

SPECIAL INSIDE
• A Q&A with a travel expert
• Exploring the exotic Kingdom of Bhutan

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DESTINATION PARADISE

The traveling never stops!

Every year, Stripes reaches out and asks readers to tell us all about the places they went during the past year. And, every year, you guys deliver. This year was no different! You traveled to places like New Zealand, Hawaii, Thailand and other exotic places. Now, you have the opportunity to read about 13 destinations in this jam-packed 2018-19 edition of Destination Paradise.

One of Stripes' favorite writers, Nano Betts, kicks off the 52 pages of Pacific destinations with a place that many have on their bucket list: Bali. She also had quite an adventure in New Zealand, even finding time to visit the home of some Hobbits.

Nano is such a travel junkie that we thought it best to sit down with her. So, this year's magazine includes a Q&A with her. Having traveled to countless places around the Pacific, she's the perfect brain to pick for anyone looking to travel a lot during their stay in the region.

What do you know about Bhutan? I'm guessing it isn't much. Well, Stripes' own Rob Zuckerman made the journey to the exotic and remote country. Where is Bhutan located you ask? You'll just have to read to find out!

Zeke Lyons took his family to Thailand, where they spent time on beautiful Railay Beach, and best of all – he's sharing his adventure with all of you.

If fun in the sun isn't your thing, fret not, we've got you covered! AFN's own Joely Santiago takes us on a wintery trip to Northern Japan for some snowboarding and lodging in a snowy cabin in the woods.

Stripes is all about giving our readers a platform to tell their stories to fellow members of the military community. After all, you are the experts when it comes to life abroad in the Pacific.

Our community newspapers – Stripes Japan, Stripes Okinawa, Stripes Guam and Stripes Korea – serve up travel and culture stories, restaurant reviews, and the latest happenings on and off the local bases.

Although we can't always get everything into the newspaper, StripesJapan.com, StripesOkinawa.com, StripesKorea.com and Guam.Stripes.com are all packed with helpful, local information.

Many of our stories and helpful videos can also be found on our Facebook page. Search Stripes Pacific on Facebook, and be sure to follow us to get all the latest info on what's going on as well as the details on all the fun contests Stripes is running.

We want to help you get out and explore, but we need your help! So, don't be shy. Reach out and tell us what's on your mind. I promise we'll get right back to you.

In the meantime, give the magazine a read and get some ideas for that next trip of your own. Who knows, maybe next year you'll find yourself published in this magazine.

Ian Waddick
Publishing and Media Design Editor
Stars and Stripes



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Ian Waddick
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Kayoko Shimoda
Layout Designer

Max D. Lederer Jr.
Publisher

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“After spending only 12 hours here and barely scratching the surface, I’m nowhere close to being fit to offer you ‘a comprehensive guide of Ubud’, but I’m more than qualified to share how to plan the most perfect day there.”

The most perfect day in Ubud

Story and photos by
NANO BETTS



Despite us having only five days to spare in Bali, I couldn’t possibly leave the island without seeing Ubud, the culture capital of the island. Ubud is awash with fascinating things to do and stunning places to visit. As tempting as it was to make it a marathon of ticking “must-see things” off the list, this trip was all about pure relaxation and indulgence, so we decided to make a leisurely day out of it, and enjoy Ubud at our own slow pace. And it was amazing.

To ensure a comfortable tour, I hired a driver from BaliCab, who promptly picked us up at the hotel early in the morning as I requested and was incredibly cordial. Even though I had a general idea of places I wanted us to see (well, you didn’t believe I would travel completely unprepared, did you?), I trusted his advice to opt for some other spots to avoid notorious local traffic. And I was so happy I did, because he showed us around some amazing places and made sure we fell irrevocably in love with Ubud.

After spending only

12 hours here and barely scratching the surface I’m nowhere close to being fit to offer you “a comprehensive guide of Ubud,” but I’m more than qualified to share how to plan the most perfect day there. So, without further ado, here’s the story of our first taste of Ubud.

PURA TAMAN AYUN TEMPLE

I was particularly keen to visit local temples because I’m fascinated by the architecture of Balinese places of worship – open air spaces with intricately decorated gates and thatched-roof pavilions. Known as the land of a thousand temples, Bali is home to more than 5,000 stunning examples. In fact, every single family has a small shrine in Bali.

This means that while there are a few prominent temples to visit, if it is a truly off the beaten track photography opportunity you are looking for, then drive around (not just within

Ubud), observe and I promise you, you’ll find more than one temple grounds that will make your jaw drop.

For the first time in my life, I wish I could rent a motorbike and just roam the nooks and crannies of local villages. The untainted beauty of this island is unimaginable.

We got the windshield tour of villages in and around Ubud, I



PURA TAMAN AYUN TEMPLE

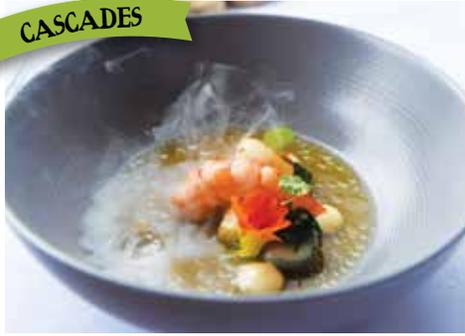


INDONESIA

dedicated to Sanghyang Widhi, the highest Balinese deity. This temple was to serve as a main site of worship among the Mengwi people who need not travel too far to the main large temples.

GUNUNG KAWI SEBATU TEMPLE

CASCADES



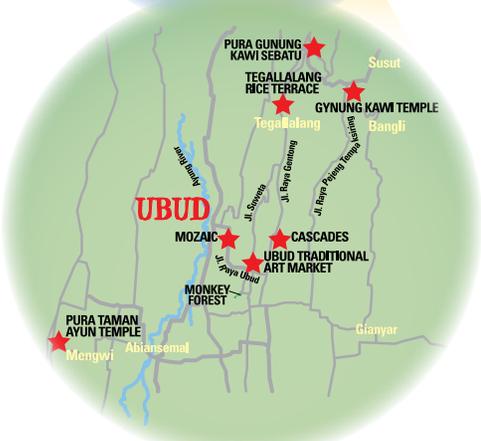
LUNCH AT CASCADES BY VICEROY BALI

After frolicking the grounds of Taman Ayun, we were sufficiently hungry for a delicious lunch. Choosing a place to eat in Ubud is very hard simply because there are so many great options – from local warungs serving finger-licking Indonesian fare to fine dining restaurants (I am so bummed we couldn't try the famous Locavore!). We opted for CasCades, and like I am so happy that we did. The view of the lush jungles that this area is so famous for was unbeatable. Plus, our multi-course chef's tasting menu didn't disappoint.

TEGALLALANG RICE TERRACES

The verdant winding rice paddies are perhaps one of the most iconic images of Bali and I was so keen to see it in person. It was every bit as beautiful as I imagined. Tegallalang is one of the most popular and hence the most touristy spots, surrounded with multiple local cafes where you can drink the local specialty – kopi luwak coffee and take in the beauty of the green of Bali. You can also walk around the terraces and take as many photos as your heart desires. I don't necessarily think these are the most beautiful terraces I've seen, even though I loved the wave like shape of the paddies that draped along the steep hillside into a deep gorge. But remember the point I made about temples? The same applies to the rice terraces. During our windshield tour of the area we saw so many spectacular spots that were equally beautiful and completely deserted. Having said that, I think it is absolutely worth seeing Tegallalang if you have a chance.

SEE BALI ON PAGE 8 ►

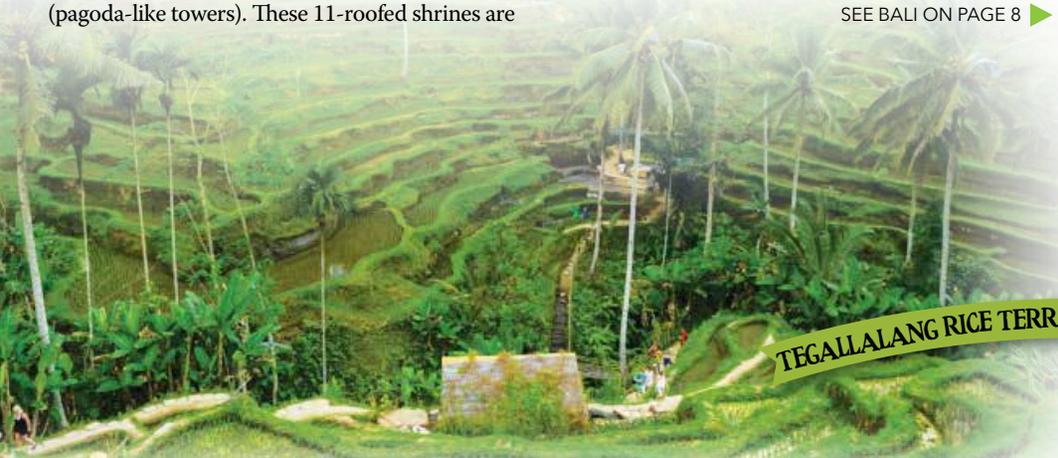


MY PARADISE

cannot even fathom what lies beyond. But I digress. An hour and a half drive from our hotel, brought us to the doors of Pura Taman Ayun Temple, which translates into a poetic name 'Garden Temple in the Water'. This UNESCO recognized site of cultural heritage is located in the village of Mengwi and dates back to 1634. The temple grounds featured spacious courtyards and enclosures with green lawns, manicured gardens, fish ponds and fountains and most importantly, jero – the gated holy area with multi-tiered meru (pagoda-like towers). These 11-roofed shrines are



TEGALLALANG RICE TERRACES



BALI

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

TOUR OF ART VILLAGES

Ubud is known as the culture capital of Bali for a good reason. There are dozens of villages and art markets where you can purchase the most beautiful local handicrafts and art work. Each village is famous for a specific form of art: you can find high quality wood carving in Desa Mas, highly skilled gold and silver crafting in Caluk, traditional Balinese paintings in Batuan, batik (clothe painting which is one of many Indonesian finest heritages) and traditional hand weaving in Tohpati Village. You can also watch many types of traditional dances being in Batubulan Village, which is known as one of the most artistic and creative villages in Bali. And there's also Ubud Art Market, open daily for the exchange of arts, handicrafts and textiles.

GUNUNG KAWI SEBATU TEMPLE

This place. It was otherworldly. I can't find another word to describe it. Located within the highland village of Sebatu in Tegallalang, it features verdant courtyard with ponds filled with carp and blooming lotuses, and ancient shrines surrounded by crystal clear pools fed by natural springs. You will even see roaming free packs of tame fowl, caged white doves and roosters frolicking around which makes you feel you just arrived into a Gar-



den of Eden.

Beside the pool there are two walled bathing sections that the locals and pilgrims to Gunung Kawi Sebatu actually use for bathing. Water features at Balinese Hindu temples are not only used for decoration purposes, but serve to purify and heal thus being used in every ceremony and ritual. The best part of this temple was that it was almost deserted, which contributed to the ethereal tranquil atmosphere.



GUNUNG KAWI TEMPLE

After all this sightseeing, we had just enough time and energy left before dinner for one more place and our driver surprised us with a visit to this special spot – Gunung Kawi Temple complex which is one of Bali's most unique archaeological sites. We descended a long flight of stairs (300 to be exact!), that winds through the stunning rice paddies and tropical forest lined with art shops and small local warungs, to the bed of the sacred Pakerisan River.

And then I gasped. No photo will ever do justice to the beauty of this place. There is a collection of massive ancient candi or shrine reliefs carved into the face of a rock cliffs facing each other on both sides of the river. Dedicated to the kings from centuries past, the complex exudes a certain mystical atmosphere of ancient legends and long lost tales of forgotten Balinese kings.

Legends relate that the whole group of memorials was carved out of the rock face in one hard-working night by the mighty fingernails of KeboIwa, a renowned military commander in ancient Balinese Kingdom who possessed supernatural powers. Legends aside, the candis of Gunung Kawi are believed to date back to the 11th century (1080

AD) and were carved under the orders of King Anak Wungsu in honor of his father, the great Balinese ruler Udayana and the Warmadewa Dynasty.

For what it's worth, President Obama also visited the place during his recent (June 2017) family trip to Bali. As with any other temple visit in Bali, and especially to temples held sacred, proper attire consisting of a sarong cloth with a sash around the waist is required for all visitors. The sash and sarong are available for rent at the ticket purchase booth before the stairs down to the valley.

I wasn't planning on it, but I felt like we saw two very special and off the beaten track temples and I couldn't have been more thankful to our driver for that.



DINNER AT MOZAIC

I didn't think anything could wow me at this point, but Mozaic (often touted as Bali's best restaurant) didn't fail to impress with its ambiance. Dining al fresco in a cozy lush courtyard at candlelit tables was the best ending to a wonderful day. Not to say that food is lacking in any way. Chef and owner Chris Salan's French-Indonesian restaurant has been a forerunner among Bali's elite dining club for a while now. Alongside charming ambiance, the signature multi-course tasting menu tantalizes your senses by showcasing the best of local and foreign ingredients cooked in the most beautiful and inventive way. We loved every single course and had the most romantic dinner of the trip.

On our way back to the hotel, as we drove past the flickering lights of the impatient motor-bikers, I couldn't help but smile to the perfect day we've had. At times letting go and going with the flow, truly leads to the best experiences.

Fresh off another trip, writer takes minute to talk travel



Nano Betts

A child in Soviet Russia, Nano Betts would travel to cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg with her mother. She may not have known it at the time, but it may have been those trips that planted the travel seeds in her brain. Now a military spouse, Betts and her husband are constantly visiting exciting new places, both in and around Japan. Her website, www.Travelwithnanob.com is full of stories and photos of the amazing places she visits. Fresh off her trip to Australia and New Zealand, Betts was kind enough to talk with Stars and Stripes about traveling in the Pacific.

Q Your website is full of stories and photos of the many places that you've been. What spurred your love to travel the world?

A It's hard to remember where or when I got infected with my travel bug first. I recently read an article by Conde Nast Traveler which claimed that the feeling of wanderlust is in our DNA. If that's true, then I might have gotten it from my mom. I was born in Soviet Russia with closed boundaries, but I remember my mom loved taking trips with me every season to Moscow and St. Petersburg - both very vibrant cities with dynamic cultural life - as well as resort towns like Sochi and Kislovodsk. Even though I was little, she made sure we visited all the galleries, museums and theater/ballet performances to instill love for art in me from the young age. I guess that is the reason I've always had itchy feet and insatiable urge to explore. I also love being in airports, there is inexplicable verve and excitement in the air. Plus, it's a great place to people watch.

Q Where have you traveled and what is your favorite place you've been (in and outside of the Pacific) and why?

A I've traveled around Europe, a bit of Asia and the States. While each country had something unique to offer, there are a few destinations that stand out as very special to me. I fell in love with London because it is a vibrant city with lots of history, culture and amazing array

of restaurants. Italy is my favorite country in the world. The locals fit my Caucasian temperament - communicative and outgoing. New Zealand absolutely awed me with its amazing natural beauty. I have never seen mountain ranges and glaciers that grand before. And I have the fondest memories of my time spent in Hawaii and Bali, both with my husband. Last but not least, I don't think there is a place quite like Japan. It is a combination of culture, people and overall sense of security and comfort that has made my life here an absolute dream.

Q What's the one place you want to visit the most and why?

A So many, I have hard time prioritizing. In my dreams, I go back to Europe to travel through the Scandinavian countries, especially Norway to view the Northern lights. I want to travel back to the UK and Ireland, this time with my husband to trace back his ancestral roots. I also want to visit south of Spain and Portugal because every photo I see of those places are absolutely jaw-dropping (let's be honest, I want to indulge in as many tapas as I can). Lastly, I want to explore South America when we move back to the States. Argentina, Chile and Peru are very high on my list.

Q What travel advice would you give to someone who just began a three-year stay in the Pacific?

A The Pacific is a totally different world, so have an open mind about things. Learn about local culture to make sure you respect their traditions and way of life. Most importantly, don't be afraid to explore and be adventurous. You will have the most wonderful tour because there is plenty to see and do. If you're not an independent planner, do your research on the web. Find local bloggers who would be happy to give recommendations based on your interests. Don't be afraid to get lost, because the best adventures I've had in Japan happened when I went off the beaten path.

Q On www.Travelwithnanob.com, you offer consultation for people planning a trip to Japan. Was it a goal of yours to start a travel-based business and how is that going?

A I never planned to turn my knowledge into business when I first started writing. My blog has aimed to share my experience with the readers. However, since I came to Japan and my readership grew significantly, I began receiving emails asking me to give them a tour of Tokyo, or help them review their itinerary and recommend places to see and things to do tailored to their travel aspirations. This gave me an idea to turn it into a mini-business. I am happy to say that I've provided my travel expertise to over two dozen customers now and it feels great to help people experience Japan and fall in love with it the way I did.

Q What place is next on the list for you to visit and why?

A It is our final year in Japan (insert lots of tears here), so we will do our best to travel around Asia. We have already been to China and Indonesia, but we'd love to visit countries like Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam to see a different side of this region. Not sure if we will be able to accomplish all of that in eight months (probably not), but at least we will always have a reason to come back.

Q If you were able to PCS in a year to anywhere in this world, where would you go and why?

A London. No place felt like home as much as London did, so an opportunity to actually live there would be a huge dream come true. It is in Europe and travel is so affordable and easily accessible that it would enable me to explore all the places I have on my bottomless bucket-list. Plus, the social media marketing industry in the UK is currently booming and I feel like I would fit perfectly as a travel and food writer.

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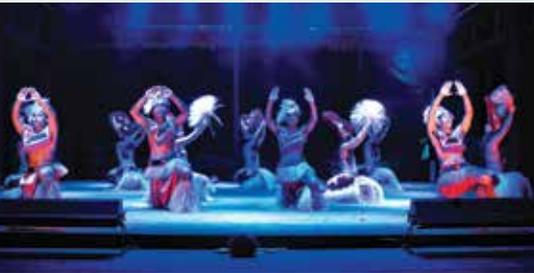
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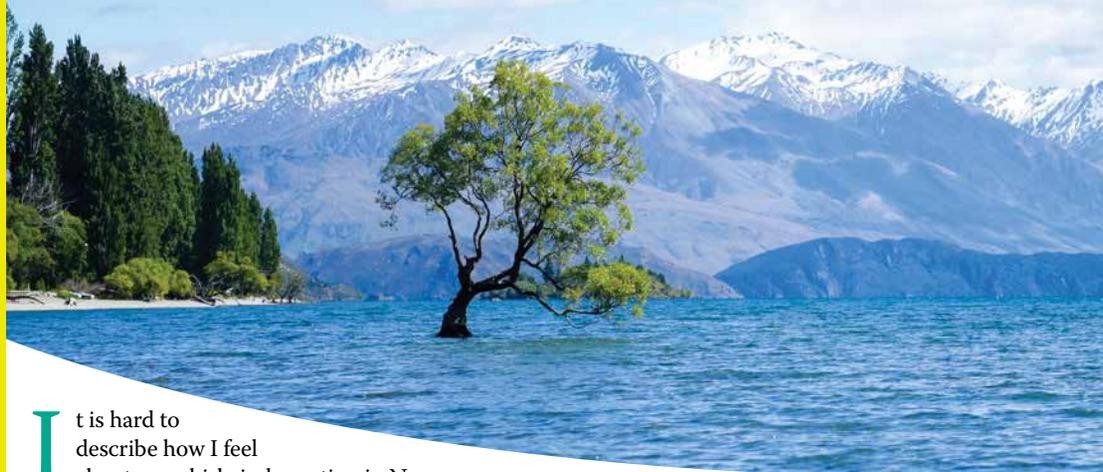
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“Our trip was jam-packed with spellbinding sights, the finest food and wine, and exciting activities.”

The top 10 reasons you should visit New Zealand

Story and photos by
NANO BETTS



It is hard to describe how I feel about my whirlwind vacation in New Zealand, but one thing is certain – one week we spent there was nothing short of amazing. Our trip was jam-packed with spellbinding sights, finest food and wine, exciting activities and, believe it or not, we even managed to squeeze in some quality downtime in the beautiful mountains of the South Island. The rich culture, high standard of living, hospitable people and stunning nature of New Zealand, make it a perfect destination for solo travelers, couples and families alike. It truly is one of the most astounding parts of the world I have seen, and the fact that it is tucked away and somewhat off the beaten track, makes it even more special. If you are considering a trip to New Zealand, believe me, there are countless reasons why you'll fall in love with this country and most probably won't want to leave (or start planning a return trip right away). While we covered a lot of ground and did a lot of activities, I wanted to start my series about our antipodean adventures by sharing my personal views on what makes this country so special and the reasons you should travel to New Zealand.



FRIENDLY PEOPLE

New Zealanders, colloquially known as Kiwis, are truly a very friendly people and excel at making you feel welcomed. You can always rely on a local to share interesting stories about their country and then send you on your way feeling like you have made a friend for life. They are

MY PARADISE

always keen to assist in case you need an advice or recommendation. My father-in-law loves talking to locals everywhere he goes, saying it's the best way to find local gems. I remember he stopped a random lady in the street of Auckland asking her for a good pizza place in the neighborhood. Not only did she share her favorite spot, but she escorted us there and made sure we were introduced to the owner. It was a very pleasant spot with lovely courtyard hidden in the back, and they most certainly served delicious pizza. In short, don't be shy to reach out and communicate with Kiwis, they love it and are always keen to help out or just chat. Most importantly, there's a strong cultural identity here and it's easy to come away feeling privileged to have experienced it. It was very inspiring to see how everyone truly loves their country and is so rightly proud of where they live.



MAORI CULTURE

The indigenous people of New Zealand arrived more than 1000 years ago from Polynesia, and make up around 15% of the country's population. This culture, woven with that of the European settlers, makes for an interesting and sometimes dramatic backdrop to today's New Zealand. The traditions and tales of generations of Maori are still evident around the country. Carving, weaving and tattooing are common Maori art forms, as are powerful physical performances combining *waita* (singing) and *haka* (dance). You can watch *haka* performed by the national rugby team, the All Blacks, before their matches.

Auckland Museum and Wellington's Te Papa Tongarewa are great places to learn more about Maori history.



File photo



katipō bite in the last 100 years. Apparently, it nests in remote beaches, and is poisonous only 6 weeks a year. Basically you must be really unlucky to be stung by it. Our guide told us that the worst and most common thing that can potentially happen to you is being stung by a bee. In a nutshell, I've never been so calm and relaxed while trekking through the forest.

3 STUNNING NATURE

You see videos and photos and think you are prepared for it, but you really aren't cause no visuals give it justice. From sweeping seascapes and soaring mountains to volcanic peaks and rainforest-clad gorges, the scenery in New Zealand is varied and spellbinding. From the Southern Alps, to the rugged West Coast, to the lakes, to the beaches, to the fjords, the glaciers, the geysers and the green, green, green everything... it truly is a perfect place to escape into the wilderness. We'd see one lake and think it cannot get better than this and then arrive to the other lake and be wow-ed again. New Zealand is definitely a paradise for nature lovers, and even if you aren't it will turn you into one. Cities of New Zealand are great, but it is what lies beyond the cityscape that will astound. The best way to explore is to rent a car or a good private tour to explore. I'd also highly recommend exploring both North and South islands as there are places not to be missed in both places. It was really inspiring to see how keen Kiwis are about preserving the nature and how very environmentally conscious everybody is.

4 FINE FOOD & WINE

We have some delightful meals during our trip and New Zealand wine is really delicious. We did two wine tasting tours – Waiheke Island and Central Otago wineries, which boasts high-quality varietals including chardonnay, pinot gris, pinot noir and riesling. Marlborough is another region producing one of the finest wines in the country. Rolling hills covered with vineyards provide an amazing scene for sipping a glass of wine and enjoying fine food. Due to rich volcanic soil, local produce in New Zealand is truly delicious. Much like Japan, local restaurants focus on serving seasonal ingredients, so you always enjoy the best of the season. Lots of towns and cities have a weekly farmers market which is great for buying locally sourced goods and Kiwi's take a lot of pride in where their food comes from.

5 NUMEROUS ACTIVITIES

New Zealand is a perfect place for outdoor activities, and there is so much to do that you will never get bored.

From extreme sports to mellow family-oriented activities, there is something for everybody. You can try everything from snow-boarding to surfing, hiking to white water rafting. Queenstown in particular is heaven for adrenaline-junkies: bungee jumping (did you know it was invented in New Zealand?), zorbing, paragliding, and skydiving are just a few varieties of extreme sports you could consider trying. However, it's not just the extreme sports on offer, there is also fishing, sailing, scuba diving, mountain biking, swinging, zip-lining and even Lugging.

6 SAFETY

New Zealand is one of the safest countries in the world, with a very low crime rate. So wherever you go, you will not feel unsafe or threatened.

7 WATER

It may sound a bit rudimentary to some, but I love drinking water and will take it over a can of soda or even a glass of freshly squeezed juice any time. In New Zealand, there are more than 425,000 km of rivers and streams, about 4,000 lakes and over 200 underground aquifers. Therefore, water is relatively abundant. It was a pleasant surprise to find out that water in New Zealand is as pure as it gets, and buying a bottled water is essentially a waste of money. Except in exceptional circumstances, NZ tap water is universally safe to drink.

8 NOTHING CAN HARM OR KILL YOU

Unlike the neighboring Australia, which comes with all sorts of lethal and terrifying creatures, New Zealand is completely void of any mammal predators or harmful animals like venomous snakes, scorpions or venomous insects. Its sole venomous native spider – the rare katipō – has almost mythical status. Few New Zealanders have ever seen one, let alone been bitten. Despite their reputation, there is no solid evidence that anyone has died from a

9 UNIQUE WILDLIFE

New Zealand is an incredible destination for wildlife. It is home to the endangered kiwi bird and Kea (rated as one of the most intelligent in the world). Besides the birdlife, you can whale watch, spot wild dolphins and even seals. If you are lucky you can even see the world's smallest penguin.

10 IT IS JUST LIKE MIDDLE-EARTH

This ties back to my point about stunning nature. After filming the entirety of the Lord of the Rings in New Zealand, Peter Jackson decided that New Zealand had everything he needed to film The Hobbit Trilogy as it already was "the perfect Middle-earth." We visited The Hobbiton Movie Set in Matamata and it did feel like we were transported to the magical world of hobbits. Definitely a must-do when you visit New Zealand.



SEE NEW ZEALAND ON PAGE 14 ►



'The Lord of the Rings' Hobbiton movie set

While New Zealand's South Island typically gets all the praise and glory, there is a lot to explore up in the north as well. We spent beautiful time discovering the city of Auckland, sampling wine on Waiheke Island, and hiking through the rain forest of Waitakere Range. Although, one place we were particularly anxious to get to was Hobbiton Movie Set. The 12-hour tour that we booked included a visit to the magical world of the Middle-earth, as well as Glowworm Caves in Waitomo – which is magical in its own way. Our bus driver Damien had a real gift for storytelling and kept us entertained the whole way with interesting facts and stories about New Zealand, as well as the sights we were visiting.

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.”

For well over a decade now, 'The Lord of the Rings' Hobbiton Movie Set has been attracting crowds from all over the world every single day. And for a good reason. The place is every bit as spectacular as you'd imagine. For the uninitiated, the Hobbiton Movie Set is located on a stunning 1,250-acre sheep farm of Alexander family close to the town of Matakana in the central part of New Zealand's North Island.

Peter Jackson's very long search for a perfect movie set finally brought him to the doorsteps of the Alexander family. It was literally love at first sight. The location had everything he was looking for – the iconic rolling hills, lush green pastures, and a magnificent pine tree towering over a nearby lake. The surrounding areas were untouched; no power lines, no buildings and no roads in sight – ideal spot for creating a fantasy world of Middle-earth. Plus, it was secluded enough, which meant secrecy and no threat of exposure from media. Peter Jackson was able to tick all the required boxes, and after making corresponding arrangements with Alexander family, the crew started to create this imaginary world.

The initial movie set took nine months to construct and featured 39 temporary hobbit holes. It was never intended to turn into a popular tourist destination and the plan was to demolish everything and return the farm to its initial state. However, once the movie came out and the word got out about the



location of the movie set (by that time there were 17 bare plywood facades remaining), the public flocked to the Alexander farm to see the Hobbiton in person.

In 2009, Peter Jackson returned to the farm to film The Hobbit trilogy and was determined to create the most authentic-looking fantasy world a human eye had seen. He thought through every detail and made sure everything was constructed using high quality, durable material, which is now maintained all year round by a specialized staff. It is also worth noting that Hobbiton is the only full movie set left in-tact in New Zealand. Indeed, the attention to detail that went into creating this world is simply incredible and absolutely adorable: laundry lines with washing hung out to dry; a picnic set up on the dock, moss and lichen growing on the fences,

MY PARADISE

brooms and gardening tools near hobbit doors, signs on notice boards. Unfortunately, you cannot go inside any of the hobbit holes, because there are just facades. The interior sets were all shot on a sound stage in Wellington.

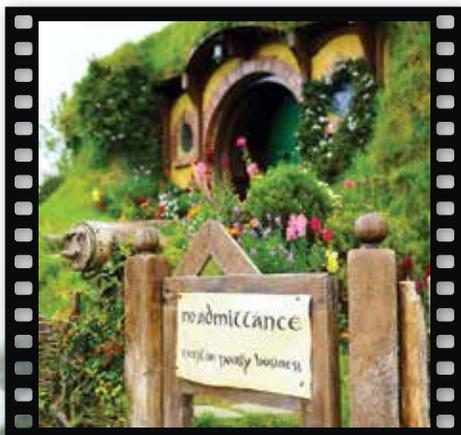
Important thing to note about visiting the Hobbiton Movie Set is that you are not allowed to enter and wonder around independently. If you decide to get a rental car and drive here, you'll join one of the tours provided by the staff on the set. There is a parking lot available. You can grab





a bite at the café right there, buy souvenirs and, most importantly, purchase tickets for one of the tours – group, private or an Evening Banquet (delicious affair, but advance reservation might be needed). You'll then board a bus that drives you through the Alexander farm to the movie set, get a guided walking tour and be escorted back to the parking lot. You can find out more about the available tours and events on their official website.

Needless to say, it was beyond amazing to wonder around the 12-acre set through the wandering paths of The Shire, past Hobbit Holes, the Mill and into the Green Dragon Inn, where we got to sample a pint of in-house brewed cider and beer to conclude our own Middle-earth adventure. By then we felt quite famished and were treated by a banquet lunch (included in the price of the tour) under a tent inside the movie set. I didn't get the photos, but the food – served buffet style – was quite delicious and featured a variety of dishes. Overall, despite the hunch that it might be a tourist trap I must confess: Hobbiton was really worth visiting!



Waitomo Glowworm Caves

We then hopped back on a bus and set off to our second destination – Waitomo Glowworm Caves. Located in the heart of a lush New Zealand rain forest, the caves are actually a private property and belong to a Maori family. Every single person employed there is related.

Once you arrive, you join a guided tour that takes you through three different levels and begins at the top level of the cave and the Catacombs. You get to see breathtaking caverns featuring beautiful limestone formations of stalactites and stalagmites. The second level is called the Banquet Chamber where early visitors stopped to eat, while the third and final level goes down into the Cathedral which is absolutely beautiful and has perfect natural acoustics. Our guide even told us that their family often holds private events here, including weddings!

We then went further down into the bowl of the earth to an underground river and boarded a boat. The boat tour is unreal as you are led from pitch black caverns that are lighted by thousands of glowworms.

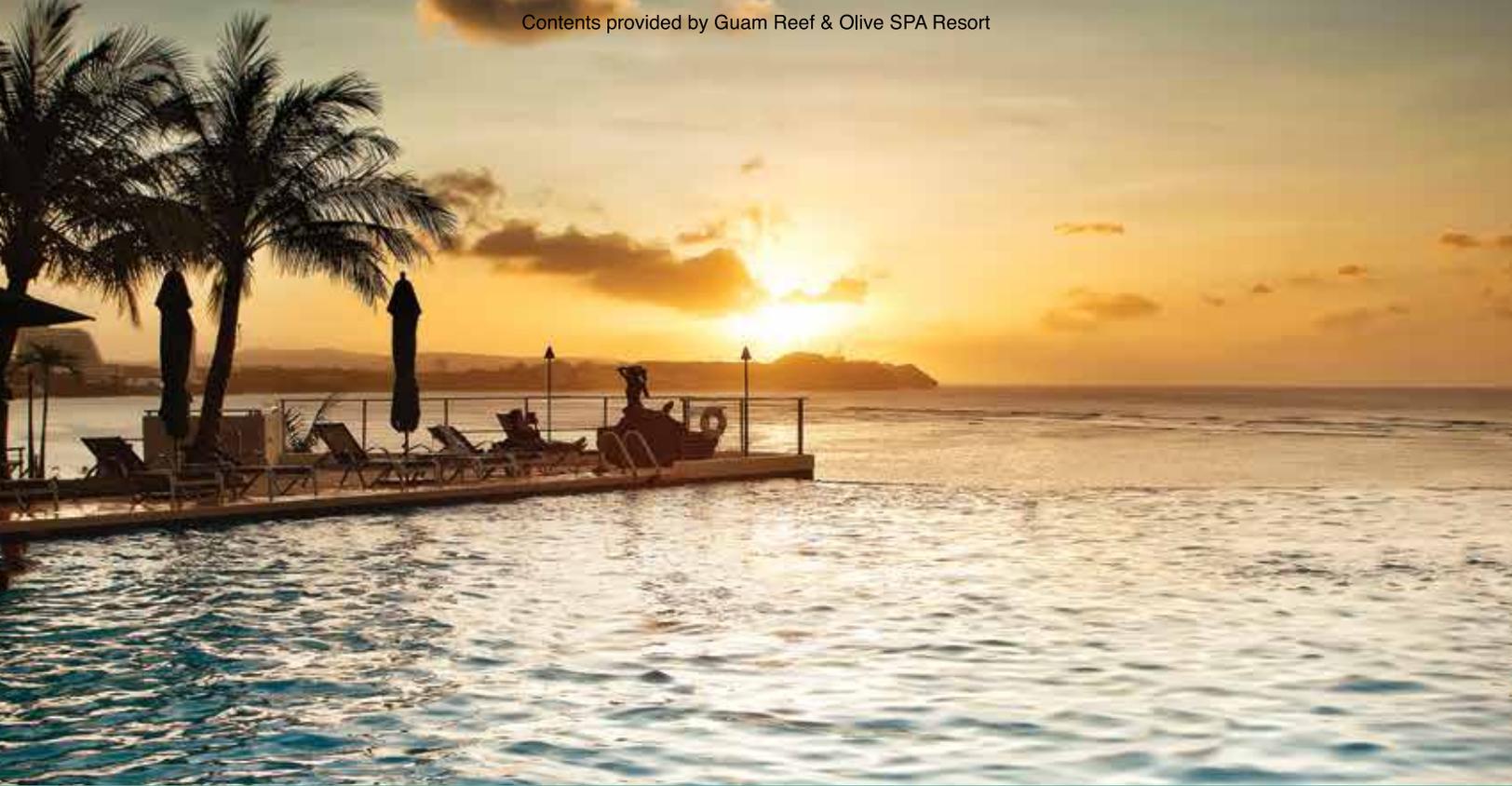
Glowworms, species found exclusively in New Zealand, glow to attract insects, which get caught in the glowworms sticky lines. When a female reaches adulthood it uses the light to attract a mate. The glow also protects them from getting eaten by predators and is used for burning waste. The glow is a reaction between chemicals given off by the glowworm and oxygen, otherwise known as bioluminescence. Glowworms can control how light its tail is by changing the amount of oxygen reaching its light organ.

Now, I should warn you that they are not as bright and shiny as they look on the photo – adults are around the size of an average mosquito. Instead, imagine a night sky dotted with thousands of living lights. It was absolutely mesmerizing to see. We sat there for a while in total silence and darkness. The only thing I could hear was a soft echo of a trickling water and the only thing I could see were the myriads of these tiny creatures glowing beautifully replicating a starry night's sky. I can honestly say that I have never had another experience even come close to what I saw in these caves.

I won't lie it was a very long day. We headed home exhausted but full of great memories. We hardly made a dent on North Island, but I believe it deserves its own spotlight and is well worth the visit, if you plan to travel to New Zealand.



Photos were strictly prohibited, so here's a shot taken from Pinterest to give you a little sneak peak of what to expect.



ON THE BEACH IN THE HEART OF GUAM

LOCATION

Guam Reef & Olive SPA Resort, offers hospitality and high quality entertainment space. Located in the center of the shopping and entertainment district just 10 minutes away from Guam International Airport, and within walking distance of all the exciting Tumon attractions. Guests at the Guam Reef beachfront hotel can enjoy Guam's famous emerald blue sea and white sandy beaches spread out below Guam Reef's world famous Infinity pool.

DINING

Guam Reef & Olive SPA Resort offers a wide selection of restaurants and bars for your convenience. Enjoy an International all-you-can-eat buffet at MAIN; Japanese fusion cuisine at WAON; lunch and happy hour at the Top of the Reef, where you can take in a great ocean view during the day and a fantastic sunset in the evening.

ROOMS & SPA

Guam Reef & Olive SPA Resort has 427 well-appointed stylish rooms and is located in the heart of Tumon Guam. Our Beach Tower and Infinity Tower offer you a range of rooms from modern minimalist to rooms with panoramic views of Tumon Bay. All rooms include a flat-screen TV, hot/cold water dispenser and free Wi-Fi for your convenience. Enjoy the finest quality healing and rejuvenation experience at the unique Japanese Olive Spa, located on the 2nd floor of the Beach Tower. You will experience an elegant and luxurious massage session in our private rooms where you can immerse in the aromas of fragrant oils and enjoy tea time in a relaxing space that overlooks the ocean. Start your day by joining our poolside Morning Yoga and enjoy the spectacular views of Tumon Bay. A fitness room (678 sq ft) is available to help you unwind and further enhance your stay with us. We also have a coin laundry facility, available 24 hours for your convenience.



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“If you have a true sense of adventure and are interested in experiencing a totally different way of life, Bhutan is a land not to be missed!”

Discovering The Land of Happiness

Story and photos by **ROB ZUCKERMAN**

KUBUZONGLA!!!!
Have you heard of Bhutan? And if so, do you know where it is?

For the many of you scratching your head, the Kingdom of Bhutan is one of the most remote countries on Earth, located in the middle of the Himalayan range.

If you have a true sense of adventure and are interested in experiencing a totally different way of life, Bhutan is a land not to be missed! Its rugged Himalayan terrain offers the outdoors enthusiast in you one challenge after another, from river rafting and trekking at altitudes 10,000 feet and higher to its internationally renowned marathon.

The adventure begins as the plane makes its descent into Paro International Airport. With an approach which requires some maneuvering between the Himalayan hills surrounding this quaint mountain city, only eight pilots are certified to land here, and the only two airlines which can are DrukAir Royal Bhutan Airlines and Bhutan Airlines. No foreign carriers at all, despite the fact that most of the eight pilots are themselves foreign nationals.

Paro Airport has to be the most relaxed port of entry I have ever arrived at. Planes land on the tarmac and people walk off the plane snapping photos of their new surroundings, whether it be the beautiful Himalayan hills, the dzong (old fortress) or the mural painting of the royal family outside the



Tshering Wangdi and Sangay Thinley on road overlooking Paro Airport.

building you enter.

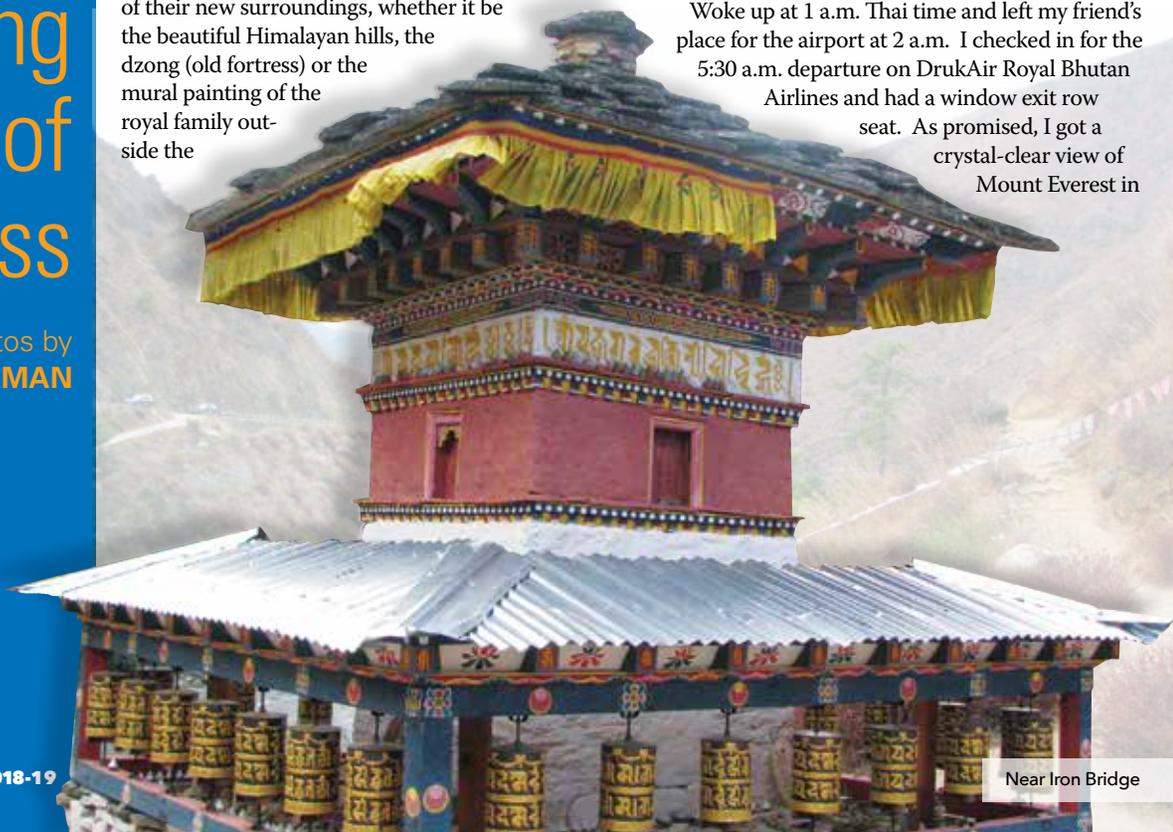
Photos are fine even inside the customs area. The immigration officer even remembered stamping me into the country as I was departing and asked me to take his photo there! If you know another spot with such a relaxed immigration staff, I want to go there next.

But until then, I have my journal below to remind me of my adventure in the Land of Happiness, the Kingdom of Bhutan.

Day 1

Quite the amazing day today, to say the least.

Woke up at 1 a.m. Thai time and left my friend's place for the airport at 2 a.m. I checked in for the 5:30 a.m. departure on DrukAir Royal Bhutan Airlines and had a window exit row seat. As promised, I got a crystal-clear view of Mount Everest in



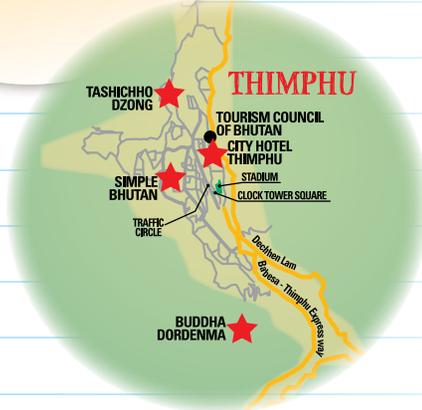
Near Iron Bridge



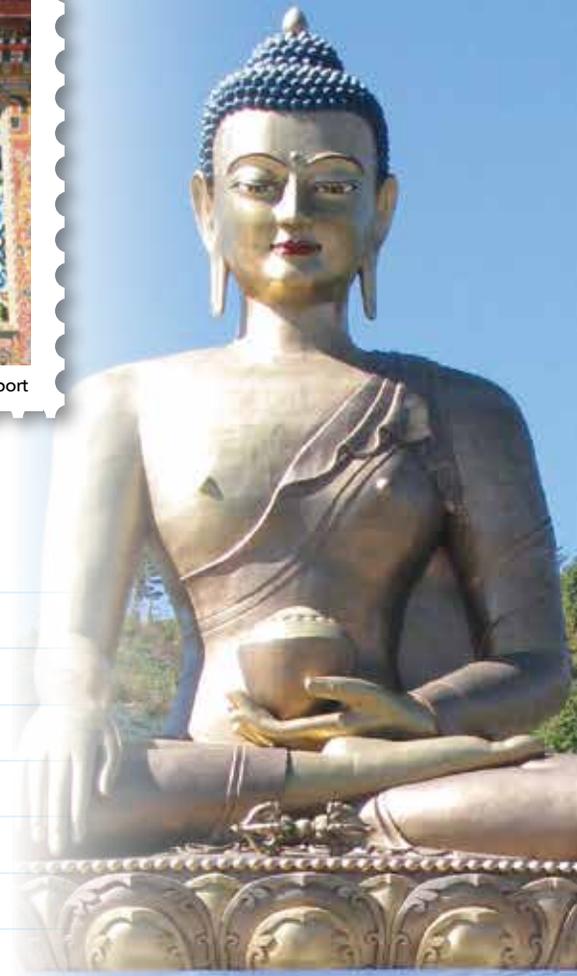
Royal family mural at Paro Int'l Airport



BHUTAN



MY PARADISE



the distance on the final leg of our flight between Guwahati, India, and Paro, Bhutan.

Upon clearing immigration and customs, I was greeted by my guide, Tshering Wangdi, and driver, Sangay Thinley. We visited the local food market in Tshongdue, where Sangay's wife was selling hot tea and treats. She offered us a free cup of hot tea and we strolled through the market meeting monks, seeing the local vegetables and raw meat options, as well as some woodcraft.

After having Bhutanese butter tea and cinnamon cookies, we drove up a hill to the Bhutan National Museum. In the first room, there was a display of the many masks worn in Bhutanese Buddhist festivals. Other rooms had Buddhist paintings dating back to the 13th century and there was another room dedicated to natural history.

From the museum, we climbed downhill to Rinpung Dzong, or "Fortress on a Heap of Jewels", built in 1646, which used to protect the town of Paro. The old circular guard tower stands between the museum and the dzong. Many of Bhutan's dzongs have become temples or monasteries, including this one. We saw monks of all ages running about in their burgundy robes.

We enjoyed a Bhutanese buffet lunch and then headed to the capital city of Thimphu. During the drive, we stopped to see one of the oldest suspension bridges in Bhutan, the iron bridge at Tamchu Lakhang, and took a stroll on its replacement. We also stopped at Chuzom, the intersection of the two main rivers where roads to all corners of this beautiful Himalayan kingdom converge.

Perhaps the only capital city on Earth without a single traffic light, Thimphu is a lovely spot indeed where police officers direct traffic by hand daily until 5 p.m. They did have traffic lights for a short time, but public outcry arose saying that traffic lights are too impersonal. Thus, police officers stand tall on their platforms at all major intersections in Thimphu.

Day 2

Today was a fabulous day indeed!! After having breakfast with a Tibetan Philosophy professor from Canterbury, UK, we headed out to see the first Buddha Dhodhema statue, the largest Buddha statue in Bhutan and very possibly world-wide. 51.5 meters high, it is built in

the image of Shakyamuni. Set way up in the hills overlooking the southern entrance to Thimphu, it is a site to behold.

The Kanjur, original Tibetan Buddhist scriptures which are kept in Bhutan, were recently translated into many languages for the first time. In celebration of this amazing achievement, they held a three-month long celebration at this auspicious site. With over 10,000 monks and nuns present, seeing the preparation of offerings, hearing the traditional instruments played and the ongoing chanting, made for a sense of joy throughout. This was truly an amazing experience to witness. I was quite lucky, too, to receive a copy of the prayer book the crowd used for their chanting.

From there we strolled on a nearby trail in Kuenselphodrang Park, which winds up and down the hills surrounding Thimphu. As Tshering and I were



Thimphu traffic cop



BHUTAN

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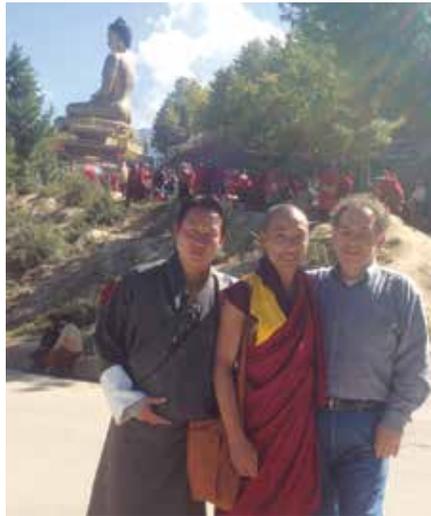
Monks and nuns chanting prayers at the Buddha Dhodhema.

at a picnic table taking a break, the monks also decided to take a break. All of a sudden we were surrounded by monks of all ages in their burgundy robes coming to take a rest from the chanting. The forest below was also packed with monks on break and was quite amazing to see. A great photo op to say the least.

We met back up with Sangay and also had the honor of meeting Namgay Tenzin, the head monk of the Phajoding Monastery Project. The Project is a special center that is located a three-hour hike up in the mountains over Thimphu and houses 80 orphaned boys who learn not only the usual school subjects, but the Buddhist ways of life as well.

After our lunch with Namgay, we went to see the Second National Memorial Chorten, a Buddhist stupa in central Thimphu that pays respect to Bhutan's Third King. Our timing was quite fortunate once again as they were preparing for a festival, which meant the building was open. We walked around the first floor of this magnificent structure with the several story-high sculpture in the middle guarded by the four protective deities to the north, south, east and west, respectively.

As I had asked to see a modern Bhutanese



Tshering Wangdi, Namgay Tenzin Principal of the Phajoding and me.

musical act, in the evening we went to Club Thimphu, a bar and dance floor spot where dancers perform to music, ranging from traditional Bhutanese folk music to Tibetan rock, with western tunes played in between. I was delighted to learn that smoking is officially banned in all public venues throughout Bhutan.

One could say that I saw the two extremes of Thimphu life today, from 10,000 monks chanting in unison, to young Bhutanese dancers perform-

ing to Western, Tibetan and Bhutanese rock tunes. Quite the contrast!

Day 3

After breakfast, we took off to visit the preservation center of Bhutan's national animal, the taikin, which has the appearance of a cow's body with a goat's head.

Local legend says that the Divine Mad Man, Drukpa Keunley, showed his magical powers by combining these creatures with the snap of his fingers. In addition to these creatures, the reserve has a variety of reindeer called Himalayan semon and another local variety of deer named shambha.

We then visited the National Institute of Zorig Chusum (art school). Here the students may major in any of the traditional arts of Bhutan, whether it be the Buddhist image painting, wood carving, pottery sculptures or embroidery. We watched the students at work and purchased some items to support their school.

From there we began our east-bound drive to Punakha, the former capital city of Bhutan. We stopped for lunch at an altitude of 3,100 meters, it has a breathtaking view of the snow-capped Himalayan peaks. One of these beautiful peaks was recently a border dispute where Indian and Chinese troops were facing off. One Bhutanese scholar wrote that this is a border not between China and India, but between Tibet and Bhutan, where people





Farm house host family enjoying organic dinner in Punakha.

have strolled across from both sides for centuries and will continue to do so. At that point, both China and India packed up their troops and went home.

Once in Punakha, we headed up above the Mo Chhu (female river) and Pho Chhu (male river) on a winding dirt road in pitch-black darkness to the farm house we would be staying for the next two nights. A French family was also staying there with their guide and driver. I have kept in touch with this lovely French family after we parted ways.

Day 4

We awakened to a lovely patio breakfast overlooking the Mo Chhu and Pho Chhu with a view of the snow-capped Himalayan peaks. The meal was made entirely out of food grown on the family's three-acre farm. The grandfather used to serve as a body guard for the Third King of Bhutan and was given the house and land by the king as a thank you for his loyal service.

After breakfast, I was told that we will be going on "a hike." As the only direction one can go in this Himalayan kingdom is up, a better word to describe it was "a climb." We walked past beautiful terraced fields with donkeys, horses, cows and dogs strolling freely along the dirt trail. We stopped about half way up our 1,000-foot climb to rest where a 90- and a 79-year-old farmer were selling their guavas as they spun a huge Buddhist prayer wheel.

Upon reaching the top, we arrived at the Khamsum Yulung Namgye stupa. A beautifully designed three-story golden temple, it has a gorgeous statue in the middle of the first floor and two additional floors contain various Buddhist statues. The rooftop allowed for breathtaking views of this Himalayan valley.

After taking a leisurely rooftop breather, we headed back down to the river we had crossed hours before to begin our ascent. A friendly dog carefully followed just behind me the entire way down, most likely having sensed my exhaustion. We sat along the river bank watching other tourists go rafting on the Po Chu before driving down river for have lunch.

Once we had regained some energy from our meal, we headed back to visit the absolute must-see, the Punakha Dzong or Pungthang Dewa Chenpoi Phodrang, the Palace of Great Bliss.

Built in 1637, this dzong was the center of Bhutanese governance until the capital moved to Thimphu in 1955.

After touring this beautiful dzong and stopping for a local snack, we headed back to the farm house. After taking a relaxing hot stone bath, we sat down to dinner on the floor in the living room along with the host family. A nice evening was had by all.

Day 5

Today, we headed further east toward Trongsa.

As the road elevation increased, we didn't only see the usual cow, horse or donkey roaming across the highway, but for the first time in my life, I saw yaks in the wild, both grazing near and strolling across the highway.

We were lucky enough to happen upon a very local festival near the entry to Trongsa, named the Chendipiji Moenlam Chenmo or Great Prayer Festival. This festival originated in Tibet in 1409 and is repeated throughout Bhutan and Tibet in different locations to assure the devout have the opportunity to attend. People were staying in tents surrounding the stupa. Festival rituals occurred under larger tents in a center area surrounded by a flea market which wound its way down the hill to a beautiful rambling river. Looking at this scene through American eyes, I thought of this as a Mahayana Buddhist Woodstock!!! Hearing the ongoing ritual chanting and rushing water as we browsed through the vendor stalls was quite the experience!

Though admittedly not realizing its significance at the time, I was enjoying this experience so much

that we got back in the car later than planned. Sangay is a star on wheels, to say the least. Despite having to drive through the darkness on this winding Himalayan road under construction, he got us to our destination safely. Upon reaching Trongsa, they brought me to the hotel where my room had a breathtaking view of the Trongsa Dzong all lit up. A beautiful ending to another great day!

Day 6

After breakfast, we drove along the winding road below the hotel to reach the Trongsa Dzong. Built in 1647 on the site of a renown 14th century temple, this is the largest dzong in all Bhutan. The first king of Bhutan took reign in 1907. All the kings following him are required to serve as the governor of the Central Region prior to taking reign and they work from offices inside the Trongsa Dzong. After crossing the Mangdey Chhu, we were greeted by a group of langur monkeys, including two mother and child combinations. Very cute!

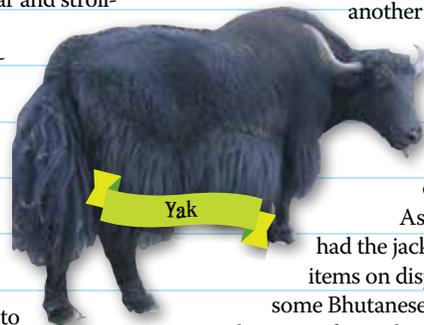
We were quite fortunate to visit on this day, as it was an auspicious one due to the date on the Mahayana Buddhist lunar calendar. They opened several internal temples which are usually not even open to the Bhutanese Buddhists, much less a Jewish tourist. We saw one of these temples on the second floor and as we were about to head back

downstairs, I noticed a monk opening yet another temple on the third floor up a narrow steep wooden staircase. I looked at Tshering and said, "Let's go check that out!" He looked at me surprised at my curiosity, so up we went.

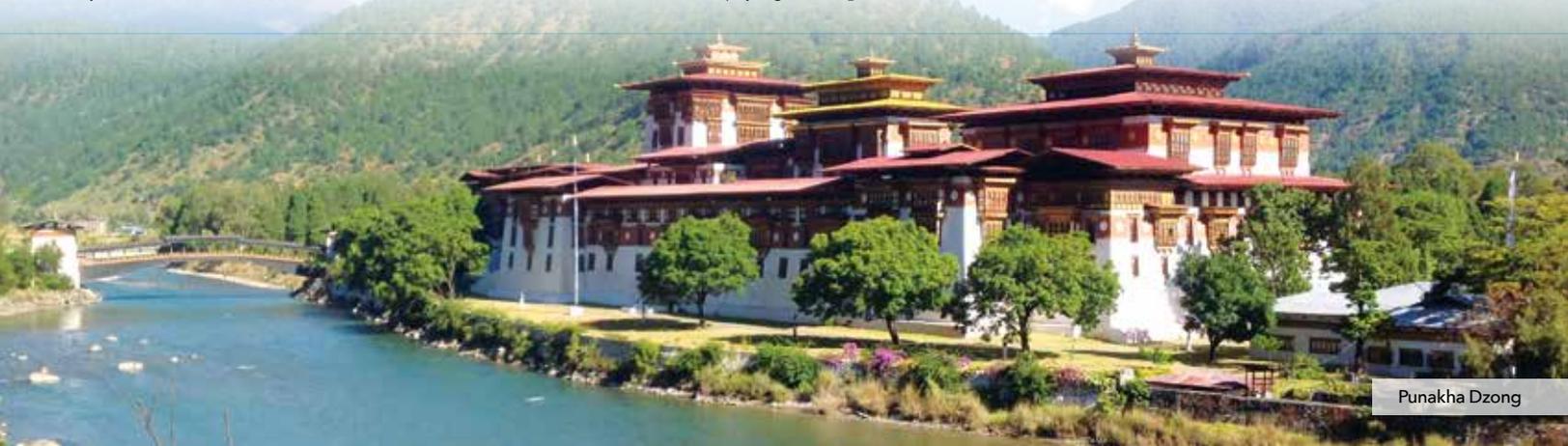
As it turned out, that temple had the jackpot of Bhutanese Buddhist items on display. As we entered, we saw

some Bhutanese kids standing on a stool with a magnifying glass looking at something inside the glass enclosure beside the main Buddha statue in this elegantly painted hall. It was a single rice grain-sized golden image of Buddha, one of only two in existence. It is called the rangjung khartsapanii, or secret relic. This was a feast for the eyes.

After seeing the rest of the Trongsa Dzong, we were on the road again, this time to the farming village of Phobjikha in one of Bhutan's most beautiful



SEE BHUTAN ON PAGE 24 ▶



Rejuvenate,
Recreate,
Revive....

The Northern Mariana Islands of Saipan, Tinian, and Rota are a U.S. Commonwealth located in the western Pacific. Skip the hassle of visas, currency exchange, and language barriers and spend more time enjoying your vacation.

Short direct flights are available to Saipan, Tinian and Rota from Tokyo, Seoul, Busan, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Bring your sunglasses & be ready to shop, golf, dive, party, eat great food, touch history & culture, hike & bike. No visa required from Russia, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan or Hong Kong.

Saipan

Saipan, as the capitol, is the largest and most populated island in The Marianas. This tropical paradise offers beautiful white sand beaches with crystal clear water and pure, fresh air. Warmth is in the air and in the people you will meet. It is a throwback to a relaxed lifestyle coupled with modern hotels,



incredible sights, adventurous activities and shopping.

Garapan is the epicenter of activities with many restaurants, bars, and shopping options.

Although only about 12 miles long and 5.5 miles wide, Saipan has a nearly 4,000-year history. The array of natural life encased in double rainbows, if you are lucky, makes The Marianas a magical destination. The indigenous Chamorro and Carolinian people welcome you to these islands with open arms.



Tinian

Home of the annual "Pika Festival," Tinian, a neighboring island just three miles south of Saipan, is easily accessible through a short hop on a plane.

Stretches of secluded beaches await your footsteps. The crystal-clear water, colorful marine life, and pristine coral reefs surrounding the island offer excellent snorkeling, scuba diving, and fishing. Explore Tinian's rich historic sites. See pre-historic remains of ancient indigenous Chamorro culture, including the ruins of the House of Taga.

World War II relics abound, including the Atomic Bomb Pits used to load the atomic bombs dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. During WWII Tinian had the busiest airport in the world, and you can still drive those extensive runways today that played a pivotal role in ending the deadliest war known to mankind.



Rota

Nicknamed "The World's Friendliest Island," Rota is known for its friendly

nature, sweet potatoes and coconut crabs. If not the local delicacies, Rota's people will soon charm you with their smiles and warm hospitality. A sense of family will soon overtake you. Dip your toes in the Swimming Hole or book a round of golf. The Wedding Cake Mountain and Tweksberry Beach are sights to behold, all accompanied by ceaseless songs of local birds. Rota will enchant all visitors with its wealth of natural and cultural beauty. A wide variety of diving sites feature wall dives, underwater wrecks, and coral formations. For those who want to spend time on land, you can visit the Bird Sanctuary, and fascinating historic sites like the As Nieves Latte Stone Quarry, where latte stones seemingly come alive.



The Marianas

| Saipan | Tinian | Rota |





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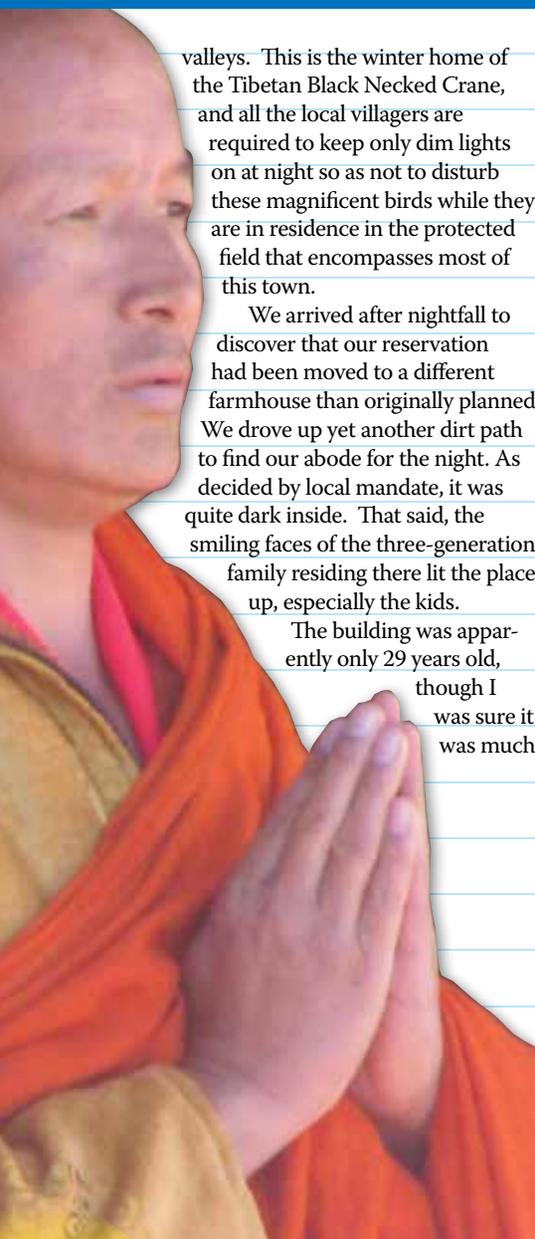


The Marianas
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BHUTAN

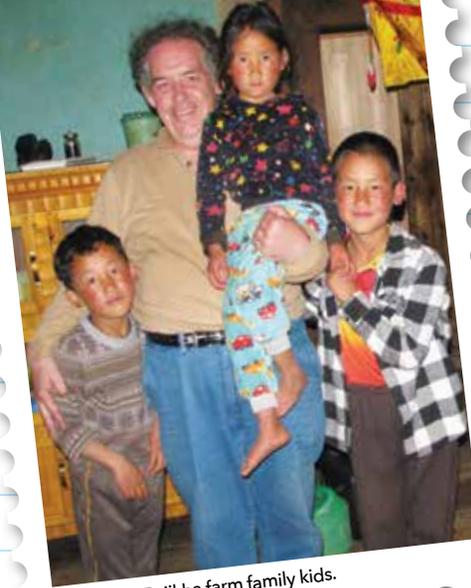
▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21



valleys. This is the winter home of the Tibetan Black Necked Crane, and all the local villagers are required to keep only dim lights on at night so as not to disturb these magnificent birds while they are in residence in the protected field that encompasses most of this town.

We arrived after nightfall to discover that our reservation had been moved to a different farmhouse than originally planned. We drove up yet another dirt path to find our abode for the night. As decided by local mandate, it was quite dark inside. That said, the smiling faces of the three-generation family residing there lit the place up, especially the kids.

The building was apparently only 29 years old, though I was sure it was much



Me with the Pojikha farm family kids.

older. An all-wooden structure with heavy sliding wooden panels for windows, it was almost as chilly inside as it was outside. Thus, we spent all of our time with the family in the large common room where the wood burning stove stayed lit to keep us warm and cook us food.

The family did have a television, which the kids watched in earnest, some shows in their native Zongsa or Bhutanese and others in English. (All school classes are taught in English, with the only exception being Zongsa class.)

We all sat on thin mattresses on the cold wooden floor to enjoy an entirely organic meal of chicken and various vegetables, including turnip leaves which were drying across the beams overhead. (To put it in Jewish perspective, it made me feel like it was an indoor sukkah.)

I gave the children a traditional Japanese Aomori painted horse and all three of them (4-year-old girl, 1st-grade boy and 4th-grade boy) enjoyed it enormously. The 4th-grader was quite curious, so I drew him a map to show where Japan is in location to Bhutan, naming the countries in between. As Bhutan is a landlocked country, this was the first time these farm village kids ever heard of an island. Thanks to Tshering's teaching skills, the 4th-grader was able to grasp and understand this new concept.

To my surprise, the only countries which have names in the local Zongsa language are those which share a

common border with Bhutan. All other countries are only named in English. I asked for their family name and was equally surprised to discover that they do not have one. As most of Bhutan's population are local village farmers who do not ever leave their local abodes, only first names are used.

Day 7

Awakening to the musical predawn shrill of the black necked cranes, I rolled over in the layers of blankets to try to keep warm in my unheated room. I got up once I heard the chopping of wood. The grandmother was out front chopping away, and I emerged to the common area to see the little girl still bundled up and sound asleep as the wood was being placed in the heater/stove to burn.

After a warm breakfast, we drove over to the Crane Center to discover it was closed until noon. The entire town, not to mention a ton of foreigners, were gathering at the temple above the valley for the combination celebration of the annual Black Necked Crane Festival and the Fourth King's Birthday.

It was an all-day celebration, including crane and traditional mask dances and even a tug-of-war between the neighboring villages and games for the children. It was great when a visiting Canadian boy won a game. From there we went back to the Crane Center and saw a video about the valley and center. We also had a beautiful view of the cranes through binoculars. After checking into a warm hotel, we went to meet other guests whose trips were booked with MyBhutan.com. The meal and unexpected Bhutanese lute concert made for a lovely ending to this festive day.

Day 8

After a cold breakfast at the hotel, we departed Phobjikha to Punakha. Once we were on the winding, dirt Himalayan roads with no place to stop, I started to feel ill. Thanks to Sangay's amazing driving skills, I reached the much-needed restroom within 45 minutes. After thinking about it, I realized the cause was the yogurt drink I had in the farm house two nights earlier which was served from a bucket on the floor. As the place was very cold, I was silly enough to think it would be alright. OOPS!!!!!! Lesson learned while traveling in the rural areas-only drink quadruple B: Bhutanese Boiled or Bottled Beverages!!!!!!

With that emergency behind us, we continued driving on. Upon our return to Punakha, we went



Tibetan Black Necked Crane

Pojikha, head priest, opening the Black Neck Crane and Fourth King Birthday Festival Celebration



Matthew R. DeSantis

WWW.MYBHUTAN.COM founder and CEO Matthew DeSantis is also the U.S. State Department Warden to Bhutan. The United States does not have an embassy in Bhutan, so booking your travel through this tour operator is a good way to assure you are already registered with the In-Country American Government Representative Office. They can work things through the government as needed. Mybhutan.com is also committed to providing discounted Bhutan trips to American servicemen, servicewomen and their families.



directly to Mad Man's Temple. This is the temple dedicated to fertility with various phallus symbols painted and carved both on display and for sale. Many infertile Bhutanese couples go there to be blessed many times with the woman walking around the temple clockwise carrying one of the wooden sculptures. Many come back with babies in arms, I am told.

From there, our next stop was another view from the Dochila Pass as we headed back to Thimphu. Upon reach-

ing Thimphu, I ran into the main supermarket, My Mart, to gather a few tasty treats to bring back home, including Maggie's Tomato Sauce, which I enjoyed in India when I first visited there in 1994. I also picked up some cashew spread, which just seems to be good and new, and a Bhutan-only pickled mangoes, which I discovered makes Korean kimchee taste mild, having just served it at a party in Japan.

We then went to check into the hotel and I was delighted to finally meet the guy who so generously set this entire Bhutan tour up for me, Matthew R.



Kheng Sonam Dorji, Director of the Music of Bhutan Research Center performing on a traditional tambourine.

DeSantis, owner and CEO of mybhutan.com, which is rated as the best Bhutan website by Lonely Planet. Matt and I had a great chat and I look forward to our growing friendship going forward.

Day 9

As I was finishing my bowl of rice porridge with honey and black tea breakfast, I heard a lady placing an order. As she clearly had an American accent, I asked where she was from. She was from California and has been going back and forth to Bhutan

for nine years. Why you ask? She is a music historian and is working along with Kheng Sonam Dorji at the Music of Bhutan Research Center to preserve this critical piece of Bhutanese culture.

She invited me and two other tourists, one of whom had helped them set up their first web site, to come to the center in the afternoon. We were honored to hear Sonam play the Bhutanese lute as he sang a traditional song. He explained that all Bhutanese lutes have a dragon's head for the neck as it is believed by locals to keep any evil spirits away as they perform. We also got to see an array of other

old instruments, some of which are no longer used today.

Prior to the musical afternoon, we went to the national library to see some items on display, including the largest book in the world. They turn one page per day on this book, which is stored under glass. We also stopped at various shops so I could get all the gifts I had yet to buy as my Himalayan journey was rapidly coming to a close.

After the musical interlude, we went to see the Simply Bhutan Museum. As Tshering had taught me so much already, I actually knew most of what the museum staffer was explaining. We both got to try to do some archery and failed miserably.

That evening, we went to the Taj Hotel for their cultural show in the courtyard with a bonfire ablaze. It was lovely, and included shortened versions of the mask dances we had seen at the Black Necked Crane Festival. From there we drove to Paro where we had my final Bhutanese meal and went to the hotel as I needed to be up at 4:30 a.m. for my 7 a.m. flight back to Bangkok.

I cannot thank Matthew R. DeSantis, Bill Fisher, Chechay Nidup, Tshering Wangdi, Sangay Thinley and the lovely lady who introduced Matthew and me via Facebook, Katie Conlon, enough for this amazing Himalayan Adventure in The Land of Happiness, BHUTAN!!!!!!!!!!!!

The story of 4 harmonious animals

This is a story created many years ago by spiritual masters to show people the strength of unity and how it's possible for everyone to co-exist:

Long ago in Bhutan when the country was enjoying peace and prosperity, the country's people were wondering why their country was very peaceful, so they went to a saint and asked. The saint said the country was enjoying peace and prosperity because of four animals living together: a bird, rabbit, monkey and elephant.

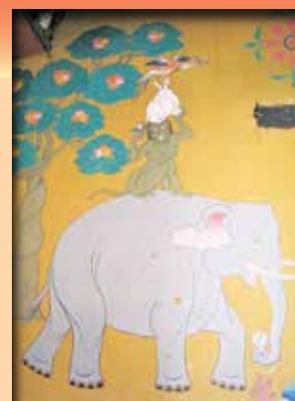
The saint explained that the bird brought a seed and

dropped it on the ground. The rabbit dug into the soil and covered the seed. The monkey helped water it. The elephant stood guard until the tree grew big and strong and began to produce delicious fruit.

The four friends ate the fruit and used the tree for shelter. They lived together, worked in harmony and respected one another despite their many differences in size and appearance.

The sign to the right can be found throughout Bhutan, and the story is told to younger generations to teach respect and show the power of cooperation.

– Tshering Wangdi, Rob's tour guide



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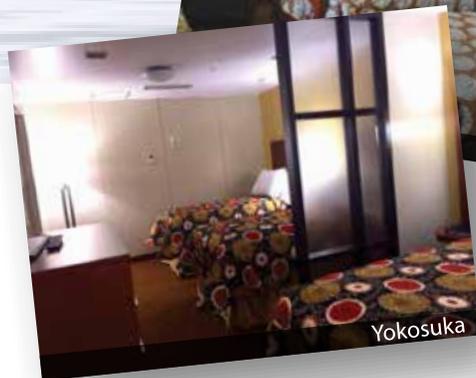
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“While the hiking, snorkeling and diving are fantastic, I adore one thing a little more — the food.”



The Big Island is a magical place. You can drive from lush tropical rainforests to dry, arid moonscape-like lava fields within a couple of hours. Discover rolling hills blanketed in misty clouds, or watch a river of oozing lava flow dramatically into the roaring ocean below.

While the hiking, snorkeling and diving are fantastic, I adore one thing a little more — the food. One of the perks of having family on the Big Island is they know where all the awesome foodie spots are. There are some amazing upscale restaurants, especially along the Kohala Coast and in Kailua-Kona (Kona). However, I think it’s almost more fun to hit up local cafes, brew pubs and diners. Here are nine of my favorite places to enjoy ono eats on your next trip to the Big Island.

short stack each time they visit. So far, only one out of six has accomplished this feat. Craving something more savory? Try the big, fluffy omelets or signature Kalua pork hash. To avoid the crowds, head over earlier rather than later.

 **Ken’s House of Pancakes**
kenshouseofpancakes.com

Ken’s has been serving up its famous pancakes since 1971. Complete with kitschy celebrity photos adorning the walls and vinyl booths, this iconic diner offers an amazing menu of pancakes, both sweet and savory. Head to All-You-Can-Eat Taco Tuesday (where my nephew famously shoveled down 15 tacos), or “Kapakahi” Thursday with delicious local fare such as lomi salmon, chicken katsu and plently more.

9 food finds on Hawaii’s Big Island

Story and photos by
STACY ROMAN

Hilo



 **Hawaiian Style Café**
www.hawaiianstylecafe.com

This unassuming restaurant is ridiculously popular for a good reason. The mouth-watering pancakes are literally bigger than your head. My father-in-law challenges his grandkids to finish a



 **Café 100**
www.cafe100.com

What on earth is a loco moco? One of the oddest and tastiest Hawaiian dishes created. A bed of rice is topped with a hamburger patty, a fried egg and covered in brown gravy. At least that’s how it began at Café 100 in the late 1940s. Stop by and sample one of the 30 varieties of this artery-clogging creation — my favorite is fried rice and Portuguese sausage.



Two Ladies Kitchen

www.facebook.com/pages/Two-Ladies-Kitchen/121212331222453

If you've been in the Pacific for any length of time, odds are you've either heard of or tasted mocha — a ball of glutinous sweet rice flour usually filled with adzuki beans. Two Ladies Kitchen has perfected this treat and is hands-down the best mochi you'll taste. With a dizzying array of choices, my favorites include strawberry, brownie and peanut butter. Best to get there early, as they sell out quickly.

Runners Up: Blaine's Drive Inn (Hilo) Ohelo Café (Volcano), Lava Rock Café (Volcano), Kaleos (Pahoa)

Honoka'a



Tex Drive-In

texdriveinhawaii.com

If you're driving the coast road (Mamalahoa Highway) between Kona and Hilo, Tex Drive-In is the perfect stopping point. Warm up with savory Portuguese bean soup or beef stew. Be sure to save room for some of the tastiest malasadas in Hawaii. These deep-fried doughy balls of deliciousness are rolled in sugar and can be filled with local flavors such as lilikoi, guava and mango.

Waimea



Village Burger

villageburgerwaimea.com

Using local Big Island beef, fresh-caught fish and organic ingredients, Village Burger is worth the stop. With choices between an Ahi or Wagyu burger, they have offerings for every palate. I recommend the Big Island Burger with avocado and

bacon, with a side of parmesan-coated fries and wasabi mayo. Go big or go home, right?

Runners Up: Big Island Brewhaus, Lilikoi Café

Punalu'u



Punalu'u Bake Shop

www.bakeshophawaii.com

Congratulations! You've made it to the southernmost point in the U.S. After a day of frolicking near the honu (green sea turtles — be sure not to touch) at the famous black sand beaches, the Punalu'u Bake Shop makes the perfect pit stop. Known for its thick and fluffy sweetbreads, diners can also enjoy decadent desserts and coffee from nearby Ka'u Coffee Mill. Be sure to pick up a couple of loaves to enjoy on your trip home.

Kona



Kona Brewing Company

konabrewingco.com

I would be remiss if I did not give a shout out to Hawaii's most famous brew house — Kona Brewing Co. Located in an industrial park above Kona, this brew pub is worth the hype. The beer is fused with local ingredients — the Wailua Wheat is unfiltered with lilikoi, and the Koko Brown Ale adds richness by using toasted coconut. Enjoy a made-from-scratch pizza or a plate of Naalehu Nachos with Kalua pork. One of our favorites is the Cubano sandwich washed down with a cold Hanalei IPA.



Pine Tree Café

www.facebook.com/Pine-Tree-Cafe-180947154470

If you just want a simple restaurant that serves fantastic, traditional Hawaiian grinds (and you might be in a hurry to catch your flight out of Kona), make a stop at the Pine Tree Café. This hole-in-the-wall local spot is known for sweetbread French toast, pineapple pancakes, kalbi short ribs, loco mocos and tasty specialty plate lunches.

Runners Up: Big Island Grill, Jackie Rey's Ohana Grill, 808 Grindz Café, Umeke's, Island Ono Loa Grill, Broke da Mouth Grindz

From cascading waterfalls along the coast to breathtaking sunsets along the Kohala coast, the Big Island is full of amazing sights and tastes. Be sure to bring your camera and especially your appetite.

MY PARADISE



Like

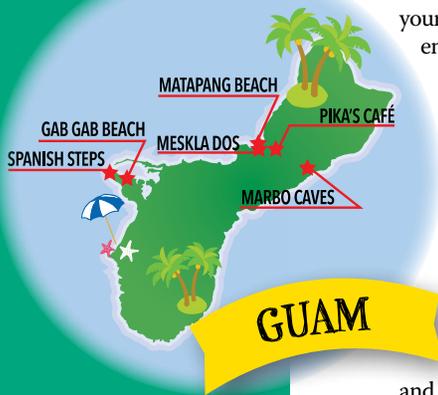
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“There was so much to learn and explore on this island. Guam is full of love and beauty.”



The island that stole my heart!

Story and photos by
MOLLY CARNAHAN

As I sit here in the States and reflect on the last four years of my life, a smile comes to my face. When we got orders for Guam in 2014, I didn't know what to expect, and I admit I was a little scared. The island of Guam was to be my home for four years. There was so much to learn and explore on this island. Guam is full of love and beauty. So, I want to share my top five favorite things about Guam. **First, my all-time favorite place on Guam is Marbo Caves.** Every time I went, I swear I could sit there on the cliff line and stare out into the ocean forever. Marbo Caves is known for its swimming hole in the cave, but for me, the cliff line lookout is really where it's at. When you look out into the ocean, it will bring a sense of peace and calmness to you. I recommend bringing your camera and a towel to sit on so you can enjoy the view.



Gab Gab Beach is definitely a close second. It is, in my opinion, the best place to snorkel. I remember snorkeling there and looking at all the beautiful fish. Suddenly, I look below and see a sea turtle swimming right underneath me. It was such a surreal experience. So, if you haven't checked out Gab Gab beach down on Naval Base Guam, then definitely head there soon. Be sure to bring a beach chair and snorkel gear!

If you are looking for an adventure, then try out the Spanish Steps hike! The view at Spanish Steps, which is located on Naval Base Guam, is one I will never forget. The hike to get there can be a little crazy, but it definitely is worth it. During the hike, you will get to climb down a ladder and scale ropes. As you walk down the trail, you will see coconut crabs and some caves. But the best part is the spectacular view at the end of the hike! Beautiful water and rocks make it a great place to swim and snorkel. When I went, I was able to see a little baby reef shark! Definitely bring a camera, swimsuit and

good hiking shoes.

One of the things I learned how to do on Guam was paddle board. The island is great place to paddleboard because of the calm, crystal-clear water. You can be paddleboarding and look down and see amazing tropical fish. My all-time favorite place for paddle boarding is Matapang Beach down in Tumon. The water is calm and it is great for any beginner who is learning how to board. My dog Skip loved riding on the board with me (Yep, that's Skip and me on the cover of this magazine.). If you want to try it out, I recommend the SUP Shack. They are located on Matapang Beach and they give lessons and will rent a board to you. Check them out on Facebook. I promise you won't regret this experience!

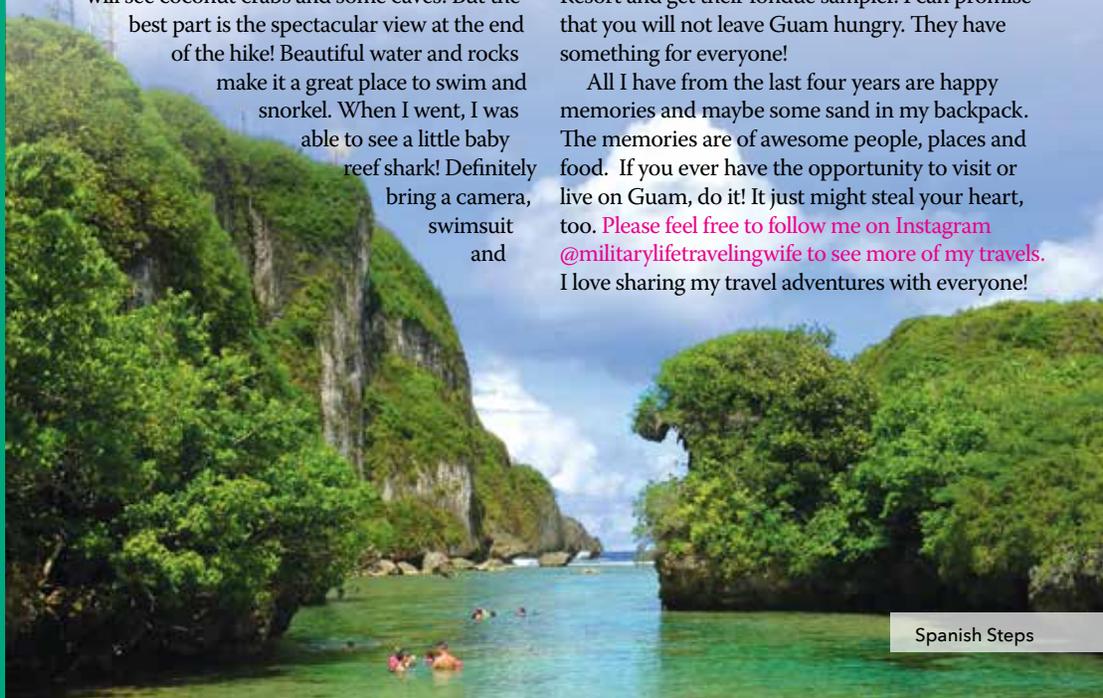
One of the things I miss the most about the island is the food. It's life changing on Guam. On any given morning, you could find me enjoying some fried rice at Kings or a breakfast burrito at Pika's Café. The best lunch spot is poolside at the Hilton Tree Bar eating one of their delicious cheeseburgers. My two favorite local dinner spots would have to be Meskla Dos and Mosa's!

The onion rings at Meskla Dos will change your life, and Mosa's lamb burger is out-of-this-world

good. If you are looking for a sweet treat, then you will want to head to Hagan Daz at the Fiesta Resort and get their fondue sampler. I can promise that you will not leave Guam hungry. They have something for everyone!

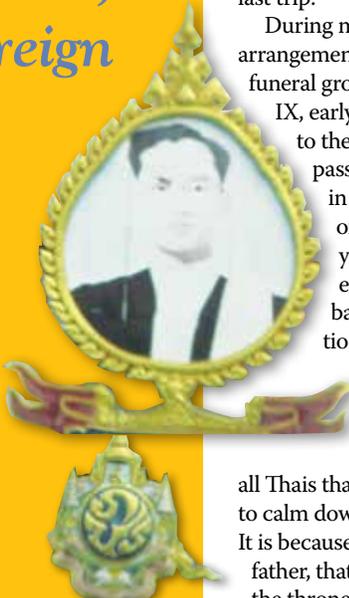
All I have from the last four years are happy memories and maybe some sand in my backpack. The memories are of awesome people, places and food. If you ever have the opportunity to visit or live on Guam, do it! It just might steal your heart, too. **Please feel free to follow me on Instagram @militarylifetravelingwife to see more of my travels.** I love sharing my travel adventures with everyone!

MY PARADISE



Spanish Steps

“It wasn’t your everyday tourist experience. But, not every foreign visitor has an amazing Thai family either.”



Being a ‘gardener’ in Thailand

Story and photos by
ROB ZUCKERMAN

I have family in Thailand. Not blood relatives, but close enough. I first met my Thai brother when he was studying in the U.S. and we have been tight for over 25 years.

I have visited him and his family regularly since 1992. I stopped by Thailand for several days in November of 2017. It was great as always seeing my Thai family. They are truly amazing people and I am honored to be thought of as a family member by them.

I was particularly fortunate to be included in a very rare opportunity of cultural significance this last trip.

During my recent visit, my Thai brother made arrangements for he, his son and me to enter the funeral grounds of Thailand’s revered king, Rama IX, early in the morning before the area opened to the general public. (His Majesty Rama IX passed away only three days before I arrived in Bangkok for a visit in October of 2016, after his more than 70-year reign. I have never seen an entire nation in mourning as I did back then, with the entire population dressed in black.)

As many of you know, Thailand has had its share of coup de tats, with the military taking over temporarily at times. Rama IX was so respected by all Thais that he, and he alone, could tell the public to calm down and things always returned to normal. It is because of this amazing public reverence for his father, that Rama X waited an entire year to take the throne after his father’s passing.

So, during my recent visit, the official funerary rites were already complete and lines stretched around the streets of central Bangkok for Thais and others to come pay their last respects and see the elaborate golden compound near the palace grounds. People waited in line for three to six hours simply to enter this revered area.

Nobody was permitted to touch a thing in sight, only look, although photographs were permitted.

Well, my Thai brother,



MY PARADISE

nephew and I didn’t have to wait in line and were even issued “Exhibitor” badges. As I wrote before, they made arrangements for us to enter before the grounds opened to the public. We went in as gardeners. That’s right, GARDENERS!!!! We were able to enter and get out in a reasonable amount of time.

And, yes, we did some gardening. We were each permitted to plant a single yellow flower in the rear garden of the compound for a mere 20 Thai Baht donation, or roughly 75 cents. It was quite an experience and the grounds were beautiful.

It wasn’t your everyday tourist experience. But, not every foreign visitor has an amazing Thai family either.

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- Tyris Kemp, Kinnick High School Alumna and a LUJ Graduate



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“While many dread the arrival of winter, I wait for it like a child waits for Christmas or summer vacation – impatiently and excitedly.”

Hiking the slopes in my winter paradise

Story and photos by
JOELY SANTIAGO

As temperatures drop and days get shorter, many find themselves longing for summer ... wishing for warmer conditions, nine o'clock sunsets and hours by the pool (or beach). Enduring snow, ice and below freezing temperatures is not something a lot of people look forward to. But with wintertime comes hot cocoa, snowmen, and, most importantly, the thrill of winter sports.

While many dread the arrival of winter, I wait for it like a child waits for Christmas or summer vacation – impatiently and excitedly. I watch the forecast and snow reports incessantly, eagerly anticipating the start of ski/snowboarding season. I wouldn't call myself an expert (or even good) by any stretch of the imagination. But I can't wait for the mountains to finally have enough snow on them for me to clumsily tumble down the slopes on my snowboard. I look forward to it every year.

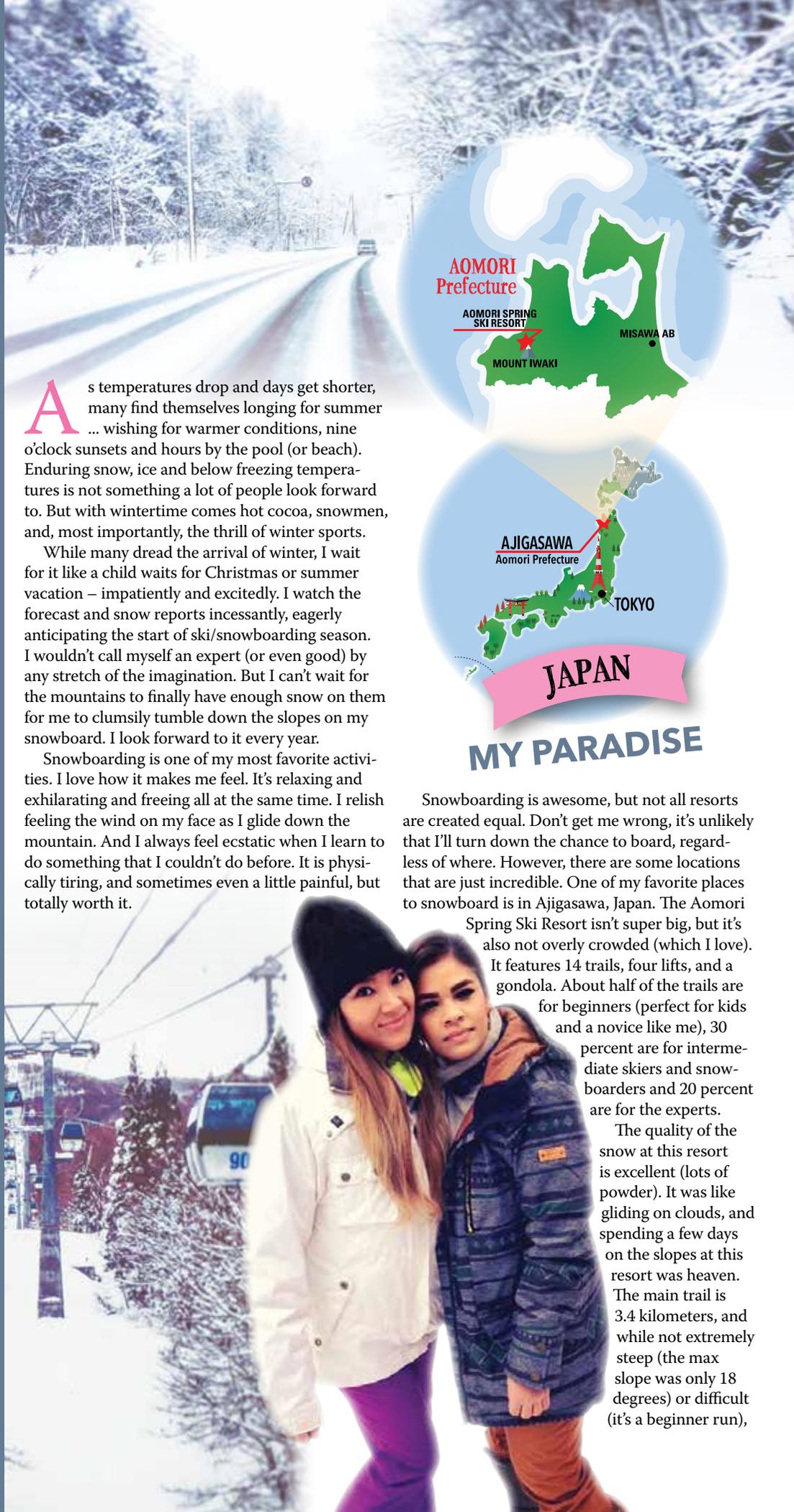
Snowboarding is one of my most favorite activities. I love how it makes me feel. It's relaxing and exhilarating and freeing all at the same time. I relish feeling the wind on my face as I glide down the mountain. And I always feel ecstatic when I learn to do something that I couldn't do before. It is physically tiring, and sometimes even a little painful, but totally worth it.



Snowboarding is awesome, but not all resorts are created equal. Don't get me wrong, it's unlikely that I'll turn down the chance to board, regardless of where. However, there are some locations that are just incredible. One of my favorite places to snowboard is in Ajigasawa, Japan. The Aomori Spring Ski Resort isn't super big, but it's also not overly crowded (which I love).

It features 14 trails, four lifts, and a gondola. About half of the trails are for beginners (perfect for kids and a novice like me), 30 percent are for intermediate skiers and snowboarders and 20 percent are for the experts.

The quality of the snow at this resort is excellent (lots of powder). It was like gliding on clouds, and spending a few days on the slopes at this resort was heaven. The main trail is 3.4 kilometers, and while not extremely steep (the max slope was only 18 degrees) or difficult (it's a beginner run),





the landscape was diverse and beautiful. More advanced skiers and boarders may not enjoy this resort as much as I did. But there is plenty terrain to go off-piste and the resort also has a big half-pipe for the more adventurous types.

I also really enjoyed Aomori Spring because it offers night-skiing and boarding. This was the first resort I ever boarded at night at, and it was really great. I half-expected the snow to be harder or icier, but it wasn't. It was soft and fluffy, and the courses were very well-lit. However, only two of the lifts are open for night skiing and none of the advanced trails are accessible after 5 p.m.

The amazing cabin cul-de-sac we stayed when I visited this resort, though, was what really made this trip for me. At Aomori Spring, you can stay at the very nice and very elegant Rockwell Hotel.

It offers comfortable, Western-style rooms with views of the slopes. It has a bar, restaurant, spa, and onsen, and the hotel is situated at the foot of two of the main lifts.

But we wanted something a little more private and spacious, so we opted to stay in the little cabin village just a few minutes down the mountain (think fancy camping). The little wooden cottage was fully furnished and featured a kitchen, two full beds, and a loft space.

There are about 10 of them, and they are surrounded by thick, snow-covered trees. It's a wonderful place to start and end your day. Access to the lifts from the cabins is easy, and you're close enough to the hotel to take advantage of its amenities. However, you're just far enough away to feel secluded and really appreciate nature. It's



what made this getaway feel that much more relaxing and adventuresome.

The fantastic runs, awesome snow quality/availability, and marvelous accommodations really made this trip one of the best I've ever taken. I can't wait to go back.



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Wisteria Flower Tunnel at Kawachi Fuji Garden

Japan, is one destination that my husband and I had always dreamed of visiting. We have always been fascinated by its culture, people, history, and don't forget the food. So, for our 36th wedding anniversary we decided to make our dream come true.

First on our agenda was to purchase a seven-day JR Pass. You have to purchase your pass two weeks in advance before you plan to travel to Japan as you can only purchase it online.

As soon as our plane landed in Narita International Airport, we immediately picked up our luggage, checked through customs and immigration and proceeded to find the JR counter where our passes awaited us.

Passes in hand, we boarded the train for our first destination, Hotel Gracery Shinjuku, which we chose because of its quick six-minute walk from Shinjuku station.

If you've never experienced Shinjuku station, it's a must-see in Tokyo. One of the busiest in the world, the station has more than three million passengers each day.

After checking in our room and freshening up, we began our adventure.

Day 1 The first stop was Hitachi Seaside Park in Ibaraki Prefecture. The 850-plus acres of flowers was beautiful. The blue nemophila, which the park is known for, covered Miharashi Hill and was spectacular. To go along with the flowers, the park also has an amusement park and trails for running and biking.

Day 2 Next up was the Wisteria Flower Tunnel at Kawachi Fuji Garden in Kitakyushu. The tunnel, the main attraction at the garden, allows visitors to walk down an enchanting tunnel exploding with color.

The garden is about six hours from Tokyo and they say the flowers are usually peaking at the end of April.

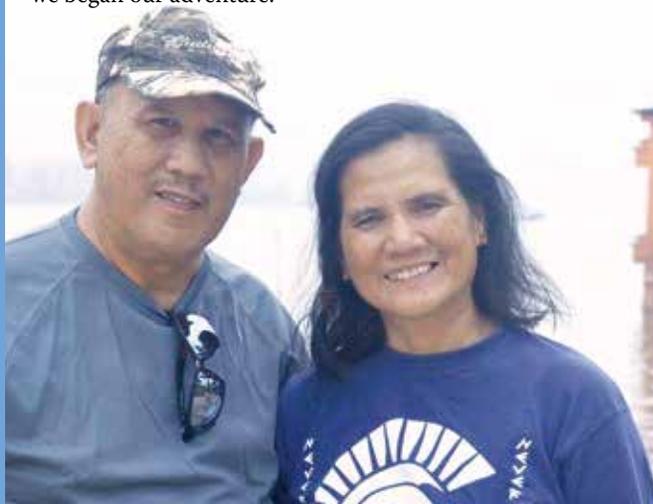
My husband and I decided to visit the place at night to avoid the crowd and to see the night illumination and we were not disappointed. The place is simply magical.

Day 3 We boarded the JR Tokaido/Sanyo Shinkansen for Hiroshima which is a four-hour train ride from Tokyo.

While in Hiroshima, we visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, Peace Memorial Museum

So much beauty right in Japan

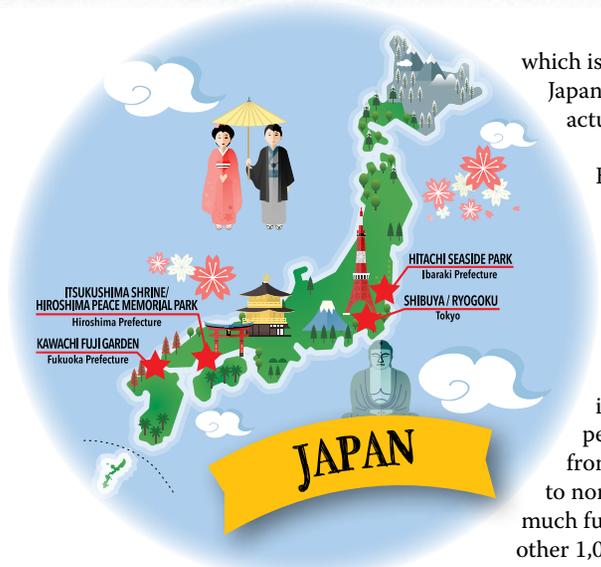
Story and photos by
YOLANDA PENARANDA



Miyajima Island



Hitachi Seaside Park in spring. 4.5 million nemophilas (baby blue eyes) paint the 3.5-hectare Miharashi Hills light blue.



which is considered one of the best in Japan. The beautiful structure was actually built in the sea.

After a restful night, we left Hiroshima and headed back for Tokyo.

Day 5 Visiting Japan is not complete unless you experience Shibuya Crossing. Rumored to be the busiest intersection in the world (and definitely in Japan), Shibuya Crossing is where hundreds, if not thousands, of people cross at the same time. They come from all directions at once, yet still manage to nonchalantly dodge each other. It was so much fun crossing the street with the rest of the other 1,000 people.

and the Atomic Bomb Dome. In between checking out the historical sites, make sure you try the dish Hiroshima is known for – okonomiyaki. The crepe-like food is filled with meat, seafood, cabbage and more. My husband and I waited an hour in line just to try this food at one of the many okonomiyaki restaurants in the prefecture. We were not disappointed.

Day 4 While in Hiroshima, we decided to take a side trip to the beautiful island of Miyajima. There we visited Itsukushima Shrine,

Day 6 This was the highlight of our trip - sumo wrestling. My husband and I were so excited to see the tournament that we arrived to the hotel a night early just to be safe. We were lucky because one of the famous wrestlers, and

Japan's favorite, was wrestling. The emperor and his wife were also on hand to see the tournament. Their favorite sumo wrestler did not win.

Nevertheless, we had so much fun just watching the tournament.

Day 7 Our final day in Japan, we decided to go to Robot Restaurant. It was different, but a bit



A-Bomb Dome, Hiroshima

too loud for my taste. After the show, we went back to our hotel for a good night rest before our flight back home.

Despite seeing all that we did, there are still so many places in Japan that we want to visit. We promised ourselves that someday we'll make a return trip - perhaps on our 37th wedding anniversary!

MY PARADISE

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“The feeling I got as I stepped off the bus in Shirakawa was akin to having stepped into a life-sized landscape painting, romanticized and enhanced ...”

Shirakawa a Japanese winter wonderland

Story and photos by
DAVID R. KRIGBAUM



The holidays are a great time to get away somewhere quiet. A traditional, quaint country village covered in a layer of white snow surrounded by evergreens that smells of firewood and chilled wind comes to mind. While this may sound like a place in rural Germany or England, Japan's Shirakawa fits that description to perfection.

Located in a river valley in the Ryohaku Mountains, Shirakawa is all of that and more with its famous thatched roof gassho zukuri farmhouses.

The feeling I got as I stepped off the bus in Shirakawa was akin to having stepped into a life-sized landscape painting, romanticized and enhanced, yet it was neither of those things. It was reality and I was in the middle of it. (As were countless other people, but careful cropping and framing keeps them out of the picture and on the outskirts of memory.)

As a photographer, it was hard to stop shooting for more than a few minutes during the trip because every scene was a post card. Whether admiring the natural, man-made or a combination of the two, I've never seen a more beautiful place in the snow.

Shirakawa looks good in any season, but winter

just feels like an especially appropriate time to visit. The farmhouse's distinctive tall roofs were designed so as not to collapse under snow. It could be said that it's a village made for winter, so it was surprising that the crowds weren't as bad as I was expecting. Despite its popularity as a tourist spot since becoming a UNESCO world heritage site, the sharp winter seems to thin the tourist herd. So, while there's plenty of people around, it never feels too crowded.

Throughout the village, houses have been preserved as museums that can be freely walked about. It's tourist friendly, but for the most part, avoids over-

playing to tourists. (An example of that would be California's Calico ghost town - a real ghost town dressed up like a gaudy cartoon version of an Old West ghost town.)

In these houses, we learned the stories of families that had lived in them for centuries, how they plied the village's twin industries of silk production and explosives. They're not merely old shells for new buildings either, all were still completely made of wood and thatch without modern supports.

The upper floors were still full of the old silk-



MY PARADISE





making implements dangling from the ceiling and on display. Their Japanese-only explanations leaving me to wonder how some of these alien devices functioned.

The one-off homes in town are nice, but the most impressive collection of houses are a scenic foot bridge across the river from the body of the village. The Open-Air Folk Museum is a collection of 26 houses from around the area. As Japan has modernized and people left their rural homes, old villages faded away. These houses were brought from those dead places and gathered here where people can experience them and learn their history. **Warning:** This area is cosplayer bait. I'm still not fully sure what the purple-haired guy dressed like a shrine maiden was supposed to be, but maybe I'm not supposed to.

It isn't all UNESCO houses and magnificent scenery, as amidst this is a village of modern people who live here and go about their lives. Despite the heavy presence of outsiders and shops that cater to them, the town itself shuts down entirely in the afternoon, leaving visitors with few options but to retire from the cold to the warmth of their ryokans for broiling onsen waters and small homemade feasts for dinner.

Another way to get warm for those averse to naked communal bathing, is drinking the moonshine this region prides itself on, doburoku sake. The milky, ricey substance is less like drinking liquor and more like drinking the mash from the distilling process.

Several Gassho Zukuri farmhouses are now ryokan, but we decided to stay at the neighboring village of Hirase Onsen as the only guests of a ryokan run by a grandmother with assistance from her teenage granddaughter.

We enjoyed the New Year's holiday in Hirase Onsen, visiting the shrine where doburoku was handed out to all visitors (sadly, my traveling companions decided not to partake, so I didn't get to try it either) and I rang in the new year with a bell at the temple at the bottom of the hill.

We stayed in a Shirakawa Gassho Zukuri on New Year's Day, which is when the seven lucky gods roam the village. The "gods" are men (even the women) in colorful costumes carrying their deities' props and performing a song and dance routine at businesses and ryokans.

We spent a total of three days here, which I believe is about the right amount of time to take everything in.

As much as I love the traditional farmhouses, after seeing a half dozen they start looking alike. And, after admiring the scenery, there wasn't much else to do but move on to the next leg of our vacation, feeling fulfilled and happy at the time spent in Shirakawa.

Shirakawa's official English (<http://ml.shirakawa-go.org/en/>) website has some helpful advice on how to get to the village from Osaka airport and Takayama. My wife and I flew in from Nagoya, but the advice is the same and our bus was direct from Nagoya with no changes.



“The island’s got the sun. It’s got the beaches. And for a one-month stretch, it’s got baseball.”



suggest any baseball fan stationed in the Pacific make it a point to get to Okinawa sometime around March.

The island is full of other activities for you to kill time between ballgames. First and foremost, don’t miss the great opportunity to enjoy fun on the water. The island is full of beautiful beaches and many water activities for those who can’t just lay in the sand for an entire day.

For the kids, Northern Okinawa is home to Churaumi Aquarium, which at one point was the world’s largest.

The island is also home to multiple castles and castle ruins. I’d recommend a tour of Shuri Castle, in Southern Okinawa, for those looking for a little history. Nearly destroyed during WWII, the castle was originally built some 400 years before the United States became a nation.

My personal favorite meal was Okinawan soba noodles.

A tiny, traditional-Okinawan-style building housed a restaurant serving only soba and only

for about 20 people max. The place was secluded and hard to find, but I’d suggest any first-time visitor

find a way to eat at a local soba joint. If it’s half as good as the stuff I had, you will not be disappointed.

And if you find a place that has a to go menu, grab some soba, a beer and bring it to the ballpark for a truly unique baseball experience.



The sun on your face. The breeze in your hair. A cold one in hand.

This. Is. Paradise.

It’s my paradise, at least.

Beaches? Na, not much of a fan. I’m talking about America’s Pastime – baseball.

Give me a cold beer and a seat in Wrigley, throw in a Chicago-style hotdog and fly the ‘W’ for good measure, and I’m as content as they come.

Living in Tokyo, Wrigley and Chicago-style dogs may be tough to come by, but baseball sure isn’t.

The game experience in Japan overall is better, in my opinion. The cheering, cheap seats and rules on bringing food and drinks into the game put it over the top. And, just like MLB, the start of the NPB calendar heralds the winter thaw – spring training.

For many of the NPB’s 12 teams, spring training takes place on Okinawa every year. The island doesn’t have its own team, but every February and March, the locals get the brief opportunity to enjoy professional baseball - albeit exhibition games - in person.

Many consider Okinawa a year-round paradise. The island’s got the sun. It’s got the beaches. And for a one-month stretch, it’s got baseball.

Don’t be confused. These preseason games don’t have nearly the same pomp and circumstance as the ones that actually count. There is still cheering and the food/drink rules are lax, but it’s more of a “show up when you want” type of atmosphere. But, if baseball is your thing, and you haven’t had it since late October, you’re certainly not complaining.

Just as I would highly recommend traveling to Arizona or Florida for MLB spring training, I would



OKINAWA Prefecture

JAPAN



OKINAWA CHURAUMI AQUARIUM

SHURI CASTLE

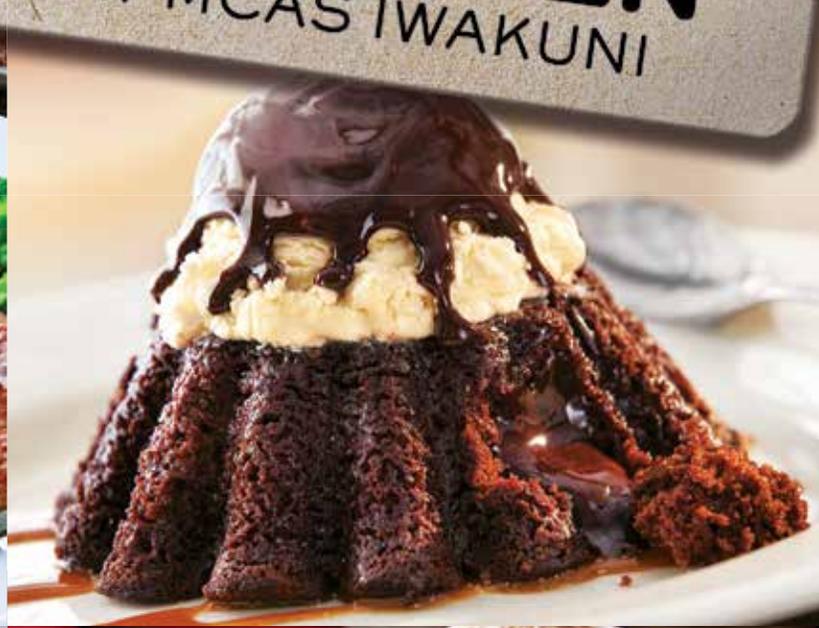
Is this heaven? It’s Okinawa

Story and photos by IAN WADDICK

MY PARADISE

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“Since it was low tide, we had to sling our baggage over our heads as we waded out to climb aboard a Thai longboat.”

Family adventure in tropical Railay

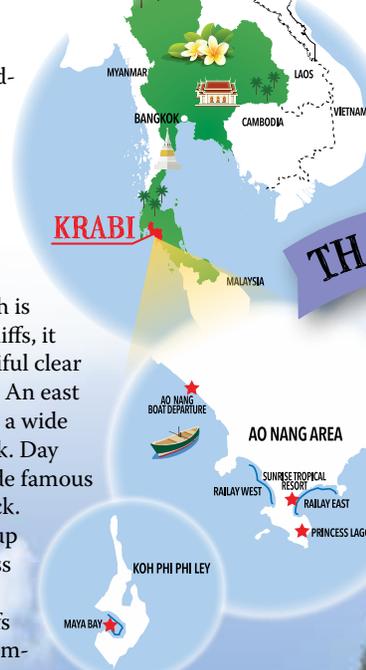
Story and photos by
ZEKE LYONS



If a jungle-ly beach surrounded by rocky cliffs is your idea of tropical paradise, then Railay Beach, Thailand, is the spot for you! It's been our favorite family destination so far.

The other best thing: no cars and no roads. Since Railay Beach is on a peninsula surrounded by cliffs, it is only reachable by boat. Beautiful clear water? check. Monkeys? check. An east facing beach for the sunrise and a wide west facing for the sunset? check. Day trips to amazing Maya Bay (made famous in the movie "The Beach")? check.

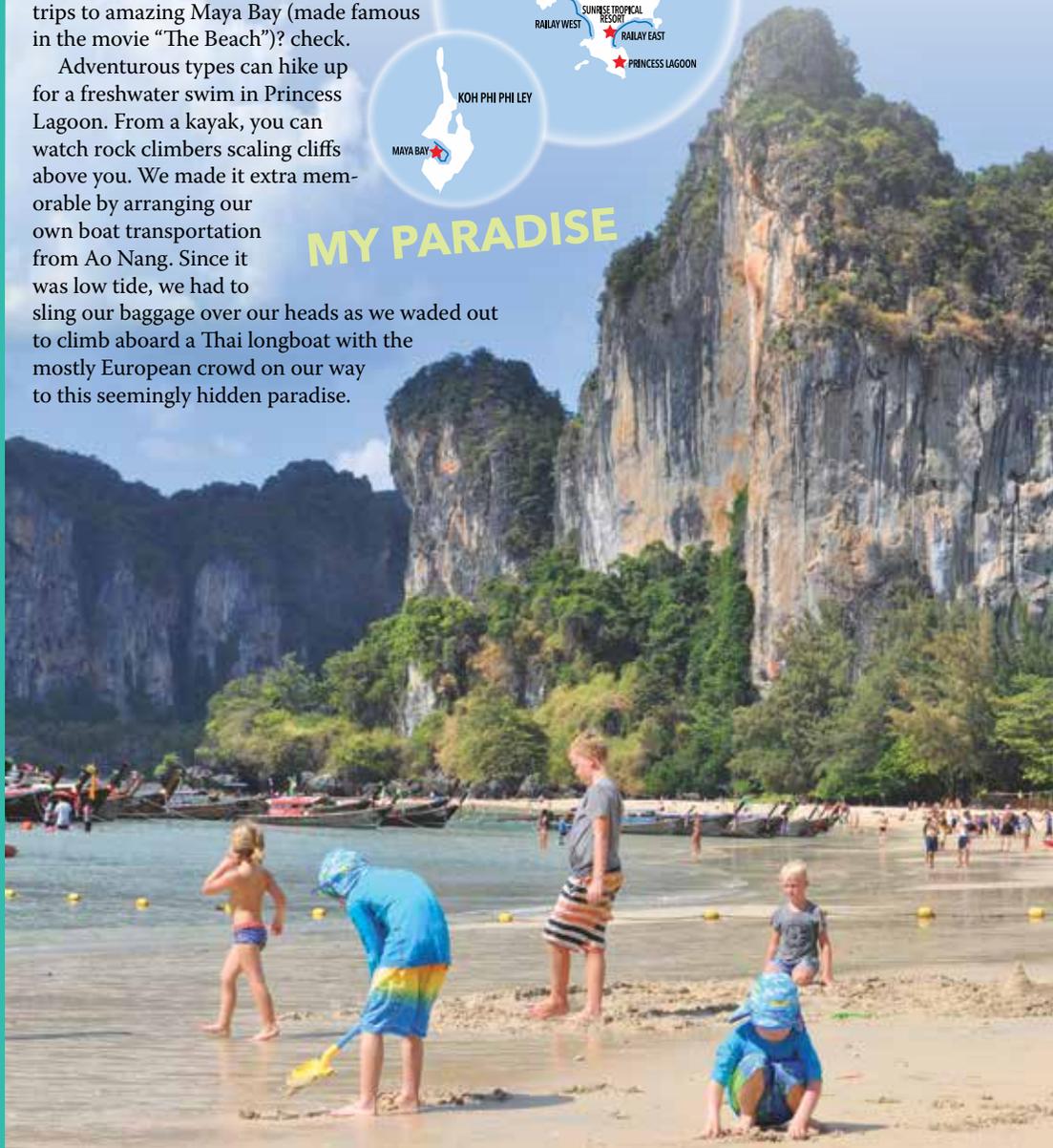
Adventurous types can hike up for a freshwater swim in Princess Lagoon. From a kayak, you can watch rock climbers scaling cliffs above you. We made it extra memorable by arranging our own boat transportation from Ao Nang. Since it was low tide, we had to sling our baggage over our heads as we waded out to climb aboard a Thai longboat with the mostly European crowd on our way to this seemingly hidden paradise.



You can find places to stay for all budgets, but we really loved the villas of Sunrise Tropical Resort.

Railay Beach is reachable from Krabi Airport, which has regular flights from Singapore and Bangkok. Check out the pictures; you won't be able to resist.

MY PARADISE



“My son was at the age where he likes to look at bright, colorful objects, so the aquarium was a no brainer.”



A lot of heart and Seoul!

Story and photos by **MOLLY CARNAHAN**



Royal Gyeongbok Palace

In February 2017, we found ourselves bound for South Korea! I never really thought about traveling there until I was offered a job that required me to travel there for two weeks. This trip was a little different than my previous trips because this time my 11-month-old son would be joining us. I wasn't really sure what Seoul had to offer, but what we found was an amazing country with a lot of heart and soul!

First, if you ever have the opportunity to fly Korean Airlines, do it! Although it was a red-eye flight, the service was amazing. The flight attendants were so kind and attended to our every need. They even set my son up with a bunch of blankets so he could sleep. They also stuffed us with so much good food. It was a great flight!

When we arrived in Seoul, we took a bus to the Dragon Hill Lodge on Yongsan. It is a very nice hotel with a lot of great amenities for military families. They have several restaurants and a few shops. The best part about the hotel is the location. It is within walking distance of the subway and some great local restaurants.

One of the most interesting places we saw was

only a 15-minute walk from our hotel. The War Museum of Korea was amazing. So many wonderful statues and sculptures depicting the military history of Korea. It was such a neat experience, and I definitely recommend it if you like history and enjoy visiting museums.

Our next stop was the Royal Gyeongbok Palace, which was such a beautiful sight. It is the largest of Korea's grand palaces. We signed up for the tour through our hotel and I am glad we did. Our guide showed us everything. One of the coolest parts of the tour was being able to watch the changing of the guards' ceremony. It was such a colorful and interesting ceremony. If you visit this palace, make sure you check the time of the changing of the guards because you won't want to miss it.

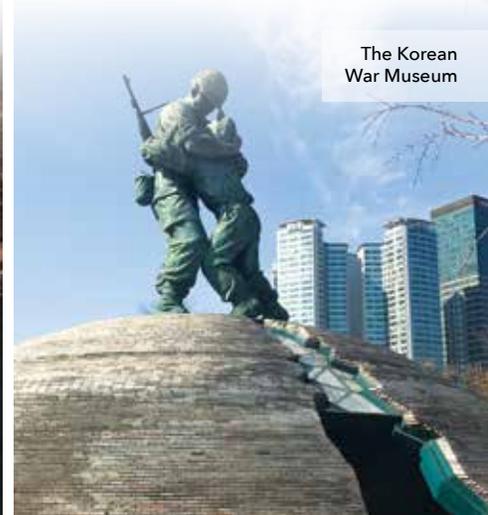
If you have kids, I recommend going to Lotte World and its aquarium. My son was at the age where he likes to look at bright, colorful objects, so the aquarium was a no brainer. We saw penguins, sharks, colorful fish and even a whale. My son really enjoyed the large tanks of colorful fish. We even got to see a little robot fish swimming with the other fish. Overall, it was a great experience and a lot of family fun.

South Korea is a beautiful country. I feel lucky that I was able to experience its culture and meet some great people. I would definitely recommend visiting there if you are stationed in the Pacific. I am already planning on heading back there soon.! Until next time, South Korea, Annyeong (bye)!

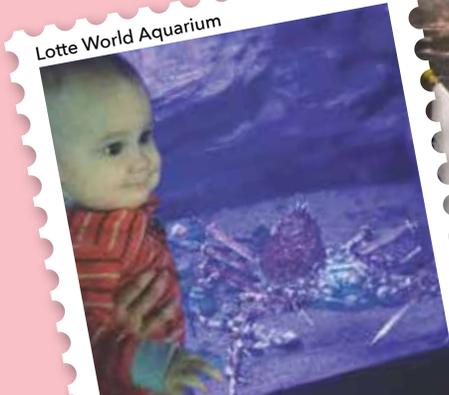
MY PARADISE



My husband Jeremy, son Hank, and me at the Korean War Museum



The Korean War Museum



Lotte World Aquarium



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“Busan was a natural choice – close enough to Japan for a short holiday and light enough on our yen to be able to spoil ourselves a little.”

Beautiful Busan bustling with fun

Story and photos by
SIMONE ARMER

“Get the vision, get the vision, get the vision, come -,” I executed the last of The Kills’ new album with a tug of my earphones when we touched down on the tarmac, breathing a small, happy sigh of relief. We had finally made it to South Korea. Or had we? The 55-minute flight from Fukuoka, Japan to Busan is odd; it takes that long to fly to Osaka and then you’re still in Japan. I blushed at the hangul winking at us through the window as we skated towards the gangway. We were definitely not in Kansas anymore.

This only became more apparent as we made our way through immigration, and then customs. “Everyone’s so tall!” I observed out loud to Madelyn. She nodded, smiling. It was my first trip to an Asian country that’s not Japan, and I couldn’t help but compare. “Wait till you see the trash!” Sure enough, empty coffee cups and soda cans were spilling out of the tops of every rubbish bin in the arrivals hall.

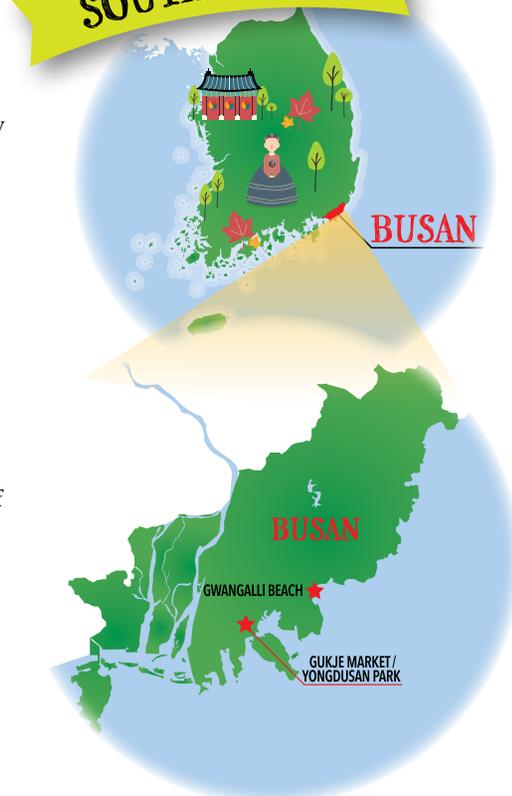
It was surprisingly refreshing to be somewhere where there was a bit of disorder. It reminded me of home.

Our 3-day getaway would be a much-needed break for the both of us; Madelyn wanted to splurge on one last trip before she headed back to Canada at the end of the month, and I needed to come up for air. The stresses of living in a foreign country for three years have their way of creeping up on you. Busan was a natural choice – close enough to Japan for a short holiday and light enough on our yen to be able to spoil ourselves a little.

We had decided to taxi the hour’s drive from Gimhae International Airport to our Airbnb on Gwangalli Beach, which, if my research was sound, would only set us back about ₩30,000 (approximately 3,000¥, or \$30). I leaned back into the leather chair of the Hyundai van and stared out into the gray.

Busan is gorgeously weird. The port city, located on the south-eastern-most tip of the Korean peninsula, sprawls beneath 18 mountain peaks, spilling down into narrow valleys between the Nakdong and Suyeong Rivers, and over the edge of its six beaches. Overlooking it all are the perfectly spaced tower apartment blocks that monopolize the city’s skyline.

SOUTH KOREA



MY PARADISE

It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen.

“I feel like if I saw a spaceship come over that hill right now I wouldn’t even be surprised,” I said to Madelyn. The inside of the taxi was just as futuristic looking – a dashboard full of lights and dials, and a warning pulsating from the GPS for every time the driver ignored the speed limit.

When we finally reached the apartment building of our Airbnb and paid the taxi driver (it came to just about what we had anticipated), we dropped off our bags and headed down the block for a quick bite to eat. Over brunch, we decided that since the taxis were so cheap, we’d head to Nampodong that way as well.





Gukje Market

Gukje Market, also known as Nampodong International Market, began during the Korean War as a place for refugees to make a living. It has since grown from its humble beginnings into a large-scale attraction that is popular with both locals and tourists.

Likened to Seoul's Namdaemun Market, Gukje's narrow alleyways are crowded with stalls selling everything from electronics and machinery to linen and kitchen appliances, all at wholesale prices. Connected to the smaller Bupyeong market nearby, it's the perfect place to hunt for bargains.

Since 2014, Gukje has also enjoyed popularity with fans of the movie *Gukjesijang*, in which the main character, a refugee of North Korea, escapes to Busan and is taken in by his aunt who runs a stall in the market.

A special tour introducing the film's shooting locations in and around Gukje Market runs for free every Saturday and Sunday at 1pm. Weekday tours are also available for groups of 10 or more.

We had our taxi driver drop us off at Busan Tower and navigated the rest of the way from there. After the clouds opened up, we popped into a shoe store to pick

up some umbrellas that were on sale and ended up ducking into Nampo Station when the rain really started to come down hard.

We confirmed directions with the friendly staff at the station's information center and then cut through the Nampodong Underground Shopping Center. At exit 5, we emerged above ground again, just 300 meters away from the market's entrance, relieved to find it fully covered.

Madelyn was in search of a Korean *dolsot* and some spoons, while I was content to just browse for trinkets.

A collection of lacquered jewellery boxes caught my eye. Inlaid with cranes and pine trees, each box turned out to be two boxes clasped together. When you undo the clasp, the twin boxes swing open to reveal a set of velveteen drawers on each side.

In the end, I settled on a *norigae* pendant and set of handcrafted cards depicting traditional *hanbok*.

The market has everything you could possibly want or need: bathroom and lighting fixtures, clothing and accessories, jewellery, bags, stationary, crafts, linen and towels, eyeglasses, electronics, woodwork, umbrellas, fans, and crockery and cutlery.

The prices are incredibly reasonable, and even then haggling is expected. For souvenirs and gifts, it's definitely the place to beat; I saw the same twin jewellery boxes which were on sale for ₩40,000 at the market, for double and triple the price elsewhere in Busan.

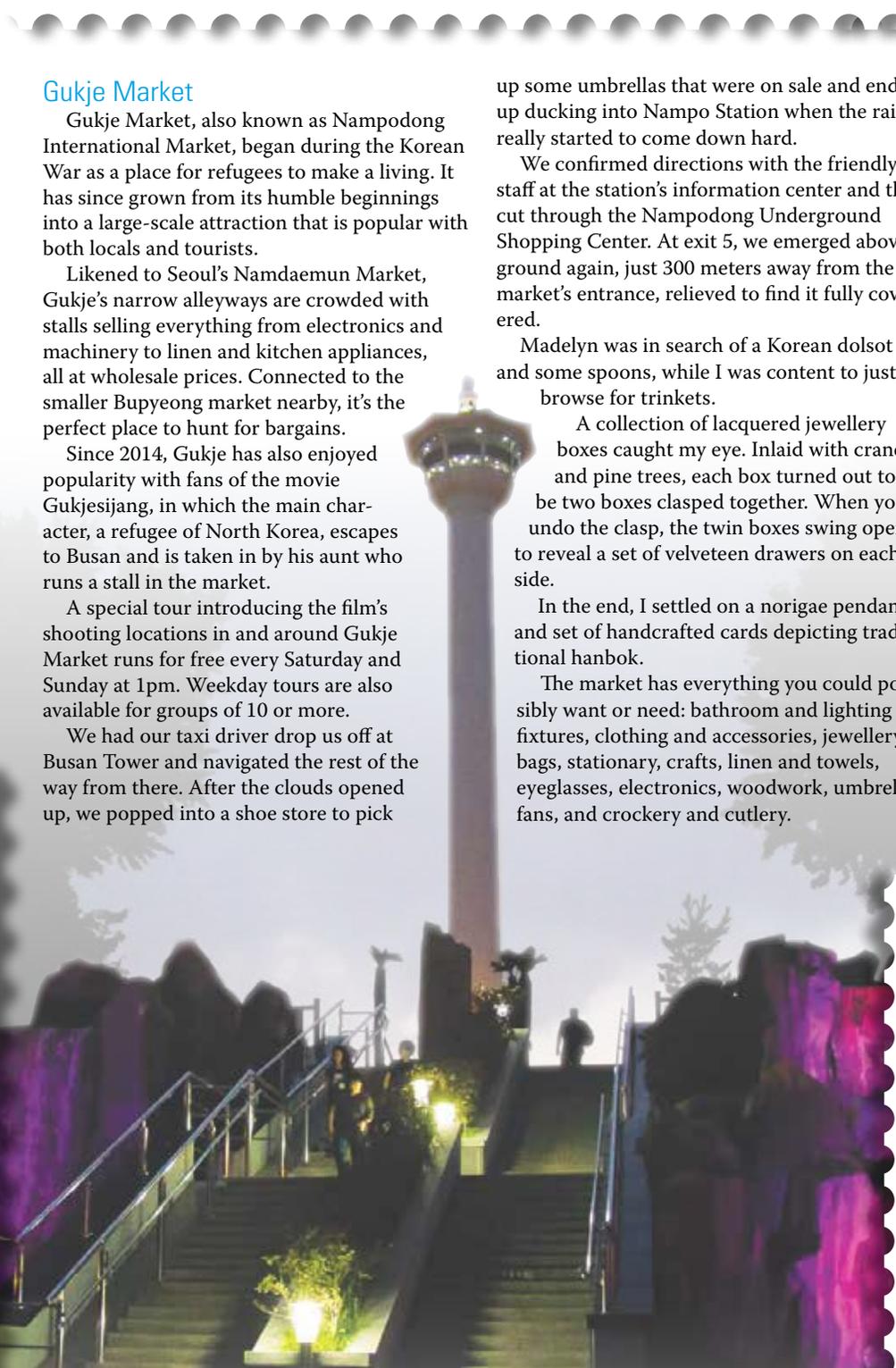
A block away from the market is the Gwangbokdong Food Street which offers a variety of delicious Korean, Japanese and Chinese street foods at ridiculously cheap prices. If street food isn't your thing, there are about 20 restaurants in the area too.

Still satisfied from our brunch earlier in the day, we grabbed a coffee at a Starbucks overlooking the street instead, enjoying the action from the counter at the window.

We popped into ArtBox next, a Korean brand store and every stationery lover's dream. The quirky shop offers an impressive selection of novelty items, cosmetics, notebooks, stickers, lamps, umbrellas, bags, stuffed animals, postcards and travel accessories.

By the time we started making our way back to Busan Tower, I could feel the hum of the energy that dusk in a city brings. We were both exhausted, but too excited to head back to our apartment, and so we pushed on.

SEE BUSAN ON PAGE 48 ▶



BUSAN

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 47

Yongdusan Park

“Almost there!” I panted over my shoulder. The narrow escalator that carries people from Gwangbok-ro Street up to Yongdusan Park was under maintenance so we were walking up the several hundred steps instead.

Located atop one of Busan’s most famous mountains, Yondgusan, the park of the same name is said to offer impressive views of the port city. We weren’t sure how much of it would be accessible after dark, but since we were already in the area we figured we’d give it a go.

As it turns out, Yongdusan Park at night is one of Busan’s best kept secrets.

I reached the top first. “You’re gonna freak,” I yelled back to Madelyn. Two purple waterfalls sat guarding the final staircase that leads to the second tier of the park, the grey silhouette of Busan Tower looming in the background. What an entrance!

Yongdusan was first called Songhyunsan, named for its view of the ocean through the trees of its forest.

It was thought that the peak, 69 metres above sea level, resembled the shape of a dragon’s head and was believed to possess the power to defeat enemies at sea. The temple was renamed Yongdusan, or “dragon head mountain”.

During the Korean War, Busan experienced an influx of refugees as one of only two cities in South Korea not captured by the North Korean army. The sudden increase in the city’s population saw houses being built all the way up its peaks.

When the structures on Yongdusan were destroyed by fire, the city decided to turn the area into a park and planted replacement trees on the bald mountain. Today, the park contains 70 different species, covering an area of 69,000 m² (226,377.95 ft²).

At the top of the final staircase, everything turned to yellow and orange; bright streetlamps illuminate a Buddhist temple and a statue of the war hero Admiral Yi Sun-Sin.



At the time of Japanese colonial rule, a shrine was built on Yongdusan, but this has since been replaced with monuments dedicated to Korean War victims, peace in the country and the April Revolution.

There is also a bronze dragon sculpture, a stone bust of activist An Huije, a flower clock, citizen’s bell, literary monument and a museum of folk instruments.

The park’s main attraction, of course, is the 120 metre-high Busan Tower. Unlike most towers with observation decks, Busan Tower was built solely for entertainment purposes and contains no transmitting equipment.

We each bought a ticket and had to wait just a few minutes before one of the tower’s high speed elevators sent us hurtling to the top.

The observation deck has two levels (or three if you count the one closed off to the public). The first, named Sky Lounge, serves coffee, snacks and ice-cream and has stools and counters where you can sit and enjoy the view.

The wall encircling the two elevators is covered in small tile magnets decorated with hearts and messages of love. There are also thousands of love locks tied to the fence at the base of the tower and several illuminated hearts where people can pose for photos. We concluded that

the park has become a significant place for couples, which is not surprising. It’s a pretty romantic place.

And if you can ignore the harsh reflection of the cafe’s fluorescent lights on the windows, the 360° view from the tower is a fairy-tale itself.

The second level is accessed via a hobbit-like staircase, which won’t be fun if you suffer from claustrophobia, but the lights here are dimmer so you’d probably be able to get a few decent shots. Eventually, I put my camera down and just tried to enjoy the city twinkling up at me.

After taking the elevator back down, we looked around the souvenir store for a bit and then slowly made our way back to the park’s entrance. Madelyn was still carrying her dolsots from the market, and we were both bordering on hangry, so we hopped in a cab and headed back to Gwangalli Beach for dinner.

Both Yongdusan Park and Busan Tower are open all year round. Entrance to the park is free, but admission to the tower is ₩5,000. The observatory is open from 9 a.m. – 10 p.m. (ticket office closes at 9:45 p.m.).

From Nampo Station, take exit 7 and turn left onto Gwanbok-ro Street. The escalator is about 150 metres away, on your right (look for the Nike store across the street).



Gwangalli Beach

As I waited for Madelyn to finish freshening up, I watched night descend on Gwangalli Beach from the window of our Airbnb. Directly below, talking moths swarmed around the glow of giant red and yellow umbrellas. To the left, neon signs advertising the many bars and restaurants that line the strip buzzed to life, one by one in a domino line, toppling into Gwangandaegyo.

The largest ocean bridge in Korea, Gwangan stretches 7.4 km over the East Sea from Suyeong-gu to Haeundae-gu. Its colourful lights began to flicker, from pink to purple to blue, their paint bleeding into the black water and streaking with the tide as it raced to shore.

The energy rising from the street was palpable; it was calling me to the ground.
“You ready to go?”

As we came out of the apartment building, traffic officers were setting up the roadblocks for the night.

On certain days during the summer, the street running alongside Gwangalli Beach is closed for an unofficial party.

The night before, we had enjoyed live music and street performers from our patio table at one of the restaurants on the strip.

Now, as we walked in the opposite direction, we spotted a night market and tables set up for playing Jenga.

Skateboarders weaved in and around artists sketching portraits and magicians performing tricks.

One man with a remote-controlled toy truck that doubled as a set of speakers was dueling with a smaller, gold car, much to the distress of the few dogs nearby.

The strip seemed to be especially popular with canine owners, many of whom let their well-trained pets roam free.

On the beach, a singer belted out lyrics in Hangul on a small stage, while groups of friends let fireworks off nearby.

During the day, the 1.4 km long stretch of white sand is popular with volleyball players and sunbathers.

The pristine waters of the beach, the result of a special cleaning program, make it popular with swimmers, jet skiers and windsurfers too.

But at night, its chaos turns romantic, literally illustrated by the four, giant, red, neon letters that guard one part of the pavement: L; O; V; E.

It was kind of odd to see so many couples, and also so many couples engaging in PDA; here in the countryside of Japan the sight of two people

just holding hands is a rarity.

But who could blame them, really? Gwangalli Beach has all the makings of a Before Sunrise-esque tale. I bet you’d even find a man willing to write you a poem about milkshake.

I had a man whisper sweet nothings to me instead; at least that’s what his offer of a giant, turtle-shaped dalgona sounded like to me. We’d found some sugar after all, just less of the colloquial kind.

And then the sugar found us; we were pulled into an impromptu dance party by a group of boys spilling out from a pub who had caught us giggling at them gyrating to songs of their own concoction.

As I let one of them spin me around, I felt a blanket of melancholy wrap around me. It was our last night in Busan and I wasn’t ready to go back.

“Maybe I should have moved here instead”, I wondered to myself. It was always my plan, and then, somewhere along the way, my plan changed.

Japan has been good to me, no doubt, but there was something about being in Busan that was speaking to my soul: for the first time in three years, I didn’t feel like a bull in a china shop.

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