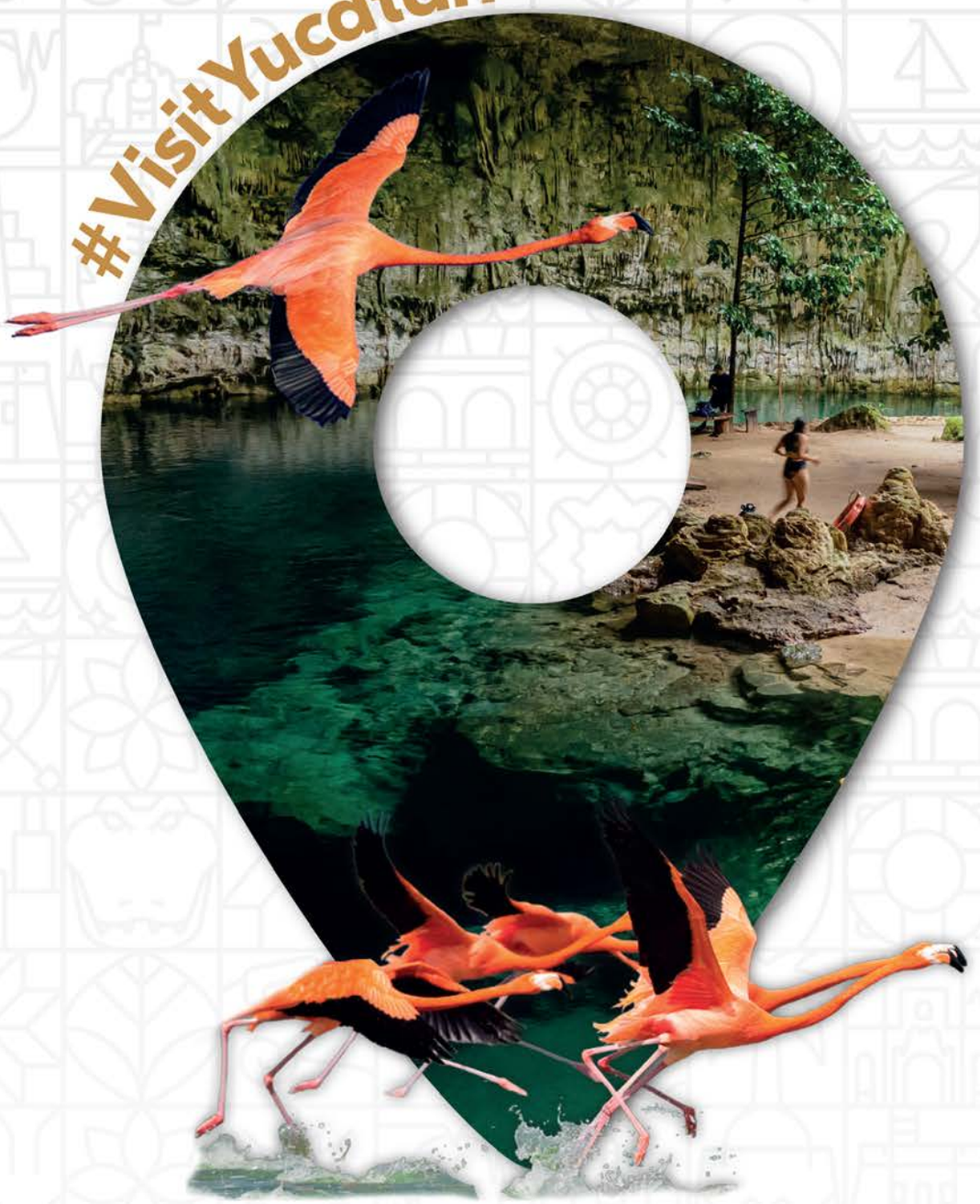

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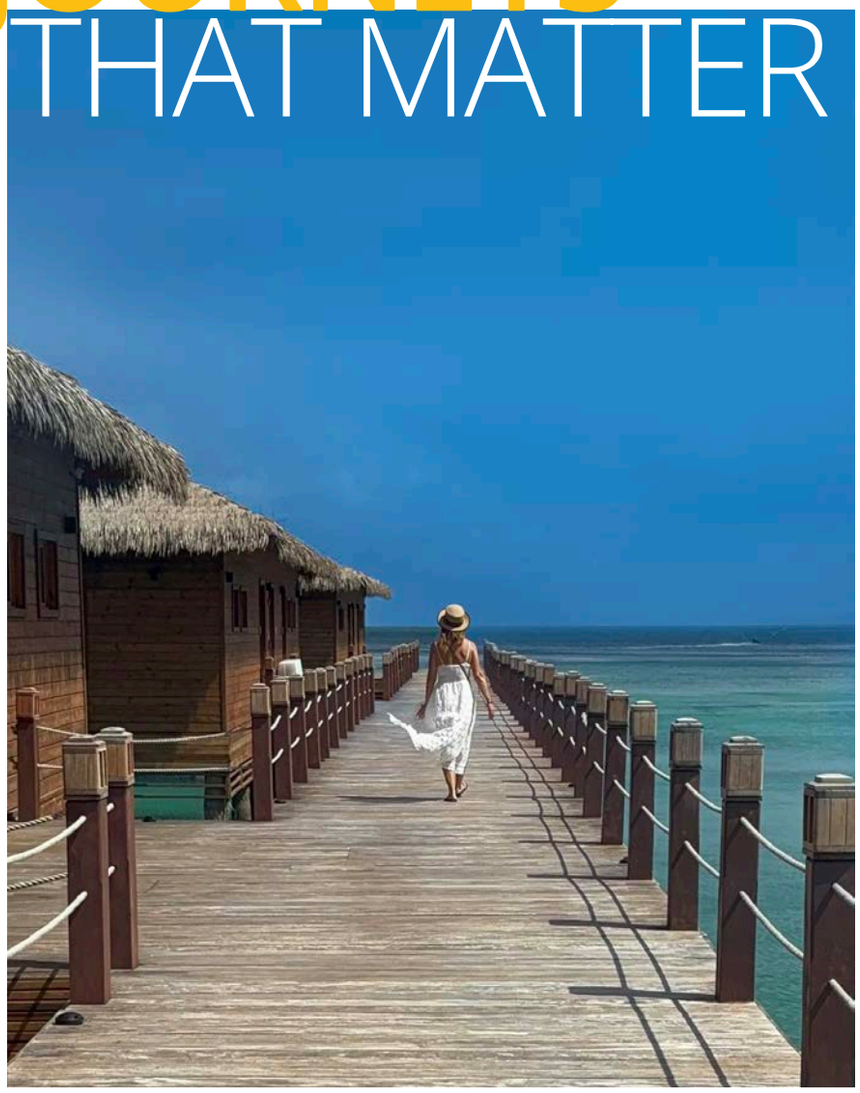
JOURNEYS THAT MATTER



Lately, I've been feeling incredibly grateful that travel isn't just a passion—it's part of my work and something that inspires me every day. Even during life's tougher moments, which can pop up when you least expect them or when you feel least ready to tackle them, travel can offer space to reflect and reconnect with what truly matters.

It's that quiet recalibration, or subtle sense of coming back to yourself, that many of us look for when we travel. Maybe that's why wellness and travel often feel so intertwined. Both ask us to pause, pay attention and show up fully as best we can. In this issue, we explore how wellness and travel intersect, sometimes in unexpected but enlightening ways.

Starting close to home, we've got a roundup of some of Canada's best Nordic spas; places where silence, steam (and cold plunges) provide an immersive way to rest and reset. Grand Velas Riviera Maya offers a fresh take on wellness travel, where thoughtful design, serious workouts and a sense of balance come together by the beach. In New Zealand, a nature-led retreat puts the landscape at the heart of healing, and aboard the Explora II, wellness and adventure travel together. In the hills outside Bologna, Palazzo di Varignana provides a thoughtful blend of wellness, culture and nourishment rooted in the land. And looking ahead, we tap into some emerging trends shaping the wellness industry in 2025 and beyond.

While wellness is a strong through line in this issue, it's far from the only story we're telling. In Curaçao, reef restoration efforts highlight how travel can support conservation in real, tangible ways. In Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, island-hopping reveals quiet coves, colourful towns and a slower pace inviting you to linger. We also turn the spotlight on Canadian destinations that tend to fly under the radar—places with compelling stories and plenty to discover.

A journey through the Baltics reveals the underrated charm of Tallinn and Vilnius, while a visit to Antigua's Hells Gate Steel Orchestra Pan Yard uncovers how music, culture and community come together. And in Quebec, the province's culinary scene finally gets its due with the debut of the Michelin Guide—a milestone that confirms what locals have known all along.

It's truly a blessing to do what I love in places that continue to inspire, and to share stories that nourish the mind, body and spirit along the way. Here's to a summer of meaningful journeys, wherever they take you.

Tammy Cecco

EDITOR IN CHIEF

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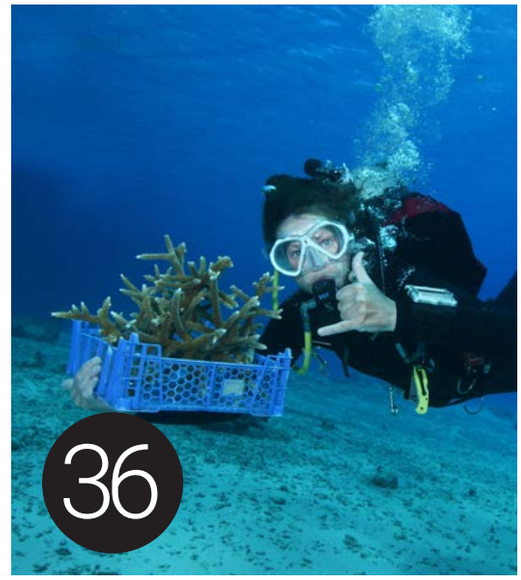

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Everything You Need To Look and Feel Good On the Move

From skincare essentials and luxe loungewear, to on-the-go fitness and wellness gear, everything on our list ensures you'll be ready for anything



Luxe loungewear

No matter where you are, sometimes all you want to do is feel comfortable. No belts, no constricting fabrics; just something effortless that makes it easy to unwind in style. For summer we're loving this pretty fuchsia duo featuring a cropped short sleeve top and classic lounge short from The Sleep Shirt. Made in Canada and 100 per cent linen, this effortlessly chic set was made with stylish comfort in mind.

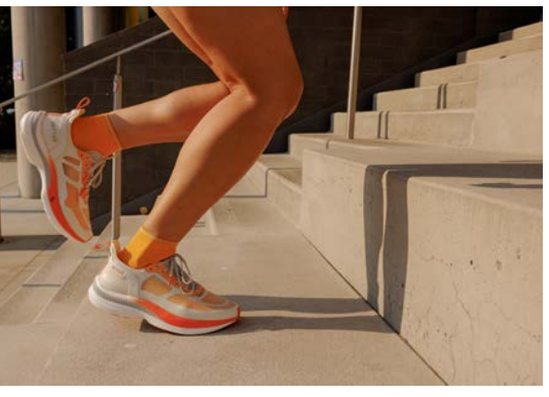
▶ **intothebedroom.com**



Eye-Catching Activewear

Designed and made in Canada, Michi's take on elevated activewear combines flattering design and stylish silhouettes with performance-ready materials. The Ambient Ribbed Jumpsuit is a modern take on a retro 80s-era romper perfect for anything from yoga to old school aerobics. Made from glossy rib Italian technical fabric that also happens to be sweat-wicking and very breathable, we especially love the textural detailing and cute, removable belt. You could easily also pair this piece with a maxi skirt or linen pants for a post-Pilates smoothie date.

▶ **michiny.com**



Stylish Sneakers

Hettas is a new Canadian footwear brand making high-performance running shoes designed specifically for women. Female-founded and based in Vancouver, the company builds each pair around how women actually move, combining smart design with clean, minimalist style. Comfortable and supportive, they're a consistently reliable choice, whether you're training or getting through a long travel day. Choose from the Alma Cruise (designed for consistency), the Alma Tempo (designed for endurance) and the Alma Speed.

▶ **hettas.ca**



Jet Lag Relief

Jet&Bo's compact Time Traveler Jet Lag Kit is stocked with items to help you recover from long-haul travel with ease. It includes two types of herbal tea (one calming, one energizing), a cashmere eye mask, two scented towelettes (one calming, one energizing) and two soy wax candles; one lemongrass and one rosemary mint, for relaxing at your destination. Packaged in a stylish leather pouch, the kit makes it easier to unwind, reset and feel more like yourself between time zones.

▶ **jetandbo.com**



A Recipe For Glowing Skin

Glow Recipe is a cult skincare favourite for a reason They create products that not only look cute on your bathroom counter, but that actually work how they say they're going to. This summer, we'll be using (and travelling with) Watermelon Glow Niacinamide Dew Drops for instantly smooth and dewy skin, Watermelon Glow PHA+BHA Pore-Tight Toner to hydrate and tighten pores and Watermelon Glow Dew Shield SPF 30 to protect skin while boosting hydration.

▶ **sephora.com**

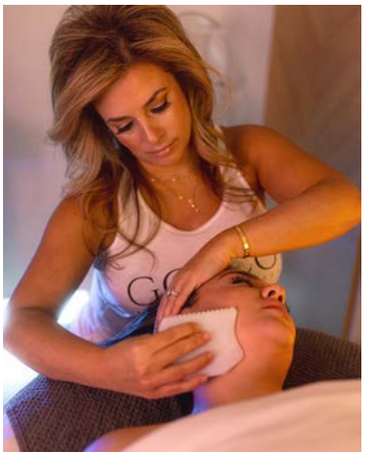


LOJEL Luggage

Founded in Japan in 1989, LOJEL is known for their sleek, smart luggage built for movement, whether you're headed across the city, or hopping on a flight. The new Cubo Fit Lite and Cubo Small Lite add even more options to the brand's already robust collection of travel must-haves. The Small Lite is more for shorter travel and day-to-day use, while the Fit Lite is made for longer journeys. Both pieces are durable, optimized for organization thanks to multiple pockets, made with a 50 per cent recycled polycarbonate shell and come with a 10-year warranty.

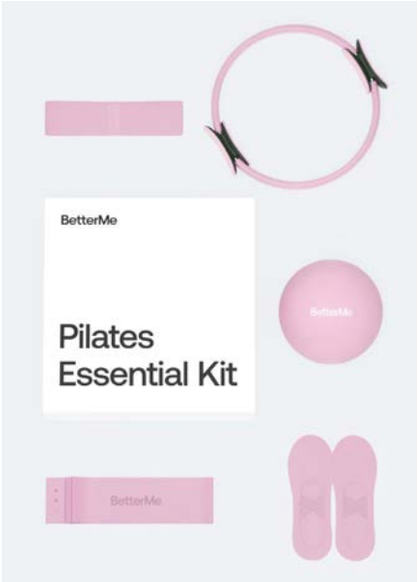
▶ **ca.lojel.com**

Pre-Trip Facial



Get your skin vacation-ready with a results-driven facial from GC and CO Salon and Med Spa. Gianna's Signature Facial is the best place to start and includes a deep cleanse, enzyme mask, extractions, microdermabrasion, Gianna's signature sculpting massage and LED light therapy. From there, add-ons that cover everything from deep hydration to plumping allow you to personalize your session based on your skincare goals. The spa also offers a range of cutting edge facial and body treatments.

▶ **gcandco.ca**



Pilates Kit

Being motivated to hit the hotel gym or leave your vacation rental for a nearby fitness class doesn't always happen, so when you're facing the age-old "to workout or not to workout" dilemma, convenience always wins. The BetterMe Pilates Essentials Kit fits the bill and comes complete with a toning Pilates ring, loop bands, Pilates ball, resistance bands and cute no-grip socks. We're partial to the raspberry pink, but the kit also comes in several other shades.

▶ **store.betterme.world**



Daily Wellness Journal

Stay grounded, even on a busy travel day, with a wellness journal that's too pretty not to pick up. Papier's hardcover wellness journals come in a range of bold patterns and are filled with 12-weeks worth of space for logging intentions, sleep, mindfulness goals, energy levels and more. Short prompts make the process more intuitive and there are weekly and monthly check-in pages to help you reflect on your progress.

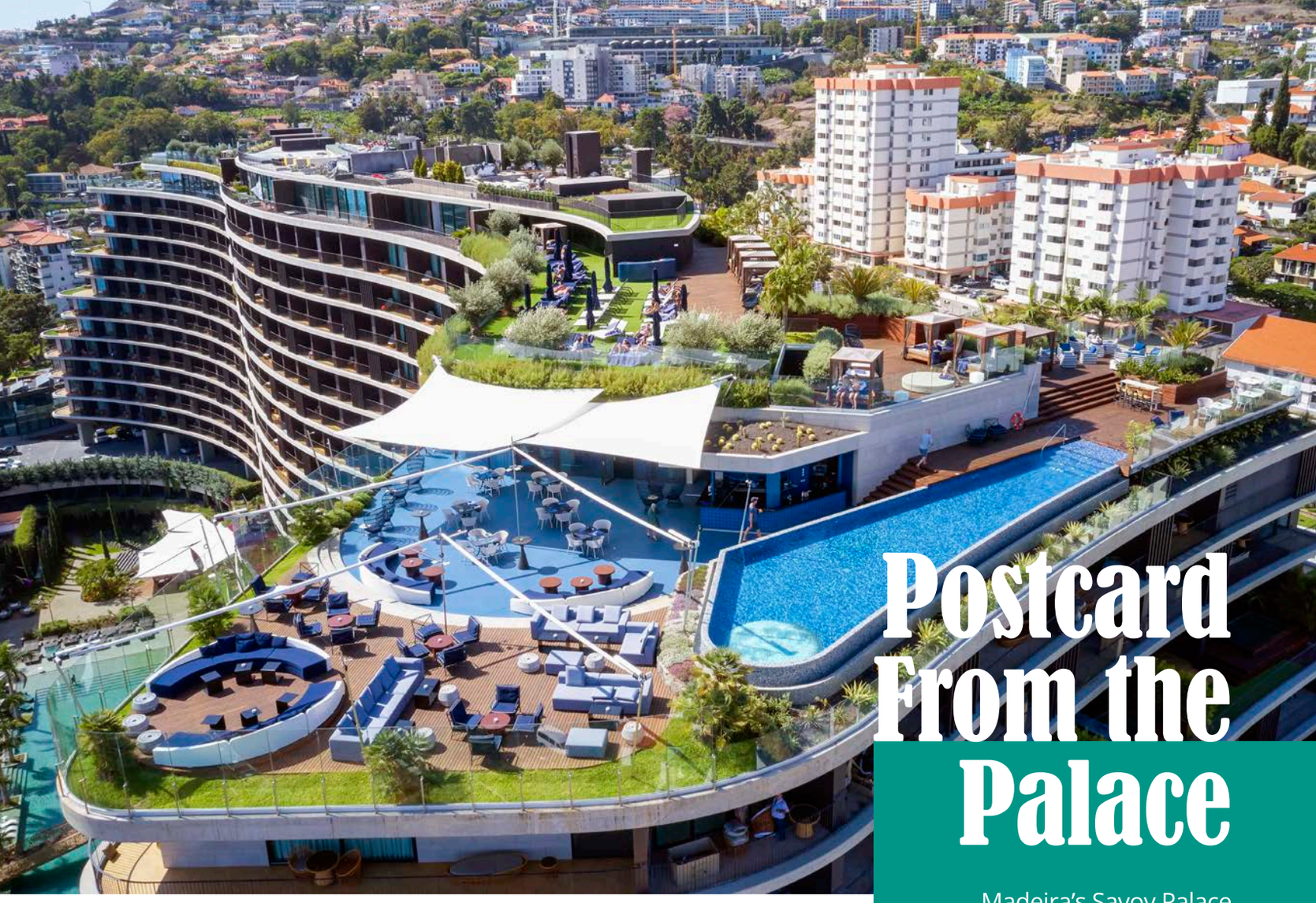
▶ **papier.com**



Manmade Must-Haves

Endorsed by Howie Mandel himself and created by men, for men, Manmade offers a full suite of travel-ready apparel designed with function in mind. Their boxer briefs are made from modal, a softer, more eco-friendly alternative to cotton and feature an innovative anti-chafe design, breathability and 3D contouring support for all-day comfort. We also love their pants, which are durable, comfortable and made to hold their shape; and the T-shirt, which won't shrink or lose its shape and can easily be dressed up or down.

▶ **manmadebrand.com**



Postcard From the Palace

Madeira's Savoy Palace delivers a "hotel within a hotel" with The Reserve

By Doug Wallace

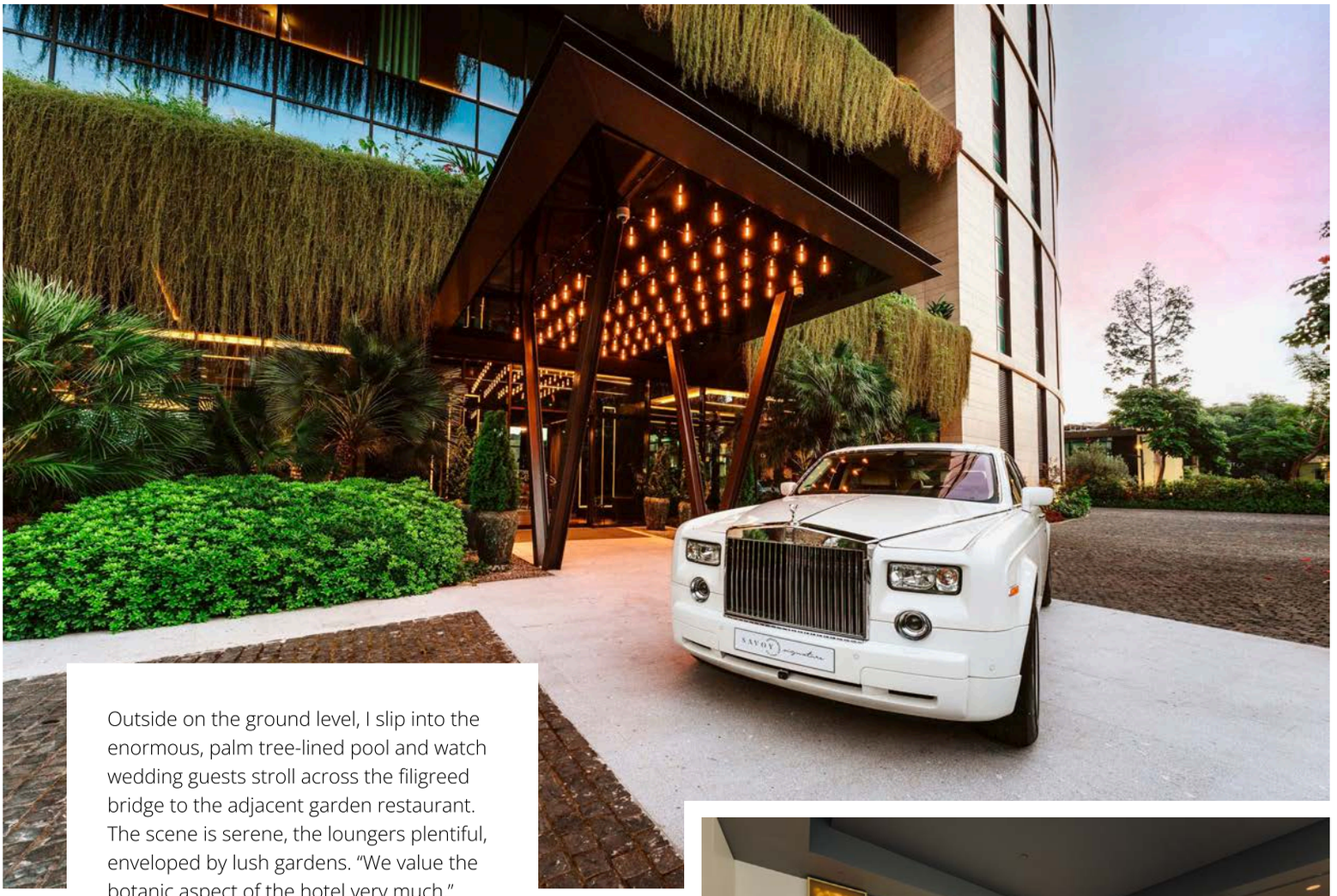
Stepping into the lobby of the Savoy Palace, I feel like I've arrived. Not just at the doorstep of Madeira's only member of The Leading Hotels of the World, but also at an amplified echelon of European hospitality that feels like home.

The five-star, 352-room Savoy Palace sits on a hill overlooking the capital city of Funchal, the flagship property of the family-owned Savoy Signature hotel group, which operates six hotels on the storied Portuguese island of Madeira. Past the reception, I'm quickly captivated by the hotel's design—grand yet not ostentatious—a mix of modern and Belle Époche panache. The interiors have been created by Madeira design icon Nini Andrade Silva, who has cleverly woven historic elements and patterns throughout the hotel's 16 floors.

"The wood, the colours, the traditional embroidery design—such as with the banister, the wickerwork—everything creates a connection, an homage to our heritage in some way," says Paula Andrade from the hotel's marketing team. "The way the gardens are designed, even the pattern of the carpeting, it's all a reflection of our nature or the sea."

The Savoy recently launched an upper tier of accommodation designated The Reserve. Guests in this category enjoy a greeting service at Madeira airport, a dedicated hotel entrance and elevator, a 24-hour personal concierge and private pools on expansive balconies. The free rides in the house Rolls Royce lend additional indulgence. The Reserve's 40 suites sport the same grandeur introduced in the lobby, dialed up a solid notch or two. Lacquered wood and gold trim establish an Art Deco vibe, overlaid with a dash of Hollywood Regency. It's all very comfortable and glamorous, with room to move.

Reserve guests also have exclusive access to the Jacarandá Lounge & Club for more private dining (including an extravagant high tea), plus unlimited access to the Laurea Spa, another picture-perfect environment, modelled after Madeira's ancestral Laurisilva Forest.

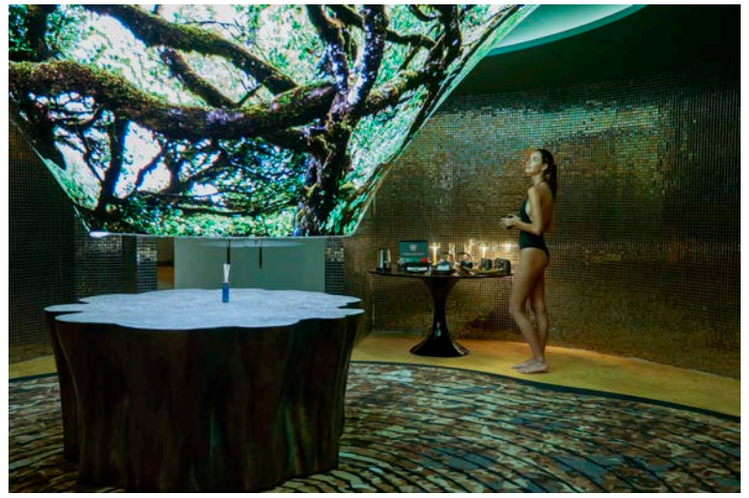


Outside on the ground level, I slip into the enormous, palm tree-lined pool and watch wedding guests stroll across the filigreed bridge to the adjacent garden restaurant. The scene is serene, the loungers plentiful, enveloped by lush gardens. "We value the botanic aspect of the hotel very much," Andrade had told me earlier. "We have a lot of different garden areas, which incorporate more than 250 different species of plants."

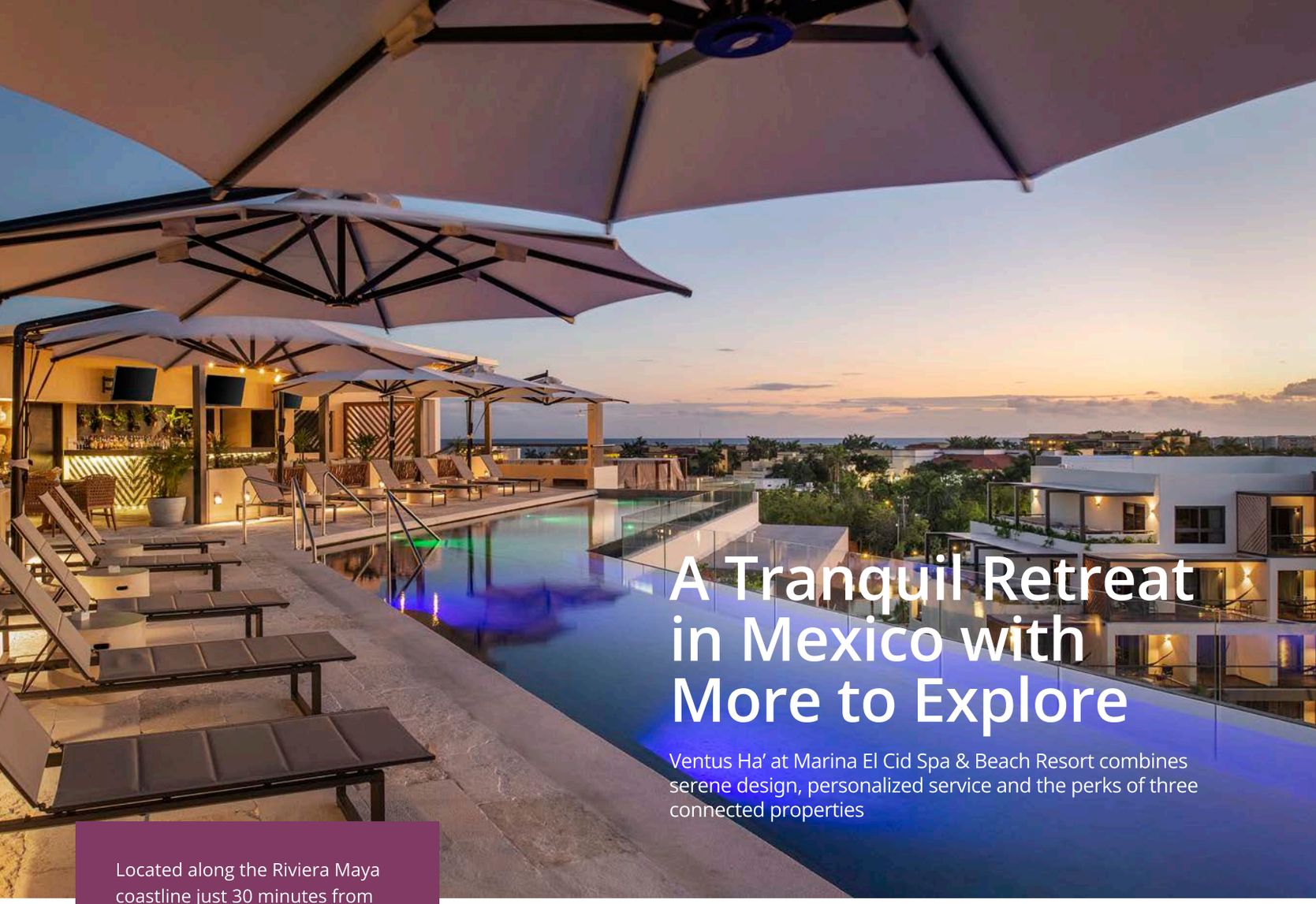
The pampering permeates through the Savoy's six restaurants as well. International flavours are layered with a homespun touch in Galáxia Skyfood, where—despite the futuristic name and décor—the food is solidly down to earth. I am spoiled with a hyperlocal four-course tasting that begins with a palate teaser of seafoods, followed by a juicy slice of suckling pig. The wine happens to be from the same region that the animal was raised. A visit to Madeira wouldn't be complete without a glass of Madeira, of course, to punctuate dessert. I'm served one from the waiter's hometown. It truly can't get any more local than this.

Above all, my Savoy Palace time was filled with the most engaging stories—about the people and the history and the island itself—tales that will assuredly bear repeat tellings.





Photos courtesy of The Savoy Palace



A Tranquil Retreat in Mexico with More to Explore

Ventus Ha' at Marina El Cid Spa & Beach Resort combines serene design, personalized service and the perks of three connected properties

Located along the Riviera Maya coastline just 30 minutes from Cancún International Airport, Ventus Ha' at Marina El Cid Spa & Beach Resort offers a refined alternative to the region's sprawling mega-resorts. With a boutique feel, nature-inspired design and a relaxed pace, the resort is ideal for anyone looking for a peaceful setting with easy access to restaurants, wellness amenities and family-friendly activities.

Part of the El Cid Resorts portfolio—which also includes oceanfront properties in Mazatlán and Cozumel—Ventus Ha' at Marina El Cid Spa & Beach Resort reflects the brand's focus on refined comfort and personalized experiences. From its architecture to its service philosophy, the property is designed to help you rest and reset, whether you're staying for a quick getaway or a longer escape.

Nature-Inspired Design

As you start exploring the property, you'll see that water is more than a backdrop. The overall layout is inspired by the region's cenotes, freshwater sinkholes unique to the Yucatán Peninsula and well worth seeking out if you get the chance. Flowing pathways, shaded lounging areas and calm reflective pools echo the natural rhythm of the surrounding landscape, making it easy to tap into tranquility as soon as you arrive.

Suites are modern and bright, with private balconies (complete with comfy hammocks), large spa-style bathrooms and views of tropical gardens or the Mayan mangroves. Interiors lean minimal but warm, polished without feeling overdone. It's a place where couples can unwind, families can spend quality time together in the sun and wellness-focused travellers can move (and feel soothed) at their own pace.





Three Resorts, One Seamless Experience

A key highlight of staying at Ventus Ha' at Marina El Cid Spa & Beach Resort is its built-in flexibility. Through El Cid's Exchange Privilege Program, all guests get access to two sister properties located just steps away: Ventus at Marina El Cid Spa & Beach Resort and Hotel Marina El Cid Spa & Beach Resort. Together, the three resorts provide easy access to over 31 restaurants and bars, multiple pools, beachfront lounges and a wide range of fun and unique activities.

Whether you're in the mood for a quiet morning in a cabana, a cooking class featuring local ingredients, a friendly pickleball match on the brand-new courts or a more active afternoon of snorkelling or paddleboarding, you can shift gears easily without ever having to go very far. This range of options means your vacation can be as structured or spontaneous as you want it to be, depending on your mood and who you're travelling with.

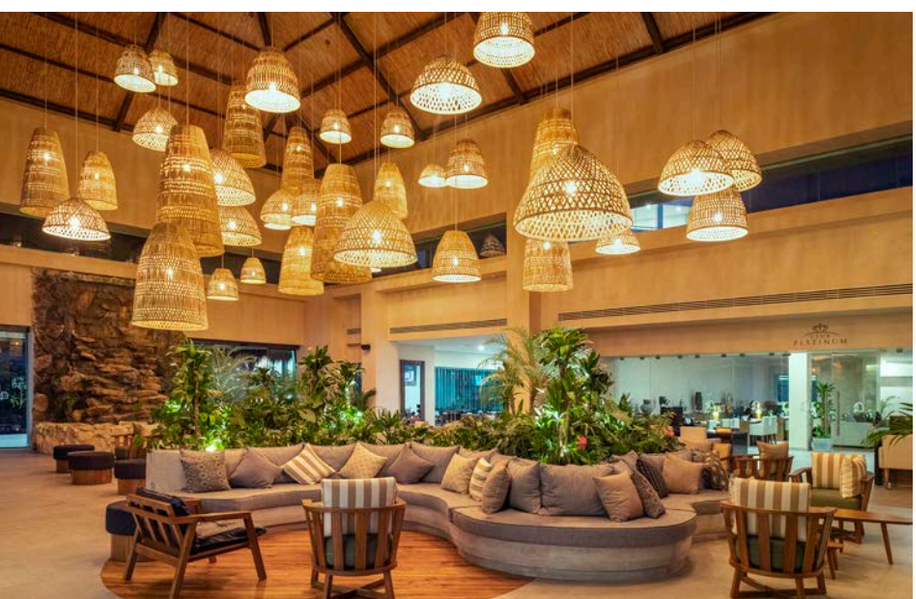
A Relaxed, Boutique Retreat

Even with access to three resorts' worth of amenities, Ventus Ha' at Marina El Cid Spa & Beach Resort maintains a calm, uncrowded atmosphere. Staff prioritize attentive, personalized service, and the overall mood encourages rest and reconnection. It's a welcome contrast to the busier resort experience that often dominates in the region.

The size and pace make it especially appealing for couples and wellness seekers, but families also benefit from the convenience and space to roam.

Ventus Ha' at Marina El Cid Spa & Beach Resort offers a rare combination: a tranquil base with the freedom to explore, indulge, or simply unwind. With thoughtful design, integrated resort access and a setting that encourages you to slow down, it delivers an experience that feels personal and easy as soon as you check in.







VENTUS HA'
AT MARINA EL CID
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A Taste of the Tropics at Sea

Windstar's James Beard Caribbean Cruise is a feast for the senses

By Melody Wren



As I stood on the sun-drenched deck of a luxurious yacht, a warm breeze swept across my skin and the turquoise sea lapped gently at the hull below. The air was alive with the scent of saltwater and tropical blooms, while the soft rhythm of steel drums floated in the wind, inviting me to slip into the laidback rhythm of the islands. Aboard the Windstar Star Pride, the Caribbean stretched endlessly ahead, promising indulgence, exploration and a feast for the senses.

Guided by the James Beard Foundation, I was setting off on a culinary voyage into the soul of the islands where culture, colour and flavour would converge in every unforgettable bite.

As the official cruise line of the Foundation, Windstar Cruises offers a rare culinary experience curated by some of the world's most acclaimed chefs. With five exclusive sailings each year, these cruises are in high demand and often sell out far in advance. This partnership elevates Windstar's commitment to local cuisine, giving guests immersive access to the authentic flavours and food traditions of each destination.

On this particular journey, guest chef Jamilka Borges, a James Beard Award semi-finalist, led onboard culinary events and demonstrations. Originally from Puerto Rico and now overseeing Lilith restaurant in Pittsburgh, Borges brings her signature style and deep passion for food to sea. Recognized in 2015 as a rising star by the Foundation, her presence added excitement and drew many guests specifically for this voyage.





CHEF HUGH ACHESON





The Star Pride, with its cozy 298-passenger capacity, fosters a warm, intimate atmosphere that makes connecting with fellow travellers and the crew effortless. Upon boarding, I was greeted by a welcoming staff whose attentiveness made me feel instantly at home. After a brief tour of the ship, I enjoyed an alfresco lunch with choices of daily made specials and then booked a spa treatment for the upcoming sea day knowing those slots disappear quickly.

As we sailed away, we were treated to the crew's signature sail-away celebration, a stirring rendition of "Conquest of Paradise" while the flag was being raised. The ritual became a favourite memory, repeated each time we departed a port. That first evening, I dined beneath the stars at Candles, where Foundation dishes were featured including thinly sliced duck carpaccio, tuna steaks and gluten free carrot cake. The food was exceptional and the conversation just as rich—passengers readily swapping travel stories over dinner.

The next day brought a solo traveller meetup, a thoughtful offering Windstar includes on most of its sailings. It was the perfect opportunity to connect with others travelling alone. According to Janet Bava, Windstar's Chief Commercial Officer, the cruise line has seen an 81 per cent rise in solo travellers since 2019, with 2024 on track to have welcomed more solo guests than ever before in its 40-year history. That upward trend shows no signs of slowing down in 2025.

As we cruised through the Caribbean, our first port of call was Willemstad, Curaçao. I chose a walking tour to explore the unique and photo-worthy architecture of this UNESCO World Heritage Site. The city is divided by a deep channel and connected by the famous Queen Emma Bridge, a pedestrian-only floating bridge, and awash with colourful buildings, vibrant murals and sculptures. After the tour, I unwound poolside with a frozen piña colada from the Star Bar basking in the island sun. That evening, the pool deck came alive with Windstar's festive barbecue buffet, featuring dishes inspired by the James Beard Foundation and accompanied by live music. As I have many dietary restrictions, one of the waitstaff walked me through the buffet suggesting dishes that would work. There were massive pans filled with local shrimp and vegetables, watermelon carved into flowers and a long table of pastries including the world's largest apple pie. I savoured a tender steak and deliciously moist jerk chicken and salads, all delicately flavoured and designed by chef Jamilka. The energy was contagious as passengers ate, mingled, danced and enjoyed the Caribbean night.

The next day's highlight was a sail on the Samur, an authentic Siamese junk, to the uninhabited island of Klein Bonaire. Snorkelling in the pristine aquamarine waters, I swam among brilliant parrotfish, curious jellyfish and sleek white fish—an unforgettable underwater world. As we sailed back, the crew served rum punch and platters of tropical fruit while Caribbean music floated through the air.

The rest of the cruise continued to delight. On our day at sea, I joined a morning Q&A with captain Krasimir Ivanov and the chief engineer, attended a cooking demo with chef Jamilka in which we tasted herb infused watermelon and shrimp salad, and enjoyed a wine seminar hosted by Luxe Wines. Later, a behind-the-scenes galley tour with executive chef Marcelo and chef Jamilka revealed the care, precision and creativity behind each meal served on board.

One of my favourite days was the beach barbecue party on the tiny island of Mayreau in St. Vincent & the Grenadines. We travelled by tender to Saline Bay, a beautiful anchorage where the Caribbean meets the Atlantic. Windstar's signature beach day unfolded with steel drums, snorkelling, kayaking, paddleboarding and a giant trampoline in the sea. The scent of smoky barbecue drifted across the beach as guests dined under shady trees, sipping tropical cocktails and soaking up the island vibes. Enormous whole fish, melt in your mouth smoked chicken, moist tropical cakes and colourful cocktails all combined to create the epitome of island-style celebration.

As the voyage came to a close, I found myself reflecting on the unforgettable experiences: the exquisite meals, the islands like jewels in the sea, the friendly crew and the warm connections made along the way. This Windstar cruise was more than a trip—it was a vibrant celebration of Caribbean culture, cuisine and community. With its intimate setting, welcoming spirit and immersive experiences, this was a journey I would recommend to anyone seeking something truly special.

All photos courtesy of Windstar Cruises, except page 1 top middle photo by Melody Wren



Quebec's Exciting Food Scene Is Ready for Its Closeup

The inaugural Michelin Guide Quebec firmly establishes the province's pedigree on the world's culinary stage

BY NICOLA BROWN

Photo courtesy of Restaurant ARVI

The much-anticipated Michelin Guide Quebec has finally landed, putting a global spotlight on one of Canada's most beloved culinary destinations. Nine restaurants in the province earned a coveted star, with Taniere[3] in Quebec City snagging two. A further 17 earned Bib Gourmands, spots recognized for exceptionally good food at moderate prices.



CHEF JULIEN MASIA OF ARVI

Michelin's star picks for Quebec span a wide range of dining atmospheres that reflect the diversity of top-notch food experiences throughout the province. While many will claim that the relative paucity of stars in Montreal means Michelin misses the magic of the city's more casual, accessible approach to fine dining, Sabayon and Mastard serve as fine character references for that quintessential Montreal restaurant vibe preferred by locals and travellers seeking something elevated yet authentic. While Quebec City, with no less than five stars awarded, proves it's not just a facsimile of the European experience in Canada—it is a firmly established world-class culinary destination in its own right.



ARCTIC CHAR AT MASTARD



Originally created to boost gas and tire sales in France in the 1900s by encouraging drivers to visit destination-worthy restaurants that might require a refuel mid-journey, the Michelin Guide has become the definitive authority on fine dining across the globe.

The excitement of travel still underscores many of Michelin's selections to this day, with stars not only limited to hubs like Montreal (Jérôme Ferrer - Europea, Mastard, Sabayon) and Quebec City (ARVI, Kebec Club Privé, Laurie Raphaël, Légende, Taniere[3]) but one in the much lesser-known destination of Rimouski on the south shore of the St. Lawrence estuary in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region: Narval.

Several of the Bib Gourmands and recommendations, too, invite a deeper dive into Quebec's small towns: Côté Est in Kamouraska; Losange, Arlequin and Les Affamés in Rimouski; La Porte Arrière in Rivière-du-Loup; Auberge Saint-Mathieu in Saint-Mathieu-du-Parc; Le Geraldine in Saint-Eustache; Myranel in Deschambault; Chex Matilde in Tadoussac; Espace Old Mill in Stanbridge East; Chardo in Bromont; Maison Boire in Granby; Les Mal Aimés in Cookshire-Eaton; L'Épicurieux in Val-David; Épi, Buvette de Quartier in Trois-Rivières; and Vin Polisson in Sherbrooke.

Among the emergent themes in the abundant accolades for Quebec restaurants, the guide seems to invite diners to keep travelling east. A suitable road trip itinerary might start in the Eastern Townships and wind its way along the St. Lawrence river into the Bas-Saint-Laurent region, dipping into small towns like Kamouraska, Riviere-du-Loup, perhaps up to Tadoussac in the Côte-Nord region on the north side of the river, and back down to Rimouski, diving deeper into the province's destination dining experiences while taking in the drama of the evolving scenery along the way.

The importance of that geography is certainly not lost on Michelin's inspectors, in fact it comes to the fore with three green stars awarded to Auberge Saint-Mathieu (Saint-Mathieu-du-Parc), Espace Old Mill (Stanbridge East) and Alentours (Quebec City). The newest of Michelin's accolades, a green star recognizes role models in sustainable gastronomy. Aspirational themes of locavore cooking, agroecology and eco-responsibility find their expression in practices such as on-site gardens, carbon-neutral greenhouses, local food independence and even recycled decor. Having earned the most green stars of any other Michelin-visited destination in the country points not only to Quebec's



rich agricultural setting, but a deeply rooted passion for pushing the boundaries of growing, cooking and dining.

The inaugural Michelin Guide Quebec not only shines a spotlight on the range and sophistication of Quebec's culinary offerings, it reminds us of the world-class travel experiences waiting to be discovered in our own back yard.

Top right photo by P. Richelet, top left photo courtesy of Restaurant ARVI, middle and bottom photos courtesy of Restaurant Europea



Farther to Table

Three small-town Ontario restaurants knocking big city players off the charts

BY NICOLA BROWN

There's something about travelling just a little bit farther for dinner that fundamentally changes the experience of fine dining. Bookending a bucket-list-worthy meal with a journey takes more time, effort and investment than firing off a same-day OpenTable reservation.

Ontario's most coveted destination dining spots stand atop a competitive food scene that sees Toronto's top players scoop most of the limelight. But fuelled by a post-Covid exodus to greener pastures and a growing appreciation for the value within our borders, going farther to table in Ontario holds more promise than ever before.

Hexagon:

Oakville, Ontario

▶ **Claim to fame:** Michelin 1-star restaurant (2024); Michelin Toronto Young Chef Award Winner Rafael Covarrubias (2024); #14 on Canada's Best 100 Restaurants (2025)


Chef Rafael Covarrubias

At the heart of Oakville's historic main street, Hexagon's massive sliding doors open onto a wrap-around patio, exclusive yet immersed in the buoyant summer mood of the adjacent main square. Live jazz on a warm Friday evening mints the suspicion that there are few better places to be for one of Canada's best dining experiences.

Chef Rafael Covarrubias's precociously polished dishes are anchored in European culinary finesse, but enlivened by Mexican and South American inflections. Complex, layered flavours in a spritely leche de tigre marinade add dimension to delicate Japanese flounder. While a strapping black mole honours the investment of a four-week aged duck, a tasting menu signature dish that's been studied and refined over several years.

The experience really comes to the fore with the addition of a wine pairing. Each carefully attuned glass poured by head sommelier Martin Watson comes with a passionately told story that extends beyond tasting notes to paint a humanizing picture of the people and places behind the process.

Chef Covarrubias describes his intention behind Hexagon as a place where food can be transcendent in its power to bring people together. "We like to introduce our guests to unfamiliar ingredients through familiar flavours or recognizable dishes—something they can connect with. Over time, we're able to shift perspectives by building trust," he says, which also speaks to the unusual propensity of this Michelin-starred destination to see a high proportion of returning regulars.

Going back to that aged duck, he continues: "Understanding what repetition and discipline can bring to any process has been a major part of the trajectory here at Hexagon. Our goal has always been to produce the best possible food we can. By allowing our dishes to evolve and mature alongside us as a team, we've been able to see that goal gradually come to life."

This unhurried dedication to long-term culinary development and discovery gives Hexagon the gravitas to command a position among Ontario's best destination restaurants.

▶ **Where to stay:** A dearth of good accommodations in Oakville itself means Toronto, a 40–50-minute drive, is still your best home base. If you need something closer, there are a few informal bed-and-breakfast style options in the area.

Page 1 photos courtesy of Hexagon





The Pine:

Creemore, Ontario

▶ **Claim to fame:** Michelin 1-star restaurant (2024); #19 on Canada's Best 100 Restaurants (2025)

In a recent move from Collingwood to Creemore, The Pine now inhabits a spacious and minimal gallery of a dining room, giving chef Jeremy Austin's insatiable creative spirit the expansiveness it calls for. With all diners seated and served simultaneously, a carefully choreographed 18-course tasting menu evokes art-meets-theatre of a measure you might expect to find in some of the world's culinary capitals, not Creemore.

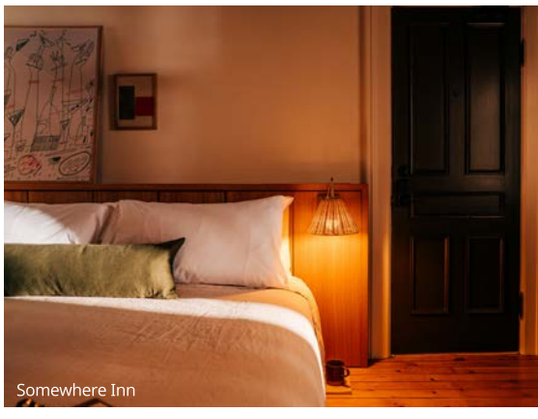

Chef Jeremy Austin

Dishes present a globally-inspired, locally-anchored culinary ambition defined by Austin's character-building experiences cooking and travelling in China. The opening dish, a tea egg marinated in *tsaoko* (black cardamom), black tea and cassia bark comes to life with the addition of New Brunswick Acadian gold sturgeon caviar. Layering on a creative bit of performative storytelling, like acts in a play or chapters in a book, each dish is presented with the reveal of its accompanying title card, featuring a visual symbol of a key ingredient with the dish's name underneath.

Statuesque driftwood branches balance a bite-sized buckwheat disk topped with confit cod cheek and crab brain caramel—an interpretation of a traditional Hunan fish head dish—with fermented chilli, watermelon radish, beetroot emulsion and elderberry caper. Later, two miniature solid brass crabs each hold aloft a crispy crab-filled summer corn cigar inspired by jianbing, a street food breakfast crepe chef Austin often ate with a glass of corn juice before a mettle-testing workday in Shanghai's frenetic kitchens.

A prominent locavore leaning also showcases charcoal-grilled rainbow trout from Manitoulin Island, char siu barbecued pork from a farm in Meaford, Ontario, and seasonal vegetables and garnishes from wife and co-owner Cassie's parents' farm just up the road in Proton Station.

▶ **Where to stay:** Collingwood's Somewhere Inn, a boutique hotel a 20-minute drive north, is a restful set of rooms in a converted Victorian house. Warm woods, sandy-toned linens and analogue diversions—a deck of cards, a thought-provoking bedside read—invite a calm, nostalgic feeling of unplugging. Statement soaker tubs bathed in natural light look out onto a garden of hammocks, a S'mores-ready firepit and a sauna and cold plunge circuit. Stop by the intimate lobby bar for a coffee or local brew, and don't forget to cue up their custom-curated playlist for the drive.


Somewhere Inn

Top left and top right photos by chef Jeremy Austin, bottom left photo by Frances Beatty, bottom right photo by Ian Patterson Photography




Pearl Morissette

Pearl Morissette:

Lincoln, Ontario

▶ **Claim to fame:** Michelin 1-star restaurant (2024); Michelin Green Star (2024); #1 on Canada's Best 100 Restaurants (2025)

Recently crowned Canada's best restaurant, and the only one to hold both a Michelin star and a Green Star for sustainable gastronomy, Pearl Morissette is considered by many the pièce de résistance of destination fine dining in Ontario. Regional, sustainable ingredients reach their most superlative and finessed expressions in dishes born of a rare symbiotic relationship between the kitchen and the on-site garden and vineyards.

But the ethos goes well beyond seasonality. With a steadfast commitment to serve only what can be grown in Canada, innovations like kōji-fermented barley in a delicate mille-feuille create a perfect dupe for an otherwise unavailable ingredient: chocolate. The molecular-level surprises abound.

Suspend your reservations on a pre-dinner garden tour with Shane the "produce pirate" as you take a bite of a marigold petal rolled into a sorrel leaf, taco-style. Yet instead of a mouthful of flora, you taste an unmistakably sweet, juicy orange; a humbling culinary reset that awakens a child-like wonder for ingredients. Dive deeper with the oyster leaf that somehow tastes like—you guessed it—an oyster, while spicebush and sweetgrass conjure vanilla. Shane, an ex-pastry chef with an eye patch and a penchant for the f-word is an unexpectedly charming ambassador for Pearl Morissette's unique approach to agriculture.

This all sets the tone for a world-class tasting menu that redefines common associations of farm-to-table fare. But most impressively, despite the gastronomic wizardry, the final results eschew gimmicky flexes for grounded, honest plates. The carrot crisp, two slender cigars dusted with chili and carrot powder, filled with scallop roe pâté and marigold flowers, is a moreish firework of umami presented atop a bed of dried chillies. It's one of the rare signature snacks that remains on an ever-changing menu. Seasonal vegetables like tender white asparagus get paired with a delicate balance of unusual suspects, many of which speak to the celebration of whole ingredients: razor clams, cabbage stems, turnip tops, pea shoots, green mizuna and kelp powder. Shortly after, a morsel of fresh walleye arrives still wearing a crispy armour of scales fried in hot oil, adding a simple yet transformative twist on texture.


Chefs Daniel Hadida and Eric Robertson

The menu is tight, polished, creative, and its progression is well composed. Dishes change not just seasonally but daily, even hourly, as small-scale back-pocket agricultural practices allow for a largely unprecedented model of creativity and innovation in both growing and cooking. Few restaurants in Canada or beyond match this forward-thinking capability and distinction.

▶ **Where to stay:** Niagara-on-the-Lake's newest and most outspoken boutique hotel, The Scotsman, is a destination in its own right, a 25-minute drive from Pearl Morissette in the heart of Niagara wine country. Inside this historic former post office built in 1805, internationally-renowned luxury designer Lori Morris combines her signature dramatic opulence with owners Blair and Brenda's nods to the pedigree of Scotland's grand hotels. With cossetting services including a live-in chef who once cooked for the Eaton family, an on-demand chauffeur and even helicopter transfers to and from Toronto, The Scotsman offers a bucket-list-worthy getaway you won't soon forget.


The Scotsman

Orchestrating the kind of restaurant experience worthy of a Michelin inspector's attention is no small feat. Doing it beyond the typical catchment area of Ontario's top culinary talent takes a yet more rarefied form of commitment and ambition.

"The biggest benefit of being outside Toronto is that it's made us work harder," says chef Covarrubias. "It gave us a hunger to be seen, and that pushed us to stand out, to be different. The culinary scene in Canada is finally on the radar, and people around the world are paying attention to what we have to offer."

Top and bottom left photos courtesy of Pearl Morissette, top right photo courtesy of Visit Niagara, bottom right photo courtesy of The Scotsman

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INTRODUCING

TALLINN AND VILNIUS

Two underrated European cities you should visit now

By Diana Ballon

Set in the northeastern corner of Europe, Tallinn and Vilnius are two capital cities with rich medieval history, old towns that boast UNESCO World Heritage status and proximity to forest and wildlife that make visits there as charmingly urban as they are bucolic and green.

When I booked a recent Baltic cycling trip with Exodus Adventure Travels, one of my main motivators was the fact that the land there is pretty flat and the temperatures—while vastly fluctuating—are overall much cooler than their southern European counterparts.

TALLINN & VILNIUS

There are definite differences between the two cities. Estonia's capital exudes Nordic (especially Finnish) and Germanic influences, while being predominantly Protestant. Once home to wealthy merchants, its Old Town is renowned for its well-preserved medieval architecture. Tallinn is located on the country's northern coast, while Vilnius sits about 300 kilometres from the Baltic Sea.

Vilnius is renowned for its Baroque architecture (there are about 25 churches in its old town alone), making it distinct from other European cities. The city is also rich in classical music, opera and theatre and has strong Catholic traditions.

But what makes these two "brothers" connected is a shared history of the countries' survival from decades of Soviet occupation, mass deportation and policies undermining their educational systems and cultural traditions. Together they participated in the "Baltic Way" in 1989, when two million people from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania linked together, forming a 600 kilometre long human chain through the Baltic countries, which was one of the largest non-violent demonstrations ever to exist.

STAY



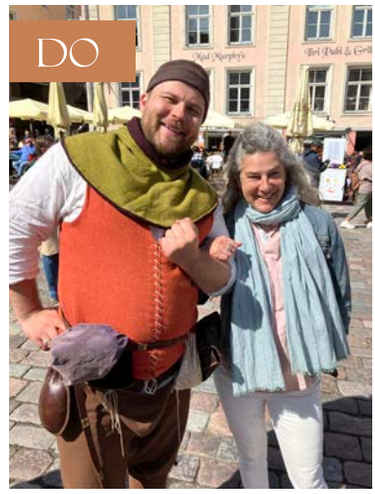
Schlössle Hotel in Tallinn

TALLINN

STAY at the Schlössle Hotel, a Small Luxury Hotel of the World. As you enter the lobby, rhubarb sparkling wine or Prosecco are there to welcome you, next to a wood-burning fire in a lounge with rough-hewn stone walls and timbered ceiling. Located in the city's Old Town, it's close to restaurants and cafés, but you can also enjoy traditional dining in their Stenhus restaurant. The breakfast included in a hotel stay is extensive, from sea buckthorn and green detox shots as part of the buffet, to a wild mushroom omelette ordered from the menu.

EAT at one of many nearby restaurants. Rataskaevu 16 offers modern European dishes served by friendly waitstaff at reasonable prices. Restaurant 180° by Matthias Dieter and Noa Chef's Hall are both Michelin fine dining restaurants with tasting menus. Or choose a less expensive but fun local experience at Kolmas Draakon in Town Hall Square, or the Reval Café.

DO book a free walking tour, which begin in front of the Tourist Information Centre in the Old Town. We loved the GuruWalk "Tales of Reval Immersion tour" led by Cedric Stimmlich who entertained us with many amusing medieval stories.



Noteworthy places to visit include the Niguliste Museum (in a 13th century church), which has 30-minute organ recitals on weekends; the Town Hall Square, including the Gothic Town Hall; and Toompea Castle, seat of the Estonian parliament. Make time to also step inside some of the city's many medieval churches, such as St. Olaf's Church, once the tallest building in Europe. There you can climb 232 steps to its viewing platform for a stunning view of the city.

VILNIUS



STAY at the historic Neringa Hotel. Located on Gediminas Avenue, the city centre's main shopping street, the hotel was like an island of modernism when it opened in 1960, with bohemians, artists and intellectuals meeting at its legendary restaurant to escape the gloomy realities of Soviet occupation. The hotel's design incorporates a Scandinavian style simplicity and minimalism, with warm colours and shapes inspired by Lithuanian folklore and the Neringa seaside. The hotel has three bars including a roof terrace with panoramic views, a lobby bar on the main floor and a cozy bar in the basement, along with 124 bright, modern rooms.



Ertlio Namas

EAT at Michelin-recommended Ertlio Namas, where you can choose between a four or six-course Lithuanian meal with wine pairings where small dishes are accompanied by a history lesson exploring the food's expression of traditions dating to Medieval, Renaissance and Enlightenment periods from as far back as the 16th century. Courses we enjoyed included trout terrine with eel and carrot sauce, snails with butter biscuit and asparagus, sorrel soup with rabbit dumplings, quail with grits, beef with mushroom stew, and wafers with rhubarb and goat milk ice cream for dessert.

DO Take a tour of the Old Town (it's one of the largest in Europe, but still very walkable). Our guide, Justina Petrauskaitė Meškauskienė,



did a great job of capturing its history. Visit the Vilnius Cathedral (and climb its bell tower), the Presidential Palace, the city's impressive university (the largest in the country) and the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, in a building that once housed KGB headquarters and a prison. Then cross to the other side of the river to visit the Uzupis quarter, with its many hidden courtyards, galleries, cafés and bohemian vibe.

Visit the former Lukiškės Prison, which has been converted into a cultural hub called "Lukiškės Prison 2.0, which is now an epicentre of culture, with everything from art exhibits, to concerts, guided tours and festivals.

Make time to visit the Jewish quarter. Once dubbed by Napoleon the "Jerusalem of the north" because of its vibrant Jewish community pre-World War II, literally 95 per cent of Jews were killed during the war. A tour will allow you to revisit historical elements such as wall paintings, memorial plaques and monuments.

Whether you visit one or both, Tallinn and Vilnius are each worth discovering and offer an enticing alternative to some of the more well-traversed European destinations.

All photos by Diana Ballon except page 1 bottom right photo courtesy of Schlössle Hotel

OFF THE BEATEN PATH IN **CANADA**

5 under-the-radar Canadian destinations just as worthwhile as many of the country's more popular sites

BY JIM BYERS



YOU CAN'T GO WRONG WITH PEGGY'S COVE. NIAGARA FALLS IS ALWAYS A THRILL. AND THE BEAUTY OF BANFF NEVER CEASES TO INSPIRE AWE. BUT CANADA IS FILLED WITH TREMENDOUS, LESSER-KNOWN PLACES TO VISIT THAT YOURS TRULY HAS HAD THE PLEASURE TO EXPLORE OVER THE YEARS. HERE'S A LOOK AT SOME SUGGESTIONS FROM A PROUD CANADIAN.



▶ PORT REXTON, NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

The Skerwink Trail is a fabulous, relatively easy hike outside of Port Rexton, which is on the Bonavista Peninsula of Newfoundland and Labrador, about 3.5 hours from St. John's. The well-marked path takes you along cliffs high above the surging Atlantic Ocean, revealing towering, black rock formations called "sea stacks" that emerge from the water like ancient stone high-rises, each one blasted by eons of wind and ice and sun. When you finish the hike, head to the Port Rexton Brewing Co. for a well-deserved craft beer.





PARC NATIONAL DES HAUTES-GORGES-DE-LA-RIVIÈRE-MALBAIE, **QUEBEC**

Forty minutes or so north of La Malbaie in the gorgeous Charlevoix region of Quebec is this fabulous, little-known park with towering cliffs and craggy rock formations you can see on a guided boat tour. If you use your imagination, you might see the shape of a monkey in the rocks, or perhaps Pierre Trudeau's face. Back on the shores of the St. Lawrence River is the lovely town of Baie St. Paul, where you'll find great restaurants and lovely art galleries. Baie St. Paul is about 75 minutes east of Quebec City.

SALT LAKES IN **SASKATCHEWAN**

Little Manitou Lake, about 90 minutes southeast of delightful Saskatoon, is one of several salt lakes in Saskatchewan. There are so many minerals in these lakes that just about anyone–or anything–can float easily. The town is home to Danceland, one of the great old dance halls of North America. It's a beautiful, romantic building that opened in 1928 and still hosts occasional dances for the public. Closer to Regina, check out the pretty lakeside town of Regina Beach.





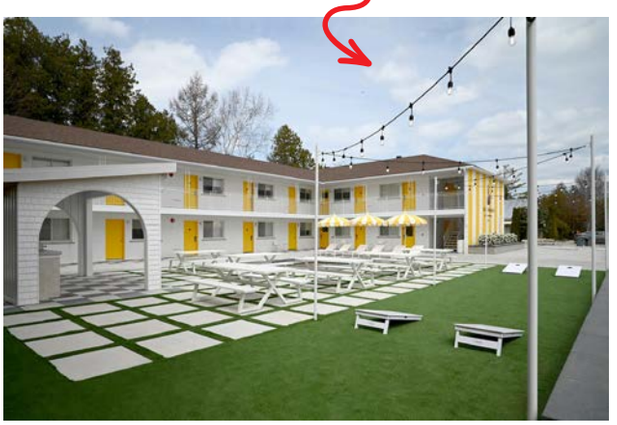
A STUNNING PARK IN **SOOKE, B.C.**



Sooke Potholes Provincial Park might be the prettiest spot in Canada with the worst name. The park features acres of trails through forests of towering, sweet-smelling trees and reveals tremendous views of small waterfalls that tumble down a series of dark rocks. It's a splendid, tranquil spot on Vancouver Island, just west of Victoria. After your walk, drop into Mom's Café in Sooke for a slice of apple pie. Each pie contains roughly 50 apples, and is nearly the size of a basketball.

SOUTHAMPTON, **ONTARIO**

This sleepy town on the shores of vast Lake Huron was once a bit of a secret. But that's been changing since a local couple began transforming the area a few years ago. They started by taking a long-forgotten motel and turning it into The Beach Motel, a stylish spot for overnight stays. Then they opened South Beach Motel, which feels like a slice of Miami right in central Ontario. The Beach Motel is also home to a fine Spanish restaurant. Southampton may not be the next Prince Edward County, but it seems to be edging in that direction.



All photos by Jim Byers except page 2 top photo by Steve Deschenes

Island Hopping Done Right in St. Vincent and the Grenadines

One unforgettable week exploring this lesser-known Caribbean chain of islands

By Jessica Padykula



As soon as our plane started its decent into St. Vincent I became increasingly excited to have chosen a window seat, especially as someone who usually opts for the aisle. Each time I glanced through the glass I was greeted with some of the bluest water I've ever seen, backed by textured green hills that looked almost hand painted. This was my introduction to St. Vincent and the Grenadines and I couldn't wait to start exploring.

This archipelago of 32 islands and cays can be found in the Lesser Antilles between St. Lucia and Grenada and has long flown under the radar of mass tourism. Only a handful of the islands are inhabited and each one brings its own distinct flavour, geography and pace of life. In just a week of travel I had the chance to experience what was essentially multiple destinations in one

Photo courtesy of DiscoverSVG.com

Young Island

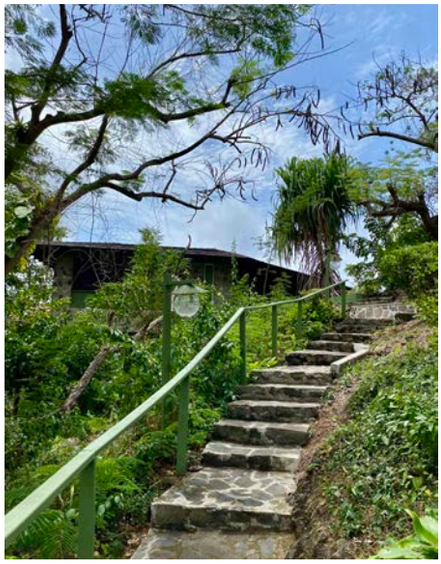
A Quiet and Soothing Start

My first stop was Young Island, a private island resort just 200 yards off the coast of St. Vincent, easily reached by a small boat that conveniently runs 24/7. A stay here puts you close enough to the many sights on St. Vincent and its busy capital of Kingstown, but also gives you the chance to unplug in a secluded setting.

This is an island to relax on. Put your phone away (if you can) and embrace the feeling of being removed from the real world in the best way possible. Cottage-style accommodations, 29 in total, are spread out at both ground level and up into the hills, providing even more seclusion. I stayed in one of the hillside suites, tucked into dense foliage and up a number of stone steps. The hike up and down was worth it for the personal plunge pool and hammock-bedecked patio overlooking the water that awaited me.

Meals are served al fresco under thatched palapas just steps from the sea and the resort's house-baked breads (six kinds, sliced tableside) are justifiably renowned among visitors. Choose from coconut, cinnamon, wheat, banana, raisin or white (all are excellent).

Despite its private island status, Young Island doesn't feel showy or gated. It strikes an ideal balance between relaxed and unpretentious and offers a great introduction to the islands of the Grenadines.





Bequia

Colour and Charm

I took the newly launched fast ferry from St. Vincent to Bequia which cuts the crossing time in half, turning what was traditionally a one-hour journey into a breezy 30-minute ride complete with postcard-perfect sea views.

The waterfront town of Port Elizabeth is bright and bustling, with little shops, brightly painted houses and a casual energy that makes it feel both welcoming and charmingly old-school. Colourful buildings, low-key cafés and a lively marina add to the island's appeal.

Bequia Beach Hotel, tucked away on pretty Friendship Beach, captures the island's understated vibe. There's a refined feel to the colonial-inspired rooms and manicured gardens, but nothing about the property feels overproduced. Food highlights local ingredients and service is attentive but not intrusive.



There is also lots to do in the area. For starters, although I didn't stay long, I knew as soon as my feet hit the sand that Princess Margaret Beach, named after the royal who once swam here during a visit in the 1950s, was worth lingering on. Accessible via a scenic walkway from Port Elizabeth, it's popular with both locals and travellers and offers calm waters perfect for swimming.

Another highlight on Bequia was a visit to Grenadine Wild Sea Salt, a small but impressive artisanal operation run by the enigmatic Jerry Simpson, a process that sees sea salt harvested via solar evaporation. The facility is eco-conscious and rooted in the local community, and the salt—mined from the clear waters surrounding Bequia—adds a pure, mineral-rich finish to any dish. Visitors can tour the grounds and chat with Simpson, while learning about his unique salt production process. The relaxed but comprehensive tour also includes the chance to sample the various salt blends infused with local ingredients, from dark rum to mango to lime.

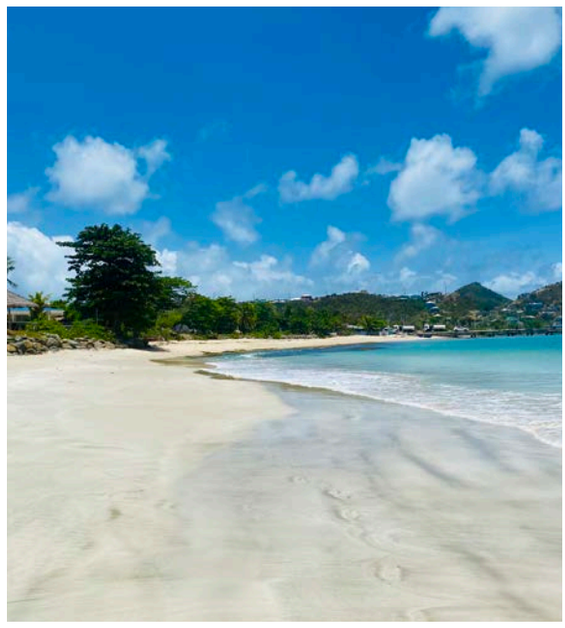
Top left photo by Jessica Padykula, top right photo courtesy of Young Island Resort, bottom photo courtesy of Bequia Beach Hotel

Canouan

Luxe and Laid Back

What it lacks in size (coming in at just five square miles), Canouan makes up for in laidback beauty. Surrounded by one of the Caribbean's largest living coral reefs, this tiny island was made for spending time in or on the water. It's an interesting island in that despite an air of luxury, it never felt anything but welcoming. I didn't have a lot of time to explore but I made the most of it, thanks in part to an exceptional stay at Soho Beach House Canouan, the global brand's first hotel in the Caribbean.

Located on Grand Bay Beach, a wide expanse of white sand, the intimate 40-room property features clean lines, muted tones with pops of colour in just the right places, thoughtful accents and the feeling that a lot of care was put into ensuring the property not only lives up to high Soho House standards, but also sets itself apart as a Caribbean flagship. There's a two-storey gym here, both a yoga and Pilates studio, beautifully prepared food at every meal and an outpost of the brand's renowned Cowshed spa offering a range of treatments (a massage is highly recommended).



Top photo courtesy of Soho Beach House Canouan, bottom photo by Jessica Padykula



Tobago Cays

Pristine Water and White Sand

From Bequia, it was about a 90-minute speedboat ride through turquoise water to Tobago Cays Marine Park. Established in 1998, this stunning group of five uninhabited islands located in the southern Grenadines includes Petit Rameau, Petit Bateau, Baradal, Jamesby and Petit Tabac. Once we anchored I couldn't wait to jump into the water, which was so blindingly blue it made my head spin. I've heard the snorkelling here is amazing, even right off one of the beaches, but I opted to split my time between swimming and relaxing on the white sand.

Lunch was on Petit Bateau, which some locals refer to as "picnic island," a sandy crescent with one shaded cooking area and picnic tables on the sand. A local crew cooked whole snapper and grilled some of the biggest lobsters I've ever seen. The setting was as relaxed as you can get: fresh fish, local seafood and cold drinks served steps away from the water. The simplicity of it all—the sea, the food, the company—made it one of the best moments of the trip.

St. Vincent

Sun, Surf and a Spectacular Sandals

I ended my already unforgettable week where it all began, on the volcanic island of St. Vincent, with a stay at Sandals St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the newest addition to the brand's already robust portfolio. The sprawling all-inclusive property showcases a lot of what makes the island of St. Vincent so special. Forested hills surround the property, nearby black sand coves can be easily accessed via kayak and the property's ultra-lush landscape hints at a tropical island interior perfectly suited for hiking and ATV tours.

The 12 dining concepts offer lots of choice, from sushi and hand-cut steak to ultra-local cuisine and island-forward cooking techniques. Grab a cold brew coffee and pastry from Blum in the morning and a made to order pizza from Isola in the afternoon. Scrimshaw, where I had dinner one night, puts the focus on sustainable and locally-fished seafood alongside craft cocktails and vegetable-forward sides. The mahi mahi was perfectly cooked and paired with bright salsa verde and an unctuous garlic cream sauce.

If you're feeling active, there are kayaks, paddleboards and bicycles on offer to take advantage of the beautiful surroundings, along with multiple pools to dive into. If you're craving a swim in solitude, check out the quiet spa pool (you don't need to have a treatment booked to enjoy it).





Rooms, all with large balconies, airy interiors and well-stocked minibars come in various categories, from ethereal overwater villas to butler-serviced suites.

What sets St. Vincent and the Grenadines apart isn't just the scenery, although the beaches, kaleidoscopically-blue waters and forest-covered hills are spectacular. It's the diversity that stands out. The islands, each with something different to offer, are well connected by ferry and short flights, allowing travellers to craft an itinerary that suits their pace and style. This region is perfect for a "choose your own adventure" style vacation, whether that's focusing on one island or hopping between three, four (or more).

Top photo by Jessica Padykula, bottom photos courtesy of Sandals St. Vincent and the Grenadines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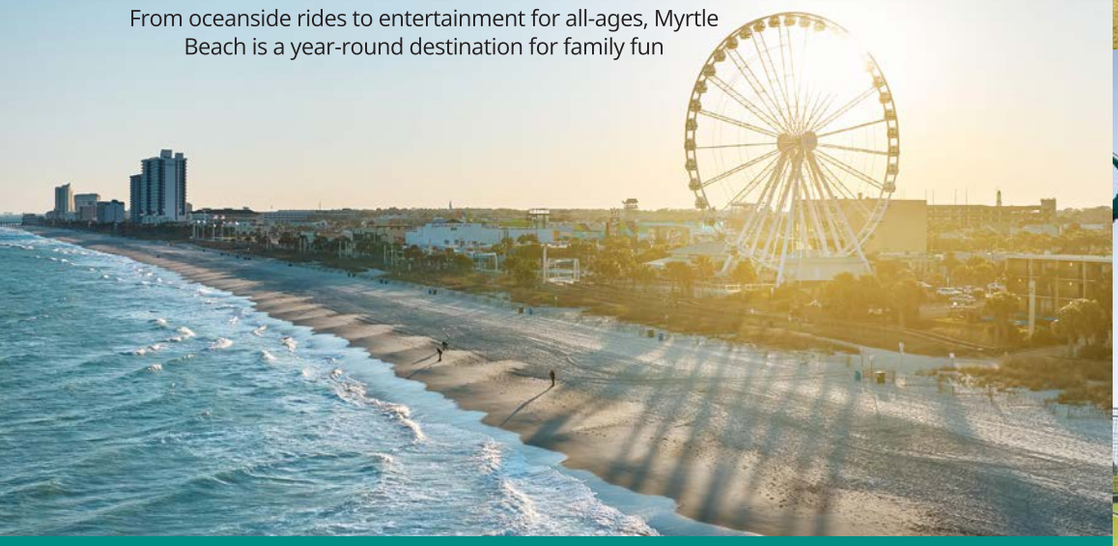
THE PERFECT PLACE FOR AN *Unforgettable Family Getaway*

From oceanside rides to entertainment for all-ages, Myrtle Beach is a year-round destination for family fun







Myrtle Beach has long been a favourite for families. With nearly 100 kilometres of sand and surf, the beach alone is an obvious draw, but there's so much more to explore. What makes this destination especially ideal for a family getaway is the sheer variety of things to do, from thrill rides and water parks to scenic state parks and over-the-top mini golf courses. Whether you have toddlers or teens in tow, Myrtle Beach makes it easy to build a trip around everyone's idea of fun.

Broadway and the Boardwalk

Broadway at the Beach is a natural starting point. This lively 350-acre complex of shops, restaurants and attractions was built with families in mind. Kids can come face-to-face with sharks and rays at Ripley's Aquarium of Myrtle Beach, or explore more than 100 imagination-sparking interactive exhibits at WonderWorks. There are rides for every age at Pavilion Park and plenty of places to eat when you need to refuel.

Not far off, the Myrtle Beach Boardwalk offers its own dose of oceanfront fun with plenty of arcade games (from Skee ball to air hockey), snack stops and souvenir shops. The standout might just be the SkyWheel, a 187-foot observation wheel that happens to be one of the tallest observation wheels on the East Coast. Needless to say, the views on your ride will be unforgettable.

Where Golf Is a Family Game

Known as the "mini golf capital of the world," there are more than 35 themed courses in Myrtle Beach featuring everything from erupting volcanoes to safari animals to pirates. If you want to check out multiple courses, consider embarking on the Myrtle Beach Mini Golf Trail, which provides a digital pass that offers discounts and rewards along the way.

When mini golf isn't quite enough, there are more than 90 championship courses across the region. Thanks to the Kids Play Free initiative, children can tee off at no cost with a paying adult at many area courses. Some clubs offer the deal year-round, while others have dedicated time slots or seasonal offers. Check with the course when booking to see what's available.

Cool-Downs and Crowd-Pleasers

For old-school amusement park fun, Family Kingdom delivers with more than 35 rides, from go-karts and bumper cars to the Swamp Fox, the iconic wooden coaster that's been a highlight of Family Kingdom since 1966.

When temperatures rise, Myrtle Waves Water Park is the ideal place to cool off. With more than 20 waterslides, a lazy river and a wave pool, it's a full day of splashy fun.

For something indoors and over the top, Pirates Voyage Dinner & Show combines a hearty meal with swashbuckling action—think sword fights, aerial feats and sea creatures—all designed to dazzle a family audience.

When you need a quieter pace, Myrtle Beach State Park and Huntington Beach State Park both offer quiet trails, shaded picnic spots and uncrowded beachfronts just a short drive from the action.

What Myrtle Beach does best is blend classic beach vacation vibes with activities the whole family can genuinely enjoy. Whether it's your first visit or a tradition in the making, Myrtle Beach is an ideal place to create summer (or any season) memories that last well beyond the trip home.

For more information on family fun:
visitmyrtlebeach.ca



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A Cultural Rhythm To Remember

Inside Antigua's historic Hells Gate Steel Orchestra Pan Yard

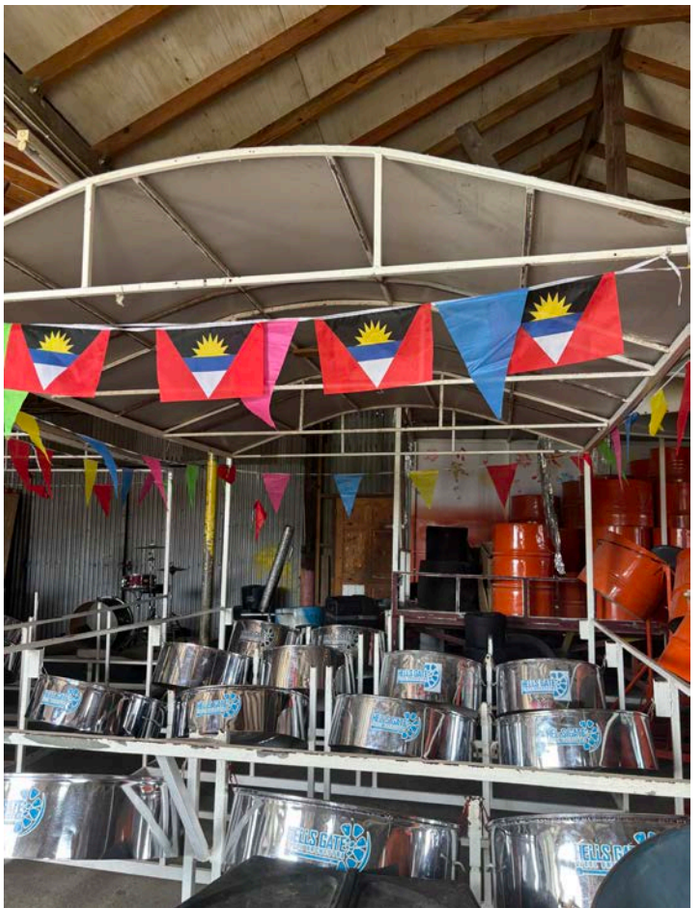
BY TAMMY CECCO



A day out in Antigua offers much more than postcard-worthy beaches and turquoise waters (despite their justifiable allure). It's also an invitation to connect with the island's living culture, and one of the best ways to do that is with a visit to the Hells Gate Steel Orchestra Pan Yard, which turned out to be an experience that stayed with me long after I left the island.

Established in 1945, Hells Gate holds the distinction of being the world's oldest continuously operating steel orchestra and has grown into a cultural institution that helped define not just Antiguan identity, but a wider Caribbean sound.







The band started out in The Point neighbourhood of Antigua as an iron band, an informal group creating rhythm from found materials like biscuit tins, metal pipes, car wheels and brake drums salvaged from a local blacksmith shop. The ensuing clanging sound that echoed through the neighbourhood led residents of The Point to dub the group "Hells Gate," likening the cacophony of energetic sound they produced to the gates of hell opening up.

That energy quickly evolved into something more musical and enduring. In 1946, members began tuning discarded oil drums into pitched instruments marking the early days of steelpan innovation in Antigua. Joseph "Jelico" Benjamin was reportedly the first in the band to perform a complete melody on pan, and from that moment, the group began shaping what would become an iconic national sound.

Today, Hells Gate Steel Orchestra Pan Yard is a vibrant rehearsal and community space, alive with the rhythms of tradition and an infectious sound that seeps into your soul. The band has gone on to win national Panorama titles and represent Antigua and Barbuda on the world stage. But maybe more importantly, it has remained committed to education and cultural preservation, mentoring generations of young musicians and keeping steelpan at the heart of Antiguan identity.

In addition to getting a lesson on the rich history of this signature island sound while I was in Antigua, a sound that's deeply rooted in custom and tradition, I also got to learn a few basics under the guidance of pan master, Khan Cordice. This experience provided a glimpse into island culture and offered a fun way to celebrate everything that makes this region so special. Getting the chance to not only hear the music but play it as well (or at least try), gave me a better understanding of its origins and importance to Antigua and Barbada.

For anyone visiting Antigua who wants to experience something beyond the beach, a session at Hells Gate Steel Orchestra Pan Yard offers a rare chance to step inside a cultural legacy.

For More Information: facebook.com/hgso1945/

Diving into Coral Reef Restoration in Curaçao

This Caribbean island is working hard to protect its underwater wonders for future generations

BY SABRINA PIRILLO



Bon bini (welcome) to Curaçao! This colourful island is home to some of the best beaches in the Caribbean, unique cultural experiences, activities for all ages and the UNESCO-listed capital of Willemstad filled with street art, pastel-hued buildings and bustling shops and cafes. It also offers an abundance of vibrant coral reefs, marine life and crystal-clear waters that make Curaçao a diver's paradise. The island is widely recognized as one of the best shore diving destinations in the world, boasting more than 38 world-class shore diving sites scattered across the island, something that makes their reef renewal program a vital part of strengthening the local ecosystem.





Just 15 minutes from Hato International Airport and five minutes from the historic capital of Willemstad, Curaçao Marriott Beach Resort is nestled amidst six oceanfront acres, complete with a robust and healthy house reef and burgeoning coral nursery. Located at the far west end of Marriott's beach is Goby Divers, an esteemed dive shop and an integral part of the property's coral restoration efforts.

As coral reefs around the world are threatened by climate change, Curaçao Marriott Beach Resort is taking the initiative to help restore the island's natural beauty and vital ecosystems by sponsoring Reef Renewal Curaçao, an organization that partners with Goby Divers to grow and maintain a coral nursery just to the side of Marriott's abundant house reef.



Founded in 2015, Reef Renewal Curaçao is a key driver behind the revitalization of the island's underwater ecosystem, establishing nurseries and planting new coral. Coral reefs cover less than one per cent of the ocean floor but are home to nearly 25 per cent of all marine life, highlighting the importance of this restoration project.

Coral reefs also play a vital role in the economy, boosting economic development through tourism and fishing, from snorkelling tours to recreational fishing trips. The coastal barriers also protect against storms, wind damage and erosion. Goby Divers are a proud project partner, serving as an active centre for education through which hotel guests can learn about reef restoration thanks to Curaçao Marriott Beach Resort's sponsorship of complimentary guided snorkel sessions for guests who would like to see the nursery and explore the reef.

Divers who visit the island can also participate in a Reef Renewal Diver course with Goby Divers, which provides a hands-on approach to reef restoration. And of course, all guests are welcome to donate to the foundation to help further the work that protects the underwater wonders of Curaçao for future generations.

I had the pleasure of taking part in Goby Divers' educational sessions and guided snorkel activity just in front of the property last November. This complimentary session is offered to guests every Tuesday. Visiting the nursery felt like I was snorkelling with purpose. It was incredible to see the work that these dedicated divers are doing. One of the dive volunteers waved to me as he added coral to the bamboo sticks that are made into vertical fences. I waved back as I swam by, curious as to what this lush reef restoration will look like in a few years.

All photos courtesy of Curaçao Marriott Beach Resort except main image and page 1 bottom photo courtesy of Reef Renewal Curaçao

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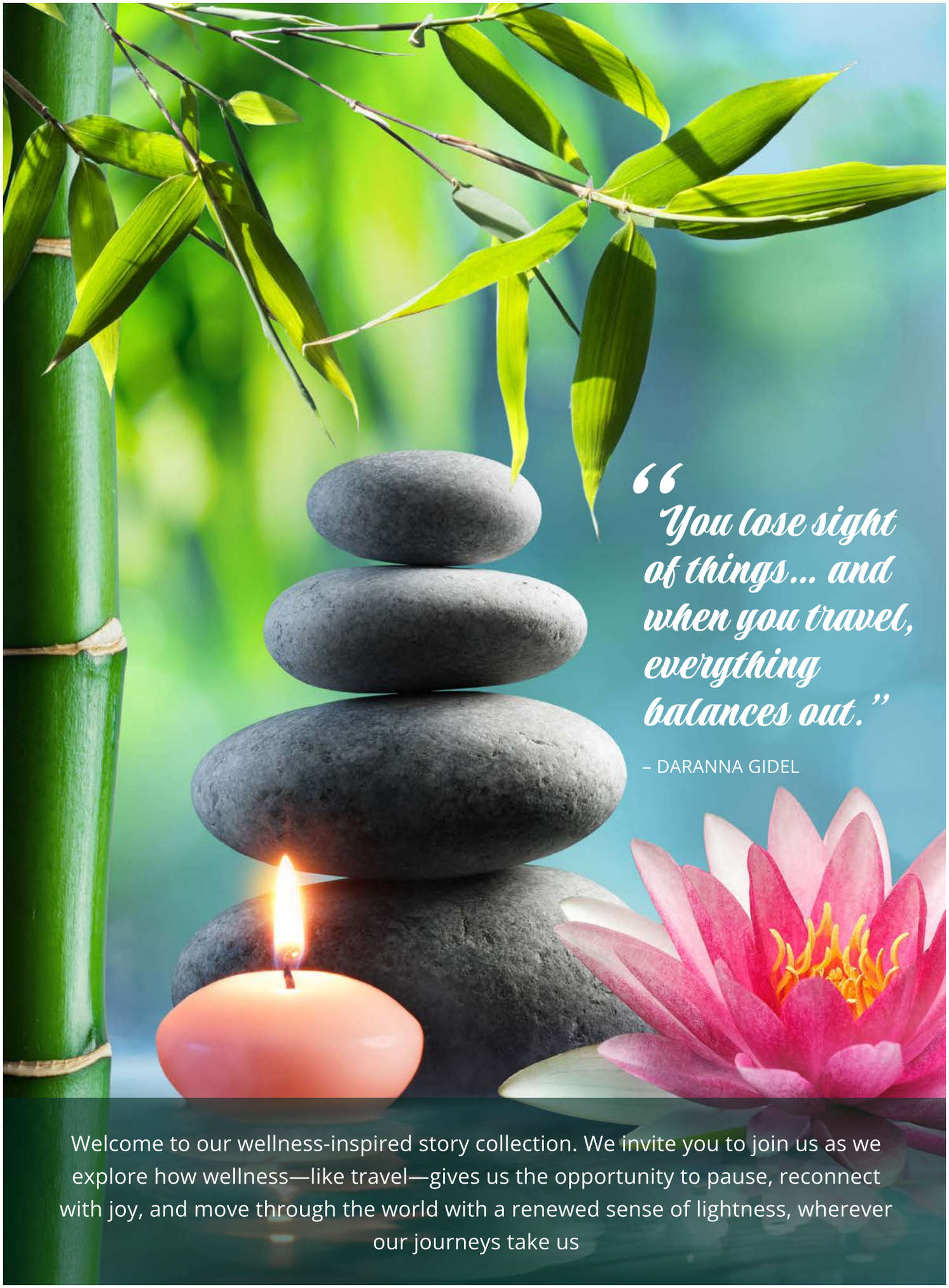

“You lose sight of things... and when you travel, everything balances out.”
– DARANNA GIDEL
Welcome to our wellness-inspired story collection. We invite you to join us as we explore how wellness—like travel—gives us the opportunity to pause, reconnect with joy, and move through the world with a renewed sense of lightness, wherever our journeys take us

WHAT'S TRENDING IN THE WORLD OF *Wellness*

A look at some of the newest ways to better yourself in mind, body and spirit this year and beyond

BY CHRIS RYALL



What's cool and what's hot in the world of wellness. How about reimagined sauna sweating, revitalizing cold plunges, celebrity backed nutritional supplements or power napping in sleep pods–and that's just the start.

The Global Wellness Institute releases its top ten trends every year and for 2025, number one on their list is logging off in service of self care. A large part of this new phase of spa-going is all about analogue wellness and device-free experiences.

Sauna culture is also rapidly growing when it comes to wellness, moving beyond traditional sweat-sessions to sauna social clubs and the idea that the sauna experience can be a more collective and immersive one.
In addition, the idea of wellness is shifting its focus from just living longer to also living better. Think supplements personalized to your body's needs (right down to your cells) so you can do more and do it better, for longer. To that end, the aging population and people staying in the workforce longer are leading employers to implement more on-site health and wellness support as well as increasing flexible work options.

Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern and Gulf countries are becoming a beacon for wellness enthusiasts with multi-billion dollar resort and spa complexes incorporating the best and latest in wellness practices and innovations.

A shift towards slower, more immersive travel means we'll be seeing more wellness facilities on cruise ships and trains, such as Belmond's fleet of luxury trains with dedicated Dior spa carriages.

You can also expect more spas and wellness facilities to adopt AI-driven wellness programs and treatment plans personalized for individuals. Smart wearables and health tracking devices will continue to evolve in the ways they collect data from sleep patterns, heart rate, stress levels and more.





DID YOU KNOW?

Wellness STATS

CANADA

Canada's **wellness economy** is ranked **#8** out of **218** countries worldwide.

There were **4,267** **spa establishments** in Canada in 2023.

Canada is among the top **ten** **fastest-growing wellness economies** in the world.

Spa revenue by all spa establishments in Canada generated **$2.4 billion U.S.**

WORLDWIDE

The global wellness economy was worth **$6.3 trillion in 2023** and is forecast to reach **$9 trillion by 2028.**

Global wellness tourism was worth **$830 billion** in 2023.

The top **ten** wellness markets in the world are the **United States, China, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, India, Canada, Italy** and **Australia.**

Sources: Global Wellness Institute/Blueprint Global/Geography of Wellness Report

COLD COMFORT

The Nordic spa trend takes off in Canada with facilities popping up around the country

BY MICHELE SPONAGLE

I've always loved spas. I've been to many worldwide and subjected myself willfully to unique treatments in the pursuit of better health. Until recently, I felt hot and cold about Nordic spas. Now, I adore the adrenaline rush I feel from immersing myself in steamy pools and saunas, followed by a plunge in frigid water. It's a thrill greater than any zipline.

In recent years, Canada has done a deep dive into the Nordic spa trend in a major way. Here's a peek at a few making a splash.



Saltair Nordic Spa & Wellness, Baxter's Harbour, Nova Scotia

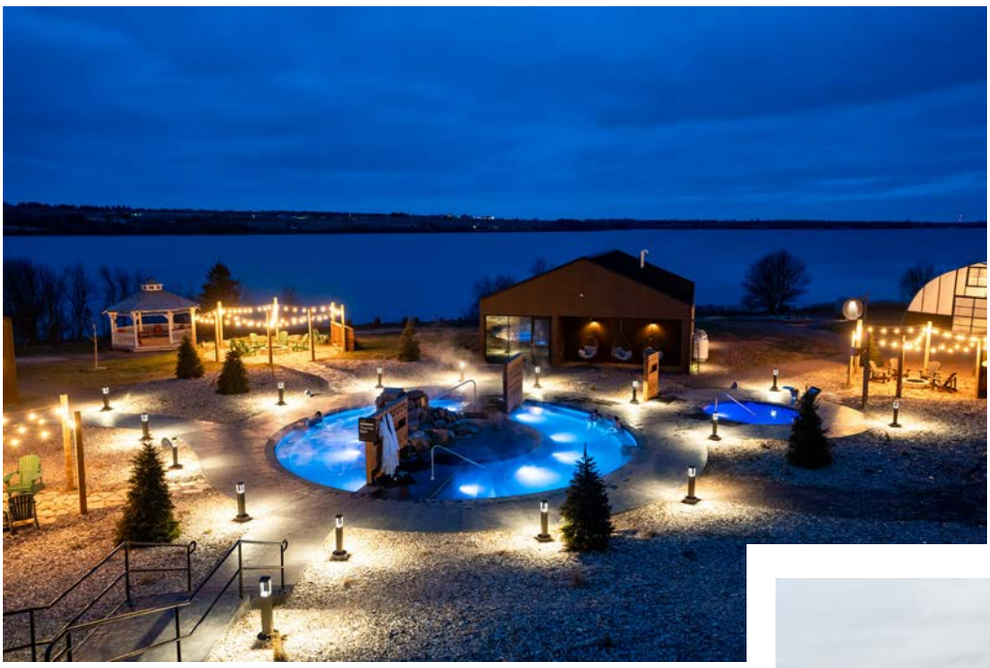
You may ask, "Where the heck am I?" after driving the rural dirt roads of the Annapolis Valley to the spa. In just a year, this spot has gained a loyal following, drawn to its warm pools, cold plunge and wood-fired sauna. Find a chair outside to take in gorgeous views of the Bay of Fundy. Add depth to your visit with a 75-minute class led by a sauna guide who helps you tap into your chakras with breathing exercises and intention setting. If the detox becomes too much, grab a beer or a glass of' wine at the café to 'retox' poolside.





Scandinave Whistler, Whistler, B.C.

For a great experience, you don't need to be surrounded by beautiful scenery, but it helps. At this Scandinave location (one of four in Canada), guests find that old-growth rainforest and Coast Mountain help them get into their Zen zone. Start with 15 minutes in the dry sauna, then move on to the cold plunge pool. Push your relaxation to the next level and book one of the thermal journey-massage combos. Scandinave is serious about digital detoxing. There's no Wi-Fi available and silence is enforced.



Mysa Nordic Spa & Resort, St. Peter's Bay, P.E.I.

Even Canada's tiniest province is getting in on the Nordic spa trend. Mysa opened in 2022 and boasts a modern vibe. It stretches over 18 acres and is chock full of ways to unwind. Tip a bucket of icy water over your head to energize you, warm up in a eucalyptus steam bath, or cozy up by the fireplace. The best spot, though, is the thermal bath in the designated silent area, thanks to pretty vistas of St. Peter's Bay.



By the end of your visit, you may crave sleep. Fortunately, guests can rent a cottage on the grounds, a short walk from the spa.



Eclipse Nordic Hot Springs, Whitehorse, Yukon

Naturally ocurring, mineral-rich hot springs make this place stand out. The pools are a toasty 40 degrees Celsius without pumps or heating technology. Mother Nature does the work. Along with the Nordic vibe, this facility throws in a bit of Japanese culture with an onsen-style soaking pool, complete with a cascading waterfall. In winter, compete in the Hair Freezing Contest and win cash. Wet hair and temperatures of -20 degree Celsius are perfect conditions for pretty wild (and frosty) hairdos.







Spa Nordic Station, Magog, Quebec

Just five minutes from Magog—a cute-as-a-button town in the Eastern Townships, this facility takes advantage of its forest location. It has a rustic quality, which is oh so lovely after you've completed a hot-cold cycle. Plant yourself in a lounger and inhale clean, highly oxygenated air. Even on busy days, you can always find tranquility. Its features, like a steam crypt (also known as a hammam) and Finnish sauna, are spread out over multiple terraces. For maximum chill, take a dip in the Castle River, which flows around the site.

WELLNESS THAT WORKS

With their unique Wellnessing Getaways, Grand Velas Resorts make it easy to have a fun and health-focused vacation

By Chloe Wilde

We all have a story when it comes to wellness. Some of us can't seem to stop hopping on and off the yoga bandwagon, while others try every health trend going viral on social media. Others have always wanted to prioritize their health but have a hard time committing to a routine.

While prioritizing healthy habits can bring up a plethora of conflicting feelings, the idea of a vacation almost always elicits a sense of excitement and anticipation. Grand Velas in Riviera Maya had the brilliant idea of merging wellness with a holiday experience and the Wellnessing Getaway was born. The property already had ample ways to celebrate rejuvenation, whether through their spa, the variety of healthy meals available, or the fact that they have two gyms on the property. But by teaming up with the female-founded Mexican fitness platform Fit By You for a four day getaway, they took things up a notch and welcomed fitness enthusiasts from around the world.







Elevated poolside snacks



Sound therapy by the sea

Each morning, our concierge would message us the itinerary for the various wellness activities being offered, which included sunrise yoga, Pilates, HIIT, functional training, cold exposure, mocktail making sessions, longevity workshops, bounce classes and spinning. The attention to detail is what made a huge impact, from a fresh smoothie station next to the workout area on the beach, to the recovery area where theraguns and massage therapists were waiting to dig into sore muscles, to something as simple as the towels and water bottles placed at each workout station. My personal favourite wellness moment was the morning Pilates class on the beach where I got to watch my very fit and super strong significant other, Ben get humbled by Pilates. If you know, you know.

When I wasn't sweating on the beach listening to motivating music or being pushed by trainers, I was soaking up vitamin D poolside with ocean views and indulging in Baja fish tacos with tajin-rimmed mezcalitas in hand.





Ben hitting the cold plunge





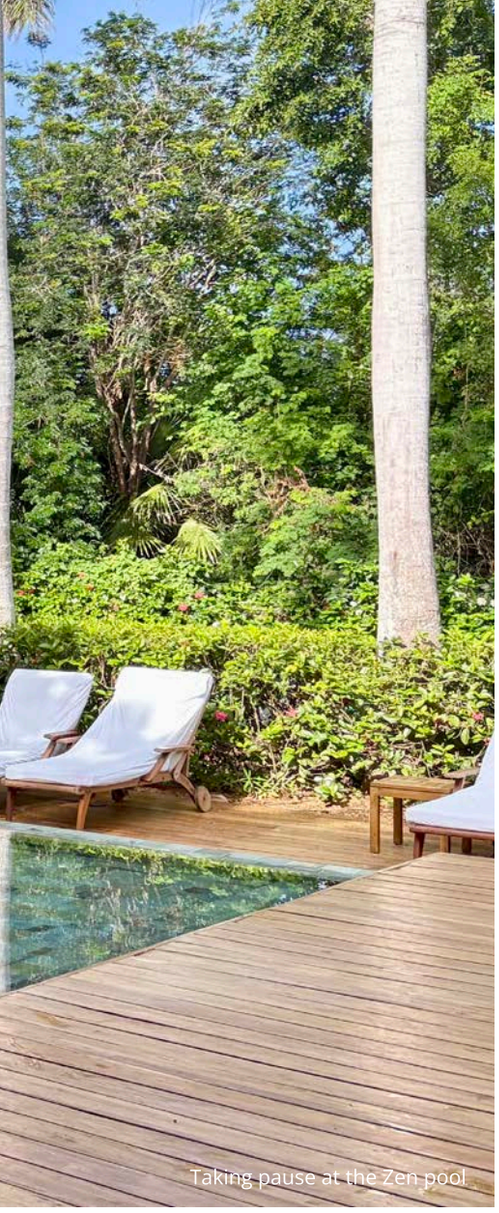
Reimagined cuisine at Cocina de Autor



Curated cocktail sampling

Grand Velas stands apart for many reasons, but for me it's their love of food, elevated dining experiences and standout service. How many all-inclusive resorts can boast that a restaurant on one of their properties has a Michelin star? That's right, Cocina de Autor has the coveted star, and for good reason. The dishes are served as experiences, the flavour profiles will wow you and the view of the ocean is a nice cherry on top. Sen Lin was another scrumptious surprise with delicious sashimi, deconstructed dumplings, beef tataki smothered in white truffle and a matcha mille-feuille to finish up the meal.




Taking pause at the Zen pool

On my last day, I made my way to Zen spa to experience their soothing water ceremony and get one of their signature treatments. The restorative hydrotherapy journey aims to relax your mind and body through various experiences including a sauna, colour therapy steam room, exfoliation room, ice room, sensation showers, hot tub and cold plunge, bubble beds, neck massage jets and more.

For my signature treatment, I chose the Bacal Massage which almost feels like a love letter to corn i.e. bacal, which is considered a sacred plant in Mayan culture. The treatment started with a corn and honey exfoliation followed by an essential oil massage where pressure is applied with corn cobs for a truly unique experience.

Welcome to rejuvenation station at Grand Velas in Riviera Maya, a true five star experience with wellness in mind.






Spa Time

All photos by Chloe Wilde except page 2 top right and bottom left and page 3 bottom right photos courtesy of Grand Velas Resorts

Rooted in Ritual But Elevated in Every Way

A lush mangrove setting, Mayan-inspired therapies and innovative wellness treatments come together at Fairmont Mayakoba's newly renovated spa

A Reimagined Spa Retreat

After a major renovation completed in 2024, the former Willow Stream Spa reopened as simply, Fairmont Spa, bringing a modern, design-forward approach to wellness inspired by local traditions. The reimagined space blends eye-catching architecture with soothing natural materials, echoing the resort's jungle surroundings. Think stone, sapote wood and green Guatemalan marble alongside indoor gardens that create a natural sense of calm.

With 37,000 square feet of serene treatment and relaxation space, including the largest salon in Mayakoba, the spa has come into its own as a truly immersive retreat. Floor-to-ceiling windows bring in natural light, complemented by earthy tones and lounge areas that extend into the surrounding landscape.









Tailored Treatments Meet Mayan Tradition

Much more than design inspiration, Mayan tradition is deeply embedded in the spa's signature offerings. The Cha Chaac Rain Ritual, for example, named for the Mayan god of rain, blends a traditional blessing and the scent of copal incense with a series of deeply restorative treatments. This includes a body mask made with local ingredients like chaya, yuca and citrus; exfoliation, a warm water shower, a soothing massage and more—all designed to leave you feeling relaxed and renewed.

You also don't want to miss a Temazcal ceremony, a traditional Mayan sweat lodge led by a trained temazcalero. Held inside a domed clay structure, this guided experience uses steam, heat and aromatic herbs to encourage detoxification, relieve stress and support both emotional and physical balance.

Nature-Focused Experiences

The spa's signature lunar-based treatments draw on the energy and symbolism of each moon phase, ranging from the grounding New Moon ritual to a calming Full Moon session. The New Moon treatment focuses on connection to the earth, pairing a full-body massage with a foot mask made from amaranth, prickly pear, chia and aloe. The Full Moon experience helps you tap into the calming effects of the full moon with a massage featuring floral essences and hot salt stones. A hydrating mini facial using honey and tepezcohuite (a tree bark extract known for its skin-regenerating properties) along with a purifying mist round out the treatment.

Another standout is the Yucatan Healing Retreat, a two-hour experience designed for couples. Held in a private treatment suite with views of the surrounding jungle, the ritual begins with a calming foot bath, then incorporates scrubs and masks made from locally sourced ingredients, as well as a luxurious bath for two infused with herbs, flowers, coconut milk and honey. The session finishes with side-by-side massages, creating space to unwind and reconnect.

Innovative Wellness

While steeped in tradition, Fairmont Spa is also forward-thinking in its approach to wellness. Among its unique features is a quartz sand bed; a heated, gently tilting surface that combines warmth and micro-massage to promote circulation and deep relaxation. Then there's Vibroacoustic Sound Therapy, a 60-minute treatment that combines gentle vibrations and calming music to help reset the nervous system.

Also innovative (and locally meaningful) is the use of Melipona honey, harvested from stingless bees native to the Yucatán Peninsula. Known for its antimicrobial and healing properties, the honey is incorporated into select treatments and products, offering a sweet nod to sustainability.

Beyond the Spa

Wellness here isn't confined to massages and facials. The spa also includes a technogym-equipped fitness centre, Peloton bikes and a full schedule of yoga, Pilates and mobility flow classes. For anyone who prefers their movement outdoors, activities range from guided bike rides through the mangroves (highly recommended) to stand-up paddleboarding and catamaran lessons along the Caribbean coast.

Before or after treatments, unwinding is easy in the indoor-outdoor lounge areas where you can sip something refreshing from the juice bar, have a light snack, or take advantage of the sea-mineral pool and rooftop vitality pool.

Fairmont Spa at Mayakoba is a complete wellness destination where every detail encourages slowing down and recharging. The combination of thoughtful design, immersive treatments that tap into local culture and amenities that make it easy to linger, create an atmosphere made for saying goodbye to stress.

For your journey to wellness:
Fairmont-mayakoba.com



DANCING AT 100

What Okinawa Taught Me About Real Wellness

Words and photos by Judi Cohen





I went to Okinawa looking for a story about the secrets to longevity. Over the next three weeks, moving between wellness resorts on Okinawa's main island and the quieter Miyako Islands, I found that, and much more, in unexpected and meaningful ways.

Upon arrival at the Shigira Resort on Miyako Island, I noticed a group of women squatting in the gardens. One woman, tiny and limber, stood up and smiled at me. She moved gracefully. Her white hair peaked out from under an oversized bucket hat. The concierge told me she was over 100. She didn't move like it. Nor did the other women who were singing, chatting and standing as they tended the flowers. That moment changed my perspective on aging and wellness.

▶ The Okinawan Secret

Okinawa is one of the world's Blue Zones where people live significantly longer and healthier lives. What struck me about wellness in this natural paradise wasn't a single magic food or fitness trend, but how simple and soulful their daily habits were. It's wellness, lived.

When I graduated as an IIN Health Coach, Joshua Rosenthal, founder of the Institute for Integrative Nutrition, introduced me to the concept of Blue Zones. He suggested, "True health isn't just about food or exercise—it's about joy, connection, purpose and self-love." And in Okinawa, that's exactly what I felt in the air. From the mindful moments I enjoyed in the thalassotherapy pools to the relaxing walks along the rocky beaches, it was joyful and rejuvenating.

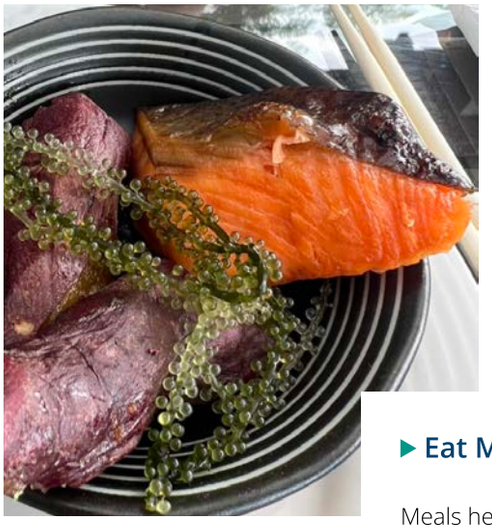
▶ Move Naturally

I noticed that from gardening to walking, to squatting instead of sitting, movement isn't scheduled, it's embedded in daily life. Elderly men and women working in restaurants, cleaning resort lobbies and maintaining hotel gardens offered a living example that movement, more than formal exercise, can be energizing and joyful.

▶ Have a Purpose

They call it "ikigai", your reason to wake up in the morning. It's not just philosophy. It's life-extending. Some find purpose in gardening. Others in caring for grandchildren. Finding "ikigai" is a journey of staying young in spirit by living with intention.









▶ Eat Mostly Plants

Meals here centre around vegetables, tofu, seaweed, fish and sweet potatoes. Purple sweet potatoes, grilled saba (mackerel) and bowls of sea grapes (umi-budō) were served alongside homemade miso soup and seasonal pickles.

Overlooking the calm East China Sea at the luxurious Terrace Club at Busena, I learned about the health benefits of each fruit, nut, pulse and vegetable. All foods were labelled in English and Japanese, with their ingredients and their medicinal properties. Being able to select foods based on my individual needs felt empowering.

The Blue Butterfly pea flower tea, found everywhere in Okinawa, had an inviting colour and flavour. Locals say its antioxidants help promote weight loss by boosting metabolism and reducing inflammation. I enjoyed sipping cups of this tea overlooking the pristine ocean waters.

Savouring modest portions of slow-simmered Okinawan pork belly, grilled Miyako beef and abalone, I learned from some of the chefs about "hara hachi bu", the habit of eating until you're 80 per cent full. "You eat slowly. You stop before you're full. You respect your body."

▶ What Okinawa Taught Me

This wasn't just a wellness vacation. It was a gentle reset, an opportunity to bring meaning to what I learned as a health coach. These islands revealed a wellness philosophy rooted in eating local, seasonal foods; incorporating natural movement into everyday life; having a reason to wake up every morning; and nurturing a deep sense of community.

As I packed my bag to leave, I was ready to carry these insights home. Not to replicate Okinawa, but to slow down, be mindful, eat with care, move intentionally and seek out my own "ikigai", one step, one bite, one breath at a time.

Maybe one day, if I'm lucky, I'll dance gracefully at 100 years of age.

▶ Put Family and Community First

Multi-generational families and friends came to these resorts to celebrate milestone birthdays, weddings and festivals. From infants to elders, many wore identical and colourful flower-patterned clothing. In Okinawa, elders live with family and aging is viewed as something beautiful. Many Okinawans belong to "moai" which are tight knit social groups. It appeared that healthy relationships and being surrounded by uplifting energy was just as important as healthy food.



Belize: Not Just For the Birds

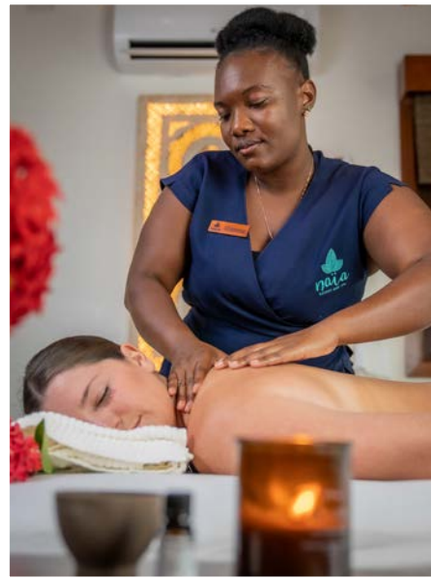
This small but mighty island may be a nature-lover's paradise but it was also made for spa-goers craving a soothing escape

BY CHRIS RYALL

More than 500 bird species call Belize home, which is a huge draw for many visitors, but this tiny country full of nature's beauty is not just a birder's paradise. People also head to Belize for its beaches, abundant marine life, rich Mayan culture, caves and opportunities for soft adventure.

I spent a few days armed with binoculars and camera lenses capturing nature and birdlife from lush forests near San Ignacio at Black Rock Lodge, to cruising the waterways and mangroves at Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary with Roni Martinez, a premier bird expert in Belize. But it was time to retreat to a place I hold dear to my aging heart and aching body–the spa. Leaving keen-eyed birdwatchers behind, I hopped on a short Tropic Air flight from Belize City to the quirky southern coastal town of Placencia. We flew over dozens of cays populated with a variety of coral and marine life lying beneath the sapphire waters. Despite its tiny size, Belize has the world's second largest barrier reef, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996.





Naïa Resort and Spa: Where the Sea and Bliss Unite

Naia Resort, located on 19 acres on the Placencia Peninsula, is my spa sanctuary of choice. The 38 luxuriously appointed beach houses and treetop villas showcase locally-made furnishings and artwork with idyllic views of the palm-fringed beach and Caribbean Sea, both of which beckon me to get wet and explore. I loved the outdoor shower, though the birds may not have appreciated my singing. There is also an indoor shower/tub if you prefer. Feeling peckish, I checked out the two restaurants (one beachside), but local seafood and a cold Belikin, the national beer of Belize, would have to wait. It was time to satisfy my spa cravings.

Naia Spa, a Soothing Haven Like No Other

Entering the spa zone is like being transported to a tropical paradise.



Naia Spa is spread over six acres of rainforest and lagoons with five over-water treatment suites and even a private couple's island suite. Complimenting the treatment rooms are a fitness centre, yoga studio, waterside spa café, saltwater pool, beauty room for mani-pedis and relaxation areas, all connected by a series of bridges and pathways. The property is also in the process of adding four spa villas, each with its own plunge pool.

I appreciated the spa's emphasis on using native botanicals and developing its own line of skincare products, as well as the way many treatments incorporate Indigenous elements.

My therapist Erin greeted me with a million-dollar smile. We walked across the winding pathway leading to the treatment room, passing a lily-filled lagoon on our way. I peruse Naia's extensive spa menu which includes the Maya Cacao and Cinnamon Wrap (dark chocolate combined with coconut oil and brown sugar), the Soothing Sole reflexology treatment, Sun Quenched Clay treatment and the Sweet Coconut Scrub among many other options.

Massage Away

I choose the Primeval Salt Stone Massage. What's not to like? Hand-carved salt stones are warmed and massaged all over my body.



While unfurling the maze of tight knots that made a home in my back, Erin rotates the warm stones in a series of strategic movements. Good riddance knots; go find a knotty pine forest. Throughout the treatment, even though I'm in a dreamy state of relaxation, we share life stories mixed with a healthy dose of laughs.

I head to the relaxation area, take a deep breath and look out over the vibrant display of nature. I take a generous sip of passion fruit juice provided to me. Sweet. Just like Belize. Sorry birds, but you have to share this sanctuary.

Photos courtesy of Naia Resort & Spa

Game, Set, Rejuvenate

Luxury resort brand Aman has partnered with tennis great Novak Djokovic for a new kind of wellness retreat

Novak Djokovic



The idea of healthy living takes many forms and goes well beyond weekly yoga sessions and morning protein smoothies. Exercise and nutritious choices play an important role, but feeling good inside and out is about more than just ticking boxes; it's about balance, intention and sometimes, a complete reset.

That's exactly what Aman is offering with Longevity Pathways, a new series of unique programs created in partnership with tennis icon Novak Djokovic. As the brand's first Global Wellness Advisor, Djokovic brings decades of discipline and his own holistic approach to health to Aman's already robust focus on longevity and wellbeing.

Djokovic, who has built a long career on consistency and a commitment to healthy living, has said the collaboration with Aman came down to shared values. "The vision and the mission that the brand has, and I have, is very much aligned. We have a common language."


Amanpuri, Thailand

The first offering, curated by Djokovic, is the three-day Detoxification Programme, now available year-round at a collection of the brand's properties worldwide.
The idea is simple but impactful: give guests a way to pause, recharge and reconnect—with their bodies, their surroundings and (sometimes most importantly), with themselves. And while the structure is consistent, the experience shifts depending on where you check in.

At Amangiri in Utah, for example, you might start your morning with sunrise yoga overlooking the desert. At Amanbagh in India, you'll experience Pinda Sweda, a traditional Ayurvedic therapy used for detoxification, reducing inflammation and easing pain and tension. While at Aman Nai Lert Bangkok, the mindful creation of traditional Thai flower garlands or folding of lotus leaves turns a crafting session into something deeply meditative.

In addition to Amangiri, Amanbagh and Aman Nai Lert Bangkok, the Detoxification Programme is also available at Amanyara (Turks & Caicos), Amanpuri (Thailand), Aman Tokyo and Aman New York.

Each three-day retreat is a chance to let go in a way that can often feel impossible to do at home and allow you to truly put yourself first. Day one starts with a signature Aman treatment—an immersive 90 to 150-minute session designed to relax the body. Day two features a destination-specific experience, with three to four curated activities inspired by the local setting and traditions. These experiences each focus on one of Aman's core principles: Spiritual Illumination, Mental Equilibrium and Physical Optimisation. Day three puts the focus on activities that promote mind-body balance to help you better integrate what you've learned and experienced into day-to-day life. This could include anything from guided breathwork to slow movement mat Pilates to a sound healing session.



Put into practice, these sessions are a way of giving guests the tools the need to live life with intention, in a manner that makes the most sense for them and their wellness goals. Whether you're working on your sleep, looking for more clarity, or just trying to move through the world with a little less stress, Aman's approach aims to support the full spectrum of what it means to feel and live well.

To that end, the Detoxification Programme offers a clear, calming invitation to pause, take a breath and find your way back to balance. For more information or to make a reservation, visit *Aman.com.*



NOURISHING BODY AND SOUL, NATURALLY

A unique wellness experience in New Zealand puts the focus on the healing powers of nature

BY RUTH ATHERLEY

In a world that often feels upside down and backwards at the same time, finding a way to pull away from the stressful chaos can feel like a fool's errand. And yet, The Hotel Britomart in Auckland, New Zealand seems to have found the magic touch when it comes to nourishing body and soul.

The Britomart has partnered with Velskov, a regenerative native forest farm located in Parau, about 25 kilometres west of Auckland's Central Business District, to create Nourishing Nature. This new travel experience takes guests into a beautiful New Zealand rainforest for an immersive and heartfelt journey that has the power to help people reconnect with themselves and the world around them.

Regenerative travel is a new concept that goes beyond sustainable travel. It is where visitors seek to restore and improve the places they visit, leaving them better than when they found them (within the context of what locals feel is better, of course!)





The *Nourishing Nature* adventure begins in Auckland, the country's largest city, in an electric van that takes guests to the Velskov forest farm. Here, we learn from an expert how to forage, which in this case means harvesting native herbs and plant ingredients to be used later in a delicious tasting experience. Wandering through nature, a surprising calm settled over the group. The sounds of birds and breeze-ruffled leaves are broken only by laughter as each guest found delight in something, an unexpected discovery. Joy isn't always quiet, but it is good for you.

The freshness of the natural woodland envelops the senses, with the sun sneaking through the tall trees highlighting a hundred shades of green. The songs of a lively winged chorus vie with the sound of your own heartbeat. You don't just see the beauty here, you feel it in your soul. I have had the privilege of visiting New Zealand a few times and I know that there is something special here. In the lush New Zealand rainforest, you connect to the earth through the dirt under your feet and the vibrant stillness in the air, both of which come together to refresh and reenergize both emotional and physical wellbeing on an elemental level.

For a few hours, this immersive experience allows each of us to forget life's worries and discover our own sense of peace. We learn about local traditions, the flavour profiles of the plants and herbs found in the forest (and now used in many of New Zealand's top restaurants), and dive into how reforestation is helping to restore the country's rich biodiversity. Each person on the tour contributes to this beautiful legacy by planting a native sapling to help restore the forest.

Finally, it's time to taste the rainforest with an immersive, nature-focused meal served in a stunning open-air glass house gently nestled among the trees. While the group relaxes with an herbaceous drink, the host showcases the unique flavours of freshly harvested plants and herbs, cooked over an open fire and served alongside delicious local artisan cheeses, meats and breads. You can find exceptional food and drink throughout New Zealand–Kiwis embraced farm to table dining a long, long time ago, but this is extra special. Something about being in nature and tasting the foods of nature make this an unforgettable experience.

Learning more about local customs and culture and truly experiencing Mother Nature at her finest (and most delicious) gives visitors a sense of being "of the forest" (not just in it). The Māori people of New Zealand use the word "kaitiakitanga," which describes a deep connection and unity with the natural world. It perfectly illustrates the feelings that one has during the *Nourishing Nature* experience.

For some, a wellness experience might include a good massage or spending time in a soothing hot spring. For me (and I expect many others), it is meeting Mother Nature on her terms and finding a soul-nourishing connection to the planet that can be carried home in our memories, wherever home may be.

To learn more about this soul-restoring half-day tour, visit **thehotelbritomart.com/nourishing-nature/.**







Photos courtesy of The Hotel Britomart

Wellness and Culture in the Hills of Bologna

Palazzo di Varignana is an Italian retreat like no other

By Melody Wren

Palazzo di Varignana is no ordinary retreat. From the moment we were ushered up the cypress-lined drive, this 18th-century estate began to unfold like a well-kept secret. At the heart of the experience is Dr. Annamaria Acquaviva, a pharmacist-turned-nutritionist and author of The Five Pillars of Health, who serves as the resort's Scientific Director. Her influence is everywhere—from the wellness philosophy behind the spa's antioxidant-rich treatments to the health-focused menus.

The 650 acre agri-tourism property produces its own olive oil, wine, saffron, pomegranates, apricots and more, which are used in everything from spa products to multi-course meals. It's a sensory-rich escape where agriculture, science, art and hospitality are deliciously intertwined.



One of seven pools


Garden Maze

A Spa Journey Rooted in the Land

We started our spa experience with the Turkish hammam, a three-step journey designed to stimulate metabolism and restore balance. Next came the Japanese bath, a quieter, more contemplative ritual. Surrounded by aromatic cypress wood, we perched on low stools and used soap crafted from homegrown pomegranate. After a mindful rinse, we submerged ourselves in a soaking bath designed to purify mind, body and soul. After a rushed travel day, I could have easily drifted off, swaddled in warmth and stillness.

As a final touch, we participated in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. A cup of green sencha tea—slightly salty, quietly bitter and metabolism-boosting—was served alongside dried figs, apricots and delicate olive oil crackers.


Varsana spa

The Science of Wellness: Dining with Dr. Acquaviva

Over dinner at the Ginkgo Longevity Restaurant, we had the privilege of dining with Dr. Acquaviva, whose rare blend of clinical insight and passion permeates every corner of Palazzo di Varignana's wellness program.

Her approach is rooted in the belief that health isn't simply about diet or discipline, but about transformation. "Our destiny is not defined by DNA," she explained. "It's defined by our choices." Her five pillars—functional nutrition, inner harmony, quality sleep, mindful supplementation and emotional wellbeing—form the foundation of everything from menus to masterclasses.

Her background in Bologna's hospitals gives her insight into wellness science. "People don't need more information," she said. "They need transformation."


Ginkgo Longevity Restaurant


Dr. Acquaviva

Drawing from neuroscience and Eastern medicine, she emphasizes the importance of the brain-gut connection and circadian rhythms in digestion, memory, immunity and mood. She encourages intention in food preparation and eating slowly—with all five senses. "Food is not just fuel. It's biology dancing with nature. The key is to eat with joy and curiosity."

Owner and History

In 2013, Carlo Gherardi opened the gates of Palazzo di Varignana, centered around a villa dating back to 1705. When he bought the property in 2005, it had long been abandoned, but Gherardi saw hidden potential and dreamed of putting Bologna—a region often overlooked by travellers—on the map. What began as 40 hectares has blossomed into 650, blending luxury and hospitality with vibrant agriculture.

One of the estate's most fascinating touches is its 1921 Royal Train of Italy. Now a restaurant open a few days a week, its menu honours stops along the train's original route. Adorned with elegant Art Nouveau details, it is a vision brought to life by Dr. Acquaviva, who believes art should be woven into every corner. As you wander the grounds, you encounter over 800 pieces of art, many being subtle sculptures that reveal themselves like hidden treasures.



Palazzo di Varignana's Treno Reale restaurant

An Agricultural Estate

Our first full day began with a generous buffet breakfast accommodating gluten- and lactose-free diets. Then, we were given a tour of the sprawling estate. Connected by a network of underground tunnels (a thoughtful touch that makes rainy days effortless), the property boasts 265 hectares of olive groves and 57 hectares of vineyards growing Pinot, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The on-site amphitheater hosts concerts celebrating culture and agriculture's harmonious blend.

Olive oil is a cornerstone here—from the groves nurtured with smart irrigation, to the mill where no part goes to waste. Last year, the estate sold 40,000 liters worldwide. Italy boasts over 500 olive varieties, and this region alone grows twelve—far from the "one olive fits all" notion. The estate's extra virgin olive oils are packed with polyphenols, prized not just for flavour but for anti-aging benefits.


Wisteria arbor


Palazzo di Varignana Winery

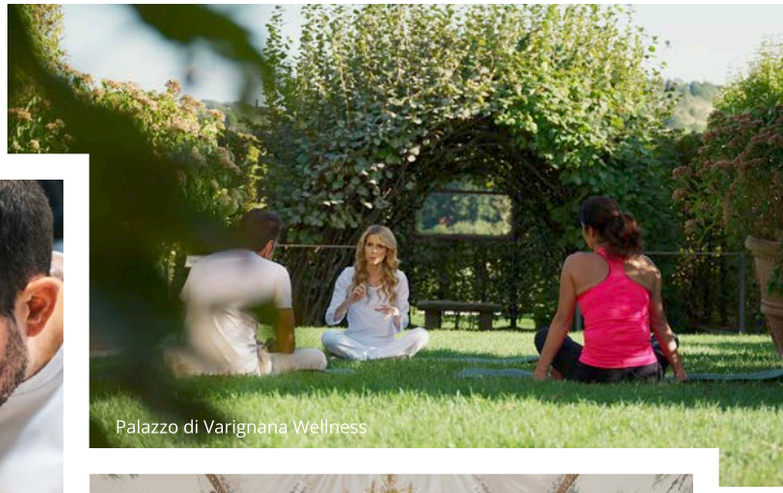

Country House Oliveti

The Resort

Seven buildings house 150 rooms, from cozy entry-level accommodations to suites and six private villas. The resort offers plenty to keep guests active, with seven pools, a practice golf course, paddle ball, baseball, tennis and squash courts. On our final night, we were thoroughly pampered with a fine dining experience in the original 18th-century palazzo that once served as General Montgomery's wartime headquarters. The elegant setting matched the artistry of the tasting menu, each course thoughtfully paired with local wines by our charming and knowledgeable maître d', Elio.

Leaving Palazzo di Varignana, I felt completely refreshed. It's one of those rare places where you could honestly spend your whole holiday or retreat without ever stepping off the property. Palazzo di Varignana isn't just a getaway—it's a little sanctuary where time slows down and genuine wellness just happens naturally.


Manograsso Piatto


Palazzo di Varignana Wellness


Grifone fine dining



Rodeo and Recharge at Calgary's Stillwater Spa

Take a restorative break from all the action of the Stampede with a soothing spa session

By Debra Smith

The crack and roll of a snare drum, a chorus of horns from a marching band, the clip clop of hooves, a flash of RCMP red serge and a flotilla of floats–the Calgary Stampede Parade signals the start of ten days of fun every July. Just one avenue away, on the second floor of the Hyatt Regency Calgary, Stillwater Spa is an island of serenity above an ocean of newly purchased cowboy hats.



The hotel itself, created from an entire city block of historic sandstone buildings, celebrates authentic Western Canadian culture with a collection of over 500 original works by Canadian artists. Landscapes from the Rockies to the prairies and images of First Nations peoples, cowboys and ranchers all come alive in sculptures and murals. At Stillwater Spa the stone walls of the 1893 Thomas Brothers Block are incorporated into the treatment rooms, bringing a tangible historic note to the spa's theme of nature, land and water.





Bottom left photo by Debra Smith





According to Liz Gataric, the spa supervisor, “Our goal is to give guests time away to retreat from the hustle and bustle, to reset and feel pampered and refreshed.” With classic products like BABOR from Germany, BIOEFFECT, an all-natural line from Iceland that’s perfect for sensitive skin; and Flo Aromatherapy, an Alberta based line of pure essential oils, there’s a solution for every skin type. Guests can choose from a wide range of services including 90 minute full body treatments that include gentle exfoliation, moisture balancing and a revitalizing massage that ends with a warm cocoon of towels. All of the spa therapists are registered practitioners and many, like Liz, have been with Stillwater for over twenty years.



The spa’s signature OxyGeneo facial uses three proprietary wands to tighten, lift and firm, oxygenating the skin with CO2 bubbles and finishing with ultrasound to reveal a radiant glow. There’s a wide range of additional treatment options, from manicures and pedicures to tinting and waxing–everything you need to get rodeo ready. And when it’s time to kick off your rhinestone cowboy boots, drop in for a half-hour foot and lower leg massage that will have you back on the dance floor in no time. Arrive up to an hour early to enjoy the bubbling hot tub and marble clad steam room and then relax and enjoy a curated selection of beverages and light bites in the serene private lounge area, no phones allowed. A two hour day pass to this hideout haven can whisk you away from the crowds during the week. Calgary hosts over a million local and international visitors during the Stampede.

If time permits, consider dining in the spa’s private café. The seasonal menu is created by the Hyatt’s chef at Thomsons Kitchen & Bar. There’s an emphasis on fresh Canadian provisions like grilled organic Alberta chicken and pan-seared Arctic char, and a selection of Canadian wines.



While buskers, artisans and the famous free Stampede pancake breakfast line-ups fill Stephen Avenue Walk below, enjoy some well deserved relaxation at Stillwater Spa. Recharged, you’ll be ready to hit the midway, stroll the endless attractions at the Stampede and line dance the night away until the last dusty booth heel hits the floor.

Stillwater Spa is located on the second floor of the Hyatt Regency Calgary, at 700 Centre Street SE.

OCEAN STATE OF MIND

Enter into a world of wellness and adventure when you embark on an Explora II cruise journey

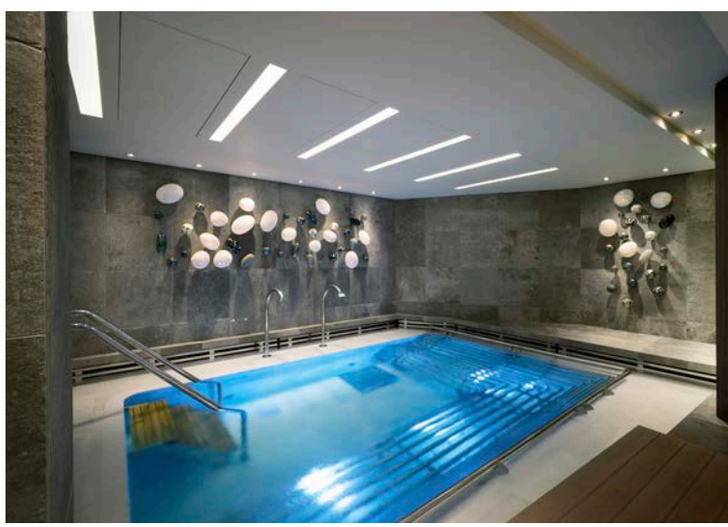
By Charmaine Noronha

> We're going to connect with the ocean, and do a visualization, which will help you access your own ocean state of mind during our journey at sea," says yoga master Dheeraj.

My sensory journey at sea started as soon as I boarded my luxury Explora II Caribbean cruise, from the constant motion of the ocean and the ever-present scent of the sea to the calming design features on board. But Dheeraj is taking it to another level as we lay back onto yoga mats to internalize this seaborne journey in our minds, bodies and spirits via a sound bath meditation.

"Close your eyes, relax and just allow the music to take you away," he says before circling one of several crystal singing bowls with a mallet to create deep vibrations.

A sound bath is a meditative experience where individuals are "bathed" in resonant sound vibrations to promote relaxation, healing and mindfulness. It involves using instruments like singing bowls, gongs and chimes to create a wash of sound, encouraging the body to release tension and the mind to relax.



Within minutes I feel mentally lost at sea in the best way possible. I slip away from the present and into the peaceful darkness of shuttered eyes. The music moves me vibrationally, while the gentle rocking of the ocean almost lulls me into a meditative state. While I've experienced several sound baths, I had never done one at sea.

Photos courtesy of Explora Journeys





I've also never done yoga or attended breathwork workshops on a large ship. However, it was this wellness focus of Explora II that drew me to this cruise in the first place.

"The brand's aspiration is to create a unique 'ocean state of mind' by connecting guests with the sea, with themselves and with like-minded others, while remarkable itineraries blend renowned destinations with lesser-travelled ports, for a journey that inspires discovery in all its forms," explains Julanda Marais, Explora Journey's Wellness Director.

And indeed, I went from downward dog on the ship to hiking uphill and more during our almost daily excursions. I was excited for this sailing not only for the wellness factor onboard, but also some island exploration.

First stop: Dominica, a Caribbean island that is part of the Windward Islands in the Lesser Antilles. This lush island is known for its numerous cascading waterfalls, so I jumped at the chance to take in Trafalgar Falls. The only twin waterfalls on the island, these majestic beauties cascade side by side. Affectionately named the Mother and Father Falls, Trafalgar's twins give way to numerous water basins and streams at their base.

We take this immersion into nature—which studies show can offer a sense of calm, awe and serenity for the senses—further by visiting UNESCO-listed Titou Gorge for a refreshing cave swim. I glide through natural ponds carved into the rock, surrounded by towering cliff walls draped in a canopy of interwoven trees.

Sunlight filters gently through the foliage above, casting dappled light on the water below. When you reach the powerful waterfall, it's exhilarating trying to grip the slippery rock face to make your way behind it.

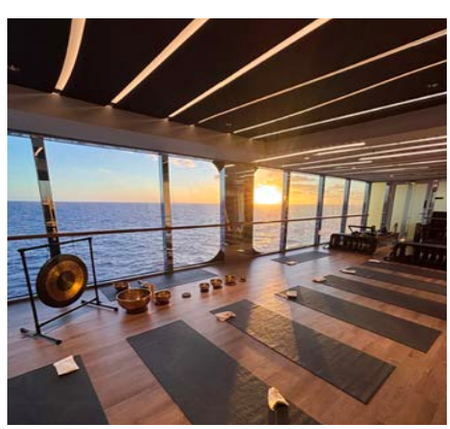
To cap off our day of wellness in the wild, we head to Wotten Waven. Enveloped by tropical forest, Wotten Waven contains natural hot sulfur springs and mud pools believed to have restorative qualities. The hot springs offer a relaxing experience after a beautiful day exploring the natural beauty of Dominica.

The relaxation continues when I step back onboard. I head to the ship's spa to take advantage of its hydrotherapy circuit before ordering a delectable dinner of grilled salmon to my spacious suite, which I enjoy on my terrace as the sun makes her descent into the sea.

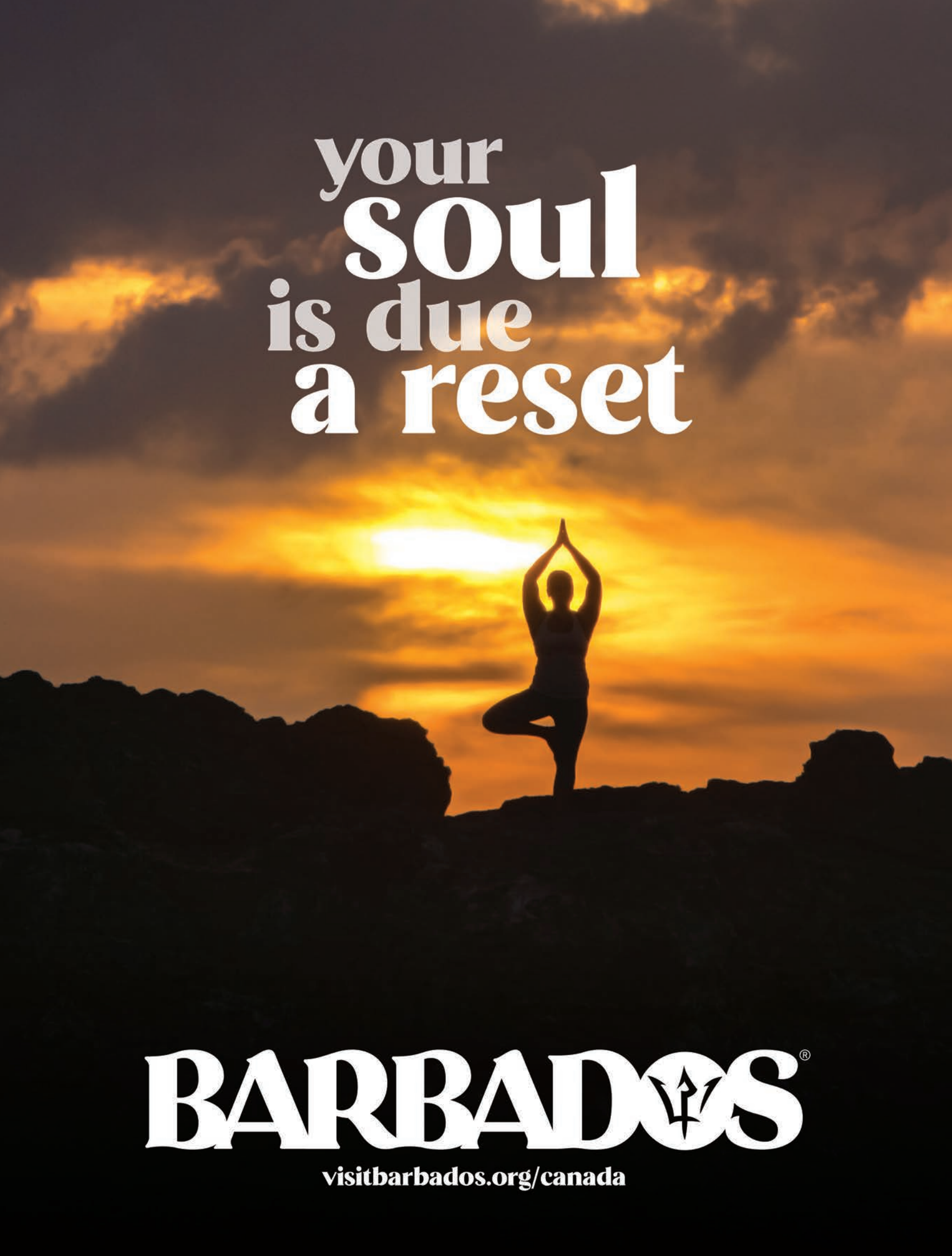
This extra self care was necessary to ease my muscles because I would be trekking the rainforest of Guadeloupe the next day. A beaming sunrise nudges me awake to join my fellow cruisers to head to the National Park of Guadeloupe where we'll be exploring the lush flora and fauna of this French territory island. A moderate hike brings my travelling group and I to Chutes du Carbet, which boasts two powerful waterfalls plunging down a mountain face.

We then head for a traditional drumming meditation in a park. We sit in a circle to participate in Gwo Ka, which combines responsive singing in Guadeloupean Creole with rhythms played on traditional Ka drums. The seven fundamental rhythms of Gwo Ka are each symbolically linked to the four elements of nature, as well as to the body, soul and spirit, says our meditation guide, a well-known local musician and therapist.

The experience concludes with the sharing of a traditional medicinal tea, and as I sip, I feel grateful to take in this moment of pause during a week of honing my "ocean state of mind."



Photos courtesy of Explora Journeys, except top and bottom right photos by Charmaine Noronha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