

World Traveller

INSPIRED BY
onatravel

ISSUE 152 | NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2021 | DHS 15

Little Wonder

Touring Jordan's abundant beauty

SEEING DOUBLE

A tale of two islands in the Seychelles

The Legend Continues

The St. Regis Downtown Dubai: the city's most sophisticated address

AZERBAIJAN
LOS ANGELES
STAYCATIONS
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It's always exciting when a new hotel opens up, but particularly so when the hotel is a St. Regis. That's why when the doors opened on the brand's new canal-side property in Downtown Dubai, we were delighted to head down and capture this month's cover shot (and stay for dinner at the brilliant, rebooted Bleu Blanc, somewhere to add to your must-dine list).

Speaking of to-do lists, do reserve a spot on your bucket list for the soul-stirring Desroches Island in the Seychelles. Turn to page 42 to find out why.

Elsewhere in this issue, James Stewart reports back from a tour across fascinating Azerbaijan (p48); Ian Belcher is enchanted by Jordan's myriad charms (p54); and Michelin-rated chef David Myers takes us on a tour of his hometown, L.A (p18).

Plenty to put you in the mood for another great escape...

The World Traveller Team

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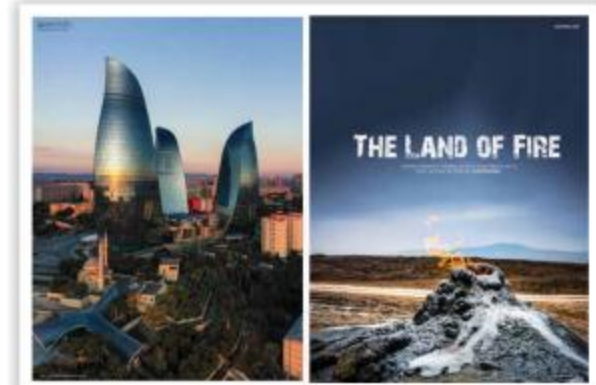


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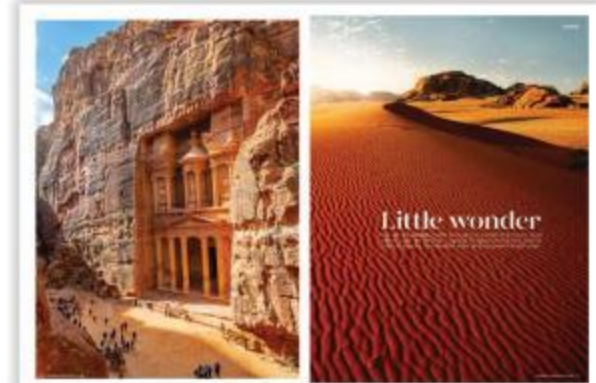
The St. Regis Downtown Dubai, by Muthu Kumar



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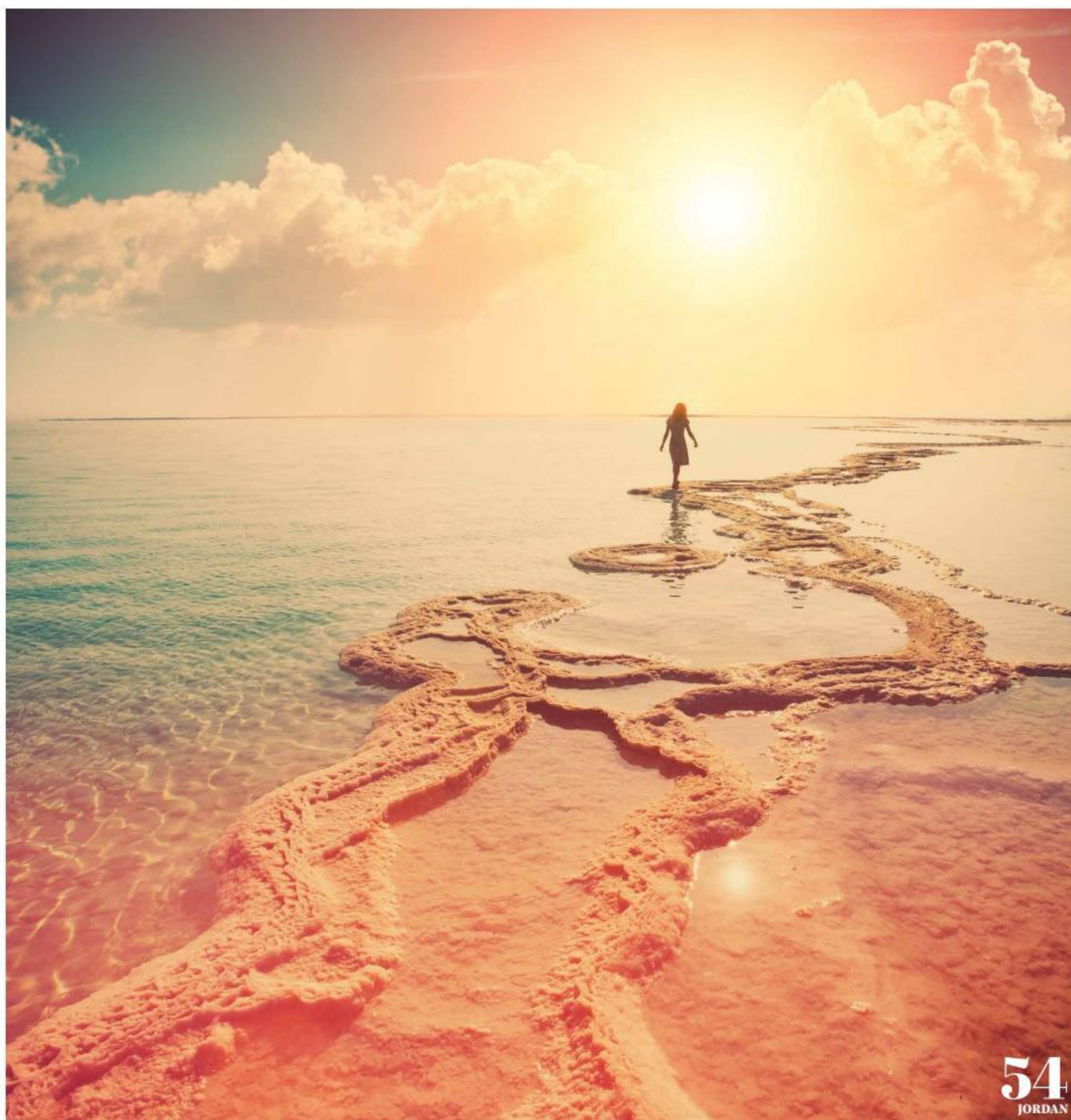
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JORDAN

WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD

Places to inspire your wanderlust

Madagascar

With endemic lemurs, jungles, rainforests and desert, Madagascar is an ideal destination for outdoors enthusiasts that deserves to be more popular. Fortunately, it's far enough off the beaten track that only dedicated travellers will ever end up there. Offering hiking, diving, mountain biking, kitesurfing and phenomenal off-road driving, you can find just about any activity imaginable. Head north towards clusters of islands lying off the mainland and you will come across some of the most picturesque beaches you have ever seen. Some are so remote you may need to charter a private plane or boat to get there. A must-see site is The Avenue of the Baobabs — a group of *Adansonia digitata* trees lining the dirt road in Morondava, situated in the west of the country.





Iceland

Winter is coming to the land of ice and fire. Dominated by its dramatic landscapes with volcanoes, lava fields, glaciers and waterfalls, Iceland brings endless opportunities for adventure. Brave the cold and gaze in awe at the Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights, which will typically start to dance through the sky from December until mid-April next year. Thrill-seekers will be in their element when stepping inside the Breiðamerkurjökull to ice cave to explore its frozen chambers. The region surrounding this magnificent attraction is known for Jeep and snowmobile trips, as well as skiing and hiking, too.



Vietnam

Breathtakingly exotic and truly timeless, Vietnam captivates visitors with its sublime landscapes and ancient heritage. Hike through the rice paddies in the North East's Sa Pa and see these cascading green fields, which sit beneath a backdrop of thick bamboo woodlands, moving like silk scarves blowing in the wind. Or venture to UNESCO World Heritage site Ha Long Bay — famous for its emerald waters and towering limestone islands topped by rainforests. Hoi An charms travellers with its romantic atmospheric — especially at night when strings of street lanterns are alight, while Hue, once the capital of the Nguyen emperors, impresses with its Citadel and collection of historic sights. Its prime location on the Perfume River means you'll also see young fisherman, following in their father's footsteps, as they cast their nets in hope of a catch.



Wellness Haven at Saray Spa



A relaxing realm of quiet luxury, Saray Spa at the JW Marriott Marquis Dubai is an authentic wellness spa, where ancient healing techniques and locally sourced natural ingredients are combined to pay homage to its Arabian heritage.

The spa features 17 treatment rooms, inclusive of two private hammam rooms and two Private Luxury Spa Suites. Experience the wonders of the Middle East through Arabian body or hammam rituals, or benefit from anti-aging and hydrating facial treatments.

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Treat yourself to a relaxing top-to-toe retreat that begins with a customized Saray Spa facial and finishes with a complimentary massage of your choice.

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NOV/DEC

Globetrotter

Be informed, be inspired,
be there

BEACHY KEEN

Cotton-soft sand beaches, coastal forests and unrivalled calm are all promises that are made and kept at the new Kisawa in Mozambique. Opening in November, the resort comprises 22 bungalows spread across 12 residences, each either cove or ocean facing. With an onus on conservation, the property was built using 3D sand-printing technology and traditional building methods, and was constructed by a local workforce — 50% of whom were women. There are seven dining options within the resort and meals can be taken in a variety of Insta-worthy locations, from picnics in the red dunes to sundowners out on a dhow.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

After two years of limited travel, the world seems to be slowly reassuming business



MADAGASCAR

If you've been dreaming of a holiday filled with natural beauty and wildlife, good news as Madagascar is back on the cards. Travellers can fly into Mauritius or Reunion Island before taking a connecting flight to the East African isle. There's a mandatory PCR test included in the air fare and a quarantine period of one to two days while you wait for the result.



THAILAND

Reignite your love of tropical beaches and bustling streets as Thailand officially opens to vaccinated travellers from November 1. You can enter without quarantine if you've been in one of 46 approved countries (the UAE is one of them) for more than 21 days.



PHU QUOC, VIETNAM

Off the coast of Cambodia lies the picturesque beach isle of Phu Quoc, with its beach-meets-mountainous terrain. Charter flights for international vaccinated travellers will begin on November 20, after the island shut for almost two years. You'll need a vaccine certificate along with negative PCR test result to enter.



TRENDING DESTINATIONS

As borders open, Emily Jenkins, dnata Travel's resident globetrotter, reveals the places you should visit

WHISTLER, CANADA

Two hours north of Vancouver is one of the world's most visited ski resorts. Take to the runs, or relax in the picturesque chalet-style village sits at the bottom of the Whistler and Blackcomb mountains.

ST. MORITZ, SWITZERLAND

Winter sport enthusiasts know the drill — this alpine resort, set amidst the Engadin valley, is a glamorous way to spend the ski season. Join the celebrities enjoying the world-class facilities and restaurants here.

BERLIN, GERMANY

An 'edgy' city full of culture, you'll find plenty of cool restaurants, galleries and entertainment venues along with the UNESCO World Heritage Site Museum Island. And for those looking for a seasonal break, the festive markets open from the end of November.

JABAL AL AKHDAR, OMAN

As temperatures cool across the Middle East, head to 'The Green Mountain' within the Hajar Mountains for breathtaking hiking trails and cave explorations. Stay in one of the luxury resorts and don't miss exploring the souks nearby in Nizwa.

The Legacy and the Future of All-Inclusive

Ali Ozbay, Regional Director of Marketing and Communications at Rixos UAE, on how the Rixos brand has set new standards for the region

Rixos Hotels has helped drive the evolution of the All-Inclusive concept into a luxury vacation segment. The all-inclusive of today is nothing like what some may recall from the early, unruly days of All-Inclusives, which started popping up on Caribbean beaches in the 1970s with no business model or game plan. Increased demand has spurred competition and resulted in vastly higher quality at every level.

We're a young and dynamic brand; this freshness gives us a unique advantage compared to more traditional brands. We focus on trends that we think would become relevant and execute them before our competition. This might mean a gluten-free corner in our all-day dining restaurant, your very own Netflix subscription in the comfort of your hotel room, or our regular morning S.U.P. rides on the iconic Palm Jumeirah island. It's essential to anticipate what the guest might need or want before the trend even becomes apparent. We believe guests want to engage in experiences with brands they can resonate with on an emotional level.

We started tailoring our brand proposition to the experiences that our guests crave, along with the people, things, and ideas that inspire them. Suppose you are into watching a particular Netflix series in the evenings; in that case, there is no reason why you should stop doing that when you



go on a holiday, especially when your room comes with cutting edge IPTV solutions.

The key is to stop focusing on the product and anticipate what the guest might expect. Times have changed. While baby boomers were more into traditional luxury hotels, the new generation is looking for something different, new experiences, or recognition of their personality. For them, a hotel that caters to their lifestyle and moods is the place to be.

Take a look at Rixos Premium Dubai, our lifestyle destination set apart from our All-Inclusive offerings in the region. It has been trending on multiple platforms since its launch back in 2017.

Rixos Premium Dubai is a unique property combining various lifestyle elements and fashionably presenting them, starting with the majestic lobby with strikingly modern and minimalist design, exuding that trendsetting vibe. The halls serve as the runway for celebrities and trendsetters, with the constant influx of familiar faces in this 'destination'. Thousands of them share their holidays on various social channels, adding to the hotel's fame. From Premiership footballers and A-list celebrities, to the art world's greatest creators and best-selling authors, you can bump into a wide range of well-known figures in this hotel. The guest profile is young and trendy. They stay with us to relax, socialize, see and be seen.

As they say, there is a Rixos destination for every type of traveller and any chapter in your life. Demanding travellers expect inspirational holiday experiences. People want to fill their life with adventures, not things. They want stories to tell, not stuff to show. Conventional luxury is an element of the past. We present multiple stories to make your choice as easy and joyful as possible.

After much anticipation, our first All-Inclusive All-Exclusive resort in Abu Dhabi will reveal its new secret hideaway this November 2021. Rixos Premium Saadiyat Island has taken its Executive and Superior Villas line and rebranded as Club Privé by Rixos Saadiyat Island, following Rixos Hotels' successful boutique lifestyle destinations — Club Privé by Rixos Belek and Club Privé by Rixos Gocek.

We're very excited about this initiative because we're bringing another first to the region — the next level of luxury through private beachfront villas too good to be true. Think around-the-clock butler service, an exclusive dining venue at Club House, ultimate privacy, and the All-Inclusive All-Exclusive experience. Our pride and pleasure ensure that it meets the high expectations of the sophisticated modern traveller through tranquil and inspiring locations, comfortable yet elegant surroundings, excellent food and beverage and most importantly, genuine, discreet hospitality in pristine settings. This is Club Privé's very definition of 'Authentic Luxury'.

To read the full interview with Ali Ozbay, head to worldtravellerme.com



Aja, Rixos Premium Saadiyat Island



Club Privé by Rixos Saadiyat Island

HOW I TRAVEL

MY FAVOURITE FOODIE DESTINATIONS ARE...

In the UK, I love Devon for its great little fishing ports and food producers. Pretty much every summer I go to France and Spain. I love restaurants such as Quique Dacosta and Restaurant Baumanière in Les Baux de Provence.

THE THING I LOVE MOST ABOUT TRAVELLING IS...

Discovering new cities and what their local delicacies are. I love to spend time in the local markets trying the local produce to get a real sense of the city's identity through local tastes.

MY FAVOURITE RESTAURANTS IN THE WORLD ARE...

There are so many amazing restaurants around the world, we are seriously spoilt for choice these days, but the one that stood out for me was French Laundry by Thomas Keller in Washington.

THE STAMP IN MY PASSPORT I'M MOST PROUD OF IS...

Sri Lanka has a firm place in my heart. My wife and I did lots of amazing trips with our children who couldn't believe their eyes seeing so many incredible wild animals in their natural habitat.

THE BEST WAY TO FIND GOOD FOOD ON HOLIDAY IS...

I always use social media to ask for recommendations, as it's the best way to get so many incredible responses and ideas easily.

I KEEP MYSELF ENTERTAINED WHEN I TRAVEL BY...

Catching up on work! When



Tom Aikens

The award-winning chef at the helm of Tom's by Tom Aikens at The Langham, Jakarta

flying, it's a segment of time I use wisely to work through my emails.

THE COUNTRY THAT INSPIRED MY CULINARY JOURNEY MOST WAS...

France. I moved to Paris in 1993 to cook with Joel Robuchon and Gerard Boyer

at Reims. Joel is someone who really inspired me and shaped my career.

IF YOU VISIT THE LANGHAM, JAKARTA YOU HAVE TO TRY...

Anything from our à la carte Gueridon service of meat carvings. Our Tea Smoked

These pages, from top to bottom: Devon; grand staircase at The Langham, Jakarta; bar at Tom's by Tom Aikens; Louvre, Paris



Bass and Spiced Lobster Roll are a must try too.

MY FAVOURITE DISH TO COOK IS...

My home roast chicken and sourdough bread.

WHEN I TRAVEL, I PACK...

Whether I'm away on holiday or travelling for work, I always take my own chef knives with me, without fail. And I always take a little bit of mother with me so I can make my own sourdough wherever I go.





Slide into premium luxury

Discover a carefree vacation playground at **Siyam World** with an all-inclusive Maldives getaway that invites you to live life to the full

A premium all-inclusive reimagination of the Maldivian island experience, Siyam World is poised to capture a new generation of luxury devotees with a passion for living life to the full.

Community is the essence of this exciting new vacation playground; a 54-hectare natural wonderland fringed by four kilometres of pure white sands and ringed by a stunning house reef. Located in the ultra-desirable Noonu Atoll, the resort delivers on its promise of one-of-a-kind accommodation and never-before-seen experiences.

Ticking all the right boxes from the second guests set foot on the island, Siyam World keeps it simple with a 24-hour Premium All-Inclusive getaway premise that is the starting point for a carefree vacation with endless opportunities for fun. Pleasure seekers are welcomed with open arms, whether it's couples looking for romance, multi-generational families, or groups of friends on an escape from the boredom of everyday life.

There are no less than 21 accommodation options to choose from, including shoreline Pool Beach Villas and Beach Suites, through to the expansive Beach House Collection residences, crowned by The Palace, a 3,000-square-metre luxury home-away-from-home. An added bonus for residences guests is 24/7 private butler service. If you're a big kid at heart or one of our younger guests, then it has to be a Lagoon or Water Villa, with your very own Instagram-worthy deck to ocean slide.

Speaking of ocean slides, the resort is also home to Siyam Water World, the biggest floating water park in the country complete with monkey bars, halfpipes and trampolines. If you can tear the kids away from this buoyant oasis of aquatic fun, the Little Explorers club offers an edutainment schedule of fun activities. More grown-up pursuits include mingling with the marine life in the house reef, sunset strolls across the powder-soft sands, stand-up paddle boarding, kayaking, and diving excursions

out into the Indian Ocean depths. Inside-out wellness is also a focus with the resort's Veyo Spa, gym and fitness class schedule rounding out the leisure offering.

Pause for breath between activities to explore more than a dozen world-class restaurants and bars ensuring that mealtimes are anything but boring. Highlights include Baraabar's international menu and Friday nights' grand pop-up beach buffets, where sandy toes will curl in delight at the array of fresh seafood on offer. For authentic Thai flavours, head to Takrai or, switch it up with a culinary trip across India at Kurry Leaf. It would be remiss not to mention The Wahoo Grill, the signature contemporary Maldivian restaurant. Local influences are countered by the best of the Mediterranean and Spanish courtesy of Andalucia, while Arigato takes diners into the heart of Japan's gourmet scene.

Whatever your wish, here it will be granted. **To find out more, visit siyamworld.com**

This page, clockwise from below: Venice Beach, by David Cain; L.A. skyline; an Adrift Burger; Hollywood Hills, by Gerson Repreza



MY CITY Los Angeles

Michelin-rated chef **David Myers** on his hometown hits

What makes L.A. special?

As a chef, the number one thing I love and appreciate about my home city is that I can visit a great farmers' market any day of the week. The variety of fresh produce that's available from across California is just incredible. Something else that's become increasingly important and valuable to me through the years is the fact that L.A. is a city that is health conscious in so many ways. Living here can really set the tone for a well-balanced lifestyle that includes vitamin D3-rich sunny weather all year around, beautiful beaches for morning runs, and breathtaking canyons for weekend hikes.

My favourite place in L.A.

Although I love the buzz and vibrancy of city life, I am very much an outdoors person at heart. So although I could probably name a dozen iconic places or hidden gems in L.A. which are perhaps more unique and exciting to explore, I am going to have to say that my two favourite places are the canyons for hiking and the ocean for surfing. I live



David Myers

in Venice Beach, so I am right next to the sea which suits my lifestyle to a T.

My favourite places for culture

Something that I really appreciate about my own neighbourhood, Venice Beach, is the edge and culture that has been cultivated by the local art community over the years. This is very much a vibe that represents California well. Another great spot that will truly inspire you is Downtown L.A., in particular its Arts District. This part of town has an array of art galleries showcasing both well-established names as well as up-and-coming artists. After strolling around some of its art spaces, such as the Institute of Contemporary Art L.A., CES Gallery, and Hauser & Wirth, you could also pop over to the nearby Little Tokyo where you'll find the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA.

My favourite places to eat

I love Japanese food so most of my picks are my go-to places when I'm missing my second home, Tokyo. First on the list is Pikuniko in the ROW DTLA, a casual Japanese 'karaage' fried chicken concept by a good friend of mine. Then for incredible sushi in a completely unpretentious setting I would head



to Hiko Sushi in West L.A. If you're looking for an authentic yakitori experience I love Yakitoriya on Sawtelle Blvd where they prepare all parts of a chicken grilled on skewers over hot coals. Finally, for a more Californian twist, I like to visit Gjeline in Venice Beach for lunch, brunch, and dinner. They're a great example of a Californian restaurant that showcases local produce but with global influences across the menu. Their pizzas are insanely good!

My favourite places to shop in L.A.

Since I opened Adrift Burger Bar in Venice Beach last year, I've been spending a lot more time on the iconic Abbot Kinney Blvd, a place that is brimming with cool and stylish boutiques. Other areas I tend to visit for shopping are Brentwood Country Mart, Malibu Country Mart and ROW DTLA. The latter has a beautifully curated selection of global brands, including Kinto – a Japanese tableware and glass designer whose collections I frequently use in my restaurants around the world – including at my latest concept, Adrift Burger Bar at Expo 2020 Dubai. Some other of my favourite boutiques to shop in L.A. are Maxfield, a luxury boutique in West Hollywood and Malibu with curated designer and vintage collections, Tortoise, a Japanese store with house wear, styled items and lots of neat knickknacks, and finally James Perse which is my go-to designer for my everyday clothes.

My favourite attractions

Besides the ocean and the mountains that surround the city, some top attractions I recommend are The Getty, a place known for its architecture, mesmerising gardens, and stunning views overlooking Los Angeles, and The Hollywood Bowl, an amphitheatre in the Hollywood Hills. It has been named one of the best live music venues in America by *Rolling Stone* magazine and is just pure magic! And whether or not you're into sports, I would highly recommend catching a Dodgers game while you're in town.

If you do only one thing while in L.A. I recommend...

I'm going to give you a full day's itinerary

The Getty Museum,
by Rachel Cheng

"The Getty is a place known for its architecture, mesmerising gardens, and stunning views"

to mix things up a little. It begins with a morning hike through one of the canyons to work up a sweat and give you a full view of the city below. Afterwards, you'll head over to Venice Beach to grab a burger and milkshake for lunch at Adrift Burger Bar, followed by some shopping along Abbott Kinney Blvd. Then in the afternoon you'll take a slow drive up the Malibu coast to finally park yourself at the iconic Neptune's Net for some fresh seafood right on the ocean front.

David Myers has opened Adrift Burger Bar in collaboration with Gates Hospitality and Naim Maadad at Expo 2020 Dubai



ALL THE BEST

Feel a sense of freedom at **Rixos Bab Al Bahr** with a premium all-inclusive getaway that thrives on non-stop fun, gourmet dining and dawn-to-dusk entertainment

The UAE's northern emirates have always been a magnet for jaded city dwellers looking for a change of scenery and space to unwind. Barely an hour's drive from bustling Dubai, at Rixos Bab Al Bahr you can almost feel the weight magically lift from your shoulders as you step into the coolness of the resort's Ottoman-inspired marble lobby, beyond which awaits pure escapism.

Occupying a prime site on Al Marjan Island, part of a manmade archipelago sitting off the coast of Ras Al Khaimah, another worry is immediately taken away with the resort's all-inclusive offering your gateway to luxurious indulgence and unlimited fun.

A striking trio of pyramid-shaped buildings anchor the experience with thoughtfully designed rooms and spacious suites overlooking the eight swimming pools, landscaped

gardens and Arabian Gulf waters.

Sun, sea and sand are the main attraction, but the resort amps up the leisure quotient with a raft of action and relaxation-based activities ranging from tennis, beach volleyball, basketball and indoor billiards through to adrenaline-inducing parasailing and jet skis, plus a full menu of water sports and child-friendly Aqua Pool.

Leave younger family members in safe hands at Rixys Kids' Club for fun and games, including arts and crafts and a mini disco, and leave the teens to their own devices at the dedicated Teens' Club while you escape to the adults-only infinity pool, laze on the 450-metre-long soft sand beach, or book in for an afternoon of hands-on therapeutic bliss at the Turkish-inspired Avitane Spa.

It's a short hop from your sun lounger or water slide to access the resort's impressive clutch of seven dining venues, ranging from super casual to upscale stylish. Theme nights are a highlight at all-day buffet dining concept Seven Heights, while signature a la carté restaurant, Lalezar, is the home of authentic Turkish cuisine. Add to that seafood specialities at Fishbone, Aja's pan-Asian delights, all things carnivorous at Meatpoint,



and classic Italian at L'Olivo, and you can travel the world on a plate.

Day-to-night entertainment is a Rixos trademark, and the winter season sees evenings brought to life with live music, dancing, acrobatics and shows held in the multi-purpose amphitheatre. Plus, with six bars serving up sundowners, nightcaps and everything in between, the fun never stops.

Find out more at rixos.com



In a city of firsts, Rixos The Palm Dubai Hotel & Suites adds its own milestone as the pioneer of all-inclusive hospitality in the Emirates. And that's not all, with the luxury resort bagging a premium slice of historic beachfront on the easternmost tip of the iconic Palm Jumeirah crescent.

Authentic Turkish hospitality is the bedrock of this multi-award-winning luxury beach destination from the guaranteed warm welcome right down to the smallest detail. Gourmet cuisine is another reason that guests return time and time again, with a choice of 10 unique destinations, including all-day dining venue A La Turca and a trio of signature destinations — enjoy Italian flavours and a side of romance at L'Olivo Ristorante, sublime seafood at Aqua & More, and choice cuts at Toro Loco Steakhouse.

Accoladed for its family-friendly facilities, the resort walks the talks with its 'happy kids make for happy parents' commitment. Little ones may need to be prised away from the endless fun on offer at Rixy Kids' Club where magic shows, treasure hunts, and talent shows abound — Wednesdays are a

dedicated Kids' Fest, with an al fresco buffet backed by activities galore. Pool time at the main swimming pool is a relaxing alternative; take a refreshing dip then grab a sun lounger on the lawn to soak up the distant city skyline vista.

Teens — and adults — will gravitate towards the Exclusive Sports Club, with a comprehensive menu of land and water activities, such as antigravity yoga, aqua jumping and spin cycling. Scuba diving fans can also explore Palm Jumeirah's fascinating underwater world via the PADI five-star resort accredited diving centre, or simply skim across the sea on a standup paddleboard.. Balance it all with a pampering session at another award-winning venue, Anjana Spa, which boasts a one-of-a-kind selection of signature rituals dating back to the Ottoman Empire.

When bedtime beckons, it's a pleasure rather than a chore to retreat for the night to your spacious, well-designed guestroom or opulent grand suite. With every room offering floor-to-ceiling views of either the Arabian Gulf, the sparkling skyline or peaceful lush hotel gardens, sweet dreams are a given.

Find out more at rixos.com

LANDMARK LUXURY

Stay and play at **Rixos The Palm Dubai Hotel & Suites**, the city's most exclusive island address for an all-inclusive family experience





SIX OF THE BEST

WAYS TO ENJOY GERMANY

With a spectacular landscape, vibrant cities and abundant spa towns, there's much to love

1

Berlin

In the words of David Bowie, Berlin is 'the greatest cultural extravaganza that one could imagine', with an insatiable appetite for all-things artistic and vibrant. And little wonder, given that the capital has risen from the ashes of wartime, a period that is addressed with great poignance and respect via the Holocaust Memorial, the Brandenburg Gate, and the Berlin Wall Memorial at Bernauer Strasse — the

final remaining section of this epoch-defining divide. But Berlin's present shines through, too: you can spy modern masterpieces at the Academy of Arts, wander the flower-filled borders of the Botanical Gardens, and lose yourself in the exhibitions of Museum Island. To see it all, scale the 368m Television Tower: it's no Burj Khalifa, but is a spectacular place to get your bearings — especially at sunset.

2

Fairytale castles

As if on a throne, Neuschwanstein Castle sits high above the Bavarian countryside, its dove-grey walls rising above a ruffle of forest — and its turrets and towers forming a cloud-grazing crown. At its foot, the stone tumbles away to a patchwork of meadows, while the muscular Alps loom large in the distance. It takes little imagination to see why Neuschwanstein is rumoured to have inspired the design of

Disney's Cinderella Castle, but it's far from alone: Germany has thousands of fairytale-esque castles and fortresses, found in every corner of its cities and countryside. The likes of Heidelberg Castle (in Baden-Württemberg) and Wartburg Castle (in Eisenach) date back to the Middle Ages, but their imposing style has inspired architects ever since — including those of Neuschwanstein, which was built in the 1800s.



Neuschwanstein Castle

3

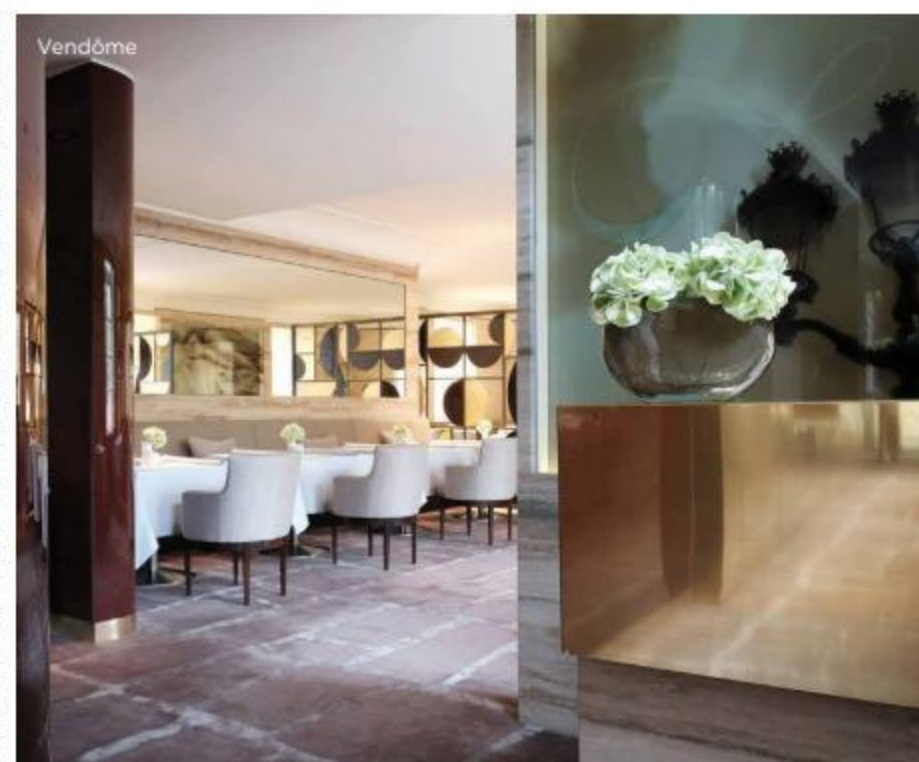
Fine dining

For decades, German cuisine was considered more stodgy than stylish, more functional than flavoursome — but it now boasts a constellation of Michelin stars. Many of its most decorated chefs have risen from humble beginnings: like Helmut Thielges, who has transformed the Waldhotel Sonnora, his family's modest guesthouse in western Germany, into a gourmet grandee boasting three

Michelin stars. Meanwhile, Chef Joachim Wissler grew up on a farm in the Swabian Alb, a southern mountain range. Today, he gives classic alpine fare an haute cuisine twist, at the helm of his three-starred restaurant Vendôme in the Althoff Grandhotel Schloss Bensberg. For the culinary connoisseur, other top tables include Rutz (in Berlin), Aqua (in Wolfsburg), and The Table (Hamburg) — all have a trio of Michelin twinklers.



Vendôme



Vendôme

4

Theme parks

Move over, Disneyland: Germany has enough rollercoasters, rides and rip-roaring entertainment to fill an entire fortnight. At Europa-Park, in Baden-Württemberg, you'll find over 100 attractions — including the mighty 'Silver Star' (which reaches 130km/h and centrifugal forces of 4G), the racing rapids of 'Fjord-Rafting', and the virtual reality fun of 'Alpenexpress Coastality'. If you're travelling with younger children, head

to LEGOLAND Deutschland Resort, near Günzburg: its Miniland recreates the likes of Paris and Rome in over 23 million tiny colourful bricks, alongside rides of all kinds in Adventure Land, Pirate Land and the splash-tastic LEGO X-TREME. Meanwhile, the vintage style Hansa-Park, with its classic 'coasters and toddler-friendly Kinderland, sits on the coast overlooking the beautiful Bay of Lübeck.

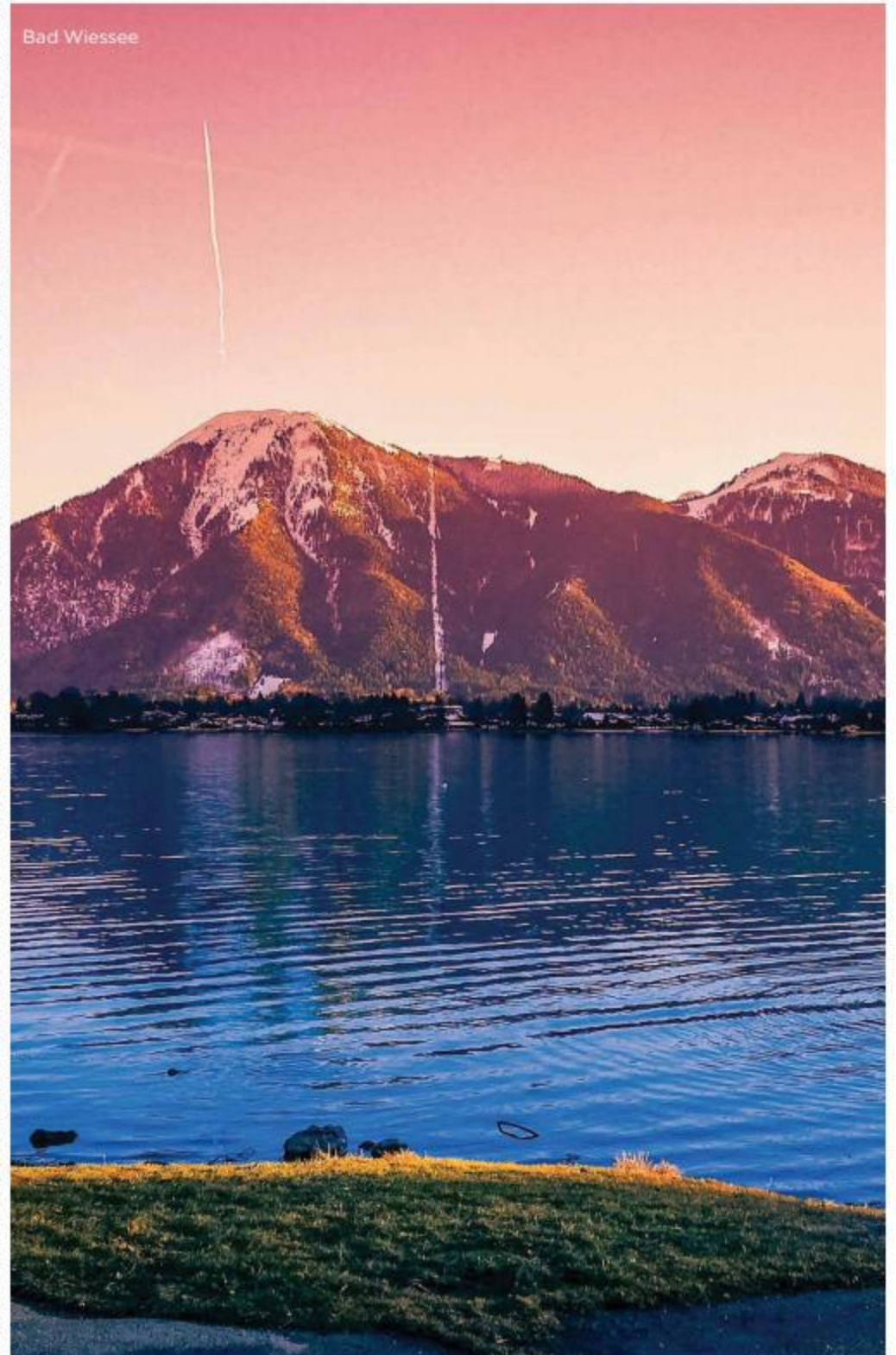


5

Wellness retreats

Spa trips aren't simply an indulgence in Germany, they're a way of life. For centuries, the nation has wholeheartedly embraced the benefits of heady herbal saunas, mineral-laced waters and deep-tissue massages — and in doing so, has created some of the world's finest wellness retreats. It helps, of course, that Germany's topography is curative by nature: from the geothermal hot springs

in the mountainous south — especially the Bavarian Alps and Black Forest regions — to the soothing seawater of the northern coast, where sanitariums draw from the Baltic and North seas for thalassotherapy treatments. Today, the country has over 350 towns and resorts dedicated to wellness: like Bad Wiessee, with its famous healing sulfur fountain, and Bad Elster, a hotspot for mineral baths.



6

Outdoor adventures

Of course, you could spend your trip simply admiring Germany's natural beauty: lingering over views of the lush Moselle valley, or Lake Königssee's mighty backdrop of snow-dusted peaks. But what's the joy in just looking, when you don't delve into it all? Germany has wild lagoons to bathe in, forest trails to follow, and countless adventures to try – from cycling between spa towns on the Allgäu Loop, to abseiling the epic limestone towers of Saxon

Switzerland National Park. In the Moselle valley, pick up a section of the Moselsteig Trail: it runs the river's entire 365km through Germany, passing through pretty Medieval villages and pristine woodlands — while Lake Königssee, in Bavaria, offers paddle-boating, hiking and mountain climbing galore. Indeed, the wider Bavaria region is catnip for thrill seekers year-round, with paragliding and canyoning in summer, and cross-country skiing in winter.

Saxon Switzerland
National Park



HOW TO DO MILAN

Milan is not like other Italian cities. Far from being an open-air museum, it's a living, breathing, aperitivo-clinking live wire, where 'street style' still means sharp suits, or slim heels clacking on cobbles. There's also an ornate cathedral, classical art and that opera house. After Florence and Venice, these queue-free sights feel like a treat.

Words: Lucy Thackray



These pages, clockwise from top: Galleria Vittorio Emanuele; Navigli; Duomo. All images courtesy of Four Seasons Milan.



bought a ticket, circled the solemn interior and ascended to the heavenly rooftop (buy the 'B' ticket with lift entry). Go just before sunset to see its angels and gargoyles basking in golden light.

• **After a peek at the gaudy Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II arcade 3,**

emerge onto Piazza della Scala for the art treasures of the Gallerie d'Italia — expect classic oil paintings mixed in with whimsical sculptures. Go in the evening (until 7.30pm most days, 10.30pm Thurs) and you may have it all to yourself.

• **Next morning, wander around Brera neighbourhood** — more pretty

boutiques than A-list labels. Browse along Via Madonnina 5, then follow Via Brera, fragrant with perfumeries, such as Campomarzio, to the Pinacoteca di Brera. This colonnaded art museum sets lush Caravaggios and Mantegnas against jewel-coloured walls — and its marble-floored cafe is a ravishing stop for a cappuccino.

• **You've delved into Milan's history; now for Porta Nuova and a jolt into the future.**

This quarter centres around Piazza Gae Aulenti, where the spire of the Unicredit building unfurls like a scroll; immaculately landscaped gardens (in season) attract butterflies; and, across the motorway, plants cascade down the Jenga-like Bosco Verticale buildings.

• **Worried that Prada, Armani and D&G may bust your budget?**

No matter: you can eat, drink and breathe Italy's fashion houses in many guises. View archive gowns at the Armani/Silos gallery in Zona Tortona. The must-see is Fondazione Prada an architectural wonderland of art installations and film screenings.



SEE & DO

• **Most famous as a fashion week hub,** Milan demands you fall in line with the everyday catwalk-strut of its residents. You'll dodge women with lethally large shopping bags, suave gents wielding espressos and those mascots of any well-dressed city — countless tiny dogs. Acclimatise in the caramel and terracotta alleys of the Quadrilatero della Moda, the warren of boutiques around Via Monte Napoleone, battling to out-bling each other

• **In centuries past, the place to parade your couture was the Teatro**

alla Scala, the opera house known as La Scala. Its opening gala is still winter's fashion highlight. Ignore its drab facade: inside it's a scarlet-satin, gold-leaf, crystal-chandeliered dream. Take the 4pm tour in English to sit in the royal box and nose around backstage.

• **Milan's 'touristy bit' is really one broad piazza,** crowned by the dripping candle turrets of the Gothic, gleaming marble Duomo. Here, in the time you'd spend in the queue for Florence's cathedral, you'll have

EAT

Chic pizzeria

DRY MILANO

It does two things — pizza and cocktails — and does them well. A concrete interior is warmed by low lights and a well-heeled clientele. Don't order the signature side dish cubotti — if you're having pizza, these focaccia chunks feel like an overdo(ugh)se. drymilano.it

Art of dining

LUBAR

In a Neo-Classical villa (the gallery of modern art), palm-frond-filled like a winter garden, it does Italian simplicity (fried anchovies, caponata) in style. Sneak round to the undulating 'secret garden' behind. It's a public park, but, sweetly, reserved for groups with children. lubar.it

Fairy-lights 'n' foliage

PENEOPE A CASA

This is where Milan's stylish women converge for Prosecco topped with candyfloss, oysters sprayed with gin and brilliantly OTT interiors. The pasta dishes are generous, so consider sharing one if you're also having secondi piatti. penelopeacasa.it

Star spotting

RISTORANTE IL NIKO ROMITO

The Bulgari hotel is where celebs and designers stay, taking to its black and gold restaurant for dry Martinis and sea bream with caviar. The bar gets buzzing around 8pm. Order a smoked Negroni and settle in for peak people-watching. bulgarihotels.com;

Foodie's boast

RISTORANTE BERTON

It's the finest fine-dining in town. Pigeon lasagna or an 'egg' filled with whipped yoghurt and mango thrill in a minimalist-metallic dining room. Service is slick and speedy — do let staff know if you need a pause. ristoranteberton.com

Designer drinks

BAR LUCE

It's auteur Wes Anderson's peppermint and pink take on a bar-

deli.Go after an art fix at Fondazione Prada. Just order a coffee — Luce is more style than foodie substance. fondazioneprada.org/barluce

Canalside cocktails

BOND

You'll inevitably end up in the Navigli district, where buzzy alfresco restaurants line two canals. Everyone goes to Ugo, so instead try Bond — neon-tinged and '60s-retro. It's serious about its tea and coffee. bondmilano.eatbu.com



Above: Bar Luce

Right: Four Seasons Milan

Top Tip

Fancy the opera? Unless you've booked two months in advance, you'll likely have to enter a draw for gallery tickets on the day.



STAY

Well-oiled machine**WESTIN MILAN PALACE**

As well as racking up points for Marriott members, the Westin has the ingredients to make a short trip run smoothly: a taxi-fed driveway, well-staffed reception and proximity to a central Metro stop. If you're splashing out on a suite, ask for their unique selling points — Executive Suites, for example, have private marble steam rooms with a view of the Duomo. Piazza della Repubblica

Polished pad**SENATO HOTEL**

You'd never believe this swish stay has some of the most affordable rates in town — polished marble floors, snow-white rooms and a high-design bar and rooftop means this is where the MFW models hang out. Ask for a courtyard-facing room for the quietest nights — and prettier views.

Maximalist fun**AETHOS MILAN**

It's stacked with vintage trinkets, from globes to gymnastics horses, in striking black, teal, jade or monochrome rooms offset with mismatched throws or graphic posters. It's in the Navigli district, so great for proximity to dinner and drinks, though you're a cab or a Metro ride from the sights.

Architect's choice**HOTEL VIU**

Architect's choice This very modern, design-angled high-rise has views across town, 'living walls' and a scene-y cocktail bar. The rooftop bar closes at midnight (go for a pre-dinner drink with a view),

City slicker**FOUR SEASONS MILAN**

Set in a 15th-century convent with a manicured courtyard, it's the most stylish luxury pad in town. And



it's right in the fashion quarter. There's a serene spa and pool in the former cellars, with plush loungers, steam room and sauna. Cross-the road to visit Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, a preserved palazzo stuffed with Italian curios from Renaissance weaponry to tapestries.



A sanctuary in the city

Retreat from the outside world at **Park Hyatt Dubai**, a luxury retreat where serenity is the end goal for each and every carefully curated lifestyle experience

A short drive from Dubai International airport and the vibrant buzz of the city's trading heartland, Park Hyatt Dubai is an oasis of calm. From gently swaying palms and the calm blue waters of a private lagoon to its low-rise whitewashed architectural aesthetic, the resort evokes the essence of the relaxed Mediterranean lifestyle blended with accents of Arabian heritage.

Overlooking the historic Dubai Creek with picture-postcard views of the city skyline, the resort is perfectly poised between old and new. Less-is-more luxury defines the hospitality experience with tailor-made stays for loved ones and little ones, whether it's a couple in search of romantic seclusion for a honeymoon or anniversary celebration, or a family looking for a fun weekend of togetherness.

It all begins with the resort's guestrooms and suites, each of which comes with inviting water-facing views from the chic setting of a private balcony

or terrace. Interiors are purposely neutral yet quietly lavish, with a muted colour palette and thoughtful touches, such as inviting freestanding bathtubs and bespoke toiletries.

With ample space allowing guests to create their own pockets of serenity, family fun is guaranteed. As well as pool time at either of two family-friendly locations, The Cave Kids Club runs daily activities for three to 12-year-olds, including arts and crafts, board and electronic games, and much more.

A hub for action or relaxation, chilled downtime is the mantra for the adults' only Lagoon Beach, with views extending as far as Burj Khalifa. Elsewhere, lush green surroundings are dotted with shaded spots and cosy benches, weaving a thread of calm meditative opportunities throughout the resort. The serene vibe continues at Amara Spa, an award-winning wellness destination set within a series of quiet courtyard

spaces, with its own private pool. Drawing on Moroccan influences, choose from an extensive collection of personalised treatments, including an anti-pollution detox facial, botanical Arabic massage and sought-after couples' experience

Keen golfers, meanwhile, have the championship 18-hole Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club course on the doorstep, complete with top-drawer academy coaching. Guests with a surfeit of energy to burn can opt for a game of padel tennis, regular tennis or hit the gym.

After working up an appetite, travel the world with a choice of award-winning restaurants. Seafood favourites are in the spotlight at NOËPE, a Cape Cod-esque venue overlooking the swish yachts berthed at the adjacent marina. At the other end of the foodie spectrum, the legendary Traiteur Friday brunch is a must-do for every Dubai visitor and resident. Spanish bodega flavours characterise the menu at Casa de Tapas, while al fresco dining with a hint of the Med defines the offering at Boardwalk, a Dubai institution for 25 years. Fabulous views are a bonus at Lakeview where modern European cuisine is the focus, and every great evening starts with a sundowner and ends with a nightcap at QD's: life doesn't get much better than this. **To find out more, visit [hyatt.com](https://www.hyatt.com)**





SOPHISTICATION HAS A NEW ADDRESS

The St. Regis Downtown Dubai opens its doors

Though it would prove a tough ask to add to the allure of Downtown Dubai, a location made world famous by its twin residents The Dubai Mall and Burj Khalifa, the arrival of St. Regis to a landmark building beside the Dubai Water Canal has certainly sprinkled lustre. A truly iconic brand globally renowned for its own pillars of hospitality — time-honoured rituals like champagne sabering and afternoon tea; the signature St. Regis butler service that provides round-the-clock personalised service — the opening of The St. Regis Downtown Dubai also adds a welcome slice of sophistication, inspired as it is by the spirit of the legendary St. Regis in New York.

Home to 233 guestrooms and 65 suites which boast views of the Dubai Water Canal or Burj Khalifa,

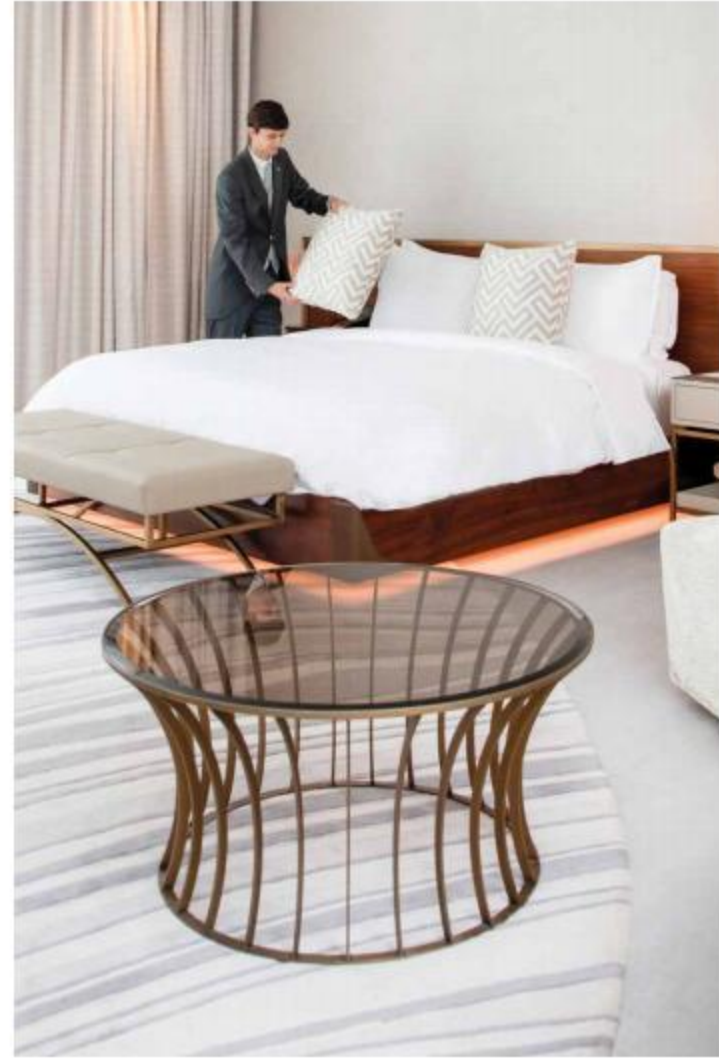
this elegant address also houses The St. Regis Spa — the first of its kind. It features six suites offering up bespoke signature treatments and the likes of a 24-karat gold age-defying facial. Bookend your rejuvenating treatment here with a relaxing spell in the en-suite steam room or sauna.

As with all St. Regis properties, this hotel pays homage to its host city; the spectacular chandelier that hangs in the main reception (and graces the front cover of this issue) was designed to mimic a gold necklace, in a nod to Dubai's Gold Souq. Elsewhere, artworks sourced from local artists add a sense of place to walls and walkways.

For a closer look at Dubai's most sophisticated address, World Traveller was invited inside...







The Rooms

As you'd expect from a hotel that bears the St. Regis name, rooms (223) and suites (65) here are timeless in design, with elegance to the fore. They're spacious too, with walk-in closets and bathrooms featuring both rain showers and stand-alone bathtubs, while views from floor-to-ceiling windows take in one of Burj Khalifa or the Dubai Water Canal. Signature suites include the Royal Suite, comprised of a living room, dining area, and fully-equipped kitchen and bar. But you don't need to be of royal stock to be treated to round-the-clock service — the legendary St. Regis butler service comes as standard.







‘THE STARS OF THE SHOW HERE ARE UNDOUBTEDLY THE PIZZAS’



Basta!

In a city not short of excellent Italian restaurants, Basta! commands a seat at the top table. Traditional at heart, the menu features myriad regional favourites to showcase the breadth of flavour throughout Italy — classic Roman meatballs and veal Milanese; a Tuscan bean salad and spinach tagliatelle Bolognese. But the stars of the show here are undoubtedly the pizzas, Wood-fired for a superior crust, they come topped with a range of both popular and inventive flavours, including veal cotto, gorgonzola and sweet onion; and ricotta and farm egg, finished with a shaving of decadence in the form of black truffle.





‘PAULO LOSTIA'S EXPRESSIVE NEW MENU MARRIES INVENTION TO TRADITION’



Bleu Blanc

As the new Head Chef of the critically acclaimed Bleu Blanc, Paulo Lostia brings with him a CV littered with Michelin stars. In a career spanning twenty-three years and counting, Lostia's roles have taken him from Italy to Spain, France to the UK, the USA to the UAE. And from Sous Chef at the one Michelin-star Grazia Deledda Ristorante in Porto Cervo, to Junior Sous Chef at the three Michelin-star Quique Dacosta in Alicante. Yet it's in the UAE that Lostia has made his name, voted 'Young Chef of the Year' in 2015 for his celebrated tenure as Head Chef at leading hotels like The St. Regis Abu Dhabi. Donning his chef's whites again to lead the culinary charge at The St. Regis

Downtown Dubai, Lostia has elevated the French flavoured menu at Bleu Blanc, revamping it with new dishes that marry invention to tradition. Alongside the finest fresh oysters for which Bleu Blanc is famed (best paired with a chilled glass of vintage bubbly) are the likes of a king crab salad; beef tartare with smoked eggplants; butter-soft barbecue lamb ribs; homemade gnocchi stuffed with forest mushrooms; and the dessert of a choice, a sublime chocolate ganache, the bitterness of the dark chocolate cut through with a scoop of sweet raspberry sorbet. Paulo Lostia may not have needed to put Bleu Blanc on the culinary map, but his presence there ensures it will be every gourmand's go-to spot.



An aerial photograph of a tropical beach. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, transitioning to a lighter, sandy hue near the shore. A small, rectangular wooden beach hut with a red roof sits on the white sand. A red beach umbrella is open next to it. The beach curves along the shoreline, and the water is clear, showing some darker patches of coral or rocks further out.

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A tale of two islands

A family trip to two Four Seasons resorts in the **Seychelles** proved just the tonic for a post-pandemic escape

WORDS: JOHN THATCHER

“You’ll get up this time. You’re that close.” I’m not sure I share Justin’s confidence, given what he’s sure about is my ability to stand upright on a surfboard that he is about to propel with his hands across the water. I’d fallen off during the previous two attempts, my mind running through the three positions my body needs to move into at pace, and in order, if I’m to stand up for longer than the split second I’ve managed until now. Third time lucky? If Justin says so...Chicken position. Check. Lizard position. Check. Up! Check. Erm, kind of. Once up on the board I was supposed to turn my lead foot on its heel and look ahead, not down. I did neither. I was up, for sure, just not in a stance you’d normally associate with surfing. My upper body more crumpled, as though I’d been shot in the stomach, my feet resolute in their desire to do their own thing, which just so happened to be the wrong thing. Sure enough, a few seconds later I made a terrific splash into the water, much to the hilarity of my watching wife and daughters — the latter pair having successfully glided gracefully across the water atop their boards on only their second attempt. That was their afternoon ice cream cancelled.

To be fair to Justin [who along with his partner, Nicole, run Tropicsurf at Four Seasons Resort Seychelles at Desroches], he’d worked minor miracles to get me upright at all, however awkward I may have looked. It was the first time any of us had tried surfing (me at the ripe old age of 47), and he and Nicole are both brilliant instructors - and blessed with the patience of saints.

It’s hard not to be a little envious of their life here. Both had given up corporate careers to teach surfing, first in the Maldives and now Seychelles, trading up the rat race for paradise. We decided to do likewise, if only for a week in July, swapping car-clogged roads, sand-filled air, and the barely bearable heat of Dubai for clear skies, even clearer water, and beaches we’d have all to ourselves. That’s not because we paid a princely sum for an island buy out (journalism doesn’t pay that well) but due to the sheer size of Desroches. It’s wrapped by 9km of beach, which means even when its villas and residences are full, you’re only

ever likely to encounter other guests at mealtimes — handy when you make a fool of yourself falling off a surfboard. And a paddleboard, I should probably add.

If you’re set on solitude, you can of course choose to dine privately — even on the beach. My reward for coming so close to surfing superstardom (as my memory will bank it) was a picnic on a lovely bit of beach called Aquarium. The punishment I metered out to the kids for being markedly better than me at surfing was to ride our bicycles there. We were blissfully unaware when setting off from our villa that Aquarium beach is a good 25-minute bike ride away (golf buggies are an alternative), crossing the island’s runway, from the side operated by Four Seasons to the side inhabited by locals, whose hut-like houses are surrounded by the island’s other, though notably slower inhabitants — giant tortoises. More of whom in a moment.

Having arrived (a fair few moans and groans along the way), everything was set up for us. Two large blankets laid out on the sand, two parasols shading them, and four wicker picnic baskets, each brimming with sweet and savoury goodies packed by the island’s deli. They also packed a perfectly chilled bottle of

Whispering Angel into an ice bucket.

Sitting there, sipping our rosé, watching the ocean roll into waves in the distance and hurried hermit crabs scurrying to avoid the lapping water, serenity reigned supreme. This is the type of moment that informs daydreams of travel — which is all we had as the pandemic raged. I can’t tell you how good it felt to finally have those dreams realised once again.

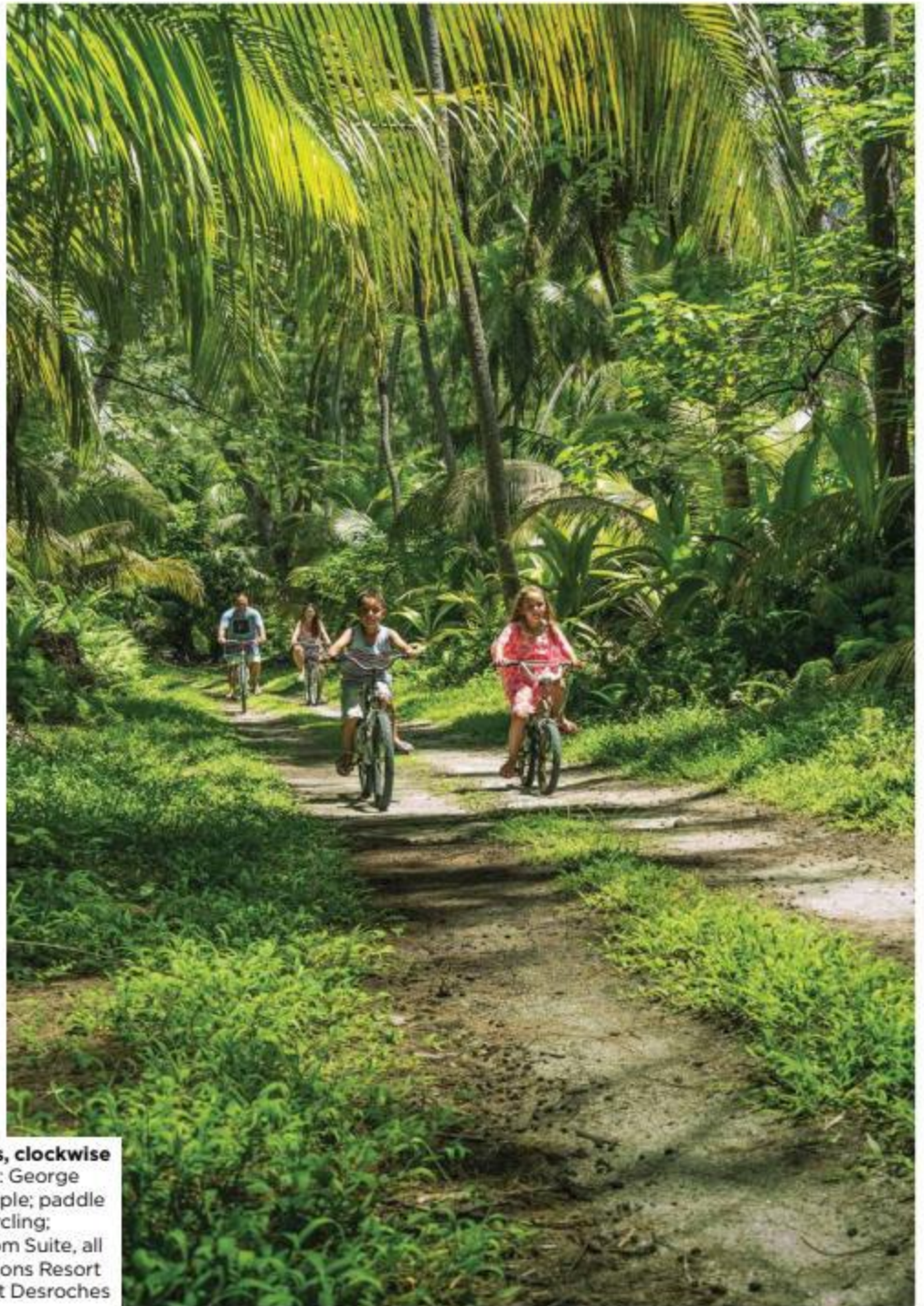
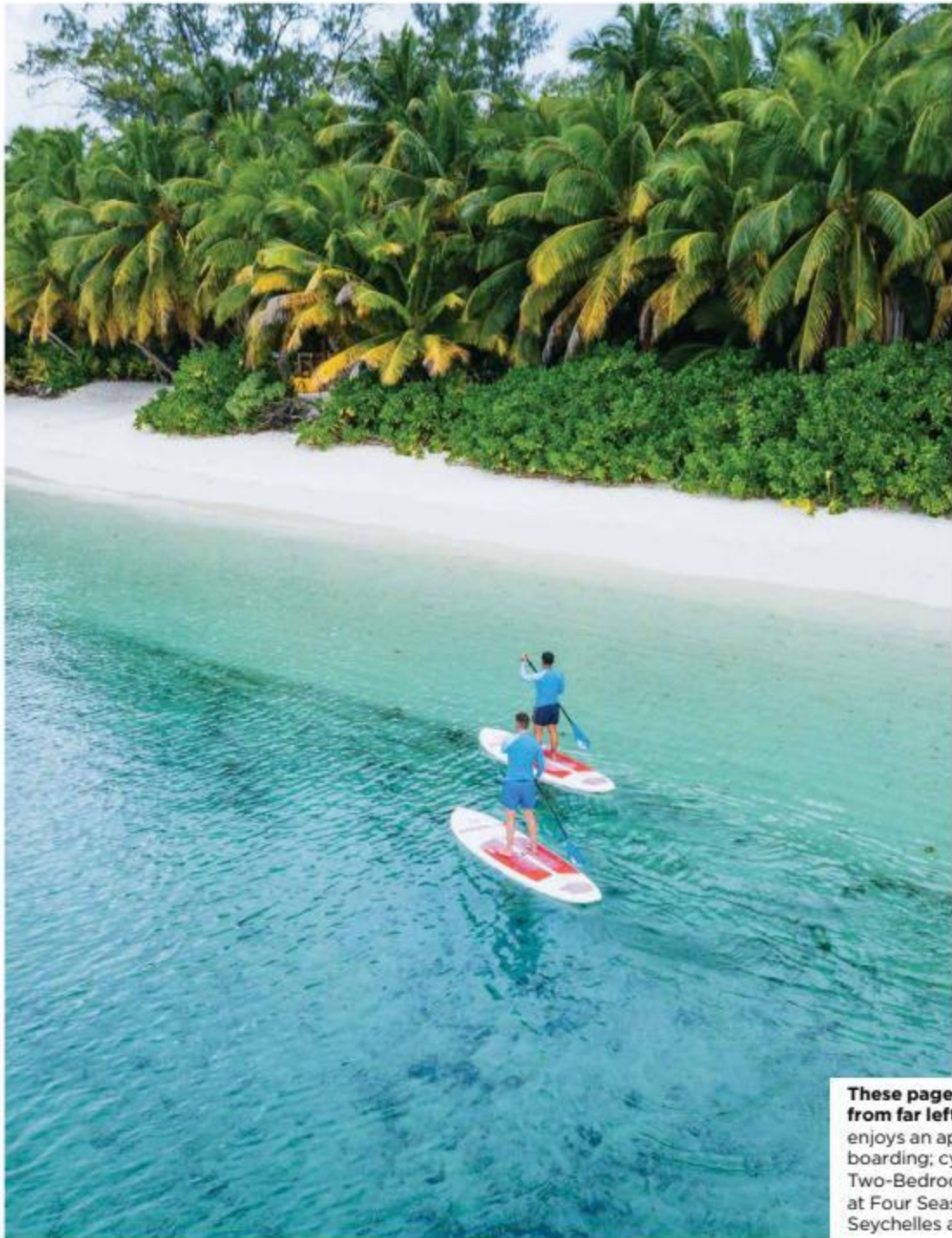
Aquarium beach gets its name from the drop that’s some three hundred yards out to sea. There, the sea life and coral were once so colourful, so abundant, that the name Aquarium was the perfect fit. I snorkelled there roughly eight years ago, when Desroches was under different management, and the memory remains burned in my mind. Sadly, coral bleaching has made a damaging impact; the coral dimmed, the sea life sparse. That said, the very first thing I spotted snorkelling this time was a turtle. The second?

Another turtle. The third? A stingray. The fishes were few, that’s true, but it’s hard to complain at the ocean’s offering.

Four Seasons took over at Desroches in 2017, adding splendour to the accommodation and ingenuity to the culinary offering — including a lighthouse that doubles as a fine dining restaurant

‘GEORGE, THE ISLAND’S UNDOUBTED, SLOW-WALKING SUPERSTAR. HE’S 120 YEARS-OLD AND IS PARTICULARLY PARTIAL TO APPLES AND CAMERAS’

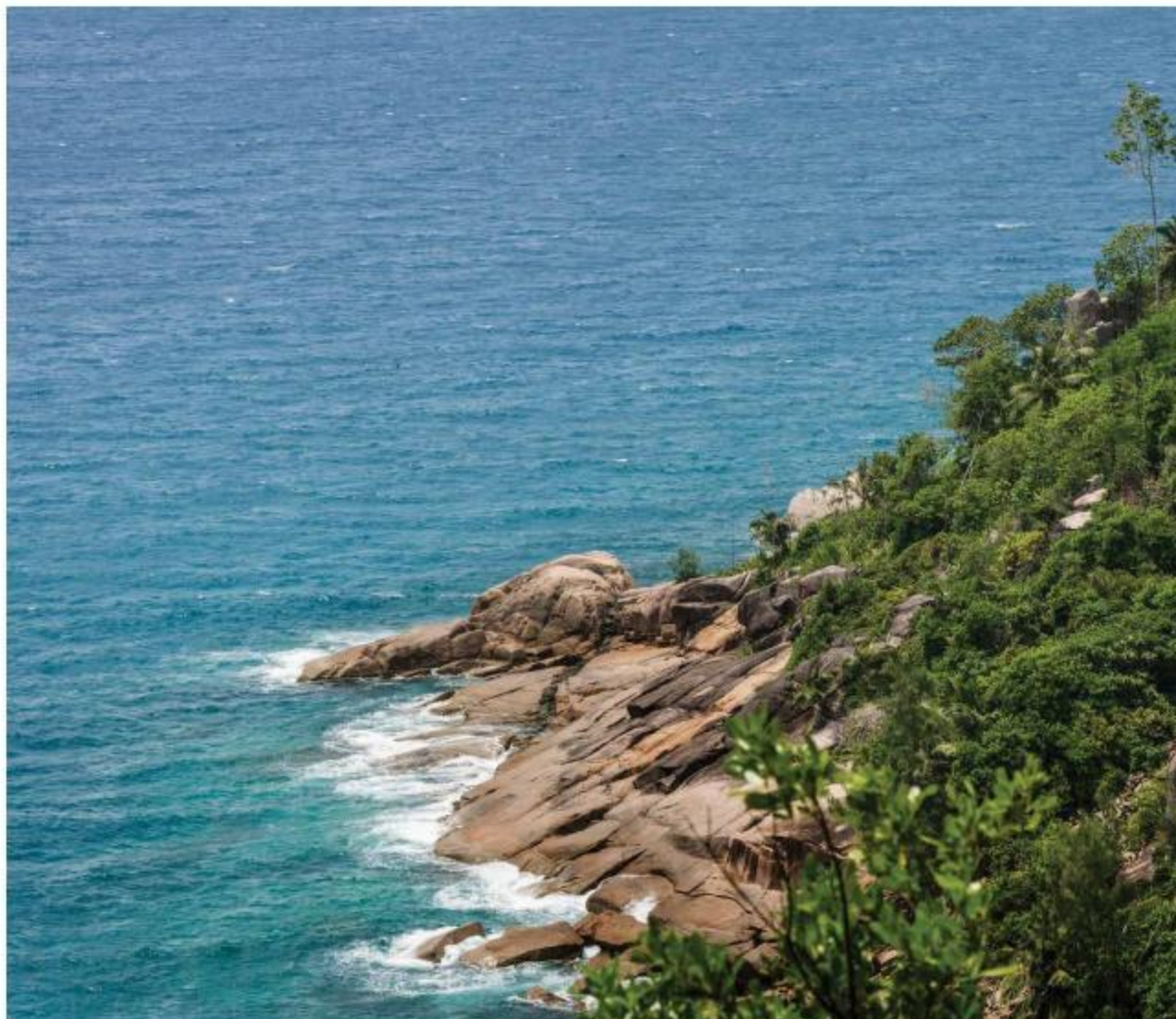




These pages, clockwise from far left: George enjoys an apple; paddle boarding; cycling; Two-Bedroom Suite, all at Four Seasons Resort Seychelles at Desroches



These pages, clockwise from bottom left: tempura at KOI restaurant; Ocean View Suite; aerial view of resort, all at Four Seasons Resort Seychelles



‘SITTING THERE, SIPPING OUR ROSE, WATCHING THE OCEAN ROLL INTO WAVES IN THE DISTANCE AND HURRIED HERMIT CRABS SCURRYING TO AVOID THE LAPPING WATER, SERENITY REIGNED SUPREME’

and the ultimate spot for sundowners.

We stayed in a Two-Bedroom Suite, which should really be renamed to something more befitting of its size, such as Beachfront Estate or This Place Is So Big You Probably Won't See The Other Members Of Your Family While Inside Suite. Comprising three separate buildings, one contains a huge bedroom and bathroom (indoors and out), another the master bedroom, which is apartment-like with its lounge and office areas, while the third houses the kitchen, living and dining rooms. All have individual terraces and share a decent sized pool in a garden that leads to the beach, a mere twenty steps away. There are larger, grander options, too.

Though not native to Desroches, the giant tortoises have been residents far longer than Four Seasons. They're birthed, reared, and cared for in a sanctuary here, which is open to guests to visit at their leisure, to pluck leaves from the trees and feed these friendly reptiles. Every guest seeks out George, the island's undoubted, slow-walking superstar. He's 120 years-old and is particularly partial to apples and cameras. The former to munch on, the latter to pose for, which he does like a pro.

Also a pro is Othello, the chef at Lighthouse, whose sushi rolls meant are family dinners there were anything but a tragedy. The sushi was made bespoke for two reasons: one, my daughters, the eldest of whom does not like fish, while the youngest is no fan of seaweed (both insist that they love sushi) and two: Alejandra, our Venezuelan waitress. Like almost every hotel working through the problems posed by the pandemic, Four Seasons Desroches was having to work with a smaller pool of staff during our visit, yet it's due to people like Alejandra that you wouldn't know it. Instantly likeable and engaging, she would go

out of her way to ensure everyone's contentment. It meant that we also had to go out of our way – by order of the kids, to whichever of the island's restaurants Alejandra was working at that night. Handily, that included a starlit BBQ on the beach, where we ate smoky king prawns and buttery lobster, prized easily from its shell.

We may have spent only five days in paradise, but the memory of them will linger.

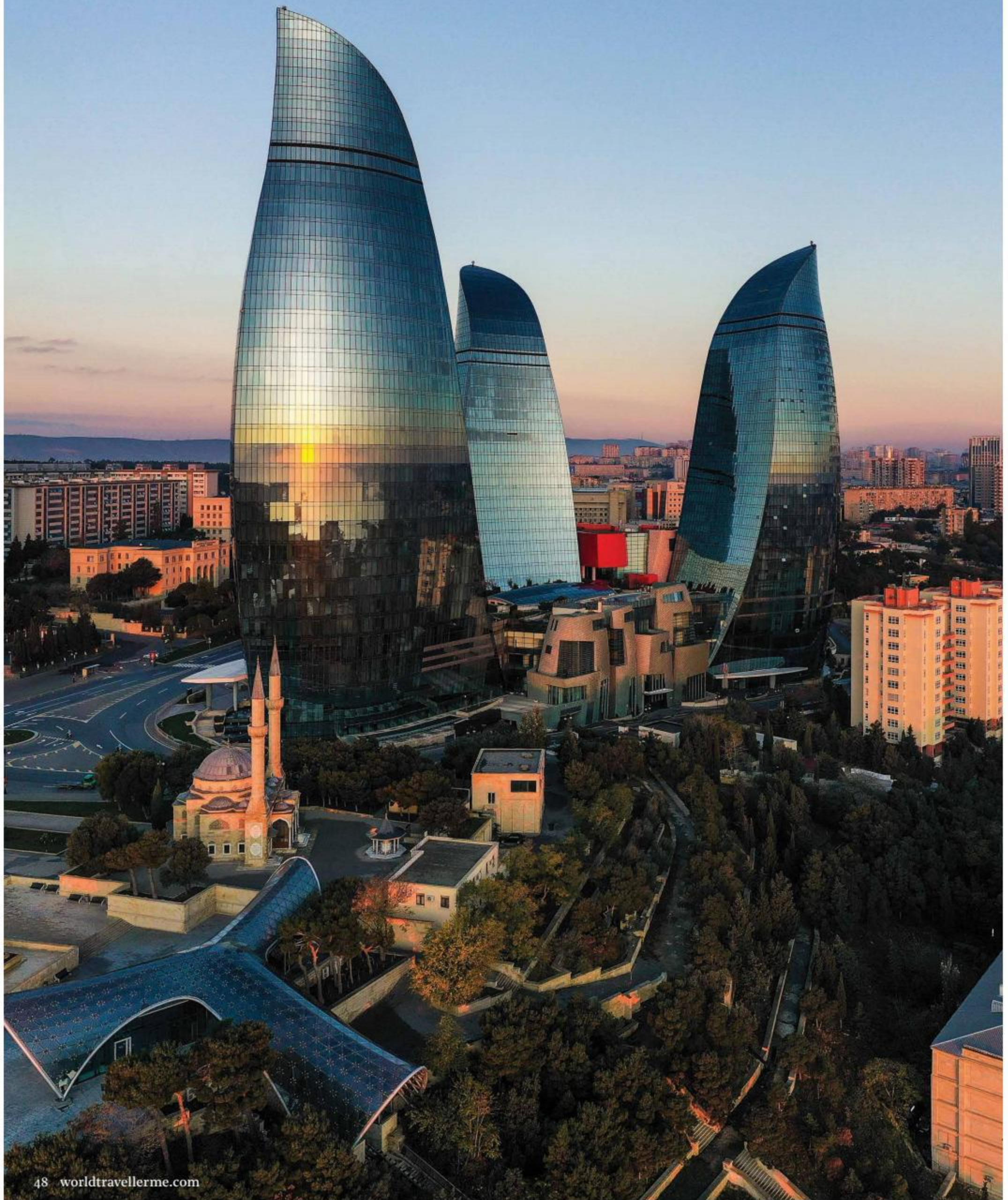
The sadness of our departure from Desroches was, however, softened somewhat by the cushion of the Four Seasons' sister property on Mahé, where we spent our last two nights in the Seychelles. It's a beautiful spot, with ocean-facing villas cut high and low into the mountainside, while its sun-kissed bay is blessed by a quite stunning beach — the sand powder-soft and vanilla hued; the ocean turquoise, surging waves rolling into shore. The snorkelling is better here, regenerating coral attracting a colourful crowd of fish.

Like Desroches, Four Seasons Resort Seychelles has its own star staff member, Kashi, the cross-restaurants sommelier who selected an agreeable Riesling to complement our assorted platter of nigiri and sashimi (and a nearly Nobu-worthy miso black cod) while engaging us with tales from his training in France — and iPhone shots of assorted family members.

On our last morning we did yoga in a treetop-skimming spa pavilion, managing to stay on a mat far more successfully than I had a surfboard and giving me the headspace to hang loose and declare that two nights aren't nearly enough to enjoy all that this resort has to offer — we'll just have to catch a wave back here soon. **Inspired to travel? To book a trip, call +971 4 316 6666 or visit dnatatravel.com**



These pages, from left to right: Baku; mud volcano in Gobustan National Park



THE LAND OF FIRE

James Stewart heads to the mountains on a tour across arresting Azerbaijan



Deep in the mountains of north-east Azerbaijan I am discussing Noah with an elderly villager. Wrapped in a headscarf and woolly hat, Malaksima, a formidable 80-something (she isn't sure) with a weathered face like a walnut, is collecting spring water in a silver teapot. I ask about a tale that the people of Khinaliq are direct descendants of Noah. Had the Bible's original sailor really dropped anchor on these flat summits?

"Noah?" says Malaksima. She laughs. "Show me: where's the ocean? Noah's not even Muslim."

Though Khinaliq lacks two-by-two wildlife, from aardvarks to zebras, it might pass as somewhere from the *Old Testament*. At the head of one of Azerbaijan's remotest valleys, the village coils over a mountain spur above the valley floor. In the silence you can hear the river below. Natural gas fires burn like divine portents in the surrounding mountains. Before Islam — before the Hebrews wrote about Noah, even — Azerbaijanis were Zoroastrians, fire-worshippers who discovered magic according to Pliny the Elder.

Old habits die hard. Azerbaijan's favourite name for itself remains 'The Land of Fire.'

"Anyway," continues Malaksima, "everyone knows an angel founded this village. He was called Nabi. He was sent by Allah to build a mosque in the valley. Maybe he came along with Noah, I don't know. But it's true. I swear on bread."

"On bread?" I ask.

"Of course. It's older than the Koran," she reasons.

In the jigsaw of nations that forms the Caucasus, the least accessible, most interesting country is Azerbaijan.

Capital Baku has tarted itself up with oil money, ringing a historic core with ego-architecture in an aspiration to become a Dubai of the Caspian Sea. But life in rural Azerbaijan carries on much as it has for centuries: venerating bread, ritualising tea-drinking, tending sheep. Figuring the way to experience that is on foot, I want to walk.

Sheki is in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, a five-hour drive west of Baku. That sounds a drag until you see the scenery. Beyond the capital, the desert ends abruptly



and you are rolling past wooded hills and vineyards and blokes scything rhythmically in fields. It resembles a long-vanished Provence, if Provence had ever included samovars and Soviet trucks for sale at the roadside. They go for a song since Azerbaijan shrugged off Russia's bear-hug in 1991.

In July 2019, Sheki won World Heritage status for its 'tangible Silk Road heritage'. In the cool water garden of an old caravanserai, I sit beneath arcades where merchants once bartered for metalwork, ceramics and silks. In the Palace of Sheki Khans, I tour rooms with Persian carpets, a decorative fusion of

the Middle East, India and China, of geometric Islam and the pictorial west.

The culture clash continues in a café beside the market. The owner flashes me a mouthful of gold teeth, then rattles through the day's dishes: Central Asian sheep kidneys, Russian borscht, oriental dushbara dumplings, all accompanied by watery sheep's yogurt served by the pint. The local delicacy is Ottoman, a sweet walnut baklava. Let's just say Sheki has a lot of dentists.

For a change of scene I walk three miles to Kish village. As Sheki falls behind, woods take over, dotted here and there with former dachas. For

IN A PLACE THAT SEEMS BEYOND TIME, STORIES SWIRL LIKE THE CLOUDS OVER SURROUNDING PEAKS?



These pages, clockwise from top left: Khinaliq; The Heydar Aliyev Center, Baku; Old Town in Baku; a local bean dish; Martyrs' Monument; salt formation in Lake Masazir



These pages, from top to bottom: Sheki;
Palace of Sheki Khans



the Russian elite, Azerbaijan was a Soviet shire, a place to breathe mountain air and enjoy a simple rustic life facilitated by servants.

Kish is the real deal, with cockerels strutting along rough-cobbled lanes. On the main square stands a bust of Thor Heyerdahl. The Norwegian adventurer has a cult following in Azerbaijan having funded the restoration of Kish's first-century church, the country's oldest. To understand why, you need to know about his pet theory concerning Azerbaijan as the wellspring of Scandinavians. They went west when the Romans arrived, he thought, citing an Icelandic saga that describes Odin's homeland as 'Aser' east of the Black Sea and petroglyphs like Viking ships at Gobustan, 40 miles from Baku.

Azerbaijanis seem happy to indulge the idea. At the church, an attendant shows me two skeletons. "You see?" he asks pointing into the crypt. "They're giants." They are, although Bronze Age skeletons over 6ft 6in seem on the large side even for proto-Scandinavians.

Throughout my time in Sheki, people mention Quba Rayon. Near the Russian border in the north-east, the district is said to be a throwback even by Azerbaijani standards; a mountainous place that was almost isolated until a road was built in 2006, where traditional culture still thrives in sheep villages. It is beautiful, remote, fascinating, people said.

I return to Baku and head north. Beyond Quba town, in the taxi of a rakish cove with a brigand's haul of gold teeth — my driver refuses to risk his new car on the roads ahead — I ascend up a narrowing valley past new guesthouses and slow cows. The road swerves through a ravine, ducking under overhangs, to emerge on a broad plateau riven by canyons as if God has gone mad with a pickaxe.

An hour up the road we come to Khinaliq, the highest village in Europe (7,645ft), heaped above a shallow river like a braid of rope. As we arrive a boy canters past on a horse, a blanket for a saddle, a toddler clinging to his waist.

The modern age has encroached with the new road but Khinaliq hovers uneasily beside the 21st century. Compacted manure and

‘A FEW VILLAGERS DIRECT MY GAZE ACROSS THE VALLEY TO KING MOUNTAIN, PROPPED BETWEEN PEAKS. GILDED IN THE SUNSET, IT SHINES LIKE A CROWN’

hay is burned for fuel. Most water comes from a spring — the hammam turns out to be the village shower (singular) in someone's basement — and loos are long drops which smell several stages beyond ripe.

There is a shop selling tea and wire, a school, two mosques and the air of permanence that can only be acquired through 5,000 years of existence. The 2,000 residents farm sheep, speak a unique language and live in boxy stone houses hunkered down against the weather. I stay in that of Rauf and his wife Junata: four rough-walled rooms with space for the sheep downstairs — a budget way to take the bite off chill mountain air if you don't mind the smell of ammonia.

In a place that seems beyond time, stories swirl like the clouds over surrounding peaks. In 1988 a goat-herder fell asleep in a cave. Babaali Babaaliev said he woke to see a huge hairy humanoid staring at him. Understandably, he has never quite been the same again.

I want to believe it. If Azerbaijan could accommodate Noah and angels and Vikings, why not a lost yeti? Bilal, my hosts' 16-year-old son, is unconvinced. "But there are bears in the mountains," he said. "Wolves too: you can hear them at night." He takes me for a stroll around the village. Anything to avoid his parents — they are furious he has dropped out of school. "What would I do at college in Baku?" he asks. "I'm a shepherd. I only know sheep and mountains."

There seem worse things to know. We stop on a terrace. A few villagers in crumpled suits grin shy grins and shuffle awkwardly.

They direct my gaze across the valley to Shahdag (King Mountain), propped between peaks. Gilded in the sunset, it shines like a crown.

The next day I go for a walk. Beyond women thwacking fresh wool in a trough, the old dirt road clings to slopes above the valley floor. I spend the day in this wild place, swishing through buttercups and harebells, watching jackdaws tumble across big skies and waving to shepherds who trail behind their sheep.

When I drop into Kalaykhudat village, after a few hours a man invites me for mountain-thyme tea. He tells me about a fortress of the Quba Khans that had controlled this ancient trade route and of a fire temple recently rebuilt in the Shahdag National Park. Apparently the shepherds use it to make tea.

Yet change may be coming. There are plans to transform my walking route into a tourist drive. Another project would create the world's longest cable car from Khinaliq to Qabala ski resort.

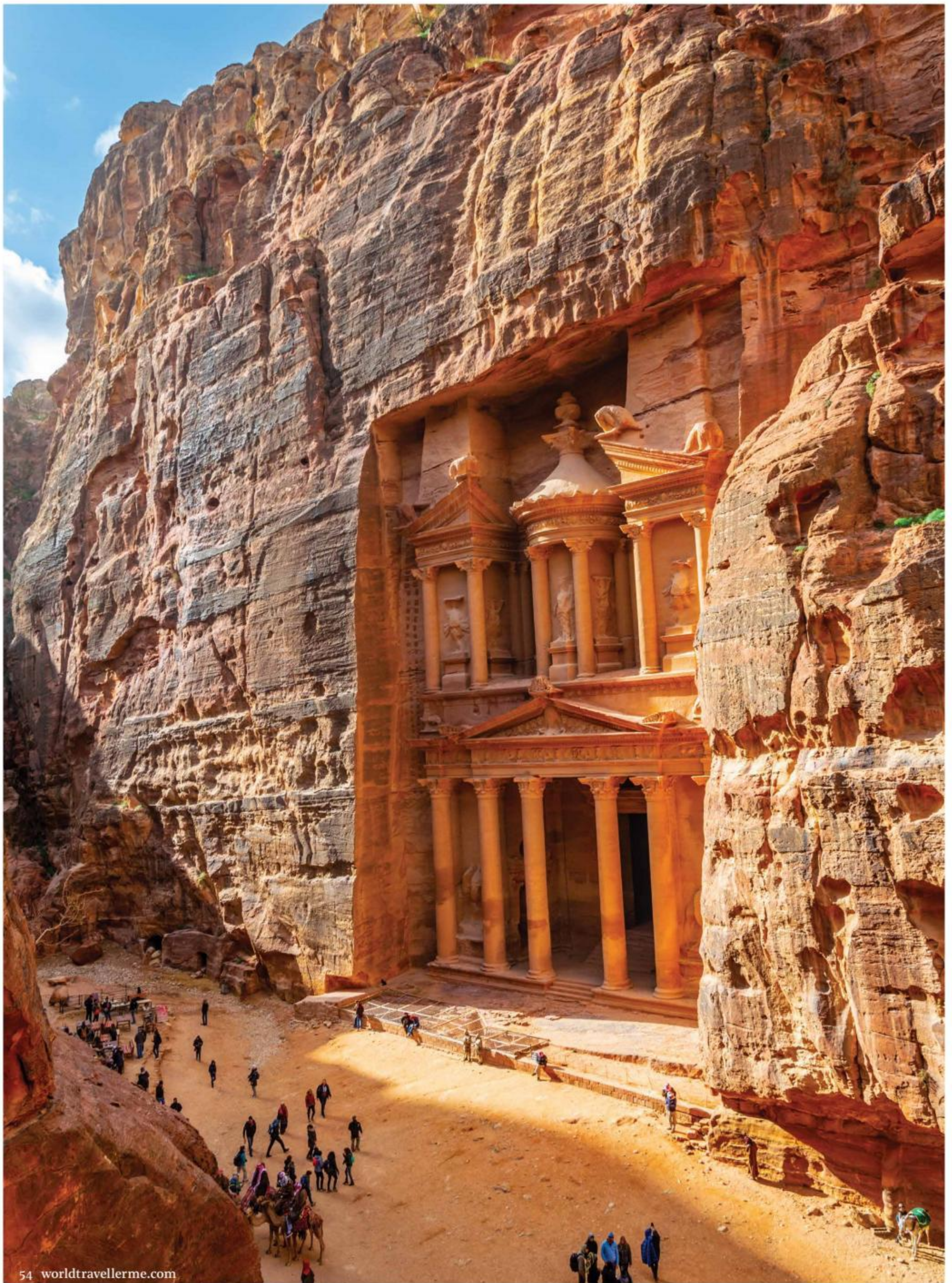
This is the point where you are expecting me to condemn both. I won't. Frankly, life is tough enough in these remote villages. If residents want a road and it sustains their futures, good luck to them.

In the night, after a dinner of kid goat, Rauf envisages bus tours and new hotels. He makes them sound as fantastical as abominable snowmen or Noah dropping anchor on a nearby summit. "Great news isn't it," he says.

"No," I reply. "Terrible." There is a brief silence, then we both begin to laugh.

I'm still not sure who is right. But I'd go there sharpish if I were you.

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Little wonder

You can do **Jordan**, north to south, in a mere five hours. Even better, says Ian Belcher — spend 10 days circling this land of biblical beauty, star-dusted skies and aquarium-bright seas

It takes just the blink of an eye. One second, my camel is padding across a monochrome desert beneath an ambivalent dawn sky still sprinkled with stars. The next, without warning, a celestial hand is daubing warm rich colour across the silent Jordanian valley. Suddenly, it's a different landscape: waves of burnt orange dunes dwarfed by cappuccino-hued cliffs and vast rock formations resembling Henry Moore abstracts. It's humbling: a moment that makes me feel very small and completely justifies TE Lawrence's passion for 'this processional way greater than imagination'.

Arabia's favourite Englishman was referring to Wadi Rum, but 'this irresistible place' is a fair description for most of this extraordinarily beautiful, safe country. Jordan's elegy-inducing landscapes, astounding archaeological sites and intriguing history — including some divine biblical spots — need to be seen rather than imagined.

It's as compact as it is irresistible. A five-hour drive takes you from top to bottom, while a 10-day circular tour, starting in the capital Amman, easily covers the hot-ticket attractions. Stick on a couple of days and you can hike in diverse, sometimes surprisingly lush, nature reserves.

Wadi Rum isn't one of them. This is unapologetic, magnificently stark, highly photogenic desert. In the soft early evening sunshine, my 4WD vehicle ventures into the enigmatic wilderness that has entranced filmmakers from David Lean (*Lawrence of Arabia*) to Michael Bay (*Transformers*).

We stop at Al Salab, where Matt Damon's stranded astronaut pondered his fate in Ridley Scott's *The Martian*. Whirling sand and soupy air add an interstellar edge to the massive red plain. Then, only 3km away, I'm teleported back a couple of thousand years by Alameleh's rock inscriptions, with crags and crevices embellished by petroglyphs of athletic hunters and herds of camels, before returning to the early 20th century.

Lawrence of Arabia's heroics have received a generous spit and polish — after all, 99,999 locals ousted the Ottomans in the Arab Revolt, too — but his presence is unavoidable. It's in the air. It's in the rocks. I visit 'his' mountain, his spring and his canyon, where he camped

‘WE STOP AT AL SALAB, WHERE MATT DAMON’S STRANDED ASTRONAUT PONDERED HIS FATE IN *THE MARTIAN*. WHIRLING SAND AND SOUPY AIR ADD AN INTERSTELLAR EDGE TO THE MASSIVE RED PLAIN’

on the narrow floor between towering golden cliffs. However, Wadi Rum is about more than English gents and geology. It's about the Bedouin. My guide, Mahmoud Zawaideh, is the grandson of a desert sheikh (of course, his great-grandfather knew Lawrence). Everyone we meet appears to be a relative and, after a couple of hours, I'm addressed as his brother.

As a molten sunset weeps into the Wadi Rum Mountains, we sip tea from a battered kettle over an open fire. 'All knowledge is passed on,' says Mahmoud, recounting his childhood in gentle, silky tones. 'What you can eat, where to find water, the safest routes. The desert is my heart. I could never live in the city.'

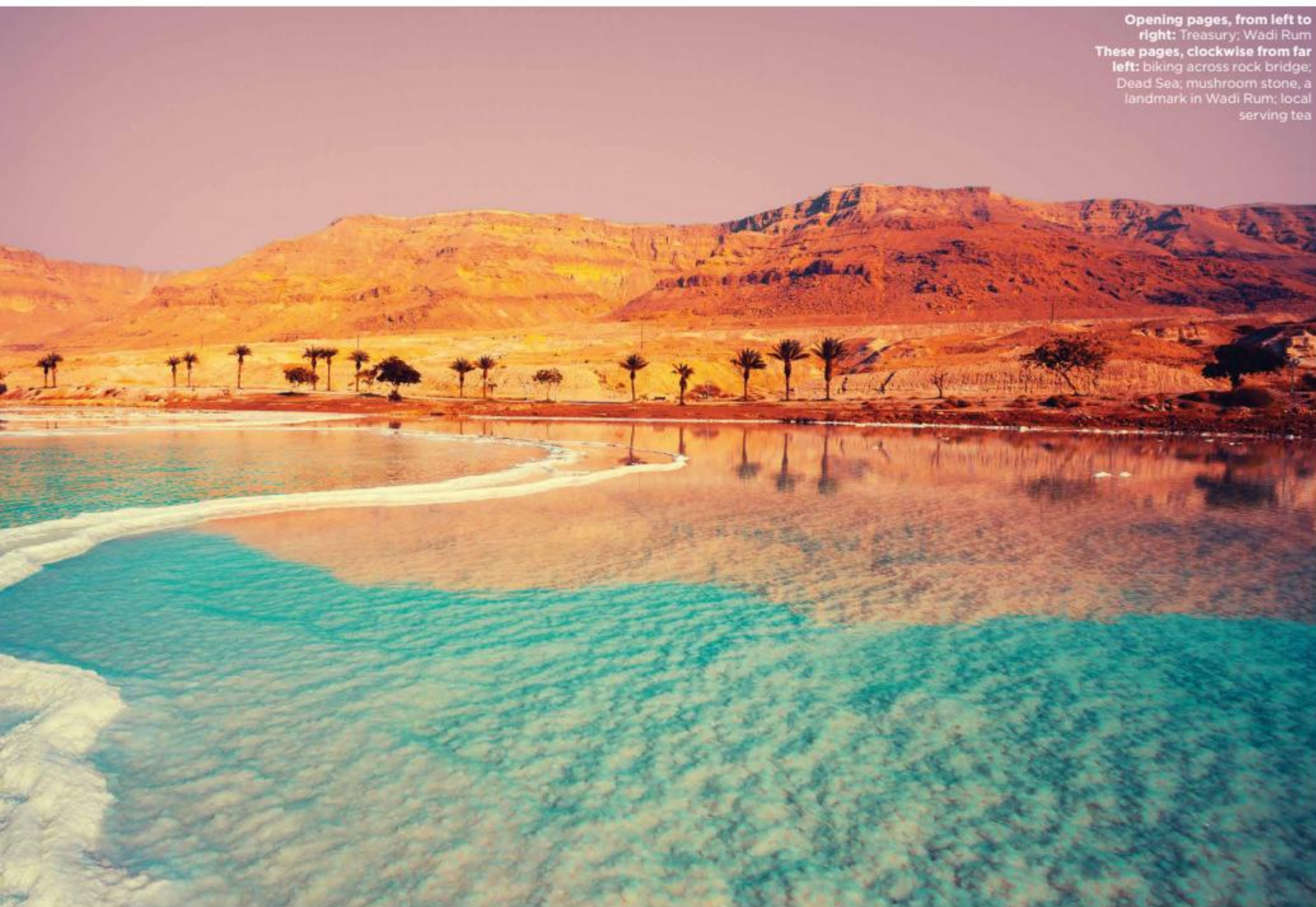
Darkness only adds to Wadi Rum's allure. The stars — heavens, the stars. After a roast Bedouin lamb, cooked underground in an earth oven, I lie back on a pillow-like dune, look up and a billion twinkling eyes return my gaze. If you want some astronomical luxury, observing the sky straight from your bed, then the space-age glass geodesic domes at nearby Memories Aicha camp will be for you.

There's nothing so futuristic at Petra. Two hours' drive from Wadi Rum, tucked into the Sharah Mountains, the Rose City is one of the planet's greatest archaeological discoveries. Its 2,000-year-old ruins merit every drop of adulation. They also deserve their fabulously theatrical entrance, the Siq, created 20 million years ago — the gods were clearly in a creative mood when seismic activity rent a 1.2km cleft in the turbulent earth. After shopping at Awny's bazaar, where blocks of musk, amber and myrrh are displayed on millstones pre-dating Jesus, I enter the passageway between walls of rock almost 200 metres high.

The altitude drops and anticipation rises as I proceed along stones scarred by the wheels of ancient chariots. Then, suddenly, nature draws back the



Opening pages, from left to right: Treasury; Wadi Rum
These pages, clockwise from far left: biking across rock bridge; Dead Sea; mushroom stone, a landmark in Wadi Rum; local serving tea



curtain to reveal the iconic facade of the Treasury, its sculptures, columns and plinths having provided a backdrop for countless heroes from Indiana Jones to Tintin.

It's ridiculously impressive, but the delight is in the detail. Its famous urn is riddled with bullet holes from fortune hunters, their pot shots motivated by rumours that it contains the riches of King Aretas III. Either side, the walls still bear the niches that provided rudimentary scaffolding for the talented craftsmen. To see it ignite in the morning sun, arrive by 9am. A night in the Movenpick Resort, close to Petra's main gate, is the easiest way to do it.

I stare for several hushed minutes — neither words nor photos can really do it justice — before recruiting Arun, a local Bedouin, to lead me up a breathlessly steep climb to the perfect selfie spot. As I snap away, he talks about a nearby cave that serves as his occasional home. "It's perfect," he says, sounding unnervingly like Kevin McCloud. "Not too hot in summer, warm in winter, and I wake up next to my work."

The Treasury, however, is merely Petra's Act I. The unfolding drama contains more than 600 tombs cut into the cliffs, including four royal blockbuster graves (one of which was turned into a 5th-century Byzantine cathedral), houses, temples and a theatre. The Nabateans, whose civilisation peaked in the centuries either side of Christ, weren't just brilliant traders and builders, they were architectural magpies, returning from sales trips to carve Greek capitals, Egyptian obelisks and Assyrian friezes into the rock. They also snaffled their clients' deities, merging foreign gods into Nabatean worship like a gap-year student returning home a dreadlocked Buddhist.

The scale is almost overwhelming — Petra really needs two days, plus a candlelit evening visit. On this one, I time my finish to perfection. A donkey floats me up about 850 steps, smoothed by millions of footsteps, to the monastery, its face glowing in early evening sun. Sure, there's a dazzling view across the top end of Africa's Great Rift Valley, but the most memorable moment? When

‘THE ALTITUDE DROPS AND ANTICIPATION RISES AS I PROCEED ALONG STONES SCARRED BY THE WHEELS OF ANCIENT CHARIOTS. THEN, SUDDENLY, NATURE DRAWS BACK THE CURTAIN TO REVEAL THE ICONIC FACADE OF THE TREASURY’

my guide, an archaeologist, tells me half of Petra is yet to be excavated.

While the Rose City is a human construct, the Dead Sea, on Jordan's border with Israel and the West Bank, is a deft work of nature. The world's lowest point on land — more than 430 metres below sea level — its waters are nine times saltier than that of an ocean. High summer turns it into a furnace — one of the reasons that spring and autumn are peak seasons for Jordanian tourism. March, after the winter's rains have freshened the desert, is slightly less busy.

In the past, I've floated in the Dead Sea's buoyant brine, reading a magazine. Today, I'm staying dry. Far from the big shoreline hotels, with spas that harness the mineral-rich mud, I turn off the highway at the sign for Ma'in Hot Springs, climbing a ladder of dizzying switchbacks tailor-made for a 007 car chase. At the top, around sea level, I contemplate a layered Rothko abstract of Prussianblue water, ochre rock and cloudless cyan sky. On the opposite shore, to the south, lies Masada, where besieged Zealots were said to have committed mass suicide nearly 2,000 years ago; to the north, the Qumran Caves, hiding place of the Dead Sea Scrolls. If you don't find inspiration here, there's no hope.

Actually, you could try nearby Mount Nebo. Moses scaled the 700-metre peak to spend his final days gazing out across the Holy Land towards Jericho and Jerusalem. Some believe he's buried here; others that he left the Ark of the Covenant in a mountain cave. Alternatively, there's Machaerus, just 24km away. It was said that John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded here in Herod the Great's hilltop fortress, his head presented on a platter to Salome after she belly-danced for the king's son.

Jordan, I'm rapidly learning, is nothing

if not generous with its charms. In Machaerus, I'm not far from Madaba, with its exquisite mosaics including a 6th-century map of the Holy Land, originally over 21 metres long with more than two million tesserae (tiles), like some hellish Byzantine jigsaw. I can also nip over to Kerak's imposing Crusader castle, perched on impossibly steep slopes and twice besieged by Saladin.

I consider driving up to Jerash — perhaps the world's best-preserved provincial Roman town, an hour north of Amman. Instead, I turn south to finish my journey in the Red Sea port of Aqaba. The final spectacular but brutal stretch bisects jagged coastal mountains streaked with volcanic minerals. The only sign of life is a solitary goat herder seeking shade beneath a lone acacia tree. On arrival, I make for the port, joining a throng of locals at Hashem and Sons to refuel on its famous *fatteh*: a dish of chickpeas, pine nuts, hummus, crunchy bread and olive oil. And then it's time for the beach.

Its petite sandy stretches offer mesmerising sunset panoramas over Sinai's crinkled peaks, across the water, but Aqaba's beaches aren't beautiful in themselves. Their crowning glory lies beneath, not above, the shimmering sea. I snorkel along Yamanieh reef, lost in tropical swarms of silversides, blue-and-white-striped surgeonfish, orange anthias and purple tangs, all flitting around a coral forest of rippling cream sponges, soft ruby tangles and neon-green brains. I've no idea if it's all painted by the same otherworldly brushstroke I witnessed at Wadi Rum. But I'm absolutely certain that Jordan is a wonder — a natural wonder.

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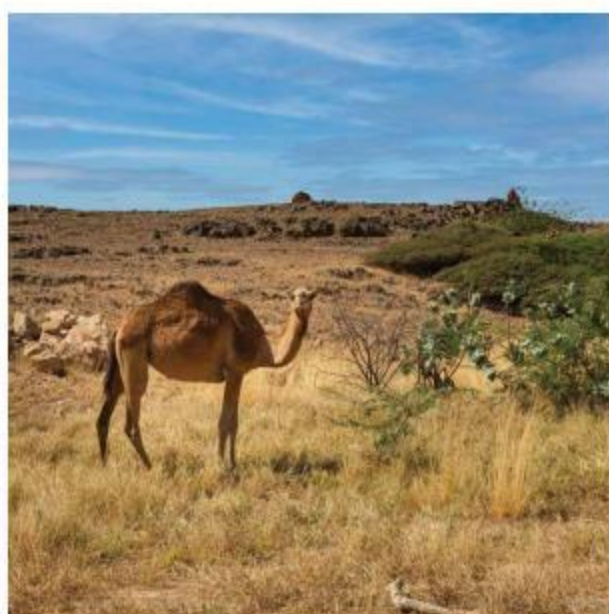
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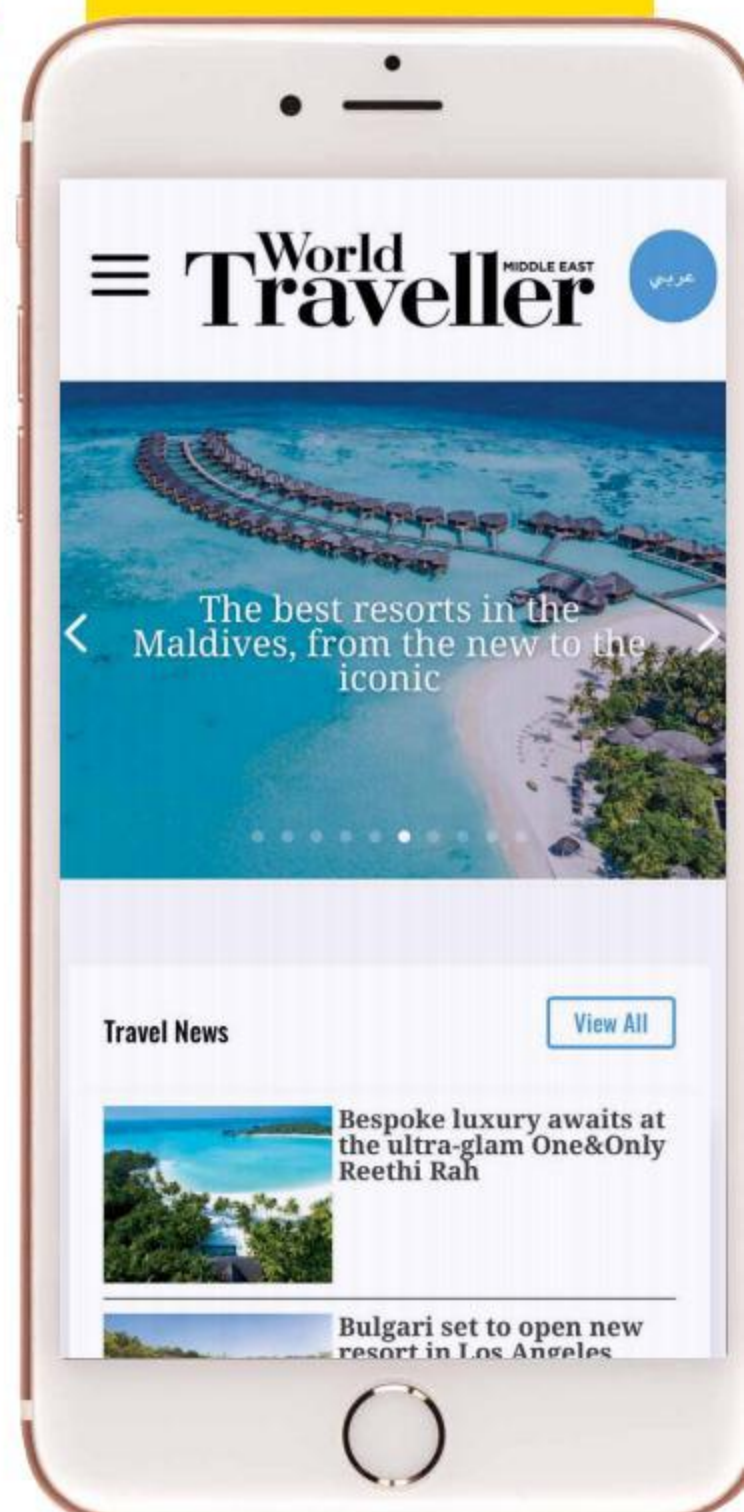
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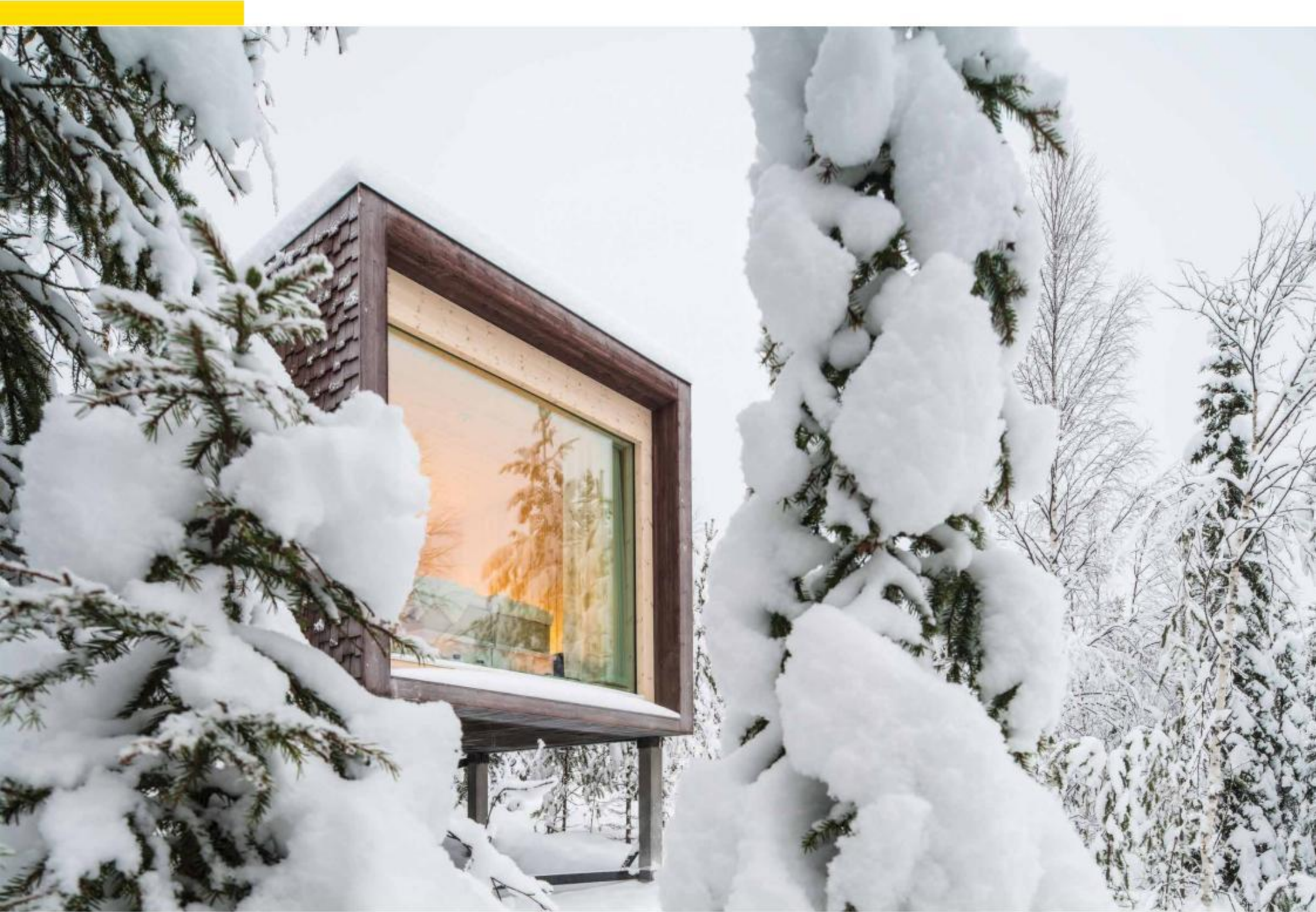
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Suite dreams

Our monthly finish with a flourish, delving into a suite that has a character and style all of its own



ARCTIC TREEHOUSE SUITE

Arctic TreeHouse Hotel, Finland

Nothing says festive like throwing open the curtains of your warm room to blankets of thick, white snow. That's why the suites at this Lapland forest hotel have been designed as an immersive experience — whilst also being luxuriously comfortable. Inside the elevated rooms there's a Scandinavian feel, with the beds looking out across the canopies of trees so you can watch nature take its snowy course. And to ensure your bedtime views even more magical, the Aurora Borealis make an appearance roughly every other night up until April.



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BEYOND THE BOOKING



Inspiration. Expertly crafted.

Comprising two iconic towers, the JW Marriott Marquis Dubai is centrally located beside the Dubai Water Canal and offers a spectrum of facilities and services for a memorable experience. The hotel features 1,608 luxurious guest rooms and suites, over 12 award-winning restaurants, the renowned Saray Spa with traditional hammams and 17 treatment rooms and 8,000 sqm of spectacular meeting spaces.

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