The island of Burano in the Venetian Lagoon
SONGLINES WEAVE THEIR WAY ACROSS EAST ARNHEM LAND, INTERLOCKING THE YOLNGU HOMELANDS AND REVEALING STORIES OF HOW TIME BEGAN, WRITES CATHERINE MARSHALL.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAMIAN BENNETT
In the pre-dawn darkness on a beach named Lonely,

Ritjilili Ganambarr sings out to the Dreamtime. She gazes across the bay and, with her keening voice, picks objects from the gloom: the boulders that disappear and re-emerge each day at the whim of the tides; the pelicans’ wings, dark against a diaphanous sky; the cyclone-buckled palm trees lying spent on the shore.

In great waves and with sobs spilling from her body, Ganambarr thanks the creation ancestors for everything around her, for the people who are here and the ones who have gone, for the saltwater crocodile floating out in the bay, for the morning star Banumbirr (Venus), which lit the way for the Djang’kawu sisters as they cast their songlines upon this land at the beginning of time.

“The rays of sun touch everything in our country,” she wails in salutation to the slow seep of daylight.

The women-only crying ceremony is now over and a new day has begun. Ganambarr mops her tears with the hem of her skirt, pours tea from the billy and surveys the land of which she is a custodian. This is Bawaka, one of the homelands knitted together to form East Arnhem Land on the Gulf of Carpentaria. Accessible only

Looking east to the Gulf of Carpentaria from Bawaka homeland
by four-wheel drive or light aircraft, they are home to the Yolngu people, who have one of the oldest and most intact living cultures in the world. I’ve come here with Lirrwi Tourism (lirrwitourism.com.au), an Aboriginal-owned organisation developing a tourism economy in East Arnhem Land by offering immersive experiences with some of the Yolngu clans.

From the air, Bawaka is a dreamscape, a cushion of dunes speckled with foliage and lapped by a watery swirl of turquoise and white. It is shot through with those songlines, imperceptible Dreaming tracks upon which the creation ancestors walked as they sang the world into life. Everything here is interconnected through them: the casuarina trees and the dugongs, the sun, the moon and the morning star, the water and the wind, and the Yolngu people themselves.

On the ground, amid this ancient lattice of stories, we’d lumbered across tracts of bone-white sand, so soft and un tarnished that it appeared to have been born just yesterday. We’d lurched along a ribbon of endless, empty beach and through forests of figs and wattles and paperbarks. Finally, we’d come
The bounty from Bawaka’s beach includes mud crabs and sea snails.

to Lonely Beach – and a scattering of dwellings facing the broad scoop of a jewel-bright bay.

Ganambarr and her daughter, Djawundil Maymuru, were waiting for us. They’d placed djilka leaves onto the smouldering coals and, when they had started to smoke, brushed them and their fragrant outflow over our bodies. The negative energy that we *napaki* (white people) had brought with us soon dissipated and into the breach slipped Bayini, one of the benign spirits of Bawaka. “When tourists come here to Bawaka, they feel that someone is protecting them,” said Ganambarr: “It’s Bayini.”

The story of this spirit woman pulsates throughout the homeland of Bawaka, a legend at once tragic and uplifting. She was a princess, brought here as a slave by the Macassans as they sailed southwards from Sulawesi on the monsoonal winds. While they traded with the Yolngu – offering knives and other items in exchange for trepang (sea cucumbers) – Bayini was held captive on their prahu out in the bay. Then one day she was thrown overboard and swam all the way to the other side of the inlet, where she left her footprint on a rock. You can still see it to this day, says Ganambarr.
We closed our eyes and inhaled the scent of the djilka leaves as the women fanned the sweet smoke around us. Bawaka will recognise us now that we’ve been cleansed and infused with Bayini’s spirit, said Maymuru. She will protect us from all harm.

On this day of the crying ceremony, we invoke Bayini as we set out to collect plants for weaving. It’s Dharraddharraduya, one of six seasons that sweep over East Arnhem Land in slow and rhythmic procession. The oppressive heat of Rarranhdharr, when the stingray will appear and the stringybark will flower, has not yet set in. The fractious thundering of Worlmanirri, with its swelter and bounty of turtles, is still months away.

It’s August now, the perfect time of year; a breeze comes in from the east but the bay is smooth and unbroken. There’s no need to consult a calendar, for the day’s reminders are embedded in nature. The red flowers of the dharrangulk tree indicate that baby sharks are ready for catching, while the golden florets bursting from the gaypal (wattle) say it’s time to fish for mullet.
It’s a veritable pantry out here: kangaroos, bandicoots and goannas are mature for the hunting; barramundi and oysters are fat for the catching; yams and honey are sweet for the tasting. The supermarket is redundant – all nourishment is here, says Ganambarr, so long as the Yolngu take just what they need and leave this bounty’s surfeit for the future.

We ponder this law of nature as we walk through the stillness and heat, through forests of spear grass and towering palms, past trees drooping with broad leaves and flush with red blooms, and screw palms encircled with decorative collars.

The men are crafting spears from malwan and gutpa trees, whittling their razor-sharp edges. They carry them out to the bay – last night’s moon predicted the tide – and thrust them at the shoals of mullet that the wattles have foretold.

But we’re busy with women’s business and Bayini is helping us to locate what we need. Ganambarr plunges a pole hook into a pandanus tree and extracts a frond from its crown. The remaining leaves snap back into place, easily concealing the wound. The other women are up to their waists in spear grass, digging for the plants that will colour their crafts, the scarlet bulbs and ochre tubers emerging kaleidoscopically from the earth.
Fifty more Indigenous experiences

Lake Mungo, NSW
Fifty-thousand years ago, Lake Mungo flowed with water and Australia’s earliest inhabitants lived along its shores. Today, this World Heritage-listed region is the site of the world’s oldest ritual cremation.

Harry Nanya Tours (harrynanyatours.com.au) walks visitors through the evolution of the Indigenous people to the effect of climate change on this fragile environment.

Olkola, Cape York, Queensland
One hundred years of perseverance paid off for the displaced Olkola people in 2014 when their land was finally returned to them. Yet they’re willing to share it; partnering with Intrepid (intrepid travel.com), they welcome tourists to this one-million-hectare expanse of ancient bora grounds, wetlands, rock art and remnant rainforest.

Ngadju Country, South Australia
Ngadju Country lies between South Australia’s coastal fringe and the outback, in the region stretching from Adelaide all the way to the Southern Flinders Ranges. Here, guests can explore the many stories – the Snake Dreaming, the creation story – that underpin this rugged landscape (aboriginalsa.com.au).

Tunnel Creek, Kimberley, Western Australia
The exhilarating story of Indigenous freedom fighter Jandamarra is told at Tunnel Creek, the state’s oldest cave system and the ideal hide-out during the Bunuba Resistance against colonists in the 19th century. Visitors can retrace the warrior’s ill-fated footsteps on walking tours with Bunuba Elder Dillon Andrews (bungoosee.com.au).

Bermagui and Bega Valley, NSW
The pastures of NSW’s South Coast don’t conjure an image of Aboriginal habitation but this is where the Yuin people have lived for thousands of years. Their stories are told during Dreaming and creation tours through Djirringanj Country, the Yuin’s lush heartland (ngaranaboriginalculture.com).

We carry our haul back to Bawaka. Beneath a shelter on Lonely Beach, we set about stripping the leaves, peeling, tearing and pulling until they are reduced to wispy filaments. We grate the tubers with a stone, releasing their golden pigment. We crush the bulbs so they bleed in scarlet rivulets. We pile our bounty into enormous pots – pandanus and plant pulp together – and boil them until they are seared with colour.

The more difficult task lies ahead: the weaving of the dillybags in which the women carry their quarry of mud crabs, oysters, pipis and yams. The dillybag contains, within its fibres, the very story of this land. “There’s lots to learn about Yolngu culture,” says Maymuru. “It goes deeper and deeper and deeper.”

Ganambarr loops the strands around her big toe, ties them tight and begins to weave. Her fingers move deftly as she tucks the weave into itself, pulls it from a gap then threads it through again.

As her dillybag grows into something substantial, Ganambarr tells us about gurrutu, the network of relationships that underpins Yolngu culture. Gurrutu is like this humble dillybag, she says. It is a cylindrical life form that grows and expands, encompassing all the disparate strands as it goes so that when it is finished, they are independently discernible yet inextricably linked. The colours and the threads – the Dreamtime’s creation, she means to say – blend into one another, green and ochre and red, so that eventually you can’t tell where one has begun and the other has ended.
A LAND

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAM CALDWELL
Who wouldn’t want to eat toutons and go mummering? Karla Courtney introduces her young son to the rugged Canadian North Atlantic and the Christmases of her childhood.
TO GET A SENSE OF MY FATHER’S CHILDHOOD, IMAGINE THE SHIPPING NEWS MEETS LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE.

WILLIAM DAVID COURTNEY was born and raised on Woody Island, Newfoundland — a remote, wild island off the coast of another remote, wild island in the Canadian North Atlantic. The area was settled in the early 19th century by English and Irish fishermen drawn to the then-plentiful cod, herring and lobster in surrounding Placentia Bay. Most communities in the province had running water, paved roads, electricity and — gasp! — store-bought bread but his family was isolated, relying on fishing, hunting, growing and preserving their own food for survival. Nanny sewed or knitted nearly every item of clothing, right down to their woollen briefs (with yarn that she handspun from her own sheep no less). Lobster was so abundant that it was considered a “poor kid’s” lunch, while the “rich” dined on canned ham or the occasional imported orange.

In the absence of television, they watched the regular arrival of whales, moose, bald eagles and the massive icebergs that float down the coast each spring after breaking away from the warming Arctic. The landscape itself was something to behold; Newfoundland is a craggy rock of an island with a fjord-carved coastline covered in coniferous trees and bountiful wild berries. The capital, St John’s, was a rugged harbour city with vast narrows that welcomed ships after being settled as a seasonal fishing camp in the 16th century. Today, the ships still come but the city’s winding streets are now filled with shops, gourmet sea-to-table restaurants, lively pubs and rows of colourful “jellybean” houses.

If weather reports are to be relied upon (and here they usually aren’t), the only sure thing is the snow that comes in winter. For the rest of the year, Mother Nature throws out whatever she chooses: rain, hail, wind, fog... even the occasional ray of sunlight.

I wasn’t born in Newfoundland but, more than anywhere else in the world, it truly feels like home. Every summer during my childhood, I would visit Woody Island, where my father’s family has a small cabin built out of lumber salvaged from the abandoned United church. Life on Woody Island is the same now as it was then: no modern conveniences but lots of rocky tidal beaches, moose sightings, cod-fishing for our supper and berry-picking for our dessert.

We’d also travel to other towns and areas, visiting family and friends and enjoying the bounty. We’d drive out to Cape Spear, North America’s easternmost point, to watch majestic humpback whales jump and splash in an ocean with icebergs as the backdrop. At Long Beach at Trinity Bay, we’d see thousands upon thousands of whirling silvery capelin converge in a thunderous mass for an annual breeding that literally shook the shore; my grandfather, Poppy, would wade out in his “waist-highs” with a big white bucket, ready to scoop up the fish for a feed.

But my favourite time to visit Newfoundland was — and still is — winter, when you can trade your hiking shoes for snowshoes, cross-country skis or even a snowmobile; when the painted wooden houses peek out from the snow like rainbow sprinkles on an ice-cream sundae; when sitting down with a hot cup of tea and a warm, freshly made touton (fried bread dough) dripping with molasses makes you feel like you’re being
hugged from the inside. Winter is also when the uniquely hospitable and lively tradition of “mummering” takes place. During the Mummers Festival (mummersfestival.ca), people disguise themselves then go from door to door, where, completely unrecognisable, they are mandatorily invited in for a full-on kitchen party with an unlimited supply of food, drink and song. The festival kicks off in St John’s at the end of November and continues until mid-December, featuring events and cultural workshops that culminate in a big parade.

It’s difficult to leave a place where you feel so comfortable, relaxed and welcome. It was certainly very hard for me – I cried every time I left Newfoundland. My dad will never let me forget one particular drive to the airport when I sang *Somewhere Out There* (as originally performed by Fievel the mouse in the 1986 animated classic, *An American Tail*) through deep sobs, my palm pressed against the fogged-up window. It was a two-hour trip. The only thing that would comfort me was the constant reminder of when we’d be returning. “Don’t worry, sweetie, we’re coming back in July!”

When I moved to Australia, I never knew when I would be back. Busy with work and stretched for time, my husband and I opted for quieter, low-key Christmas festivities closer to home in Sydney. And then came the call. My dad was on a boat, sailing up to Woody Island, when he heard his first grandchild cry from a hospital room 17,000 kilometres away. Dad anchored that night at Marshall’s Point and we named our new son Marshall.

We planned Marshall’s first winter visit to Newfoundland when he was just old enough – two years – to take it all in. And take it in he did. That first morning, he ran out on his great-grandfather’s deck to discover a light dusting of snow. He literally danced with glee as he noticed his feet creating a trail of prints that followed him. Before this trip, he’d never heard the word “snowmobile” but it instantly became his favourite form of transport after hours of whizzing and bouncing through the cold air, bundled up in a one-piece suit and clinging to his great-uncle’s back.

He had his first taste of homemade spiced dark Christmas cake. He hated it and spat out all the dried fruit onto his plate (do any kids like Christmas cake?). And he explored St John’s. We drove up to Signal Hill, to catch an aerial view of the city lit up and shimmering white, then walked along the harbourfront, pointing out the huge ships and reading where they came from. At a local café, Rocket Bakery & Fresh Food (rocketfood.ca), we had chocolate-covered nut clusters (he didn’t spit those out) while being serenaded by a fiddler at the next table.

One evening, Marshall sat on my lap and put his little hands on top of mine while we knitted under the light of Nanny’s old lamp, using her needles. He grew weary of the process but was overjoyed when a mini scarf emerged from a jumbled ball of string.

And he really fell in love with Poppy, who has only left Newfoundland a handful of times. While my dad left in his 20s in search of work in Toronto, Poppy spent his life working as a logger then a carpenter building houses across the island. He’ll tell you he has built hundreds and, by all accounts, he isn’t exaggerating.

Poppy’s hands are incredibly strong; Marshall’s fist next to his is like a pebble in the shadow of a boulder. And Poppy is quiet; he speaks in gestures. Before Marshall could ever get cold, Poppy would have an extra layer ready to put on him. Before he could hint at being tired, Poppy would have already scooped him up into his arms. One morning, we woke to find Poppy making us jars of bakeapple jam with frozen berries he’d picked that summer because he overheard me say I couldn’t find any in the shop.

Poppy is now 88. He lives on his own in a bay community on a small peninsula that feels like a dream bubble compared with my city life. He has ocean views from his kitchen window at the back and his living room window at the front. He grows his own vegetables and still gets out with his bucket for the capelin.

Marshall cried when we had to say goodbye to Poppy. But Poppy never cries – he knows we’ll be back.
Wild at heart

Newfoundland offers nature-lovers a whale of a time in summer, as well as a range of seriously cool places to stay.

ICEBERG TOURS
The entire east coast of Newfoundland and Labrador is known as Iceberg Alley. Expect a parade of icebergs from spring (April) to early summer (June, sometimes into July). The easiest way to view them is to do a tour from St John’s (icebergquest.com). There are also tours from Fogo and Change islands (fogoislandboattours.com).

WHALE WATCHING
One population of humpback whales comes here between May and September, joined by up to 21 other species of whales and dolphins. There’s a range of tours departing from St John’s and many other towns. You might also see whales while walking along Cape Spear.

FISHING
The prime time to fish for most species is typically summer, from June to September. If fishing is the focus of your holiday, there are many providers offering packages to suit different levels of experience and types of catches (angling newfoundlandlabrador.com).

PUFFIN SPOTTING
These adorable small seabirds, known for their brightly coloured beaks, are plentiful in Newfoundland. The best time to see them is during the breeding and fledging season from May to September. O’Briens (obriensboattours.com) runs one of the most popular puffin-watching tours out of Bay Bulls, a 30-minute drive south of St John’s.

HIKING
The most scenic hiking is in Gros Morne National Park on Newfoundland’s west coast. There are more than 100 kilometres of marked trails and 20 routes graded by their elevation. The best time to hike is late spring to late summer (May to September). In winter (December to March), go skiing or snowshoeing.

CAPELIN SPAWNING
Millions of capelin spawn at beaches in late spring to early summer (May to June) each year, attracting many locals who come to scoop up the fish. The activity is hard to predict and is usually monitored by regulars, who go to historical hotspots to keep a lookout. If you want to catch this phenomenon, speak to locals and get ready to hop in the car.

Stay
- St John’s is a good place to base yourself as it’s the largest city and the location of the main airport. Book a Deluxe Harbour View Guest Room at Sheraton Hotel Newfoundland (hotel.qantas.com.au/sheratonnewfoundland) for panoramic views of the harbour and the Narrows. For a modern, boutique vibe, try Blue on Water (hotel.qantas.com.au/bluewaterresort) or The Luxus (theluxus.ca) – both on Water Street with a harbour outlook.
- For a luxurious getaway, stay at Fogo Island Inn (fogoislandinn.ca). This tiny island off Newfoundland’s north-east coast, while not as convenient as St John’s, is a destination in itself. The inn offers luxurious suites, fine dining and peaceful ways to enjoy Fogo’s natural history and landscapes.

Getting around
The island of Newfoundland is 108,860 square kilometres and has almost 10,000 kilometres of coastline. As there’s very little public transport, you’ll need a car to get around. There are many rental options at St John’s and Gander international airports. There’s one major highway, the Trans-Canada, which crosses the island from Port aux Basques on the west coast to St John’s in the east. One bus service crosses the island daily, with the westbound bus leaving St John’s and the eastbound bus leaving Port aux Basques, both in the morning (drl-lr.com).

Flight path

YYT

Qantas flies to Los Angeles from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, where connections to St John’s are available. qantas.com
WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO IMPRESS THE GREATEST COOKS ON THE PLANET?

FOURTEEN CHEFS FROM THE WORLD’S 50 BEST RESTAURANTS LIST RELIVE THE MEALS THEY’LL NEVER FORGET.

INTERVIEWS BY CARRIE HUTCHINSON

Chef Rasmus Kofoed of Geranium in Copenhagen recalls a surprise dinner at the Palace of Versailles
When he dropped out of school in Switzerland at the age of 14, Daniel Humm would never have guessed that in his 40th year he would be lauded as the greatest chef in the world. At Eleven Madison Park, he takes inspiration from the city around him to create fine-dining nirvana.

“…One of my favourite restaurants in the entire world is Zürich’s Kronenhalle (kronenhalle.ch). Being from Switzerland, I love that it captures the old-school glamour of Zürich. Many of the delicious, classic Swiss dishes are served tableside by the warm and friendly staff. There’s also a bar with walls covered in amazing works of art by the likes of Picasso, Miró and Chagall – it’s one of the most impressive collections I’ve seen outside a museum. Legend has it that, back in the day, these famous artists would use paintings as currency and the restaurant has held onto them. It’s an experience that truly transports you to another place in time.”

ELENA ARZAK

Arzak, San Sebastián, Spain
World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 30

The restaurant has been in her family for generations and now Elena Arzak carries the torch for New Basque cuisine, creating dishes such as sea bass served on an electronic tablet showing images of the ocean.

“…Sometimes your dream is close to home. I love fish and always look forward to grilled turbot in season at Elkano (restauranteelkano.com) in the lovely fishing village of Getaria, about half an hour from San Sebastián. My grandmother was obsessed with fish – she taught my father and me how to choose the best raw ingredients. Chef Aitor Arregui is tireless in his search for the perfect fish each season. The turbot is cooked whole on the charcoal grill outside the restaurant and finished with salt and a special vinaigrette that melds with the juices of the fish. It’s lovely and gelatinous, especially the tiny rice-shaped bits between the fins. In July, they stuff baby squid with caramelised onion – another favourite!”

RASMUS KOFOED

Geranium, Copenhagen, Denmark
World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 19

All the world is in love with Nordic cuisine and the rapture continues for Rasmus Kofoed, who presents the flavours and textures of the region’s wild and organic produce at his restaurant in the national soccer stadium.

“…About five years ago, I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience attending a dinner in one of the elaborate dining halls at the Palace of Versailles. Some good friends invited me, as a surprise birthday gift, to a special dinner prepared by several two- and three-Michelin-starred chefs. The whole experience was magical, from entering the palace to looking up at the ceilings and the surroundings while enjoying a beautiful meal. It made me dream about what it would have been like to have dined there with Louis XIV.”

DANIEL HUMM

Eleven Madison Park, New York City, USA
World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 1

When he dropped out of school in Switzerland at the age of 14, Daniel Humm would never have guessed that in his 40th year he would be lauded as the greatest chef in the world. At Eleven Madison Park, he takes inspiration from the city around him to create fine-dining nirvana.

“…One of my favourite restaurants in the entire world is Zürich’s Kronenhalle (kronenhalle.ch). Being from Switzerland, I love that it captures the old-school glamour of Zürich. Many of the delicious, classic Swiss dishes are served tableside by the warm and friendly staff. There’s also a bar with walls covered in amazing works of art by the likes of Picasso, Miró and Chagall – it’s one of the most impressive collections I’ve seen outside a museum. Legend has it that, back in the day, these famous artists would use paintings as currency and the restaurant has held onto them. It’s an experience that truly transports you to another place in time.”
Peter Goossens

Hof van Cleve, Kruishoutem, Belgium
World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 50

For much of his career – it’s spanned more than three decades – Peter Goossens has brought the best seasonal produce of Belgium to guests at his farmhouse restaurant in the Flemish countryside.

❝ My dream meal is definitely ‘asparagus in the Flemish way’. I am so fond of it that I could eat it every day during the asparagus season. What is the Flemish preparation? White asparagus with crushed hard-boiled egg, butter, parsley and freshly peeled North Sea shrimp. It’s simple but utterly delicious and a must-eat when you’re in Flanders. Believe me, you will be overwhelmed.”

Richard Ekkebus

Amber, Hong Kong, China
World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 24

Time spent with renowned French chefs Alain Passard and Pierre Gagnaire has given Dutch-born Richard Ekkebus the classical skills to develop a contemporary, produce-driven style of his own.

❝ As a young man, I travelled through India. In Jaisalmer, I met a French documentary maker shooting a film about the Rabari people who travel through the desert between Rajasthan and Pakistan. Each night, as we travelled with the Rabari, they would bake the most amazing bread, along with the best potato and vegetable curry I have ever had. Being surrounded by a thousand camels under the most incredible sky of stars must have impacted the overall experience and I would retake that trip in a heartbeat.”

Heinz Reitbauer

Steirereck, Vienna, Austria
World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 10

He grew up working in his parents’ restaurant and, after training in France and the UK, Heinz Reitbauer returned to his homeland to become a partner in the family business, where he puts a contemporary, creative spin on Austrian cuisine.

❝ The meals I still dream of are the ones I had at my grandmother’s house. She was a woman with a passion for cooking and she inspired me and made me decide to become a chef. Her kitchen was simple – just fresh herbs and vegetables from her garden but they were cooked with love. I could taste that in every spoonful. My grandmother died last year at the age of 101 and, until the end, she loved good food.”
MAURO COLAGRECO
Mirazur, Menton, France
World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 4

His Italian and Argentine heritage, along with a location on the French Riviera, offers a wealth of inspiration for Mauro Colagreco. He shops at the local fish market and collects produce from his own farm to create dishes such as his signature oyster with tapioca, shallot cream and pear.

I had an unforgettable experience at Le Calandre (alajmo.it) near Padua in Italy. The whole meal was delicious and for dessert we went to a different room, chef Max Alajmo’s ‘office’. They said we were there because we were being served a very personal dessert made in homage to Alajmo’s newborn and that the dish represented the pregnancy from beginning to end. The presentation was nine small portions, each with different ingredients, textures and tastes, moving from sweet to acid and bitter at the end to represent childbirth. It was the first and only time I’ve ever cried while eating a dish – maybe because my wife had recently given birth.”

PAUL PAIRET
Ultraviolet by Paul Pairet, Shanghai, China
World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 41

This provocative French chef utilises technology – video, audio, scents, lighting – to enhance his unexpected dishes, served to just 10 people each night at a single table.

A meal at Asador Etxebarri (asadoretxebarri.com), close to Bilbao, Spain, was certainly one of the most impressive. Victor Arguinzoniz is an icon among chefs. He is an open-fire grill master, wrapping dishes in smoke, getting the best out of each product and seasoning to perfection with a simple condiment or counterpoint that lifts each bite. It’s a lesson about excellence in simplicity.”
**ASHLEY PALMER-WATTS**

Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, London, UK

*World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 36*

British culinary history is the inspiration for the restaurant helmed by Ashley Palmer-Watts. He’s been working with Heston Blumenthal for almost 20 years, including when The Fat Duck was awarded its third Michelin star.

I was 28 and in Sydney with Heston, cooking for the Starlight Foundation with Neil Perry, Guillaume Brahimi, Thomas Keller and Tetsuya Wakuda. After the event, at midnight, Tetsuya took us to his office. It had an incredible kitchen at one end and we sat around a traditional sushi counter as he started to prepare some food. He explained they weren’t his restaurant dishes but he wanted to show us the very best Australian produce. We were drinking magnums of Dom Pérignon, Salon and old bordeaux. I was a young chef, tasting the most amazing flavours and sitting next to Thomas Keller and the other great chefs while Tetsuya cooked.

It was an experience I will remember forever.”

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**DAN HUNTER**

Brae, Birregurra, Australia

*World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 44*

After working at Spain’s Mugaritz, Dan Hunter returned to Australia to transform the Royal Mail Hotel in regional Dunkeld into a gourmet destination. Now at Brae, 90 minutes’ drive from Melbourne, he continues to bring a love of foraging and native ingredients to the kitchen.

I’ve been lucky to have had some really detailed personal dining and hospitality experiences in my life but some of the longest-lasting memories have come from quite simple and unexpected dishes. One that still stands out is a tom yum soup I ate in Thailand in a car park in Sukhothai in 1998, served to me by a woman using a single burner attached to the front of a bicycle. I couldn’t believe the depth, complexity and perfect balance of this thin, water-like soup and that it came from such a simple set-up. It’s still a reference for me today and a reminder that great cooking will always be about technique and understanding rather than gadgets.”

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**VIRGILIO MARTÍNEZ**

Central, Lima, Peru

*World’s 50 Best Restaurants: No. 5*

Cooking food that you’d find elsewhere in the world is not Virgilio Martínez’s style. His exploration of traditional Peruvian ingredients has led to the creation of a distinctive, highly praised cuisine. His ambitious new project, Mil, a 40-seat restaurant above the Inca ruins of Moray in the Sacred Valley, near Cuzco, is due to open next month.

Elkano (restauranteelkano.com) in Spain’s Basque Country was memorable, not just one time but the three times I’ve been there. This is the place where cooks love to go when we are in love with fish. They serve the whole fish, cooked to perfection on a *parrilla*, with no fuss. The place has no special effects, no modernity – they cook traditionally and with emotion. There’s no fine dining and no tasting menu and you can watch chef Aitor Arregui, who used to be a football player, deboning your fish in the kitchen.”
There’s no menu at Dan Barber’s Upstate New York restaurant. Instead, guests are presented with a series of morsels created using ingredients sourced from the paddocks and gardens at Stone Barns – diners are often taken on a farm tour – and some of its neighbouring properties.

I still remember every bite that I had at Aponiente (aponiente.com) near Cádiz, Spain. How do you forget a meal that starts with phytoplankton bread? The chef, Ángel León, told me that he wanted the taste and aroma of the ocean to linger throughout the entire meal – and it did. Ángel’s food is humble – or maybe reverent is a better word. He breaks rules, not with wild juxtapositions but by looking to the sea to define his cuisine.”

Two years ago, my wife, my sous-chef and I were having lunch at Eleven Madison Park (elevenmadisonpark.com) in New York because I’m friends with Daniel [Humm] and [co-owner] Will [Guidara]. My wife mentioned we were messy because there were a lot of breadcrumbs on the table. ‘Why doesn’t anyone ever think to put a chicken on the table to eat the crumbs?’ she said. A few minutes later, the waiter brought out a wooden chicken, put it on the table and said it was to eat the crumbs. One of the courses they made for me was a pig’s ear salad because in a very old interview I’d said I would want to eat that as my last meal. It was very touching and every little detail required a lot of effort. It’s not about using the most expensive ingredients and crockery but about what guests will remember.”

Born in New Zealand but Ben Shewry’s style is embedded in Australia. He includes kangaroo, emu and wallaby on his menu and other native ingredients play a key role in the formation of his creative dishes.

In 2011, I arrived in Copenhagen in the Danish winter on the back of a visit to France, where I spoke at a symposium. It was horrible: -10°C and blowing a gale. I’d been friends with René [Redzepi] for years and he’d visited me in 2006. I went to Noma (noma.dk) with no expectations but the crew has a unique way of looking after people and I was touched by their generosity and hospitality. I was with a friend and neither of us had any money. They came up to us at the start and asked what we wanted and I said, ‘Give us everything you’ve got.’ Then I immediately thought, ‘What does that mean? I probably can’t even afford it.’ I was worried for the entire meal but the bill came out and René had handwritten ‘zero’ on it. It just about made me cry.”
THE MALDIVES PROMISES BEAUTY, DECADENCE AND A SENSE OF THE EXOTIC. BUT, ASKS KIRSTEN GALLIOTT, WILL IT ALSO OFFER A ONE-ON-ONE ENCOUNTER WITH MANTA RAYS?
Right in front of me is a group of large manta rays suspended in aquamarine. There are too many to count quickly but there must be at least 40 of the majestic creatures, spiralling out in a convoy of sorts. “This is a drone photo from the other week,” explains diving instructor Bo, taking back his phone. “But it’s been four or five days since we’ve seen manta rays. I’m tired of saying sorry to the guests.”

I’ve journeyed to the Maldives to swim with some of the biggest rays in the world. Of course, when your trip is predicated on seeing animals in the wild, there’s always the risk that they might not be as interested in you as you are in them. “Yesterday, we didn’t see any rays,” laments Rilwan, who takes guided snorkelling tours. “We went to three different places – but nothing.”

It seems I may have to rein in my expectations. Fortunately, there are other diversions at Anantara Kihavah (hotel.qantas.com.au/anantarakihavamaldives), a six-year-old resort in Baa Atoll in the archipelago’s west – and one of the most luxurious. This is one time in life to embrace clichés because it’s everything I’d imagined the Maldives to be: blindingly white sand, clear turquoise water, rows of overwater bungalows arcing out across the ocean. Even without the rays, it’s obvious that I have found paradise.

There’s a dream-like quality to the Maldives. That’s partly because the 1200 islands that make up this tropical nation in the Indian Ocean are so remote. This chain of 26 atolls is at least two plane trips from Australia, which adds to the sense of discovery. And to access Anantara Kihavah from Malé, the capital, you must travel by seaplane. As we cross the ocean, I see a never-ending expanse of blue – it’s cerulean; no, it’s cobalt; wait, it’s lapis lazuli – broken only by tendrils of clouds and islands surrounded by vivid coral reefs. From above, some of the islands look to be the same shape as the fish that teem in the waters surrounding them.

The true allure of the Maldives (pronounced mol-deevs) is found beneath the surface. Don’t get me wrong, life is very sweet on dry land. Anantara Kihavah offers the ultimate five-star experience; it’s all Taittinger champagne, seemingly unlimited choices (which of the 16 types of salt would you like?) and seamless service from the mostly Maldivian staff, some with smiles as wide as the mouths of the manta rays I’m dreaming of seeing. But underwater? You’ll be ridding your mind of every thought but the spectacle before you.

There are creatures I’ve never seen before. A titan triggerfish ploughs past the coral, its mottled yellow skin and dog-like teeth giving it a prehistoric edge. A juvenile box fish – which looks awfully like an oversized banana, thanks to its bright-yellow hue and black markings – hides in a crevice. And a school of black squid huddle together in the shape of a diamond, pulsing through the water.

And, of course, there’s the tantalising prospect of seeing those gentle giants of the sea. The Maldives is home to an estimated 5000 reef manta rays. From June to November, they migrate south; the best time to see them near Anantara Kihavah, says Bo, is August to November.

I will find out on my third day here – when I’ve scheduled a trip to Hanifaru Bay, the most famous spot in the Maldives to see rays – but until then, there are meals to be savoured, massages to be relished and experiences to discover.

There’s something so meditative about a tropical island: the gentle crunch of sand under the bike I use to get across the island, the joy of a light breeze scudding across the water and the sweet surprise of a gecko or a crab scuttling across the path in front of me.
Opposite) The Two-Bedroom Beach Pool Residence at Anantara Kihavah; (clockwise from top) the resort has an infinity pool that’s long enough to swim laps, a Japanese restaurant, Fire, that serves a standout lobster salad and design details inspired by the sea.
On my first day here, I receive a message from a friend back home. “I can’t wait to hear if you love it,” she says. “I’m keen to go but I wonder if I’d go stir-crazy after three days.”

The answer to that, frankly, depends on how deep your pockets are. This is not a budget trip. Villas at Anantara Kihavah – from the famous overwater bungalows with see-through bathtubs to the tastefully decorated beach villas beloved of Saudi royalty and offering total seclusion and a private pool – start at $1000 a night. And everything else, other than breakfast, comes at an additional cost.

But what price the experiences of a lifetime? Adventure-lovers will be torn between snorkelling with turtles, watching dolphins cavort in the warm waters, parasailing up to 150 metres in the sky or diving around the resort and marvelling at that underwater garden, all yellow and green and alive.

Restaurants in remote locations can vary dramatically in quality – even at five-star resorts – but the food at Anantara Kihavah is consistently good, from the pan-Asian flavours of Salt to the teppanyaki at Fire. Be sure to book ahead for Sea, one of only three underwater restaurants in the Maldives, which feels both surreal and spectacular.

Anantara Kihavah’s overwater villas

This is the resort’s fine-diner but I barely give the nearly 400 labels in the wine cellar a second glance, so entranced am I by the continuous reel of ocean life being played out before my eyes.

Of course, sometimes a dream holiday is simply about relaxing and doing very little: to note the shocking pink of a bougainvillea against a cloudless sky; to succumb in the decadent spa to the hands of shy masseuse Fay, whose petite frame belies her strength; to sit on the deck at Sky bar, champagne in hand, and marvel at the stars leaking through an inky sky.

“Stargazing in the Maldives is a very special experience,” says Shameem, one of the resort’s 307 permanent staff. “There is no light pollution here.” Shameem has been studying astronomy for 15 years and gives passionate, accessible talks to interested guests. “I’m a nocturnal person,” he laughs, pointing his laser pen at the sky. “I come alive at night. I’ve spoken to more than 100,000 people about stars. Every star has a story to tell.”

And off he goes. After explaining a light year (“it’s equivalent to 9.4 trillion kilometres”), he whips out his phone and shows me a photo of VY Canis Majoris, one of the biggest stars in the galaxy.

“It would take two days for a plane to fly around Earth,” he says, “but it would take 1100 years to fly to this star!” His enthusiasm is contagious.

The resort’s general manager, Dylan Counsel, has seen enough potential in the sky to build a brand-new stargazing deck and observatory, which is due to open before Christmas, so that guests can view the rings of Saturn. “We will have the biggest telescope in the Maldives,” says Shameem excitedly. “We have a real contrast of experiences – the fish underneath and the stars above.”

And a life less ordinary in the middle.

FINALLY comes the day I’ve been waiting for. Manta rays. It doesn’t get off to an auspicious start. I wake to a grey sky, the early-morning light dull. Where is the Maldivian sun I’ve become accustomed to? Fat drops of rain dent the pool’s glassy surface. Ocean Whisperer, our yacht – or a dhoni, as it’s known to locals – sways in the choppy water.

We have a 50-minute trip to Hanifaru Bay. Will we find any rays there today? “I don’t know,” shrugs Bo. Hoare, our captain, puts his hands in the air. “I don’t know.”

We set off past a local isle dubbed “turtle island” for its colony of the marine reptiles. Even its green foliage looks gloomy, the leaden clouds above it drooping like an uneven hem. We venture past another five-star resort, Amilla Fushi, where Leonardo DiCaprio and a gaggle of Victoria’s Secret models partied this year.

Everywhere I look, it’s grey. I have a sinking feeling in my stomach. But then, some news: there are rays up ahead. Within minutes,
we’re off the boat and in a dinghy, flippers on, racing across the slate water. “So, the mantas,” says Bo with a grin. “We don’t touch them. But sometimes they are curious and will come up to you. That’s okay. When you’re in the water, don’t follow me. Follow the mantas.”

And with that, he jumps in and gestures for me to join him.

The water seems less grey and more turquoise now that I’m in it. Still, it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. I blink and blink again. Bo nudges me and points. I swivel my head and see a large, dark smudge up ahead. It comes closer and closer, its features slowly becoming more defined. And there, gliding towards me, is the first manta ray I’ve ever seen in the wild.

It’s majestic. And it’s not alone. I count eight flying through the water. With wingspans of about three metres, they are way bigger than me. But even though they’re heading straight for me, I don’t for a moment feel fearful.

Instead, I’m in awe of their wide, gaping mouths – when open, it’s easy to see the frame of their skeleton inside – and their black, velvet-like skin, creased with scratches and scars. They are so close that I’m able to study their every detail. The gills on the white underside of their bodies resemble air-conditioning vents. Coupled with their cartoonish big mouths, they look almost alien.

One ventures away from the group and I follow it to shallower water. For a minute, it’s just the two of us, with me kicking furiously to try to keep up as it slices gracefully through the water. They are big, these amiable creatures, but not cumbersome and it easily outswims me, undulating its fins in slow motion and becoming ghost-like as the water beyond swallows it up.

I turn back and find another ray swimming towards me. When it brushes past – yes, it actually touches me, we’re that close – I have never felt so small. For the next 45 minutes, we circle each other. I find myself holding my breath, willing time to stand still. It’s one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life.

All too soon, Bo is urging me back onto the dinghy. “It’s going to rain,” he says. And so it does. As we surge across the water, the heavens open and the rain beats down, stinging my skin. But I don’t care. I turn my face towards the sky and close my eyes. I can’t remember the last time I felt so alive.
WHERE ARE THE DREAM PLACES ON THE PLANET TO STARGAZE, SCUBA-DIVE, PLAY GOLF OR
Chile’s Atacama Desert is blanketed by stars.

WISH

LIST

MEDITATE? ELEVEN WELL-TRAVELLED AUSTRALIANS SHARE THEIR DISCOVERIES WITH HAZEL FLYNN.
**DESSERT STARGAZING**

As a radio astronomer, Gaensler usually “listens” to the stars rather than watching them, ideally at the Murchison Radio-astronomy Observatory, 800 kilometres north-east of Perth. Here, far from mobile phone signals or other interference, “the faint whispers of static that can tell us how the first stars formed” are discernible.

For more conventional celestial gazing, Gaensler’s ultimate location is Chile’s Atacama Desert, where “the stars shine more clearly than just about anywhere else on the planet. The landscape looks like Mars, and the Milky Way is so bright that you find yourself instinctively ducking to avoid bumping your head on the sky.”

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**LAPPING UP THE HARBOUR**

“...You can’t go past a dip at the Andrew (Boy) Charlton Pool on Sydney’s Woolloomooloo Bay. It’s perfect for a relaxing swim and the best part is it’s still relatively unknown. With its views of Sydney Harbour – and The Royal Botanic Garden just behind – we Sydneysiders don’t know how good we’ve got it.”

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Illustrations by Bren Luke
**Making Tracks**

Ellyse Perry  
*Dual international sportswoman (soccer and cricket), star of the Australian women’s cricket team and keen runner*

In Australia, Perry enjoys the grass track near Canberra’s Mount Stromlo Observatory, where runners often encounter “friendly local kangaroos”. Internationally, Annecy in the French Alps can’t be beaten for an active getaway, she says. “The town has incredible scenery. People are constantly running, swimming, hiking, riding or strolling in summer, and in winter it turns into a ski town.” Perry first visited Annecy in 2011 to watch a Tour de France stage and stayed for three extra days, just to explore the nearby tracks. “The Old Town is also lovely to walk around and find a meal of an evening.”

**Fantasy Drive**

Warren Brown  
*Cartoonist, author and former Top Gear Australia presenter who re-created the 1907 Peking-to-Paris race in 100-year-old cars*

“Anyone who knows anything about driving destinations knows that the Stelvio Pass in Northern Italy is the Holy Grail. To have the road to yourself in a car that could handle it, such as an Aston Martin DB4, would be a mind-blowing experience.”
SPECTACULAR DIVES

Liz Ann Macgregor OBE
Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art
Australia and diving enthusiast

Heading Macgregor’s must-visit list is Western Australia’s Exmouth Navy Pier, home to “weird creatures that you see by muck diving at the bottom of the ocean”. But it’s Uepi Island Resort in the Solomon Islands that calls her back time and again. Its dives include “an amazing experience where you drop down through the green, green water of the lagoon, go through a tunnel and emerge into the ocean”, as well as a 2000-metre abyss nicknamed The Slot and the “extraordinarily beautiful” Penguin Reef. “And the island itself is idyllic. If you have a partner who’s not a diver, it’s lovely for them, too.”

REMARKABLE SIGHTINGS

The Honourable Diana Bryant AO
Former Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia and keen birdwatcher

“Australia is blessed as a birdwatching destination,” says Bryant. “I love going into remote desert areas looking for hard-to-find birds like grasswrens, chats and gibberbirds.” Internationally, Africa is a perennial drawcard, thanks to the range of species and habitats. “Kenya has diverse birdlife in its high mountains, forests, Rift Valley lakes and the Maasai Mara National Reserve, while Tanzania has Mount Kilimanjaro, the Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti, with the bonus of other wildlife. On my wish list are safari camps in Botswana’s Okavango Delta – Africa’s last Eden – and the deserts of Namibia.”
**GOLF WITH A VIEW**

Karrie Webb AM  
*Winner of more than 40 LPGA events and member of the World Golf Hall of Fame*

In her 23 years as a professional golfer, surely Webb has played at every possible dream destination? Surprisingly, no – she still has many places on her wish list, including Barnbougle on the wild north-east coast of Tasmania, an hour’s drive from Launceston. “I’ve heard so much about it. The Dunes and Lost Farm courses look spectacular.” And then there are the distinctive, historic local courses in rough, grassy coastal areas scattered throughout Scotland and Ireland. “Having two Scottish caddies for the past 17 years, I’ve heard about the famous and not-so-famous great Links courses and I’d love to go play them all... as long as the weather is all right!”

**ULTIMATE GARDEN IMMERSION**

Charlie Albone  
*Landscape designer, Selling Houses Australia co-host and winner of silver-gilt medals at the 2015 and 2016 Chelsea Flower Shows*

In the garden of Villa San Michele, high in the hills on the Italian island of Capri, “the mature trees create a beautiful canopy and there are lots of herbs and aromatic plants and the most fantastic views. Go early to beat the crowds.”

**ANCIENT WONDERS**

Kim McKay AO  
*Director & CEO of the Australian Museum*

McKay first fell in love with Egypt as a child en route from Australia to England by ship. At age five, she was struck by the inside of the country’s pyramids: “The musty smell of ancient history mixed with the searing summer heat and, later, the heady smell of jasmine-laced perfumes mixed with car exhaust and camel dung!” As an adult working on National Geographic film expeditions to the “beautiful, colourful tombs” of the Pyramids of Giza and Luxor’s Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens, she was struck anew by the powerful presence of those ancient lives “as I imagined myself sailing down the Nile on a felucca to meet my destiny.”
A WORLD OF ARCHITECTURE

Tim Ross

Radio presenter and author who explores his passion for architecture in TV’s Streets of Your Town and his touring show, Man About the House

“Architecture in cities should be like your record collection: the best of now, the best of then and some rubbish in between to remind you where you’ve come from. London has that really interesting, eclectic mix. It’s got amazing Brutalist buildings, such as the Barbican Centre and the council estates that Ernö Goldfinger designed, but a visit to Westminster Abbey is just as interesting as a visit to the Barbican. Both are gloriously beautiful.”

DESTINATION MEDITATION

David Cooke
Managing director of Konica Minolta Australia and a meditation practitioner for 46 years

For Cooke, travel is about “immersing myself in different cultures, exploring ancient civilisations and having more time for my daily meditation practice”. Cambodia is a favourite destination, particularly its 12th-century jewel, Angkor Wat. “A lot of people go to the main temple, spend an hour or two and think they’ve seen it. But it’s a 160-hectare complex with multiple temples. I’ve been to seven or eight of them but I feel I’ve only scratched the surface. My favourite experience is arriving before dawn, meditating then opening my eyes to the sun rising above the temples.”
10

PERFECT DAYS

VISITING YOUR DREAM CITY IS ONE THING; SPENDING A DREAM DAY THERE TAKES INSIDER KNOWLEDGE. OUR EXPERT GUIDES SHOW YOU HOW TO LIVE LARGE IN 24 HOURS.

The Shinjuku skyline, Tokyo
With its domes and towers reflected in the calm lagoon, Venice is a place where land, sea and sky seem to slip their fixed boundaries and drift in and out of one another’s reveries.

Lose that checklist of top-10 sights and wander through a real Venetian neighbourhood. Try Castello, east of San Marco. In its maze of lanes – and that’s not a metaphor – see gondoliers’ stripy shirts hanging out to dry between ochre-hued houses with windows that are close enough to share whispered gossip (and generate it).

Stop at neighbourhood bar and cake shop Bar Pasticceria di Chiusso Pierino (Salizada dei Greci 3306; +39 041 523 1611) for a macchiato (a Venetian specialty, halfway between a caffe macchiato and a cappuccino) and a freshly baked brioche.

Not far from the Arsenale shipyards – which could turn out a galley a day in the early 16th century – is an area that became a magnet for Venice’s large Greek and Dalmatian populations. In 1502, the latter asked painter Vittore Carpaccio to decorate the walls of their Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni (scuoladalmata venezia.com) with scenes from the lives of their patron saints. The visual stories are rich in spy detail, such as the little dog in the Saint Augustine panel, its ears cocked as if expecting a treat.

Wend north to San Francesco della Vigna church and monastery, where sandalled monks grow vegetables in the shadow of the municipal gasworks. Then tack westwards to have lunch at Osteria alla Frasca (Cannaregio 576; +39 041 241 2585), everyone’s vision of the perfect, hidden Venetian trattoria. Friendly owner Bruno is a talented blues guitarist, while Sicilian chef Giorgio riffs on the food, running a thread of good balsamic vinegar over seared calamari, cherry tomatoes, lamb’s lettuce and artichokes for the ideal spring salad.

Continue west into Cannaregio, where the canals host a distinctly Venetian eating and drinking scene – at its most atmospheric at Al Timon (Fondamenta dei Ormesini 2754; +39 041 524 6066), a wine bar that uses a moored barge as an alfresco lounge.

Gondola rides are for tourists but in this dream you get to row one. Set up by an Australian, Jane Caporal, the (almost) all-female association Row Venice (rowvenice.org) offers hands-on lessons in Cannaregio’s quiet canals. The boat is a traditional “shrimp-tailed” batellina, not a gondola, but the oar technique is no different.

Have a quick ombra (glass of wine) before heading to the Fondamente Nove water-bus stop – destination Burano. Enjoy the ferry trip as the sun picks out the Julian Alps on the horizon and enjoy still more the sight of packed boats heading in the other direction. On this island of paintbox-coloured fishermen’s houses, timing your arrival for aperitivo time (7pm in summer) hands you a golden hour of light and the chance to hang out with the locals as Burano kicks back and relaxes over a spritz.

On Burano, the rooftop of great little seafood restaurant Riva Rosa (rivarosa.it) has an altana (wooden terrace) where the intimate table for two can be booked in advance. What was it that Omar Khayyam once wrote? Spaghetti with cuttlefish ink, a glass of wine – and thou? Something along those lines. In a dream, nobody minds if you misquote a little. LEE MARSHALL
THE ENCHANTMENT of the Rose City emerges with the dawn sun slowly revealing talismanic ochre-pink walls. Rulers have come and gone over the past millennia but nothing has usurped the mesmerising sights, smells and sounds within the walled medina, where the cacophony of Moroccan life sounds under the stern gaze of the Atlas Mountains. 

The gentle music of a fountain mingles with birdsong at the serene Riad Les Yeux Bleus (hotel.qantas.com.au/riadlesyeuxbleus). This small luxury hotel in Bab Doukkala sets guests up for the day with a Moroccan breakfast spread on the rooftop terrace: cold cuts, cheese, omelette, honeyed apple cake and, naturally, endless cups of all-important mint tea. 

It's a short walk through the medina's haphazard streets – past Berber men in djellabas (hooded robes) and women in colourful caftans – to riad La Maison Arabe (lamaisonarabe.com). In its luxurious, lantern-lit hammam, tradition demands surrendering to a no-nonsense woman wielding savon noir (a thick black soap) and being buffed, steamed and massaged to perfection – or an approximation of it. 

All roads lead to Djemaa el-Fna, the central square where Berber storytellers and musicians work the crowd for loose dirham, flute-playing snake-charmers bring children's storybooks to life, medicine men offer cures for any ill and street-food vendors specialise in everything from garlicky snails to sardine sandwiches. Graze and call it lunch then climb the steps at Café de France (cafe-france-marrakech.com) to the rooftop terrace overlooking the action for coffee and pastries.

Take a deep breath and plunge into the souk, the storied bazaar at the heart of the medina. It would take weeks to properly explore this eccentric jumble of alleyways and their miniscule tributaries. Getting lost is almost a given; try to remember landmarks (or leave a trail of breadcrumbs) because wi-fi will not save you here. Even the most apathetic shopper will be energised by the displays of metal and wood crafts. And the leather in jewel-like hues is a testament to the still-thriving tanneries of Marrakech and Fez. 

Take a taxi to Jardin Majorelle (jardinmajorelle.com), a one-hectare walled garden created by French painter Jacques Majorelle and restored by the late fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent. It’s a beautiful respite from the city's madness. And in the spirit of fashion, sophisticated shopping is just a Kelly bag’s throw away, with shops such as 33 rue Majorelle (33ruemajorelle.com) selling designer garments and homewares by local artisans. 

For dinner, Moroccan specialties at the mood-lit, luxurious riad Pepe Nero (pepenero-marrakech.com) include a delicate cinnamon-accented pigeon bastilla and dusky spiced lamb tagine. One is then duty-bound to set the dial to the city's cosmopolitan delights at the opulent Le Palace (Angle Avenue Echouhada et rue Chaouki Hervange; +212 5244 58901). Drinking cocktails and dancing under twinkling chandeliers is the perfect end to a timeless Marrakech day.

LARISSA DUBECKI

Painter Jacques Majorelle developed the shade of blue that features in his garden.
Eager cyclists fly high across Brooklyn Bridge, newspapers hit doorways (and unlucky pedestrians) and a million coffee percolators begin to groan and splutter as Manhattan island rouses from sleep. Every day here means infinite possibilities, opportunities and choices – starting with breakfast.

↓ Omelette Provençal with tomato confit – is there any better way to start the day? In a cosmopolitan city filled with Francophiles, the best breakfast can be found at a bistro such as Lafayette (lafayetteny.com), tucked away in NoHo. The coffee is strong and the croissants are crisp and flaky. Yellow cabs slide by the picture windows, rumbling off on adventures around Manhattan.

↓ Washington Square Park offers a glimpse of the city springing to daily life: a man plays a wailing saxophone while businessmen rush under the triumphal arch, oblivious to children playing in the fountain. Grab an éclair at Patisserie Claude (187 West 4th Street; +1 212 255 5911) and loll on the grass under Hangman’s Elm, one of the island’s oldest trees.

↓ Head south to the New Museum (newmuseum.org), a striking building created from seven stacked boxes on the Bowery. Less visited than some of its behemoth cousins (such as The Museum of Modern Art), it is beloved of New Yorkers for its rotating line-up of contemporary art, including experiments in virtual reality. Galleries radically transform, depending on who’s in residence.

↓ The New Museum is close to an old institution, Russ & Daughters (russanddaughters.com), a Jewish “appetizing” store that opened back in 1914. See avant-garde installations at the New then grab a classic bagel and lox with extra capers. If eating and walking isn’t your thing, Russ & Daughters also has a dedicated café on Orchard Street that sells everything from potato latkes to pickled herring. The babka ice-cream sandwich is “to die for”, as the servers say.

↓ Once the purview of artists such as Andy Warhol, SoHo has established itself as the foremost shopping district in New York.

In this labyrinth of towering loft buildings and picturesque fire-escape you’ll find most of the major players (Rag & Bone, Michael Kors) with their sleek, ambitious showrooms. But on thoroughfares such as Elizabeth Street, there are also more intimate boutiques. McNally Jackson (mcnallyjackson.com), an excellent bookshop on Prince, has a quiet basement where you can escape the crowds, as well as an on-site printing facility if, like many in New York, you happen to be a secret novelist.

↓ When happy hour arrives, a charming place for a drink in SoHo is Raoul’s (raouls.com), which has been around forever. No longer dim and raffish, it was started by two brothers from Alsace. Order a Martini (or three) and you’ll be in love, ready to paint the town red.

↓ Head for the West Village, where the worn tangle of side streets and alleyways that break from the city’s rigid grid layout are full of intimate restaurants and cozy jazz clubs – perfect for getting lost in and dreaming the night away.
EVERY DAWN is a new beginning in Havana. Jackhammers crack apart old roads to make way for the new; baristas fling open café doors and mop dew from the chairs outside; Habaneros sashay down laneways once heavy with hardship. Wherever you look, optimism and possibility rise like vapour from the crumbling foundations on which the city is built.

The queues spilling out from Panadería-Dulcería San-José (Calle Obispo 159) onto Old Havana’s main thoroughfare signal abundance rather than communist-era scarcity. Savour coffee and sugar-dusted pan de gloria (“bread of glory”) while watching tourists, touts and locals go about their working lives from your pavement perch.

Further along Calle Obispo, new entrepreneurs set up stalls selling revolutionary paraphernalia (Fidel Castro pins, Che Guevara posters) and a surprising diversity of dog-eared Spanish-language books: Hemingway, Marti, Shakespeare, the Bible.

Nearby, on the harbourside Avenida del Puerto, Cadillac drivers polish windows and tailfins in anticipation of the tourist trade. Relish the sea breeze and the views across the Canal de Entrada to Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, Havana’s 18th-century fort. And stroll among the tangle of locals that appear to have washed up here: youngsters dangling their legs over the seawall; buskers playing soulful tunes; fishermen casting their lines.

Burrow back into Old Havana’s narrow laneways, their sagging casas, mouldering shopfronts and gutted heritage buildings awaiting a capitalist makeover. Stop for a café Cubano (and a bag of freshly roasted coffee beans) at Café El Escorial on Plaza Vieja (Calle Mercaderes 317; +53 7 868 3549).

The airiness of the plaza contrasts with the smoky, wood-panelled interior of La Casa del Habano, a cigar shop on the second floor of Conde de Villanueva hotel (corner of Mercaderes and Lamparilla), where you can watch the torcedor (cigar roller) make those famous Cuban cigars.

Lunchtime crowds stream into tiny tapas bar El Chanchullero (el-chanchullero.com), just 10 minutes’ walk west, but the turnover is quick and the shrimp enchiladas and beef-stuffed peppers are just rewards.

Hail a taxi (bike, auto rickshaw, vintage Chevy) and visit some of the revolutionary landmarks beloved of Cubans: Plaza de la Revolución, where political rallies are overseen by giant steel portraits of Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos; Museo de la Revolución, housed in the former presidential palace; and Havana’s fortress, where you can regard the city from a more expansive point of view.

When the sun starts to sink, it’s time to order Mojitos at the panoramic rooftop bar of the Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski La Habana (kempinski.com). Back out on the rabbit-warren streets, you’ll be enticed into the paladares (private restaurants) that proliferate here. Try Paladar Los Mercaderes (Calle Mercaderes 207; +53 7 801 2437) for its sparkling atmosphere and dishes such as ceviche and lobster bisque that defy the beans-and-rice stereotype.

It’s late but the jazz singers and salsa dancers are just warming up. The day won’t be over until tomorrow has begun.

Catherine Marshall
Mumbai wakes like a drowsy giant: slowly, noisily and with momentous potential. India’s most cosmopolitan city and powerhouse of finance and film likes to stay up late so mornings start calmly with the cries of green parrots and crows, azans drifting through the air and the dull roar of cars, buses and trains transporting millions of people – all set to a steady metronome of the Arabian Sea crashing into concrete breakwaters.

Plug into the entrepreneurial energy at Colaba Social (socialoffline.in), a shared workspace for artists and innovators that’s a café by day and a bar by night. Doors open at 9am for a breakfast of Iroon Junglee Poro (a supercharged masala omelette of tomato, onion, ginger, garlic, turmeric and chilli) or a “hangover” tray with bacon and eggs, a Virgin Mary, toast and bananas.

Take an Uber to the Haji Ali Dargah (hajialidargah.in), a 15th-century mosque and tomb that shimmers like a mirage on the ocean’s surface. It can only be reached at low tide when the concrete jetty linking it to the shore emerges from the murky sea. Open to all faiths, the dargah is intensely spiritual (qawwals often perform, their voices echoing off the marble) and ridiculously romantic; a pilgrimage site that can be visited only when the forces of nature oblige.

Fort is Mumbai’s mercantile heart and a hive of activity by day, not least with the small army of tiffin wallahs delivering lunches to office workers. Linger with the locals over a glass of hot, milky-sweet street chai, pop into Chimanlals (chimanlals.com) for Indian-themed stationery then take a seat at Mahesh Lunch Home (maheshlunchhome.com), 40 years strong and still the city’s finest Mangalorean fish restaurant. For lasting memories, order the tandoori pomfret.

From about 4.30pm, the axis of the city’s energy shifts to Marine Drive, the three-kilometre seafront boulevard between Chowpatty Beach and the skyscrapers of Nariman Point. In the hour or two before sunset, it’s a magnet for loiterers and lovers, shoeshine men and chaat (snack food) wallahs and anyone looking to unwind after a long, hot day. Marine Drive’s sundown parties, set against a smudgy pink sky, are Mumbai at its most carefree and blithe.

The city’s first licensed drinking establishment was Harbour Bar at the landmark Taj Mahal Palace hotel (tajhotels.com). Take a window seat, with a tall gin and tonic in hand, and watch the world promenade by. Then head upstairs to Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto’s modern Japanese dining room, Wasabi, which is ranked as one of Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants. The omakase (chef’s choice) and sushi menus are founded on seafood flown in daily from Tokyo’s Tsukiji fish market. Try the black cod miso or scallop gyozo. Reserve a table overlooking the Gateway of India for maximum romance – and maximum Mumbai.

Kendall Hill
PARIS is made for dreaming and dallying, swooning and strolling. The only way to truly appreciate its all-encompassing, knee-weakening beauty is on foot, winding through time-worn cobblestoned streets, ambling along grand boulevards and meandering around pretty garden paths. The flâneur – that classic character who loaf's about town with no particular aim in mind – could only have been invented in Paris, a city of live-in-the-moment pleasures. Of course, eating, that other much-loved Parisian pursuit, goes hand in hand nicely with sauntering – or window-licking), as the French say, probably because their chocolateries and pâtisseries are so tantalisingly merchandised. Be sure to compare the macarons at Pierre Hermé (pierreherme.com) and Ladurée (laduree.fr), both on chic rue Bonaparte.

Chocolate for breakfast? It’s a Parisian must-do, as is Angelina (angelina-paris.fr), on rue de Rivoli, where the chocolat chaud is thick and velvety and the salon de thé still glows with golden Belle Époque grandeur.

↓ Pop over to the Musée de l’Orangerie (musee-orangerie.fr) in the Jardin des Tuileries for another masterpiece of that period, Monet’s Water Lilies series, then traipse around the ponds and parterres of the garden, which was one of the Impressionists’ most beloved spots in Paris.

↓ Across the road, go downstairs to the quai and saunter east along the Seine, soaking up the panoramic perspective of riverside Paris. Cross the Pont Louis-Philippe to Île Saint-Louis and explore this miniature City of Light preserved in 17th-century stone splendour. Buy a baguette and some cheese and picnic under the plane trees at the western tip while swans glide by. Still hungry? The island’s Berthillon ice-cream

PARIS

Order cream puffs at Odette after you’ve had your fill of “window-licking”
ALDOUS HUXLEY, writing in the 1930s, called Shanghai “life itself”. These days, the famed opium dens have gone, along with the colourful gangsters, White Russian émigrés, sing-song bar girls and fugitives from justice who made Shanghai one of the most disreputable places on Earth in the 1920s and 1930s. Huge tracts of the old city have been pulled down, replaced by wave upon wave of high-rise apartments – constructed to house a population heading towards 30 million – and fantasy skyscrapers that resemble gargantuan robots or hovering spaceships. Yet, in many ways, the city is unchanged; a glitzy oom town for opportunists, and humble poverty, where something in stark contrast to the one before and traces of the past linger like the smoke of joss sticks in the yellow, polluted air. ↓

It’s still possible to experience historic Shanghai in the French Concession, its lane houses and beautiful streets canopied with plane trees. Get your bearings with Shanghai Insiders (shanghaiinsiders.com) on an exhilarating ride in the sidecar of a vintage motorbike. Ask your guide to stop at Xiangyang Lu, to taste the city’s heralded street food, such as the famous soup dumplings, xiaolongbao. ↓

The fashion-conscious Shanghaiese are extreme shoppers. As with everything else here, retail is a contrast between the gleaming high-end emporiums that have shot up on every corner and the tawdry malls selling cheap handbags and prescription glasses. Han Feng (hanfeng.com), a couturier with a lovely atelier in the French Concession, is the designer to visit for flamboyant accessories and bespoke tailoring. Or delve into South Bund Fabric Market and have a favourite garment copied – it’s almost mandatory. ↓

Suitably fuelled and shopped out, it’s time to experience the city’s art. Collecting is now a national sport. Long Museum (thelongmuseum.org), on the banks of the Huangpu River, perfectly exemplifies Shanghai’s obsession with old and new. Built to incorporate an old industrial wharf, the spectacular cantilevered concrete gallery houses the largest private art collection in China and hosts world-class exhibitions. ↓

Opt for a stroll along the Bund, Shanghai’s famous riverfront boulevard, with its splendid Art Deco buildings, floral displays and views of dazzling Pudong. The Fairmont Peace Hotel (fairmont.com) still hosts the Old Jazz Band, which first played there in 1947. Two original hand members remain and the six veteran musicians average a sprightly 82 years of age. You can catch them in The Jazz Bar from 6.30pm. ↓

Back in the French Concession, a taste of Shanghai’s storied decadence can be found at Yongfoo Elite (200 Yongfu Road, Xuhui), a club and restaurant in an atmospheric 1930s villa, once the British consulate. But if you prefer Shanghai’s futuristic face, French chef Paul Pairet’s avant-garde restaurant, Ultraviolet (uvbyp.cc), employs multisensory technology to create an immersive and theatrical dining experience. It seats only 10 and is hidden away in an obscure car park. ↓

A quick trip across the river and a heady elevator ride will deliver you to the 5th floor of The Ritz-Carlton Shanghai, Pudong (ritzcarlton.com) and the glamorous Flair Rooftop Restaurant & Bar, China’s highest alfresco dining venue. All of Shanghai is laid out before you. Life itself.

LEE TULLOCH
IT’S THE WORLD’S GREATEST MELTING POT; A CITY WHERE MORE THAN 300 LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN. IT’S A BASTION OF TRADITION FOREVER HUNGRY FOR THE LATEST FADS AND FASHIONS; A CITY THAT’S BOTH GRITTY AND GLAMOROUS, WHERE RED DOUBLE-DECKER BUSES AND BLACK CABS TRUNDLE PAST CENTURIES-OLD PUBS, ZESTY CURRY HOUSES, REGAL PALACES, DEPARTMENT STORES, LEAFY PARKS AND NEON-ADORNED THEATRES. SAMUEL JOHNSON’S QUIP, “WHEN A MAN IS TIRED OF LONDON, HE IS TIRED OF LIFE,” IS AS APT TODAY (FOR WOMEN, TOO) AS IT WAS IN THE 18TH CENTURY.


↓ HALI A TAXI TO SPIRITFIELDS (SPIRITFIELDS.CO.UK), WHERE THE EAST END MEETS THE POLISHED CITY OF LONDON. THERE’S BEEN A MARKET HERE SINCE THE 1600S AND IT’S AS VIBRANT AS EVER, WITH STALLS SELLING THE WARES OF LONDON’S COOLEST DESIGNERS, VINTAGE CLOTHES, BRIC-A-BRAC AND ARTISAN FOOD AND DRINKS. FRINGING THE RESTORED VICTORIAN MARKET HALL ARE HIGH-END SHOPS, BARS AND EATERIES.

↓ LONDON’S CULINARY SCENE IS EVER EVOLVING BUT THERE’S ALWAYS AN APPETITE FOR AFTERNOON TEA. ENJOY A MODERN EUROPEAN TWIST ON THIS GREAT BRITISH INSTITUTION AT DAVID SHRIGLEY’S GALLERY AT SKETCH (SKETCH.LONDON) IN MAYFAIR. A STRING ENSEMBLE PERFORMS WHILE WAITERS IN PINK SUITS AND WHITE GLOVES SERVE FINGER SANDWICHES FILLED WITH THE LIKES OF SCOTTISH SMOKED SALMON AND QUAIL EGG, AS WELL AS PETITS GATEAUX, MACARONS, VICTORIA SPONGE, SCONES WITH CORNISH CLOTTED CREAM AND EXOTIC TEAS IN Dainty PORCELAIN CROCKERY.


↓ DINE AT SIMPSON’S IN THE STRAND (SIMPSONSINTHESTRAND..CO.UK). ESTABLISHED NEAR COVENT GARDEN IN 1828, IT WAS A FAVOURITE HAUNT OF SHERLOCK HOLMES (AND HIS CREATOR, SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE) AND HAS JUST REOPENED AFTER ITS FIRST REFURBISHMENT IN MORE THAN A CENTURY. A “REIMAGINED” MENU OFFERS ARTFULLY PRESENTED BRITISH FARE SUCH AS BEEF WELLINGTON, RAINBOW CHARD, WALES TONGUE AND RED-WINE JUS.

↓ FOR A POSTPRANDIAL DRINK, POP IN TO DUKES BAR AT DUKES HOTEL (DUKESHOTEL.COM) IN MAYFAIR. IT’S IAN FLEMING’S REFINED OLD LOCAL AND APPARENTLY WHERE HE CONJURED JAMES BOND’S IMMORTAL “SHAKEN, NOT STIRRED” LINE. HEAD BARMAN ALESSANDRO PALAZZI CONCOCTS A RAFT OF 007-THEMED TIPPLES, WITH THE VESPER MARTINI THE MIND-BLOWING PICK.

↓ YOU COULD RETIRE TO A ROOM AT DUKES HOTEL BUT YOU’LL FIND LONDON NEVER REALLY TURNS OUT THE LIGHTS. WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE ARE OTHER LATE-NIGHT TEMPTATIONS: JAZZ AGE-INSPIRED CLUBS, A TUBE-THMED SPEAKEASY AND EVEN A BAR DECKED OUT LIKE THE HOME OF FICTIONAL VICTORIAN EXPLORER PHILEAS FOGG FROM AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS.

STEVE MCKENNA
There is one way of seeing Australians as laid-back people – all “no worries” and “she’ll be right” and partial to happy hours and long weekends. But this view flies in the face of daily reality in Sydney, which bursts to life in the morning, every morning, as locals rise early to swim, run, surf or salute the sun.

It’s a city that glitters brightest on the water so a dream day involves winding along its ocean and harbour shores. The Bondi to Bronte Coastal Walk hugs the sandstone cliffs that meet the Pacific Ocean, taking in Bondi’s postcard of Wonderland City with its Mackenzies Bay and Icebergs ocean pool beyond Bronte – via the stone angels of Waverley Cemetery to Clovelly, which was declared an aquatic reserve after a celebrity groper named Bluey was speared in 2002 (although it might have been another, less famous fish). At Clovelly Bowling & Recreation Club (clovellybowlingclub.com.au), the schooners are cheap and you can play lawn bowls overlooking the Pacific before combing the beach for shells so small and perfect, it’s as though a collector has dumped their stash. You could snorkel at Gordons Bay then continue to Coogee Beach, where children are coated in ice-cream and white sand, backpackers slackline between Norfolk Island pines and, in the backyard of a suburban home, that elephant, Princess Alice, lies. Everybody throngs to the Hemmes family’s Coogee Pavilion (merivale.com.au), where there’s ping-pong on the ground floor and only adults in the rooftop bar.

But this is a city with another marvellous body of water so if you can turn your back on the Pacific, take a taxi to Catalina (catalinarosebay.com.au), at Rose Bay, where pelicans fluff their plumes and look hopeful, making themselves as comfortable on the deck as the wealthy diners inside. Here you can embrace the sparkly joys of a piece of Sydney Harbour where there are no bad tables.

Then, if this perfect Sydney day has to end, catch a ferry to Circular Quay (transportnsw.info) before sunset. The harbour seduces, whether you have to squint in the sun or huddle from rain, but at night it’s aglow, studded with the lights of small boats, and there’s no better way to experience the spectacular lightshow than on the ferry. Wander up to the Sydney Opera House, where you can drink wine right under architect Jørn Utzon’s sails at the Cured & Cultured counter at Bennelong (bennelong.com.au). It means climbing 72 granite steps to claim a stool but, as with anything in Sydney, the exertion is worth it. ALISON BOLEYN

Gordons Bay is an ideal snorkelling spot for seeing starfish, cuttlefish and gropers.
AS TOKYO wakes, surprisingly quietly, the scent of dashi from breakfast miso soup mixes with the rich notes of freshly brewed coffee. Breakfast is often eaten on the run. Standing noodle bars at every train station offer steaming bowls of soba noodles to be slurped down in seconds by orderly armies of commuters.

Those with more time linger over French toast or a sweet soufflé with the morning papers at Lauderdale (lauderdale.co.jp) in Roppongi before exploring the area’s museums. Mori Art Museum (mori.amuseum) offers cutting-edge art with spectacular city views from one of Tokyo’s most expensive residential towers. A short walk away is the Tokyo Midtown shopping complex (tokyo-midtown.com) with its warm timber interiors and dramatic ikebana installations; you’ll be cocooned in the impeccable service and luxe Zen design that Japan does so well. In winter, the adjoining park hosts an ice rink in front of the sleek 21_21 Design Sight venue (2121designsight.jp) designed by Issey Miyake. A 10-minute walk takes you to the National Art Center, Tokyo (nact.jp), its concrete-and-glass structure housing spacious galleries and Paul Bocuse’s modern pod-like brasserie that seems to hover like a spaceship.

Leave the glamorous concrete jungle to meander through the small but spectacular Happo-en gardens (happo-en.com) in Shirokane-dai – originally the grounds of a samurai’s house built in the 17th century. Enjoy a private tea ceremony at the rustic Muana tea house next to the koi pond then elegant tempura at Enju restaurant (happo-en.com/restaurant/enju).

Nearby is a grand residence from a very different era. Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum (teien-art-museum.ne.jp) is housed in Prince Asaka’s Art Deco mansion built in 1933. The interior is richly decorated, from the custom René Lalique glass doors and lights to the murals by Henri Rapin.

When the weather turns as crisp as a Fuji apple, stalls pop up on street corners, selling freshly roasted chestnuts or small fragrant Castella cakes to fuel your explorations. The best way to experience Tokyo is to get lost. Wander the backstreets of Nakameguro, on the Meguro River, where you’ll find vintage stores, denim specialists and vinyl records next to intimate bars and cafés. Dive into Waltz (waltz-store.co.jp), a tiny monument to vinyl, cassettes and even VHS tapes, plus the hardware needed to play them.

Drop by Daikanyama T-Site (real.tsite.jp/daikanyama/english), a sprawling bookshop designed by Klein Dytham that’s packed with design books and international magazines, then head to Higashi-Yama (higashiyama-tokyo.jp), tucked behind a cinder-block wall near Naka-Meguro Station, for dinner. Slip through the anonymous doorway for delicate Japanese dishes in an atmospheric converted house. After-dinner drinks in the soothing basement lounge are a must for small-batch sakés and innovative cocktails. KIRSTY MUNRO