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# DESTINASIAN

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ON SAFARI  
HONG  
KONG  
THE BEST OF  
THE WEST

MYANMAR  
ADVENTURES  
IN SHAN STATE

+

INDONESIA'S  
BANDA ISLANDS  
IN PICTURES



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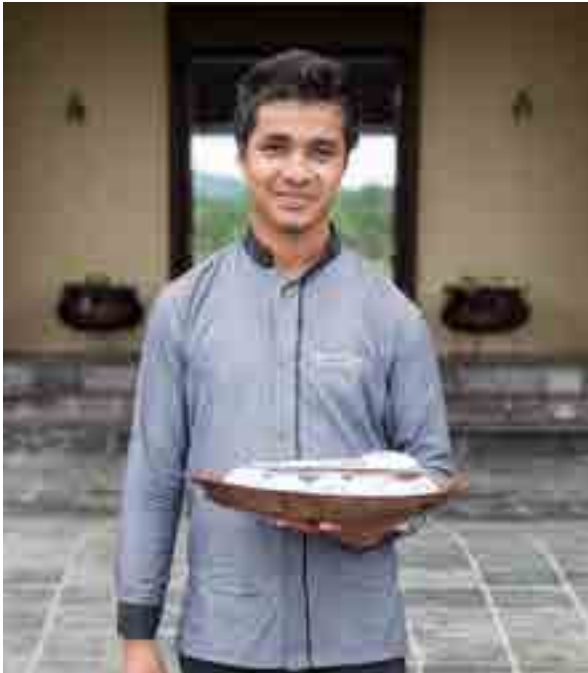


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# SHIFTING GEARS

For many of us, travel marks a change from our daily routines, as we delve into the unfamiliar and revel in the novelty of our new surroundings. Neither we as travelers nor the locales we visit remain static: we might come across a city undergoing a rapid metamorphosis, or find insights that renew us on a personal level.

In our cover story this issue, we venture deep into the mystical highlands of northern Ethiopia, following Aidan Hartley as he embarks on a pilgrimage to its monolithic rock-cut churches and otherworldly landscapes—an emotional return to a country he once visited under very different circumstances. Instead of heading for the Himalayas, Jason Overdorf takes us to Nepal’s subtropical Terai lowlands to seek out rhinos and elephants at Chitwan National Park. He underlines the success of local conservation efforts, while testing out a new lodge that brings its guests even closer to the wildlife. Muhammad Fadli’s photo essay from the Banda Islands in eastern Indonesia captures the daily lives of its people amid the remnants of a colonial past that are still apparent at every turn.

Foodies will be delighted by two stories in particular. In Hong Kong, Nick Walton takes stock of the up-and-coming neighborhoods of Kennedy Town and Sai Ying Pun, where a slew of trendy bars and restaurants have been sprouting up like never before. Also in this issue, Nicola Edmonds throws the spotlight on Kākano, a recently-opened café, cooking school, and urban farm that is reinventing Maori cuisine in the heart of Christchurch, New Zealand.

Travel, too, provides a multitude of ways to reinvent ourselves—rejuvenating the body, reviving the spirit, and giving us new eyes to appreciate this world we call home.

e-mail: publisher@destinasian.co.id



PUBLISHER’S NOTE **RONALD LIEM**

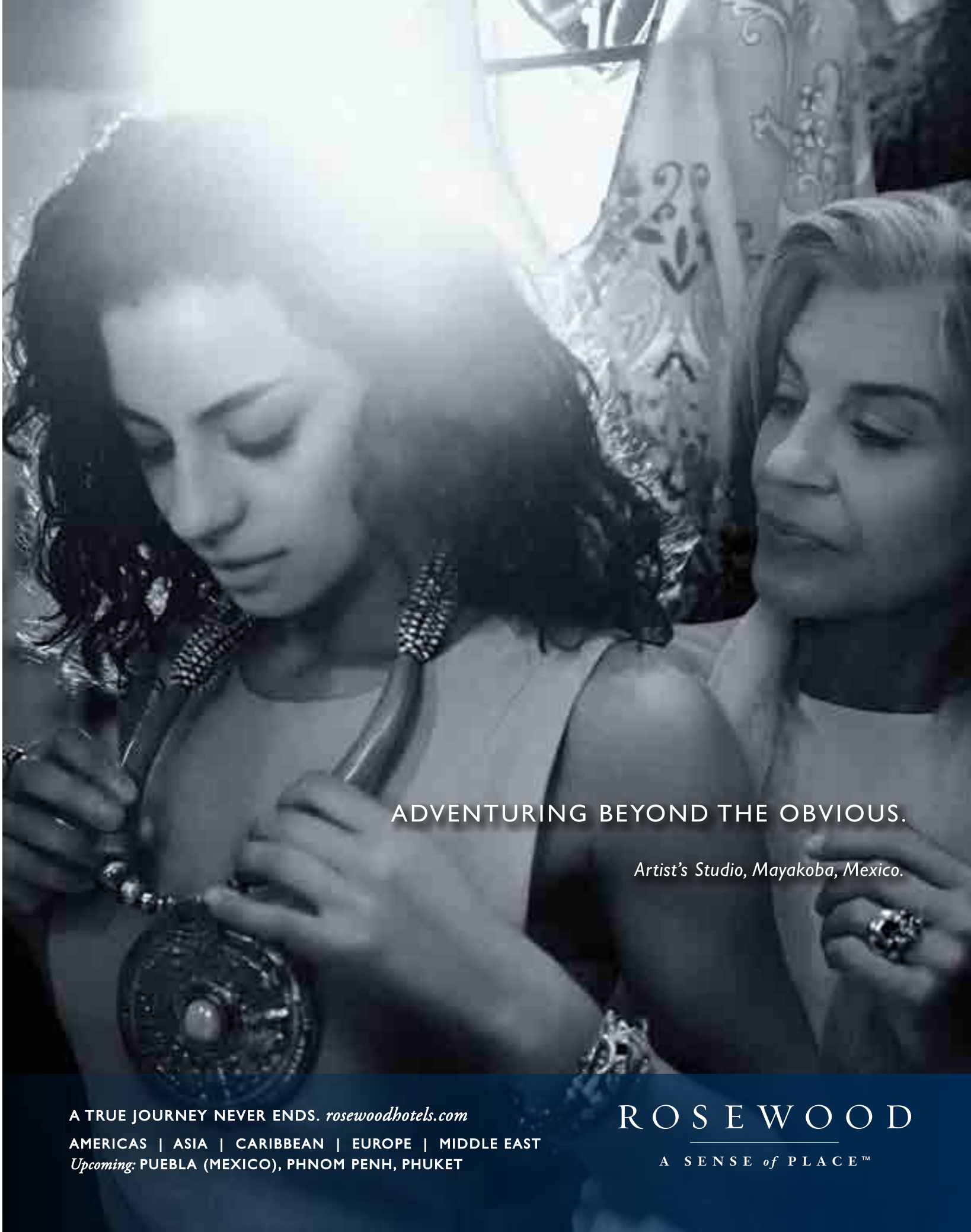


**1. MARK EVELEIGH**  
Home Base: Medewi, Bali  
Wrote: “State of Emergence,” p. 58  
There was a delightful feeling of trepidation that came with driving through Myanmar’s eastern Shan State, a conflict area that had so recently opened up. That said, the state’s remote tribal villages are home to some of the most hospitable people I’ve met.  
An unexpected highlight was the food. Even the fried crickets were delicious.

**2. NICK WALTON**  
Home Base: Hong Kong  
Wrote: “Western Promise,” p. 102  
I will always have a soft spot for Kennedy Town, no matter how much it changes. It was my first real home in Hong Kong and I still recall how local it was. I loved walking along the waterfront in summer and inviting my friends over to my rooftop for barbecues; I wanted to give them a sense of the real Hong Kong, my Hong Kong.

**3. JASON OVERDORF**  
Home Base: New Delhi  
Wrote: “On Safari in Nepal,” p. 72  
The thing that amazed me most about Nepal’s Chitwan National Park was how close you could get to the rhinos, especially on foot, which is not allowed in India. It’s a little disconcerting to be face-to-face with an animal that weighs a couple thousand kilos, but that element of fear is what separates an encounter in the wild from a trip to the zoo.

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## SOUND ADVICE

Didn't get your Glastonbury or Tomorrowland tickets before they sold out? Worry not. One of these 10 summer music festivals is sure to suit.

BY GABRIELLE LIPTON

### FOR BEACHCOMBERS:

.....  
**Beaches Brew**, June 6–10  
Head to Marina di Ravenna on Italy's Adriatic coast for five sun-kissed days of folk rock. Acts including Cate le Bon, Destroyer, Ty Segall & The Muggers, and Dirty Fences play on stages stuck in the sand (beachesbrew.com).

### FOR A WEEKEND IN THE PARK:

.....  
**Field Day**, June 11–12  
Celebrating its 10th edition this year, London's Field Day couples the biggest names in alternative music—James Blake, PJ Harvey, Air, and more—with old-fashioned games like tug-of-war and relay races in Victoria Park (fielddayfestivals.com).

### FOR TECHIES:

.....  
**Sónar**, June 16–18  
Barcelona's Sónar is a digital-creative's wonderland, with top electronic artists—from pioneers New Order and Jean-Michel Jarre to younger faces like Oneohtrix Point Never—alongside tech development and networking events (sonar.es).

### FOR STAYING UP ALL NIGHT:

.....  
**Secret Solstice**, June 16–19  
Capitalizing on its annual 72 hours of continuous sunlight, Reykjavik throws a massive music festival, this year headlined by Radiohead and Iceland's own Monsters and Men. Geothermal pools and pagan Norse stage names add to the atmosphere (secretsolstice.is).

### FOR FAMILIES:

.....  
**Festival d'Été**, July 7–17  
Street art festivals, Québécois cuisine, and cross-generational artists like Sting and Peter Gabriel make Quebec City's 11-day festival ideal for all ages (infofestival.com).

### FOR COUNTRYSIDE CAROUSING:

.....  
**T in the Park**, July 8–10  
Scotland's Strathallan Castle is the backdrop for three days of camping; listening to artists ranging from Spanish guitarists

Rodrigo y Gabriela to DJ Calvin Harris; and sipping whisky well into the night (tinthepark.com).

### FOR HIPSTERS:

.....  
**Pitchfork Music Festival**, July 15–17  
Anyone who's anyone in the indie-music zeitgeist can be found in Chicago's Union Park for Pitchfork, run by its namesake blog. FKA Twigs, Blood Orange, and Kamasi Washington are among this year's many artists (pitchforkmusicfestival.com).

### FOR MOUNTAIN MAGIC:

.....  
**Fuji Rock**, July 22–24  
Aside from its misleading name, Japan's largest music festival is a sure pleaser. Set among the mountains of Naeba Ski Resort, it has a lineup of perennial all-stars (Sigur Rós, Beck, Wilco) and ryokans as lodging options (fujirock-eng.com).

### FOR CELEBRITY SIGHTINGS:

.....  
**Panorama**, July 22–24  
New this year from the creators of Hollywood's favorite festival, Coachella, is this three-day fête in New York City. Arcade Fire and Kendrick Lamar will headline, though the people-watching is sure to be performance art in its own right (panorama.nyc).

### FOR MORE THAN MUSIC:

.....  
**Splendour in the Grass**, July 22–24  
Cocktail bars, art installations, tipi villages, stand-up comedy, even a massage lounge make this Byron Bay rock fest one of Australia's most beloved annual events. Oh, and The Strokes, The Cure, and Band of Horses will be there as well (splendourinthegrass.com).



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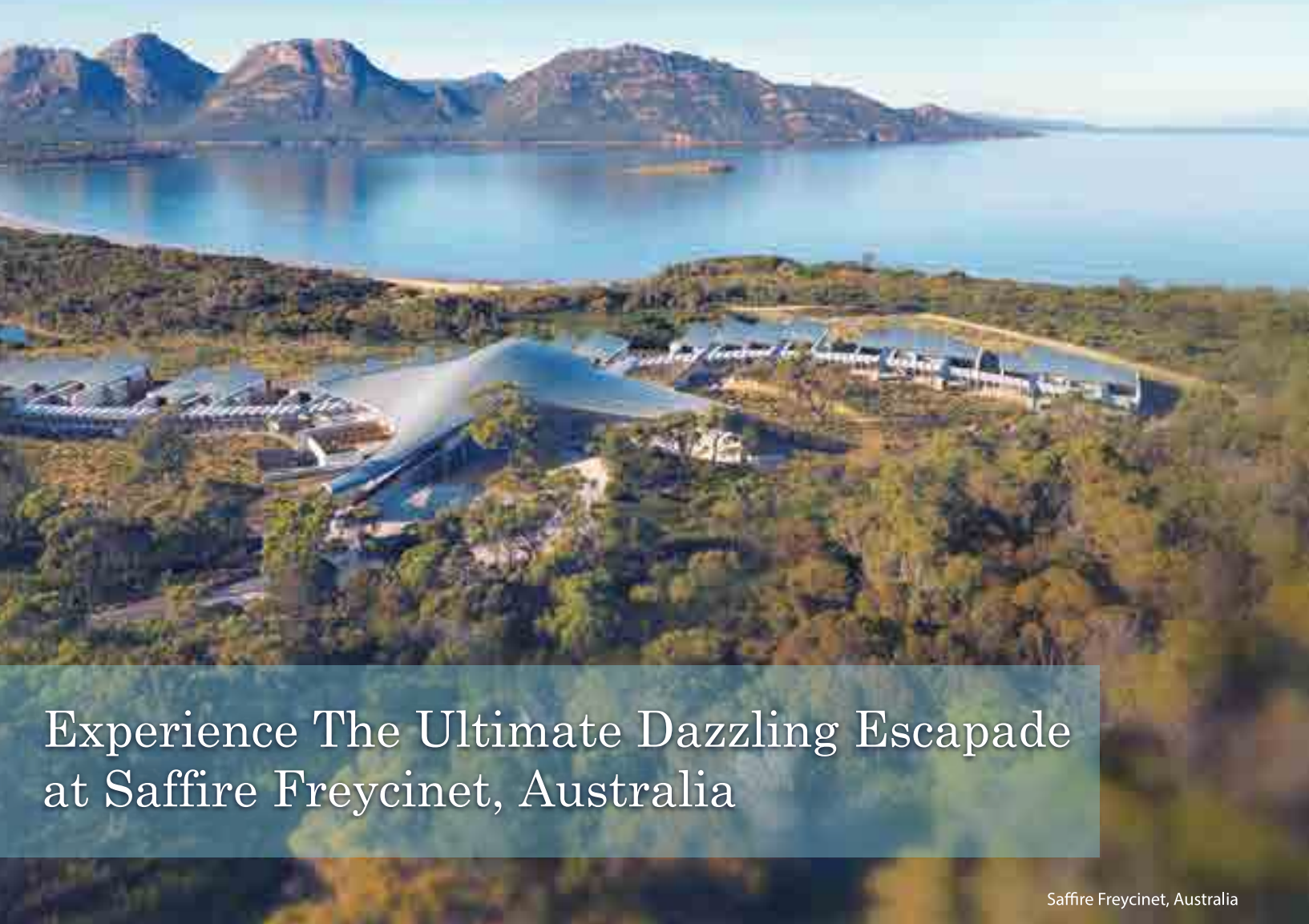
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### OM AWAY FROM HOME

Inspired by the structure of a lotus petal, the new Dharma Shanti Yoga Bale at the Four Seasons Resort Bali at Sayan is sure to enthrall any yogi or yogini. First, there's its serene setting, nestled between terraced rice fields and a swatch of tropical rain forest above the banks of the Ayung River near Ubud. Then there are its green credentials: built entirely from Balinese bamboo and held together by rope and hand-whittled pegs, the open structure is the epitome of sustainability. As for its yoga and meditation program, the bale (meaning "pavilion") is the first venue on the island to offer anti-gravity yoga, not to mention laughing-yoga sessions and talks by a resident wellness expert. Namaste to that ([fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com)). —David Tse



### TAIWAN EASE

Following a three-year makeover that saw its 853 rooms and public spaces completely overhauled, the 25-year-old Grand Hyatt Taipei relaunched in April as essentially a brand-new hotel. Centrally located in the Xinyi district and adjacent to Taipei 101 (once the world's tallest building), the property now boasts au courant guest quarters with muted tones and remodeled bathrooms, as well as a new restaurant, Yun Jin, serving a range of regional Chinese dishes (try the braised pork belly with fermented wine sauce). And while the hotel's enormous lobby remains as grand as ever, it now exudes a slightly less formal ambience, with low-slung reception desks and a shop selling treats from the new in-house bakery and confectioner ([taipei.grand.hyatt.com](http://taipei.grand.hyatt.com)). —DT

### MAKING A MARK

Guests of Manhattan's 118-room The Mark can now avail themselves of a stylish pedicab service, the first to be offered by a New York hotel. The black-and-white-striped cycle-rickshaws whisk passengers from the hotel's Upper East Side address to such nearby attractions as the Guggenheim Museum, Bergdorf Goodman, or Central Park, with the first 30 minutes free of charge. Hungry for more? Request a seasonal picnic basket from chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's on-site restaurant, whose gourmet goodies are guaranteed to put a different spin on your afternoon ([themarkhotel.com](http://themarkhotel.com)). —Gabrielle Lipton







**ALL THAT GLITTERS**

In 2011, Prince Albert II of Monaco crowned his bride with one of the most iconic jewelry pieces of modern times: the Océan Tiara by Van Cleef & Arpels. However, as Van Cleef & Arpels: The Art and Science of Gems (until August 14; [marinabaysands.com](http://marinabaysands.com)) at Singapore's ArtScience Museum goes to show, the 70-carat piece dates back not five years but 4.6 billion, when the interior movements of the earth began forming the nearly 900 diamonds and 359 sapphires that now encrust the tiara. Exploring the intersection between geoscience and the art of jewelry making, the exhibition takes visitors through seven sections that each pair a design theme (couture, precious objects, icons) with a facet of mineralogy (pressure, oxygen, water), displaying 430 of Van Cleef's dazzling creations alongside 250 minerals on loan from the French National Museum of Natural History. Pieces worn by Elizabeth Taylor and Wallis Simpson and two rose-quartz lovebirds inside a golden cage are undoubtedly man-made wonders, but equally dazzling are the natural selections, including an 800-kilogram piece of crystal, a 340-carat uncut black diamond, and what's said to be the world's oldest rock. —Jessica Gunawan

**GET THE SCOOP**

The health benefits of Indonesia's traditional medicinal drinks, jamu, are being given a delicious new form by Gelato Secrets ([gelatosecrets.com](http://gelatosecrets.com)), Bali's premier all-natural Italian gelateria chain. Three recipes based in hand-ground local herbs and spices have been adapted into sorbettoes, including turmeric-based jamu kunyit asam for detoxification, ginger-based wedang jahe for aiding digestion and cold and flu symptoms, and mixed-spice jamu beras kencur for bolstering the immune system and soothing physical fatigue. Gelateria as pharmacy—now that's a cool combination.—GL

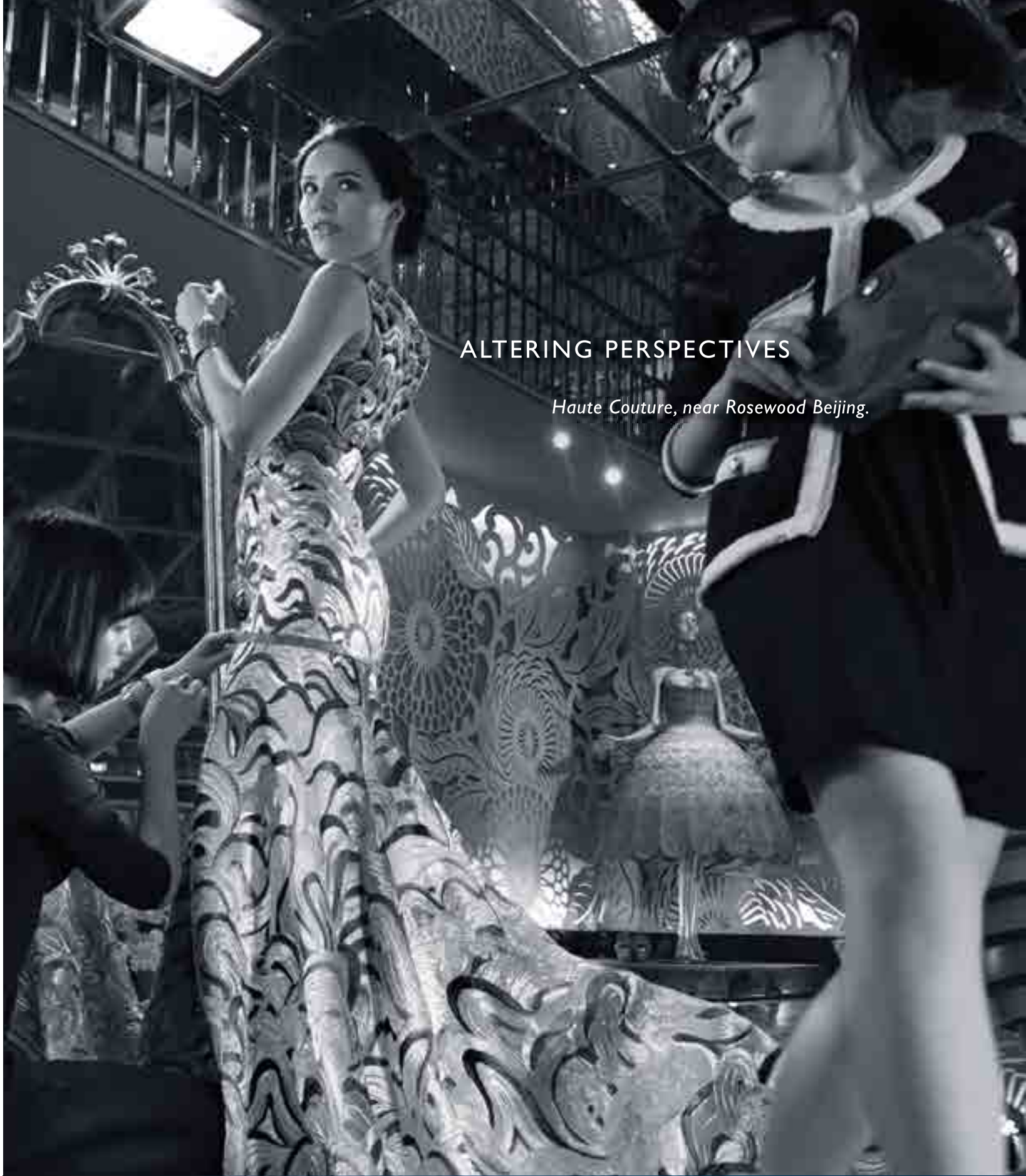


**PAGE APPEAL**

Picture books come no more sophisticated than those in the Louis Vuitton Travel Book Collection ([louisvuitton.com](http://louisvuitton.com)), which enlists famous artists for illustrative storytelling about the world's most spectacular destinations. In the latest two limited-edition volumes, graphic novelist Brecht Evens shows Paris through mixed-medium city scenes tinged with the psychedelic, and Liu Xiaodong explores South Africa through elegant paintings of landscape, natural and social both. They're equally good on coffee tables as conversation pieces, or on nightstands for an escapist bedtime story. —Gabrielle Lipton



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# AVENUE FOR CREATIVITY

With its recent expansion bringing in a wealth of new galleries and more, Alserkal Avenue has cemented its reputation as Dubai's hub for contemporary art and culture.

BY PRIYANKA PRADHAN



When Alserkal Avenue was first established in 2007, taxi drivers would wonder what their Louboutin-wearing passengers were doing, coming to such a neighborhood. Smack in the middle of nowhere—or, more precisely, Dubai's Al Quoz industrial zone—it consisted of a couple of streets of warehouses mixed in with dusty used cars and rusty hardware factories. Fast forward to today, and Alserkal Avenue has evolved from that rugged, industrial landscape into a destination arts and culture neighborhood pinned firmly on the map of the city—and, with its recent expansion, on that of the region too.

Created by renowned arts patron Abdelmonem bin Eisa Alserkal, whose family has owned the area for decades, Alserkal Avenue's modest brick-and-steel aesthetic is a sharp contrast to the glitzy glass skyscrapers of Dubai. The first gallery to set up shop here was the Ayyam Gallery (Unit 11; ayyamgallery.com), showcasing new and old Middle Eastern contemporary art, soon followed by other well-known regional galleries such as Lawrie Shabibi (Unit 21; lawrieshabibi.com) and Grey Noise (Unit 24; greynoise.com). As the years rolled on, places like The Fridge (Unit 5; thefridgeDubai.com),

an indie record company that organizes concert series and educational music programs, and JamJar (Unit 74; thejamjardubai.com), which offers workshops and a DIY painting studio for the public, joined the area, growing it into the mix that it is today: contemporary art heavy-weights alongside spunky, interactive creative spaces.

The Avenue's recent expansion sizes 76,000-square-meters, doubling it in size and adding a host of new galleries, places to eat and drink, and an OMA-designed project space that will open in September. "When we announced the expansion of Alserkal Avenue, we pledged that we would use this opportunity to break new ground and stimulate new thinking," says Alserkal, and the newcomers seem to be doing just that. El Seed (Unit 75; elseed-art.com), the prolific French-Tunisian "calligraphiti" artist, installed himself in the Avenue's first artist studio, where visitors can make appointments to come see his work known to juxtapose different languages, cultures, and identities. In another first, Swiss luxury watchmakers MB&F's Mechanical Art Devices Gallery (Unit 81; mbandf.com) is making an impact as the only gallery of its kind in the Middle East, focused on kinetic art such as handcrafted motorbikes, robot hands, and horology.

But the sure sign of the area's success is the art-world power players moving here too. While Dubai has yet to match the financial prowess of other contemporary art destinations such as New York, London, or Hong Kong, the international galleries flocking to Alserkal Avenue show that the future might be different. For example, the Avenue has just welcomed the New York-based Leila Heller Gallery (Unit 87; leilahellergallery.com), a blue-chip gallery that's a source for some of the most exceptional



works from major 20th-century artists, Andy Warhol included. "With the opening of many major museums and institutions in the U.A.E. in near future, and the expanding design district and arts scene, the art world's interest in Dubai is only increasing," Heller explains. "And at the same time, the collector base here is growing, so it felt like the right moment to make a move here."

"I was immediately attracted to the uniqueness of this district, where tire sellers and art galleries rub shoulders," says Stephane Custot, whose Custot Gallery (Unit 84; custotgallerydubai.ae) opened in mid-March. In its Paris and London locations, Custot has a legacy of fostering a dialogue between influential modern masters and international contemporary artists, and here in its gorgeous 700-square-meter Dubai outpost, it continues to do just that. In the inaugural exhibition, The World Meets Here, Robert Indiana's textual sculptures and Marc Quinn's giant metal seashells show alongside

“

**The combination of Alserkal Avenue's cheerful, diverse character and the large exhibition spaces available won me over, as I wanted to find a venue that could house large-scale sculptures and installations.**

”



hanging works from the likes of Miró and Picasso.

It seems that every tenant offers something different. The Jean-Paul Najar Foundation (Unit 45; jpnajarfoundation.com), a private nonprofit museum, showcases the impressive American and European post-minimalist collection of the late Paris-based collector Jean-Paul Najar, set in Bauhaus-influenced architecture designed by Mario Jossa of Marcel Breuer & Associates.

On an entirely different note, Dubai-based gallery The Third Line (Units 78–80; thethirdline.com) moved here from its prior location in order to double its space (which now includes a lounge and screening room) and better support its 27 emerging contemporary artists, all of whom are Middle Eastern.

And it's not just an appetite for art that Alserkal Avenue satisfies. Eateries have set up shop here—cold-pressed juicer Wild & The Moon (Unit 77; wildandthemoon.com), artisan chocolatier Atelier 28—and fashion is making its way in too, such as kimono boutique Chi-Ka (Unit 69; chikacollection.com). In the words of its founder, "Alserkal Avenue is a home for dreamers, visionaries, and creative leaders who are."



## LAO OR NEVER

Often passed over for Luang Prabang or other destinations in Laos, Vientiane—perhaps the most languid capital in Southeast Asia—more than merits a couple days’ exploration. From its Mekong riverfront and golden temples to its narrow streets where art and handicraft shops rub shoulders with chic cafés, the city has plenty to see and do. Here’s how to take in the best of it in just 48 hours.

BY LILANI GOONESENA

### • DAY ONE

**Morning:** Rise at the small and chic Ansara Hotel (Quai Fa Ngum; 856-21/213-514; ansarahotel.com; doubles from US\$148) for an early walk up Lane Xang Avenue to the Patuxai independence monument, Laos’ answer to the Arc de Triomphe. A winding stone staircase leads up to its central tower for panoramic views over the city. From here, it’s a short tuk-tuk drive east to the golden stupa of Pha That Luang, the city’s most treasured Buddhist site. Dotted with orange-robed monks and worshippers, the stupa’s immaculate grounds are peaceful despite the busy location. Lunch awaits a few streets south at the colorful Lao café Doi Ka Noi (424 Sisangvong Rd.; 856-20/5589-8959), where chef-owner Noi serves up a daily-changing menu from her tiny kitchen. The sai oua gop—frog stuffed with pork and herbs—is a standout.

**Afternoon:** Catch a tuk-tuk to COPE (Khouvieng Rd.; 856-21/241-972; copelaos.org), a nonprofit organization that provides prosthe-

ses to victims of unexploded ordnance. At its informative visitor’s center, you’ll learn that Laos has the tragic distinction of being the most heavily bombed place on earth—between 1964 and 1973, the United States dropped around two million tons of ordnance on the country, of which 30 percent failed to immediately detonate—and that unexploded munitions continue to account for as many as 300 casualties a year.

Across the road, stop for a Lao foot massage at the Green Park Boutique Hotel (856-21/264-097; greenparkvientiane.com) before heading off again toward Wat Si Muang, where women sell offerings such as parcels of sticky rice, bananas, marigolds, and twittering sparrows in bamboo cages. On the other side of the temple, stop into The Little House (Manthatourat Rd.; 856-20/5540-6036), a Japanese teahouse with delectable homemade cakes, scones, and iced organic coffee. Around the corner is the I-cat Gallery (231 Setthathirath Rd.; 856-20/7783-9674), a contemporary exhibition space for local painters, sculptors, photographers, and other artists.

**Evening:** Unwind with sundowners at downtown bar I-Beam (88 Setthathirath Rd.; 856-21/254-528), which also comes with an extensive wine list and tapas plates including the popular spiced pork belly. For a quieter and more leisurely meal, head upstairs to French fine-dining restaurant Le Silapa (856-21/219-689).

### • DAY TWO

**Morning:** You won’t find better latte art in Vientiane than at Naked Espresso 2 (Manthatourath Rd.; 856-30/538-3392); add a fresh-pressed apple-and-ginger juice and an avocado toastie to your order and you’re set till lunch. A block to the west, Nokeokoummane Road is home to Lao Textiles (856-21/212-123; laotextiles.com) and Mulberries (856-21/241-217; mulberries.org), both excellent stops for ethical, artisan-made handicrafts including colorful silk wall hangings, scarves, and shawls. For fair-trade bamboo products and spoons made from recycled bomb casings, head to nearby

Saoban (97/1 Chao Anou Rd.; 856-21/241-835; saobancrafts.com). Around the corner, T’Shop Lai Gallery (Inpeng Rd.; 856-21/223-178) stocks soaps, body creams, wooden homewares, and other items from a disadvantaged women’s cooperative called Les Artisans Lao. Break for another cup of superb Lao coffee at boutique roaster Le Trio (Setthathirath Rd., near Nam Phu; 856-20/2255-3552). Upstairs is the Ock Pop Tok (ockpoptok.com) pop-up shop, a must-see for the brand’s award-winning Luang Prabang textiles.

**Afternoon:** For lunch, sit by the bar at Spanish-style steakhouse Pimenton (5 Nokeokoummane Rd.; 856-21/215-506; pimentonrestaurant-vte.com), where steaks, ribs, and burgers are cooked to perfection on a giant open-fire grill. Back at the Ansara, wafts of cinnamon and jasmine may entice you to cross the street for an afternoon spa treatment at the gloriously chilled Tangerine Garden (856-21/251-452). Let them.

**Evening:** As the sun starts to set, follow it toward

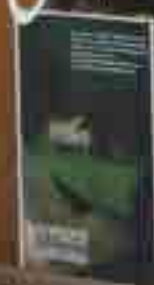






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silk tea fruit

Mulberries



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## FAR FJORDS

Wild landscapes, empty roads, and more than a few surprises await along the shores of Iceland's remote eastern fjordland.

BY WILL HIDE



On the Edge  
A stretch of the  
Ring Road south  
of Berufjörður in  
fog-prone East  
Iceland.

COURTESY OF FESTIVAL D'ÉTÉ/ANDRÉ-OLIVIER LYRA; COURTESY OF FIELD DAY/CAROLINA FARUOLO



In the far east of Iceland, it pays to grab your photo opportunities when you can. One moment the sun is shining brightly on a couple of small, shaggy-maned horses posing nonchalantly against a backdrop of cascading waterfalls, and the next, a thick fog has rolled in across the fjord and you're groping your way back to your rental car in near-zero visibility.



Did the makers of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* face similar challenges when they shot Ben Stiller's skateboarding scenes along the road to Seyðisfjörður in 2012? Perhaps—though you wouldn't know it from the film's final cut, which portrays a gorgeous landscape of mountain-backed fjords lapped by water the color of steel. Never mind that erupting CGI volcano: East Iceland, with its swaths of spongy green moss and craggy, mist-shrouded hills, is heaven for hikers, birders, kayakers, and nature photographers. Just don't expect to see too many of them. While the country is welcoming more travelers than ever before, most stick to the so-called Golden Circle route, which takes you from Reykjavík through Thingvellir National Park to Gullfoss waterfall and the geothermal field of Haukadalur. The remote east, by contrast, offers a respite from the crowds. Intrepid travelers aside, it's home to just 5 percent of Iceland's already modest population (332,000), with long stretches of empty road connecting a scattering of isolated fishing villages and lonely farmsteads.

One of the latter was my first stop after driving an hour and a half south from the airport at Egilsstaðir, Iceland's largest eastern township. "Once you reach Berufjörður, keep going a bit and look for the red roof on the left," Svavar Pétur Eysteinnsson, owner of Karlsstaðir Farm, had e-mailed me the day before. The directions were vague, yes, but sufficient. Thanks to a thick fog that had descended by the time I reached Berufjörður, that roof was all I could see through the murk—a ruddy sheet of corrugated metal seemingly afloat in a vaporous gray sea.

Originally from Reykjavík, Eysteinnsson and his wife Berglind Häsler moved here with their three children in 2014, converting the property's 1927-built farmhouse into a cozy B&B called Havaí and starting production on a line of vegan sausages and sea salt-dusted turnip chips. Confirming my conviction that Icelanders are both multitasking and quirky, the couple also happens to be behind the band Prins Póló, whose soundtrack to the indie movie hit *Paris Norðursins* ("Paris of the North") became one of Iceland's top-selling albums in 2014. Arrive at the right time in summer and they may be throwing an impromptu concert for friends in their barn.

My original plan had been to do some hiking in the area, but the weather scotched that idea. So after a sausage-centric lunch during which Svavar and I chatted variously about music, politics, and vegetables, I got back on the road for the meandering drive north to Stöðvarfjörður. I arrived an hour

later, by which time the fog had thinned but not dissipated altogether, lending a striking photographic quality to the seashore.

Once a thriving fishing village, Stöðvarfjörður is now home to the HERE Creative Centre, set inside a converted fish factory. The young, enthusiastic artists I met seemed to relish having an overseas visitor to admire their recording studio and workshops for ceramics, wood, and metal. "Tell more people to come, we need the money!" they called out as I left to wander up the street to Stöðvarfjörður's other claim to fame, Petra's Stone Collection. Billed as the largest private as-



semblage of minerals and crystals in the world, it fills the small bungalow and garden of local rock hound Petra Sveinsdóttir. Though she died four years ago at the age of 94, her time capsule of a house remains as much a museum for those who want to remember bygone days of East Iceland as for those whose interest lies in glinting shelves of jasper, quartz, and amethyst.

Looping around the next inlet to Fáskrúðsfjörður, I checked in to a century-old former hospital called Fosshotel Eastfjords. In the hotel's bar a crew of young cod fishermen were bracing themselves for a night on the Atlantic. "It's a shit job, but the money's good," one of them told me after inquiring about my English football team allegiance: Icelanders are obsessed with the Premier League and you'll win friends if you can chat about Leicester City's winning streak or Spurs' strengths in defense.

The next morning I drew back my curtains to reveal the mirror-like waters of the fjord outside my window. In the small museum across the road, exhibits explained how Fáskrúðsfjörður served as a seasonal base for French fishermen from the mid-19th century until the outbreak of World War I. Working conditions were horrendous, as men were paid only for what they caught, which meant they had to stay on deck in freezing weather on mountainous seas for hours at a time, swigging alcohol to numb the cold. The reward was a pension, unusual for the time. But the graveyard on the edge of town was a frequent destination for those who never got to cash their pay slip. It's still there today. A French flag flaps forlornly over those who never sailed south again, and streets bear both French and Icelandic names in their memory.

I carried on north to Neskaupstaður. In summer, the town's headline attraction is a heavy-metal festival called Eistnaflug, which translates to "Flying Testicles." But I was here to hike, and the weather gods were finally cooperating.

"We are like Scotland on steroids," said my trekking guide Siggí Olafsson, smiling broadly under a cloudless September sky as we caught a boat across the fjord to a beach on the Barðnes Peninsula. There was no one else around, and we tramped for several hours over squelchy moss toward dramatic sea cliffs to peer over the edge at the gannets and gulls below. Afterward, back in Neskaupstaður, I soaked in the municipal hot springs, chatting with the locals as the fog rolled in once more.

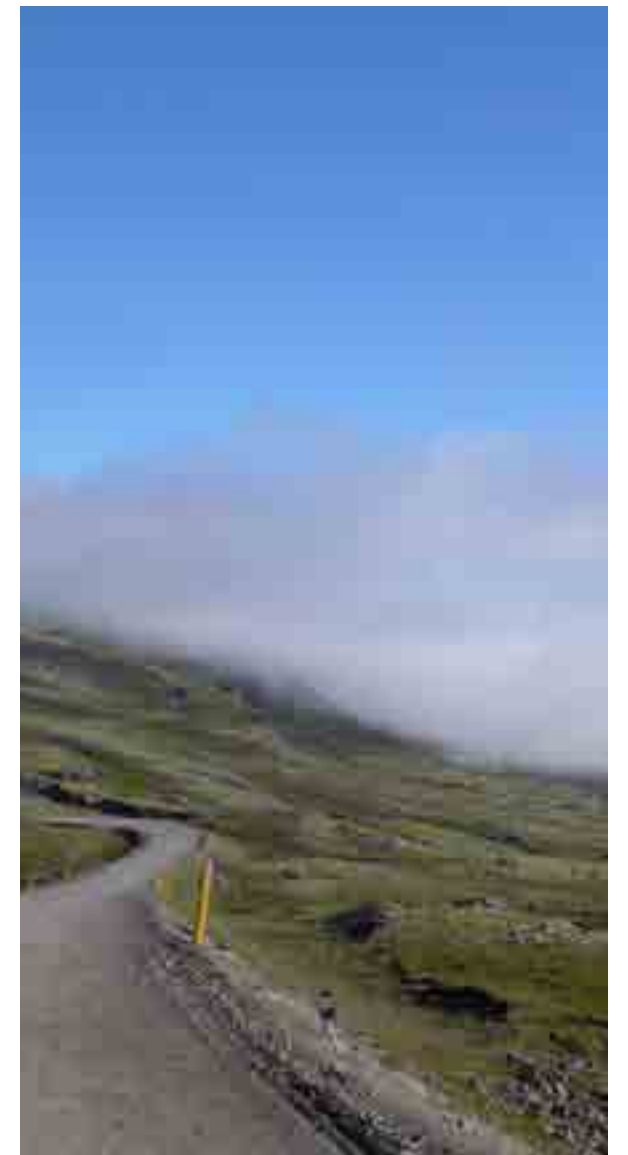
My last stop was Seyðisfjörður, where Ben Stiller's *Walter Mitty* finished his skateboard ride. "Yes, we still get people knocking on our door because they recognize it from the film," laughed the own-



ers of the Hótel Aldan, a red-trimmed former bank building that sits right at the entrance to town.

Tucked at the head of a 17-kilometer-long fjord, Seyðisfjörður is an artsy place that buzzes in summer, when daylight is pretty much around the clock and tourists keep galleries and restaurants busy. I settled in for the evening at the cozy Skaffell Bistro and was served beer and pizza by candlelight. As I wandered back to my hotel along the harbor, the northern lights

glimmered ever so faintly above the surrounding hills.







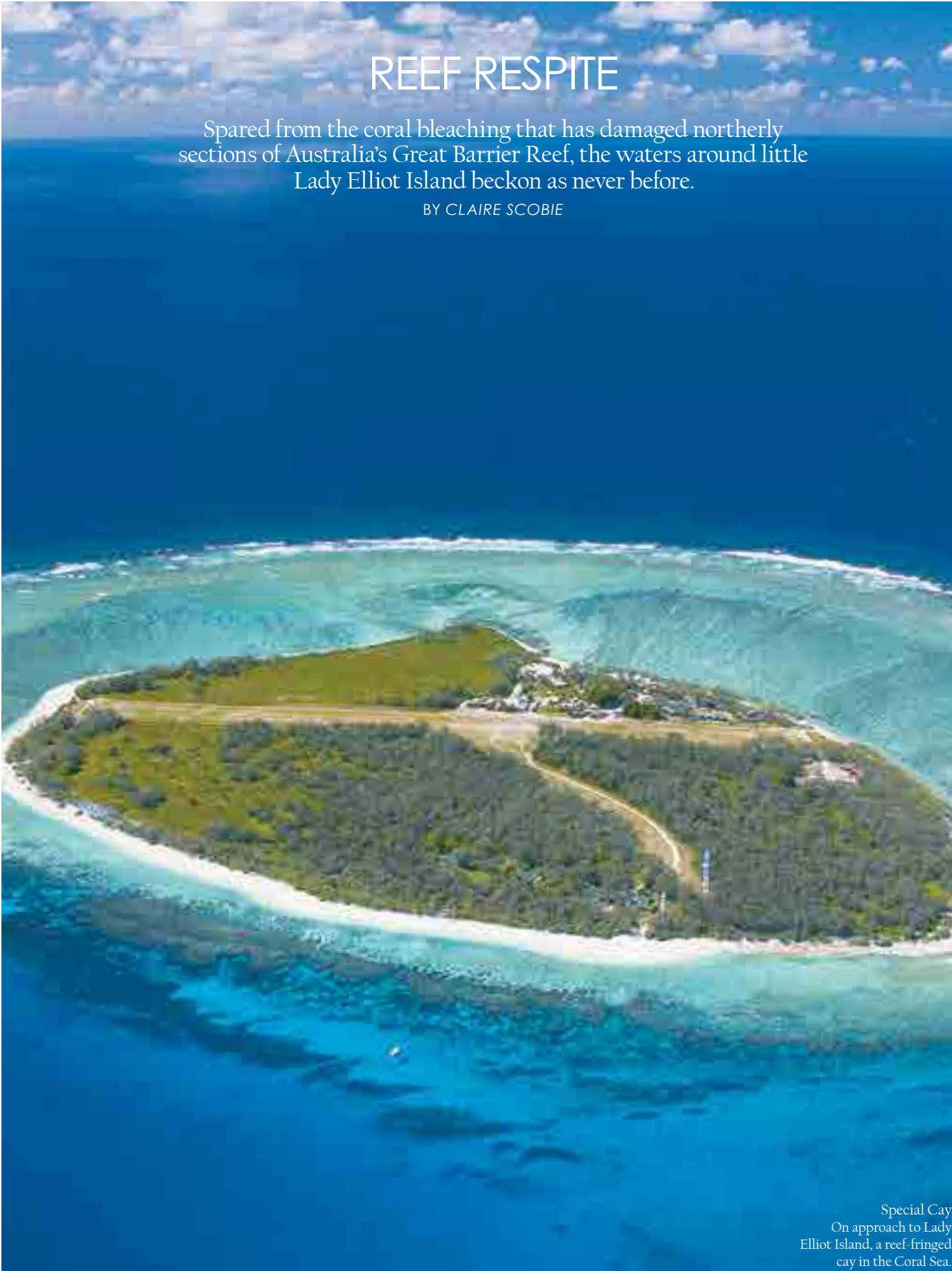
COURTESY OF FESTIVAL D'ÉTÉ/ANDRÉ-OLIVIER LYRA; COURTESY OF FIELD DAY/CAROLINA FARUOLO



Getting There  
The gateway to East  
Iceland is Egilsstaðir,  
an hour's flight from  
Reykjavik on Air  
Iceland ([airiceland.is](http://airiceland.is)).

COURTESY OF FESTIVAL D'ÉTÉ/ANDRÉ-OLIVIER LYRA; COURTESY OF FIELD DAY/CAROLINA FARUOLO





COURTESY OF FESTIVAL D'ÉTÉ/ANDRÉ-OLIVIER LYRA; COURTESY OF FIELD DAY/CAROLINA FARJOLLO

Forty minutes after taking off from Hervey Bay on the Queensland coast, our 14-seater Cessna Caravan begins its descent toward a pearly-white apostrophe that moments ago was barely visible amid the sparkling expanse of the Coral Sea. The plane veers sharply. I gulp as the grassy airstrip comes into view. It's only 620 meters long, virtually the length of Lady Elliot Island itself. As we touch down, spending three tech-free days on a tiny coral cay at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef suddenly seems too long.



I'm traveling with Fiona, a high-maintenance girlfriend from London, who thankfully appears unfazed when a glance at our phones confirms there's no service. Nor does she balk at our simple beach cabin at the island's sole hotel, Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort. Soon enough we've kicked off our city heels and surrendered to our surroundings. By the end of the day, it already feels like our own island. You don't come to Lady Elliot for frills and fine dining; guests

and staff share the same buffet-style dining room with cheeky buff-banded rails, flightless birds that have made the resort their own. (Mind you, hearty Greek salads and things like barramundi with mango dressing and blueberry clafoutis ensure that mealtimes are memorable.) You come for the astounding beauty and diversity of its underwater life—and all within minutes from your bed. A highly protected "green zone" within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, the island attracts more than 1,200 subtropical, tropical, and temperate marine species. It also has more resident manta rays than anywhere else in the world—the Brisbane-based research program Project Manta has catalogued over 800 individuals in these waters. And then there's the thriving population of green sea turtles that come to feed, mate, and lay eggs. During the February–April hatching season, visitors can watch thousands of baby turtles take their first unsteady steps as they race for the surf.

Maggie McNeil, the resort's activities supervisor and a qualified marine biologist, explains that beginner snorkelers—that's us—should start in the sheltered lagoon before attempting the snorkeling trail on the island's western side. In true Aussie style, she also warns us what's deadly. "To avoid getting stabbed by a stone fish, always wear covered footwear when walking in the shallows," she says. "And stay away from any cone-shaped shells as they shoot out lethal poison. If it's a cone, leave it alone."

While we are here mainly for the manta rays, I'm also itching to train my binoculars on the island's prolific birdlife—94 species in all. This includes the occasional red-tailed tropicbird. Like the albatross that can stay airborne all day, these slender white seabirds are so unwieldy on land they simply plummet to the ground and waddle to the nearest bush.

It turns out that Fiona and I are equally unwieldy in the water. We are the galumphing pair—I'm Laurel to her Hardy—who fall over in our flippers (note to self: next time walk backward into the water), flounder in the shallows, and, on our first afternoon, privately wonder how we can swim in a lagoon that barely reaches to our knees.

All is revealed at high tide when the mud flats magically disappear. Wearing spongy-soled shoes provided by the resort, a sturdy stick in hand, we set off on a guided reef walk. This involves wading through the shallows, careful to avoid stepping on the coral, and marveling at the extraordinary underwater garden coming to life around us. The next hour passes like a walking meditation. Three days without cell-phone service doesn't seem so long after all.

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COURTESY OF FESTIVAL D'ÉTÉ/ANDRÉ-OLIVIER LYRA; COURTESY OF FIELD DAY/CAROLINA FARJOLLO



Along the reef on the western side of the island are a series of coral outcrops known locally as bommies, which we explore on a glass-bottomed boat tour. Bommies also serve as cleaning stations for mantas, who rely on wrasse and butterfly fish to nibble away at the dead skin and parasites that have accumulated on their bodies and even inside their gills and mouths. Sure enough, it doesn't take long for Maggie McNeill to spot a rippling black fin below us. "Snorkels on. Jump in," she commands.

We stare through our masks at a school of yellow trumpet fish before locking our eyes on the manta, its triangular fins seven meters across. I watch mesmerized as it swoops and glides through the water, giving me a peep of its soft white underbelly. Surrounding it is a host of smaller fish, darting in and out to clean their giant visitor.

The next day we feel confident enough to do the more intensive snorkel "safari." Thanks to a westerly wind, the water is choppy and the current is stiff, bringing shoals of fish closer to shore. "Bad for us but good for the sharks," says our boat driver, Phil Mitchell, who has a mop of brown hair and an acerbic Aussie wit.

"Sharks?" says an English mother nervously, pulling her two boys close. "They're vegetarian aren't they?"

"Oh yes," Mitchell responds drily. "They just take a leg."

That doesn't stop any of us from diving in. And over the next hour there is so much to look at, it's hard to focus on anything. At least 10 huge mantas flap lazily by, followed shortly by a school of bigeye trevally and a large black kingfish. Cowtail and white-spotted eagle rays hover above the seabed. Later, at the wreck of the *Severance*, a sailing boat that struck the reef in 1999, we see eight black-tipped reef sharks circling for food. But it's not until I spot the toothy mouth of a giant moray eel gaping at me that I retreat back to the boat.

By our last morning on the island, Fiona and I have both conquered our fear of the deep.

**What Lies Beneath**  
Divers and snorkelers will have plenty to explore around Lady Elliot, where sites range from reef walls to bommies to the coral-festooned wreck of the sailing boat *Severance*, pictured above.

COURTESY OF FESTIVAL D'ÉTÉ/ANDRÉ-OLIVIER LYRA; COURTESY OF FIELD DAY/CAROLINA FARJOLLO



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## ON SAFARI IN NEPAL

BY JASON OVERDORF  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
CAROL SACHS

EVEN AS THE  
COUNTRY'S RHINO  
POPULATION BOUNCES  
BACK WITH RECORD  
NUMBERS, A NEW  
JUNGLE LODGE BY  
THE TAJ GROUP IS  
SEEKING TO REDEFINE  
THE WILDERNESS  
EXPERIENCE IN NEPAL.

Ticket to Ride Guests  
of Taj Safaris' Meghauri  
Serai lodge can sign up  
for elephant-back safaris  
aboard residents of a  
nearby elephant camp.



# “A vast expanse of luxuriant urban forest”

was so still that the snap of a twig sounded like a gunshot. I froze, hunched over in a half-crouch, and peered through a thicket of rosewood and acacia. A dozen strides away, a one-horned rhinoceros cow wallowed in a muddy stream on the edge of the tall grass. “Can you see the calf?” whispered my guide, Mankumar. I sank to my haunches and craned my neck as the rhino splashed toward some succulent reeds to reveal a baby version of herself, seemingly tethered to its mother’s hip.

It was a stunning moment. To my surprise and delight, I had glimpsed several rhinos here in Nepal’s Chitwan National Park the day before. But those sightings had come from the isolated safety of a safari jeep, which is why I hadn’t batted an eye when a big, near-sighted bull stared us down, weighing whether or not to charge. Today was different. Together with Mankumar and naturalist Dipu Sasi, I’d tracked the rhino cow through the jungle on foot, following colossal dung piles and flat, featureless footprints as big as dinner plates. Now, the only thing between me and the 1,600-kilogram animal was a stand of brambles no thicker than my pinky finger.

Mankumar and I watched in awed silence for a few tense minutes until the rhino and her calf lumbered deeper into the reeds. As we crept back to join Dipu on the game trail, our feet crunching in the apricot-colored fallen leaves of the sal trees towering above us, I knew this was one animal encounter that I’d never forget.

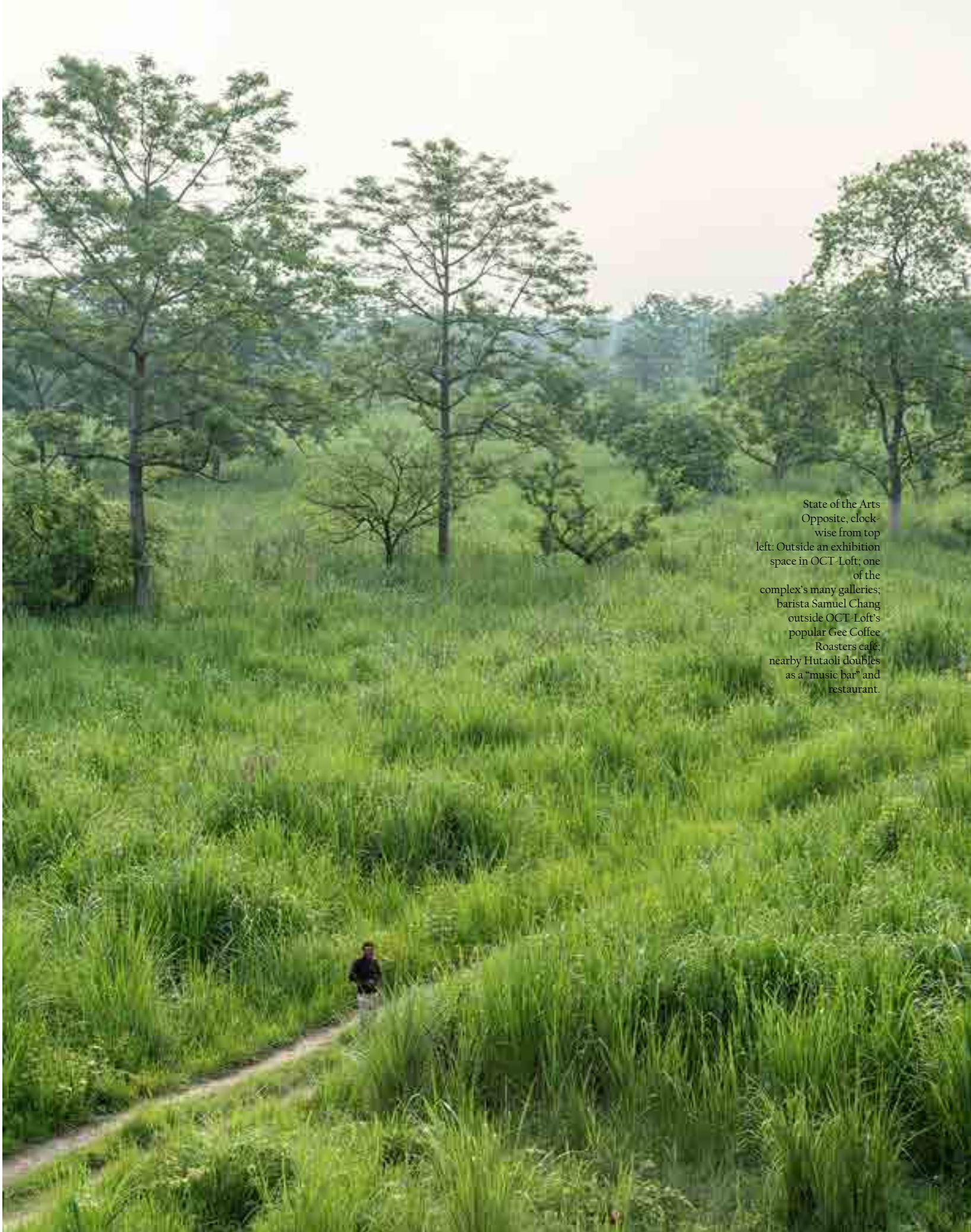
Nearly hunted to extinction by the early 20th century, the greater one-horned rhinoceros (a.k.a. the Indian rhinoceros) has made a remarkable comeback in Nepal since the 10-year civil war between Maoist guerrillas and what was then known as the Royal Nepalese Army ended in 2006. During a decade in which more than 6,000 rhinos were killed for their horns in Africa and neighboring India, Nepal virtually eliminated poaching, declaring its first “zero poaching” year in 2011 and repeating the milestone four times since then. In last year’s census, the country’s rhino population stood at 645—nearly double the 2006 number and the highest total recorded since conservation efforts began in 1957.

For Ghana S. Gurung, a conservationist with the Nepal branch of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the success is almost unbelievable. On top of all the other challenges, most of Nepal’s



National Treasure  
Opposite: One  
of Meghauli Serai’s  
nature guides inside  
Chitwan National Park.

high-ranking wildlife officials were killed in a helicopter crash in September 2006, just two months before the peace deal was brokered. Younger, less experienced staff had to fill the gap amid a full-blown conservation crisis. “We were in political chaos,” Gurung told me over the phone from Kathmandu. “The [conservation] infrastructure was totally destroyed. Now, getting to this level is a dream come true.”



State of the Arts  
Opposite, clock-  
wise from top  
left: Outside an exhibition  
space in OCT Loft; one  
of the  
complex’s many galleries;  
barista Samuel Chang  
outside OCT Loft’s  
popular Gee Coffee  
Roasters café;  
nearby Hutaoli doubles  
as a “music bar” and  
restaurant.





Paddle Power  
On a sunset boat ride  
down the Rapti River.  
Opposite: The entrance to  
Meghauli Serai's village-  
inspired dining courtyard,  
which showcases the  
culture, cuisine, and  
architecture of the Tharu  
people of Nepal's sub-  
Himalayan lowlands.





Safari Chic:  
The dining room at  
Meghauli Serai; sel roti—a  
sort of Nepali doughnut—  
with pickled potato; a  
nature guide; Meghauli  
Serai's main lodge.





**Getting There**

Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport is serviced by a handful of Southeast Asian carriers, including Silk Air and Air Asia (with direct flights from both Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur). From Hong Kong, Shenzhen is easily accessed by road or train. The Hong Kong MRT's East Rail Line travels to the Hong Kong/Chinese border in just under an hour; after disembarking at Lo Wu for border formalities, travelers can hop straight on the Shenzhen metro service.



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a full-blown conservation crisis. "We were in political chaos," Gurung told me over the phone from Kathmandu. "The [conservation] infrastructure was totally destroyed. Now, getting to this level is a dream come true."

The transition has not been painless, however. During the war, the country plunged from being the 10th most popular destination for adventure travelers to a lowly 27th, according to a survey conducted by the website iExplore. The rhino population, too, dropped to an all-time low for the modern era, as the Nepalese army battalions tasked with park conservation disbanded most of their posts in Chitwan and two other rhinoceros habitats—Bardia National Park and Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve—for fear of being overwhelmed by insurgents. The result was a free-for-all for poachers.

The rebels, meanwhile, though sparing trekkers from any violence, were not above asking for "donations" from foreigners found walking in the wilderness. And they made no bones about exacting tribute from the capitalists involved in the hotel business.

In 2004, extortion threats were behind the temporary closure of two upscale properties in Kathmandu as well as the decision by the Taj Group to abandon its once lucrative 25-year contract to operate the Hotel Annapurna. India's largest hotel chain—one of the most prestigious hospitality brands in the region—had quit Nepal.

This April, Taj announced its return.

Two days before my encounter with the mama rhino and her calf, I'd flown to Nepal from my home in Delhi to check out the venture that had lured the company back: a US\$7 million lodge on the edge of Chitwan National Park called Meghauri Serai.

It's the first international project undertaken by the group's Taj Safaris division, which was formed as a partnership with luxe African safari specialists andBeyond in 2006 to develop a circuit of jungle lodges in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Having visited two of those properties, I was keen to see how Taj's brand of high-end and sustainable wildlife tourism translated in the subtropical lowlands of south-central Nepal.

Taj Touch  
Opposite, clockwise  
from top left: Cool  
towels and a warm  
welcome; paneer  
paratha with yogurt  
and chutney; the  
main lodge and  
pool at dusk; birders  
can look forward to  
spotting a bevy of  
feathered species in  
Chitwan.



have relocated to comparable sites on the outskirts of the park.

In a market where luxury is often a relative term, Meghauri Serai, which boasts 13 hotel-style rooms and an opulent presidential suite alongside 16 spacious pool villas, has set the bar high. Apart from their stunning riverside location, guest quarters and common areas have a rustic beauty that is elegant but understated. The focus on local materials and artisans—exemplified in touches like subtle, hand-painted murals and the elephant-grass-and-bamboo furniture in the main lodge—makes the place seem like a natural addition to the landscape. Even the spout of my villa's marvelous outdoor shower was a stone carving, reminiscent of a tiger's head, from which the water splashed as though it was being poured by an enormous pitcher.

Chef Lekhraj Dangi, a Nepalese veteran of several top Taj properties in India, uses the hotel's two organic gardens to delicious effect, creating a diverse menu from the cuisines of the country's many different ethnicities. Presented artfully on the traditional banana leaf or in simple copper bowls, dishes like his chicken choyla (a pungent Newari favorite) and shapale (a Tibetan meat pie) provide a convincing argument for placing Nepalese food alongside Asia's better known cuisines. And what Dangi doesn't grow himself he sources from nearby farms, enhancing Meghauri Serai's contribution to the local economy.

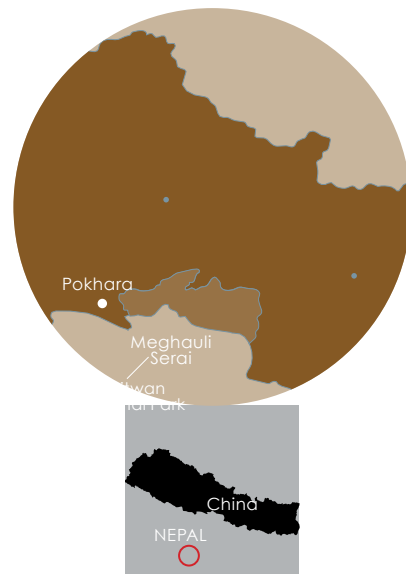
But as I've discovered over the course of half a dozen safaris, the true measure of a wilderness lodge is the caliber of its guides. Low proficiency in English and reliance on rote learning all too often give South Asia's wildlife guides a sort of robotic quality. That's why Taj Safaris, at the behest of andBeyond, introduced a longer and more detailed training program for its guides and naturalists. In contrast to the two-week orientations typical of other outfits, Taj Safaris' guides spend three months and its naturalists spend four to five months developing their existing knowledge of local plants and wildlife and learning how best to communicate their vision of the forest to foreign guests.

The results were evident whenever I stepped into Chitwan, whether for a jeep ride through the towering sal trees, a stealthy hike through the grasslands, or a rolling elephant ride along the riverbed among the herds of hog deer. A birder by inclination, Dipu, who spent several years at the Taj Safaris lodges in Madhya Pradesh prior to being posted to Nepal, was quick to spy swift, darting songbirds like the wagtail and Indian roller from the jeep and canoe. He offered a wealth of knowledge of jungle signs—from an ant lion's nest to

a sloth bear's attack on a termite mound—when we got out and hiked. And the thrill of the sighting or discovery was never lost in the rhythmic incantation of tour-guide spiel.

It was a rich tapestry. During a jeep ride with two other British guests on my first morning in the park, we saw the pencil-nosed gharial (fish-eating crocodile), the rare great hornbill, half a dozen rhinos, herds of spotted deer, and countless exotic butterflies and birds. Later that afternoon, by boat, we floated lazily down the river past a bathing rhino to spot an open-billed crane and a pied kingfisher, before stopping for sundowners on a spit of water-smoothed stones at the confluence of the Rapti and Narayani rivers.

The forest walk the next morning offered a more intimate jungle experience, as Dipu, Mankumar, and I hiked past a ficus tree still smoking from a controlled burn undertaken by the forest department, startling a heavy-antlered spotted buck. This was a rare treat for me, as only one of India's national parks (Satpura in Madhya Pradesh) permits walking tours, which is the only way to appreciate the forest's small details. This was also when we tracked and sighted the mama rhino and her calf.



#### THE DETAILS

Situated on the northern edge of Chitwan National Park, Meghauri Serai (977-56/695-304; tajsafaris.com; doubles from US\$590) is a four-plus-hour drive from Kathmandu; a better bet is to book the 20-minute flight with Buddha Air (buddhaair.com) to the town of Bharatpur, just 30 kilometers from the resort.

After a big second breakfast and a short rest, I came back down to the riverbank for the other highlight of my journey: an elephant bath. I'd been reading about the cruelty of captivity and the occasional elephant rampages associated with elephant rides in Thailand and elsewhere in Asia. But to tell the truth, I couldn't resist the opportunity to get up close and personal with one of the world's most charismatic and intelligent animals.

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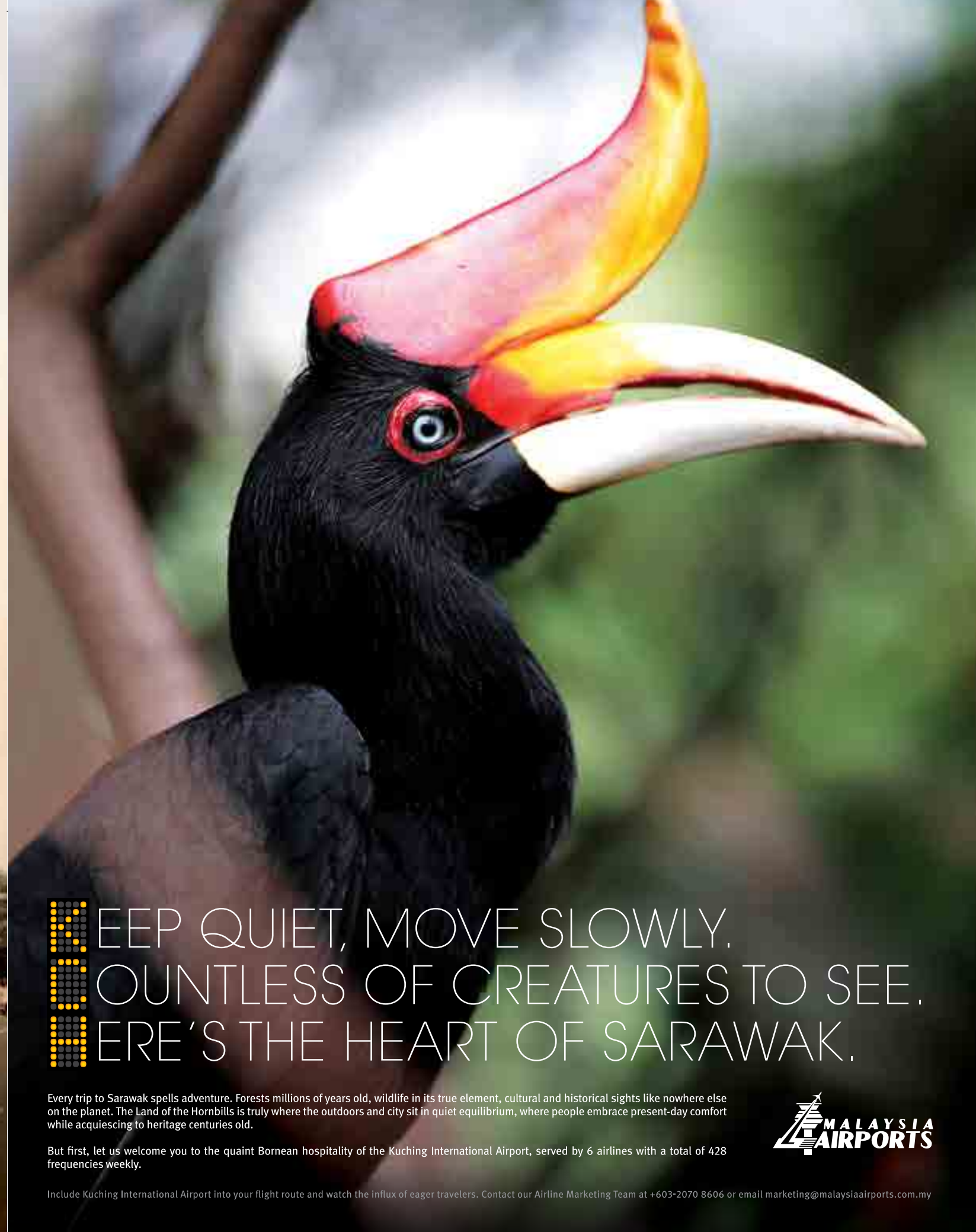


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Paddle Power  
On a bird-watching  
expedition down the  
Rapti River. Opposite:  
The entrance to  
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# ethiopia

## WILDER WANDER

ONCE OFF-LIMITS, THE EAST  
COAST OF THIS TEARDROP-  
SHAPED ISLAND IS MORE  
ALLURING NOW THAN IT HAS  
BEEN IN DECADES, WITH NEW  
RESORTS AND A NEWFOUND  
OPTIMISM PUTTING IT  
FIRMLY BACK ON THE SRI  
LANKAN TOURIST MAP.

BY CAIN NUNNS PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE



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**Paddle Power**  
On a bird-watching expedition down the Rapti River. Opposite: The entrance to Meghauli Serai's village-inspired dining courtyard, which showcases the culture, cuisine, and architecture of the Tharu people of Nepal's sub-Himalayan lowlands.





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spikes to 60 times normal levels. “Sometimes they even kidnap the domestic females and take them into the jungle.”

It was hard to imagine a better start to my stay. I’ve made more than six trips to India’s most famous national parks, and while visiting the jungle is always exciting, there are no guarantees you’ll spot one of South Asia’s equivalent of the Big Five—the Asiatic lion, Indian leopard, Bengal tiger, Indian elephant, and one-horned rhino. In fact, I’ve only ever seen a tiger. But here I was, newly arrived in Chitwan, and I had already laid eyes on a wild tusker.

As I crossed back through the lodge and crunched down the gravel path to my riverside villa, I reflected on what the Taj Group’s return might mean for Chitwan, the country’s oldest and most cherished national park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984. A few years ago, the government had forced the closure of all lodges operating within the reserve, including Temple Tiger and Tiger Tops, two of the country’s most famous wildlife resorts. Coming at a time when the country’s top hotels were bleeding money and tourist numbers were just starting to recover, it was a controversial move. Safari operators routinely claim that tourists and staff act as an informal deterrent to poaching, simply by putting more eyes and ears in the jungle. And while everybody loves elephants, rhinos, and tigers, it’s the tourist dollars they generate that provide the most compelling argument for rerouting highways and other measures needed to protect the reserve and the buffer zone around it. Moreover, it was the concessions inside the park that had put Nepal’s wildlife safaris on the map.

“When it comes to Nepal, everybody’s mind first goes to the mountains, the Himalayas,” said Basant Mishra, executive chairman of the Temple Tiger Group. “Why Chitwan became so famous is the work of the concessioners.”

But the Taj Group’s arrival suggested to me that pushing the old players out of the reserve—however painful in the short term—has opened the market up for new entrants. Freed from concerns about competing with properties located inside the park, Binod Chaudhary, the billionaire Nepalese real estate developer that built Meghauri Serai, already has two or three other developments in the works, while Tiger Tops and others have relocated to comparable sites on the outskirts of the park.

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addition to the landscape. Even the spout of my villa’s marvelous outdoor shower was a stone carving, reminiscent of a tiger’s head, from which the water splashed as though it was being poured by an enormous pitcher.

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With a little trepidation, I fed the sad-eyed female a few parcels of unhusked rice and jaggery. Then the mahout slid down and I stripped off my shirt to clamber aboard, straddling the elephant's huge neck as she lumbered toward the river. When we reached a swift flowing patch of smooth water, the mahout urged the elephant to sit down. She lurched to her knees one at a time, and then

ponderously listed to the left—20 degrees, 30 degrees, hang on!—until I splashed off into the river, a bit panicked about two and a half tons of pachyderm rolling onto my leg.

The mahout handed me a stone, and we set about scrubbing her down. (It turns out that when you're scrubbing a back the size of a small car with a rock, you think a lot about sensitive skin.) Then I climbed back on and got my own version of a bath when she pumped a trunk-full of river water onto her back.

Later, the same mahout and elephant took us on a long excursion down the riverbed—not into the park itself, but through a "community forest" that is regulated and maintained by local villagers. I couldn't help but think of the wild bull elephant that had greeted me from across the river on my arrival, and the tenuous boundaries that always exist between tourism and conservation. Would that tusker someday abduct the elephant cow I was riding and take her away into the forest, I wondered? ●



COURTESY OF FESTIVAL D'ÉTÉ/ANDRÉ-OLIVIER LYRA; COURTESY OF FIELD DAY/CAROLINA FARUOLO



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On a bird-watching expedition down the Rapti River. Opposite: The entrance to Meghauri Serai's village-inspired dining courtyard, which showcases the culture, cuisine, and architecture of the Tharu people of Nepal's sub-Himalayan lowlands.



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