



The following collection of articles were authored by Ewen Bell and have been published in News Ltd newspapers across Australia - including the Sunday Telegraph in Sydney, Melbourne's Sunday Herald-Sun and the Herald-Sun's Friday travel section, Queensland's Sunday Mail, The Sunday Times in Western Australia, The Sunday Mail in South Australia and The Sunday Tasmanian.

Last updated February 2007

## LONGING FOR LONGJI

FEBRUARY 23, 2007

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

The remote mountains to the north of Guilin are home to a collection of villages known as The Rice Terraces. The Chinese name for our destination is Longji, which literally means 'Dragon's Back'. Narrow gardens of rice and water descend the steep hills and catch the late afternoon light, like the shining ridges of a mystical beast. Twice a year I visit Longji with a photography tour, sharing my appreciation of these mountains with a new group of travellers and their cameras.

Longji marks the half-way point of our photographic journey across China. We have already visited the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an, photographed the Great Wall at sunset and explored the Hutongs and Palaces of Beijing.

Few people have heard of this region before they visit, but the combination of friendly faces and remote isolation easily makes the Rice Terrace the highlight of the tour.

Arriving at Longji by private bus we not only leave behind the comforts of modernity, but we have to leave the bus behind as well. This is where the road ends and the Rice Terraces begin.

This is a photo tour not an adventure hike, so we have porters to carry our luggage up the trail for us. A squabble of old women have met us at the bus and begin bickering for our business. Regardless of shape or size, the bags are strapped into rattan baskets and carried up the trail to our guest-house.

Almost everyone feels guilty about hiring porters, at first, but even the strongest of our group proves no match for the lean and fit local women.

Ping-An is our home for the night, a quaint village of unique ethnic origins and peculiar architecture. Homes here are broad and lofty timber masterpieces, built for large extended families and made entirely without nails. Carpentry skills alone are employed to make them sturdy.

Nestled into the valley between two hills, the village is embraced by narrow terraced-fields and cold mountain streams. This is home to the Zhuong people.

Our host for the night is Mr Li. He remembers me from the last visit and immediately offers me a cup of rice-wine. I have to be watchful of his generosity – the cup may be very small but it has a way of being refilled without my knowing. I once asked Mr Li how his rice-wine is made, to which he replied, "I don't know about these things, my wife Qin takes care of everything."

Mr Li is not wrong. Qin was there to arrange our porters when the bus arrived, she was there to check us into our rooms, and she is with us before dinner to oversee the cooking. Should enough guests stay in the village to warrant a cultural show, Qin will be there too.

The next morning our group heads off in different directions to photograph the terraces.

Some travel across to the next village and come back with stories of their encounters with donkeys and peacocks, while others stay closer to the guest house and shoot the details of rice-paddies, chillies and domesticated ducks as they forage in the village.

Women from a neighbouring town have spotted our group and within minutes are showing us silver jewellery and hand-knitted fabrics.

These ladies are from a different ethnic minority, the Yao, and in contrast to the Zhuong people are persistent in the pursuit of tourist

dollars. Yao women are a striking sight with their vivid pink garments and long-black hair. To their credit, the hand-crafted items on sale are of excellent quality.

With every purchase an obligatory photo session takes place to preserve the moment.

Zhuong people are very different to the Yao, in both appearance and character. Without regard for money the Zhuong of Ping-An are exceptionally friendly to photographers. The joy of their kind faces and welcoming smiles is nothing short of a gift.

Travellers from a previous journey have sent us copies of their photos, and we take delight in returning these images to the locals. Travellers all over the world get hassled for currency when taking photos, but in Longji we can practice less economic forms of respect and gratitude.

The excitement of matching a person to a print is something I never grow tired of, and often yields memorable photo opportunities, which in turn will be shared on my next visit.

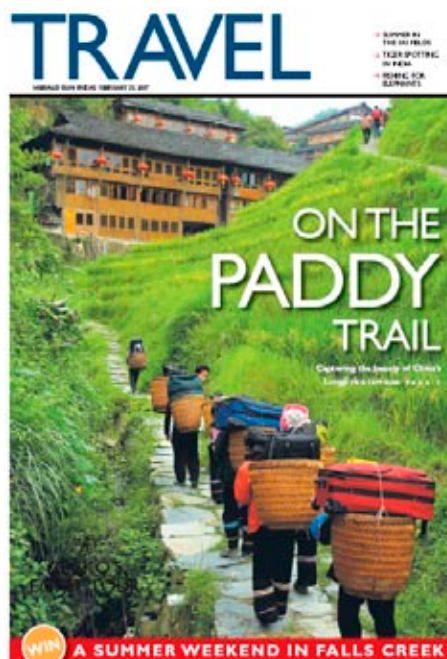
My fellow travellers are sometimes surprised that portraits are such a major part of a travel photographer's job. The faces and actions of local people are invariably the greatest keep-sakes of our journey, and in taking those photos you have to get up-close and personal with the locals.

It's a simple equation; the better your understanding of the subject, the more your photographs will reveal. In this manner the camera plays a unique role by bringing us deeper into the culture.

Lunch is provided on the guest house balcony by Mr Li. With just a few more hours left to enjoy Ping-An our group has struck a reflective note; the peaceful surrounds of a timber village has helped still our minds and given us some inspiration for the camera.

Only myself and the tour leader know what surprises lay ahead for the group. The beauty of Guilin's limestone peaks, lazy bike rides through farming communities and the stunning contrast of culture when we arrive in Shanghai. Even there we have our little secrets – historical water towns, delicious dumpling stalls and luxurious cocktail bars.

Qin arrives with a handful of eager old ladies, ready to porter our luggage back down the hill. We snap a few last shots before catching our bus and heading back to the real world, and one more week of photographic adventure.



## SHANGHAI'S SURPRISE

FEBRUARY 18, 2007

COVER STORY, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH TRAVEL SECTION

If you want a vision of the future in China, and a glimpse of the past, you need go no further than Shanghai. The red-tiled roofs of historic old buildings are giving way to a modern skyline of glass and steel. Shanghai is a sassy youngster, full of bravado and confidence with a truly modern face.

The people of Shanghai don't just wear iPods, they make them.

Sitting quietly in the shadows, just a few hours drive away, are her elder sisters; the modest and charming water towns fed by the gently flowing waters of the Grand Canal. Graceful villages such as Wuzhen, Nanxun and Xitang give us a glimpse of old China, frozen in a pre-revolution bubble and bricked in from all sides by Qing Dynasty architecture.

These small villages have changed little since the time of emperors and dynasties. Narrow stone-paved streets are flanked by timber facades, doors and shutters. Few are painted, the natural colour of the wood still evident after decades of weathering.

Trees and pot-plants offer the only competing colour along the waterways, with every inch of brick rendered with white-wash. Even the roofs are a dark-grey hue, tainted by the silty-clay of the canals. Occasional punts travel up and down the water, adding a little more timber to the view.

The laneways of Wuzhen are connected by dozens of carved-stone bridges that span the canals, some dating back as far as the 7th century and each with their own history and character.

Typical of the Chinese flare for style, the bridges are granted poetic names such as "First Time Reunited", in reference to a period after the Tang Dynasty when two halves of the town belonged to different kingdoms.

The preservation of the historic centre of Wuzhen has allowed the locals to retain a relaxed way of life. Shop-keepers and residents take short walks to visit friends in the street and share a pot of green tea.

For over a century the locals have enjoyed "jing-chi", the gentle energy that comes from time spent in good company with an endless cup of green-tea. The same few tea leaves are repeatedly used to infuse hot water, and many hours can be spent watching river punts pass by or being challenged to another game of Mah-jong.

As a traveller to Wuzhen it is useful to learn the Chinese symbol for tea, as many of the tea houses are so ornate that you can easily mistake them for an imperial courtyard or temple.

Westerners are a rare sight wandering through the streets and canals. Wuzhen has only recently opened its doors to the travelling public, and the few buses making their way daily from Shanghai and Hangzhou carry mostly Chinese tourists.

Town officials must have been expecting more English speaking visitors, because many signs for temples and lanes are marked in English.

The lone restaurant along the main canal is clearly marked with an official sign that reads "Chinese Restaurant", just in case you were expecting something else.

Don't let the signs fool you however; no one here speaks a word of English and attempts to order food are an adventure into the unknown.

Cuisine in the canal-towns lacks the modern-fusion of Shanghai, the locals preferring to enjoy traditional delights such as steamed river

shrimp and baby-greens with mushrooms. The best advice is to look up the phrase "You decide" in your guide book and sit-back for some culinary surprises.

As dusk colours the sky above Wuzhen the shops start closing up, their wooden shutters placed one-by-one into hand-carved frames. A few tea houses that line the canal stay open, and their red lanterns reflect off the water.

Fishermen tie their punts to bridges and walk down the lanes with their catch, another reminder that these are living villages.

No motorbikes or cars are permitted in the historical centre, so footsteps are often the only sound you will hear at this time of night unless musicians are performing in the square.

Once night has truly fallen the colour of lanterns is joined by candles floating down the river in paper-boats. For less than a dollar you can add to the scene and send your own prayers and wishes to be gently carried away by the current.

If you still have a few coins left in your purse then it's worth heading for the souvenir stalls that flank the entrance to the historical town. Prices here are more modest than in Shanghai and yet equally impressive for stylish trinkets, bronze replicas, and an extensive range of Mao-morabilia.

It is difficult to imagine what the autocratic architect of "The Great Leap Forward" would say about his cheerful image frozen in porcelain alongside laughing Buddhas and fake jade charms, but it's a reminder that the gaze of Mao Zedong remains ever-present over China, like a stern grandparent who dispenses un-approving glances at short skirts and fast cars.

A truly original keep-sake is the locally produced rice-wine. Elegantly presented bottles of distilled alcohol are infused with plums and sold cheaper than wine. The old lady who sold me a bottle assures me that I won't wake up with a headache even if I drank it all in one night.

I chose to keep that souvenir for a special occasion and headed back to the river to enjoy a last cup of tea before heading back to the City and her modern ways.



## PENGUIN'S PARADISE

FEBRUARY 9, 2007

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

Expeditions to Antarctica have come long way the past 100 years. The ships are made of steel rather than timber, some are equipped with active-stabilisers to reduce the rolling in heavy swell and you don't have to spend months huddled under an upturned life-raft, eating penguins to survive. The early explorer's sense of adventure is still alive, however, and the most authentic expeditions still take at least one photographer with them.

The Antarctic Peninsula offers the most scenic locations and abundant wildlife for visitors who want to experience the edge of the world. Islands and bays pepper the rugged coastline and pre-historic glaciers creep off the mainland and into the ocean.

With the arrival of summer the floating pack-ice retreats and narrow sections of rocky shores are exposed. The warmer weather between December and March provides the barest of breeding habitats for several species of penguins and birds, plus making it possible for our adventurous expedition crew to navigate the coast.

Against a backdrop of snow-covered mountains and narrow passages the surface of the sea is a landscape of constant change as ice formations come and go.

But the ice-bergs are the show-stoppers. The weathering of sun and wind on the irregular ice surfaces result in a dazzling array of shapes, textures and colours. Sunlight catching the pristine ice yields aqua and blue tones that don't exist anywhere else in nature.

Getting up close to ice-bergs is best achieved with Zodiacs; specialist rubber dinghies that take up to 12 passengers. From the safety of the Zodiacs, life on the ice is revealed. Sleeping seals and playful penguins are often seen taking a break from their sub-surface feeding, and watching the penguins fling themselves out of the water is both comical and amazing.

This is what makes expedition cruising in Antarctica special, the chance to get off the ship and be a part of the scenery.

Peregrine Adventures have over 8 years experience operating Antarctic expeditions, and 'getting off the ship' is their speciality. Weather permitting, they aim to do at least one zodiac cruise every day, and ideally a shore landing as well.

Luck was definitely with us, and for one special night we had a chance to camp in Antarctica. As twilight dimmed the sky, our little patch of peninsula gave accommodation to a few dozen passengers, one seal and hundreds of penguins. There wasn't much sleep that night, but no-one seemed the least bit disappointed.

Most shore landings last a couple of hours, long enough for some short hikes or just spending time with the penguins.

Taking a few moments to sit and watch them is time well spent, and soon the characters and conflicts of the individuals become compelling viewing. Gentoo Penguins in particular are very social and very active. I watched one industrious fellow pebble-collecting for his partner's nest by venturing a few meters up the hill, causing a ruckus of squawks from the nest-owners, and stealing a single stone. One by one he would thread his way through angry beaks to penguin-lift another pebble.

Each time he ventured off to steal another one, however, his own collection would be raided by yet another nest-builder nearby. Such is life among the Gentoos.

Most of Peregrine's Antarctic voyages will get you up-close with Chinstrap, Adelie and Gentoo Penguins while visitors to South Georgia will definitely encounter the King Penguins that call the

islands home. Emperor Penguins, the tallest and hardiest species made famous by the movie "Happy Feet", occupy the coldest climates deep inside the Antarctic Circle and are not as easily reached.

If your spirit for exploration is not completely quenched by artistic ice, squabbling penguins and hikes across the landscape you can always add a few kayak excursions to the trip. When you pre-book this option you'll be provided with sea-kayaks, dry-gear and the chance to paddle instead of Zodiac when the conditions are suitable.

Novice kayakers are well cared for; starting with an information pack to help prepare before the journey, introductory lessons when you get aboard the ship and the option of double kayaks so you can buddy-up on your first few outings.

Passenger and first time Antarctic-kayaker, Sarah Williams, explains, "When you're moving through the brash-ice you can hear the trapped bubbles of air crackling all around you and fragments banging against the hull. Then you paddle alongside an ice-berg and you feel really small and insignificant."

Sarah was also visited by Minke whales while kayaking, a moment of stillness that she will remember for a lifetime. Wildlife in Antarctica is often just as curious of us as we are of them.

The final leg of our expedition took us through the Penola Straights, a few degrees north of the Antarctic Circle. On a cloudy day with still water we found our ship surrounded by Humpback Whales in search of food. From the bow of our ship we spotted pods of whales in every direction, and watched the show with a camera in one hand a glass of red wine in the other.

Breaching whales feeding on krill make a fitting finale to any exploration of the peninsula.

It was now time to head north and we prepare ourselves for the two day ocean passage to reach Argentina and our flights home. The days spent en-route became another feature of the trip, as each of our crew members shared their specific expertise in a series of presentations. During the long voyages out and back we were treated to their wisdom and enthusiasm, enriching our appreciation of this unique adventure.

As one of our crew explained at the end of his lecture, "The essence of any adventure is the certainty of the unexpected", and adventure is exactly what we got.



## OLD YACHTS MAKE NEW FRIENDS

JANUARY 19, 2007

BOATING SPECIAL, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

Professionally crewed yachts do battle on our bays every Australia Day weekend but it's the lesser known boats from generations past that really put colour into the summer yachting season; and give unskilled land-lubbers like me the chance to get amongst the glory.

My first experience sailing was the result of someone I knew who needed crew, and I figured he must have been pretty hard-up to have asked me. That's the great thing about people who own yachts, they always need a hand to sail them. I turned up to the yacht club with some warm clothes, some bread-rolls for lunch and very little idea of how to sail.

There were more knowledgeable characters on the boat with me, and I made myself useful and discovered a new pleasure. After ten years of being told which rope to grab and where to put my feet to avoid falling over I can call myself a yachtie.

I still marvel at the pleasure of getting onto the bay for a sail. In less than an hour you can leave the office in the city and be out on the water with views of St Kilda and beyond.

Several yacht clubs operate twilight races during the summer, which encourage yacht owners out for a mid-week sail and lets anyone with an interest join a crew for the evening. If you go sailing with one of the slower boats, the bonus is a little extra time on the water to enjoy the sights. As the sun gets closer to dusk you may even hear that chatter of fairy penguins rafting up near the breakwater at St Kilda. It's time well spent.

I had the pleasure to begin my sailing on a classic wooden yacht, a living piece of history hand-built in a Geelong backyard. The yacht in question is called "Scimitar", and she is the product of three generations in the Purcell family. A true labour of love, and a family heirloom now enjoyed by a fourth generation of the family.

Her current custodian and skipper is a white-moustached "old salt" by the name of Barry Purcell, one of those truly remarkable individuals whose talented career in engineering is matched only by his dedication to the boat. It was Barry's father who commissioned construction in 1956, and it took another 30 years before she finally entered the water.

Sadly Barry's father did not live to see the yacht launched, but to this day his photo is carefully preserved below the decks to join the crew on every voyage.

I have sailed with Barry from Williamstown to Geelong many times, making the Australia Day Weekend passage race that marks the great spectacle of Skandia Geelong Week. To be out on the bay with some of the big boats is pretty special, no matter where you finish up in the rankings.

I can't say that "Scimitar" sails any faster when I'm in the crew, but I must admit that I wasn't on the boat last year when she won the overall division for classic yachts.

Racing seems a funny word to apply to these timber yachts and their crew of gentlemen. On any downwind leg the sails are loosened off to run with the wind and crew relax on deck with drinks and a sandwich. I've enjoyed a few cat-naps on the foredeck during this stage of a race, occasionally to be awakened by playful dolphins or idle chatter from a passing competitor.

It's not a bad way to work on your tan.

Gaining some skills on the water can be a stepping stone to bigger things of course, and the dream of sailing across the world or in a Sydney to Hobart race is always a possibility. But with a few big events headed our way this summer there's enough action and twilights on our own bay to keep me busy.

Besides, I still haven't learned what all the ropes are for.



**Blown away by sailing**

Twilight racing in a classic form can leave you the spirit of an old-fashioned sailor. The thrill of the race is in the wind and the water. The thrill of the race is in the wind and the water. The thrill of the race is in the wind and the water.

**GET ON BOARD**

Twilight racing in a classic form can leave you the spirit of an old-fashioned sailor. The thrill of the race is in the wind and the water. The thrill of the race is in the wind and the water. The thrill of the race is in the wind and the water.

## SEA OF COLOURS

JANUARY 05, 2007

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

The Loyalty Islands of New Caledonia are tropical and scenic, but the most beautiful sights are found below the water. With the help of a simple snorkel and goggles the dynamic world of fish and coral come to life – it's a good thing you don't have to come up for air.

Roh Bay, at the northern tip of Maré, is a place seen by very few travellers. Although New Caledonia is just a few hours flying time from Sydney, this particular island may as well be the other side of the world. No one speaks English and the waters are too shallow for any but the most specialised of cruise ships.

As our tender navigates towards a small patch of beach protected by coral flats we spot turtles racing away beneath the surface. They move quickly but their elegant silhouette against the white sand below is unmistakable. The abundance of these majestic creatures is a good sign that the reef systems are healthy.

Once on the beach it's tempting to relax on the white sands. The indulgence of remote seclusion is a rare pleasure, but the crystal clear water is equally alluring. There are certain shades of blue that only exist on a sunny day with clear water above pure white sand. Coral blooms mottle the aqua tones, and with these in mind I put on my snorkelling gear.

As I swim away from the beach the first few sections of coral are populated with Damselfish that flutter about as I draw closer. The joy of sharing the water with even the most common of marine life is something to be treasured. Heading further out from the shore the water gets a little cooler and slightly deeper, and the coral gets more dense. Living coral is easy to spot for its bright colours. Patches of pink, red and blue catch my eye.

I move a little closer to a line of rocks that protect the cove from waves. It's mostly shallow as far as they eye can see but up ahead the coral drops away like an underwater ravine, with a sandy bottom just two or three metres beneath the coral bed. Breathing through the snorkel I never have to lift my gaze out of the water, so I can glide across the ravine as though I am one of the fish.

Lining the ridge are Blue Devils which beaver about like sentinels watching their little spot of coral. Glancing along the length of the ridge-line the bright dots of electric-blue are suddenly obvious. That's the thing about snorkelling, the more you look the more you see.

When you float across a section of coral everything dashes out of your way, at least for a moment. But if you lay still, just drifting with the waves, then one by one the marine life below pops back out to continue their daily business.

On this journey I am guided by an expert from the cruise ship. Jamie Anderson has been an expedition leader with Coral Princess Cruises for over a decade, and his knowledge of life in the sea is second to none. Jamie waves me over and I follow him across the little cove to a little section where the coral flats give way to a narrow channel with a sandy bottom.

The under-water ravine is no more than three metres deep, but the steep drop-off and open space provides a play-ground for larger and

more varied species of fish. Trigger fish dart into crevices, Morish Idols poke at bits of coral in search of nutrients, and schools of Chromis shoot through and around some of the more elaborate coral pieces. It's really busy down there!

Patience is a virtue when snorkelling, and just observing the ebb and flow of life yields more and more exotic species. We watch a territorial Damselfish play games with a Moray Eel, a most unfriendly but well disguised fellow that would look right at home in a science fiction thriller.

And then we find Nemo. The orange and white clown-fish made famous by Hollywood is alive and well in New Caledonia, and he has friends. The older adults take on an increasingly darker shade of orange that is closer to brown, while distant cousins sport black and white stripes with yellow tips on their fins. Like a soft cloud that blankets them from harm they nestle into the tips of sea anemone, one of the few species that is impervious to the toxic sting.

Back on the surface we compare notes on the day's sights. As interlopers to the reef we treasure the brief immersion and start looking forward to the next opportunity for a snorkel. Jamie explains to me the unique variety of highlights to be seen across the Loyalty Islands; the natural pool on the Isle of Pines, the calm waters off the Ouvea Atoll and the immense coral flats surrounding the island of Lifou.

In the week to follow I would explore all these places and find Jamie true to his word. New Caledonia is blessed with ideal conditions for snorkelling and my confidence grew with each adventure. But I will always remember the sight of nearly a dozen butterfly fish darting along the ravine at Maré, like little yellow sports cars taking a joy ride on the freeway.

Maybe they were trying to catch-up with the turtles.



## THAI THE KNOT

JANUARY, 2007

BRIDE TO BE - YOUR DAY YEARBOOK

The chanting of monks and the blessing of friends and family set the scene for our sunset wedding on a beach in Thailand. A private villa at the southern end of Phuket was our home for the week long celebration leading up to the special day. Having enjoyed the sun and sea that Phuket is famous for, and the attentive care of friends and family, it was going to be difficult to make the honeymoon even more special. A new resort in Thailand's north proved the perfect place to enjoy our own time together and unwind after the social excesses in Phuket.

Thailand has held a special place in our relationship since first we met. Our first travel together was an overland adventure from Singapore to Bangkok, beginning with birthday drinks at Raffles Hotel. Returning to Thailand was like seeing an old friend. There's something special about a country that has almost as many statues of the Buddha than it does people.

The responsibility for the wedding planning was accepted by my soon-to-be wife, Victoria, and so we agreed that the honeymoon would fall onto my shoulders. The first thing I did was to contact Raffles in Singapore and arrange for two nights of honeymoon accommodation. Three years ago we drank Singapore Slings on the balcony of the Writers Bar, this time we would enjoy our final night as honeymooners by dining inside.

To add a touch of sentimental value, Victoria's parents gave us the two nights at Raffles as a gift and we all agreed to keep it a secret from her until the limousine driver met us at the airport. My philosophy on romantic surprises is simple; making your wife cry with joy is one of life's rare pleasures that no man should deny himself.

So the honeymoon now had a beginning and an end with Phuket and Singapore. I just had to fill-in the four nights in between. It was clear that the beautiful surrounds of a privately rented villa in Phuket would make it difficult if not impossible to take a step-up by checking into a coastal resort. That's when I remembered a particular Buddhist temple in the northern Thailand city of Chiang Mai, and discovered a most remarkable resort that caters perfectly for honeymooners and the need for privacy and solitude.

Dhara Dhevi is something out of a fairytale, a cultural resort modelled on ancient cities of the Lanna and Burmese people, complete with rice-fields, local market and temples. Driving up the cobbled stone avenue the various buildings of the resort open out like a lost city, peaked with gold and timber spires. Bell-shaped wind chimes are lifted into the breeze by the seven-layers of each spire – in Thai culture each level represents a different stage of enlightenment.

For newly weds the meaning is doubled; two lives brought together are at the end of one stage and the beginning of another.

From the balcony of our Colonial Suite we stepped out to the main pool and enjoyed the first of many long and slow swims under a peaceful blue sky. Within minutes the attentive staff had laid out our sun-chairs with towels, bottled water and tall glasses filled with ice.

That night we ordered dinner served in our room and selected some DVD's to watch together. The combination of too much food, an exhausting wedding and the indulgently comfortable suite ensured that we feel asleep during the first movie.

In the following days we did manage to enjoy a massage and spa together, the experienced team at Dheva Spa worthy of the King of Thailand himself, but the chance to not do anything was really more appealing than anything else. Replacing the intense excitement of the wedding with the time and space to enjoy the company of each other was ideal.

While it's hard to imagine wanting to leave the resort, we did take advantage of the scheduled shuttle service that connects with the night market in Chiang Mai. This infamous boulevard comes to life in the evenings as vendors fill every inch of footpath with local crafts, silks, candles and Buddha images.

The glittering jewel of Chiang Mai is found a few miles out of town in the cool air of the surrounding hills. The temple at Doi Suthep is unlike any other in the world, sitting high above the city this is a living temple where monks train and study. The inner core of the complex is a square lined by prayer halls, all facing into the middle where a magnificent golden chedi rises to Doi Suthep's highest point.

Gold images of Buddha, big and small, fill the square. The brink of dusk signalled the monks to chant their prayers and we stayed just long enough to hear their harmonious voices chanting. Not since our wedding day had we listened so intently to their song.

Turning to head back down the hill I knew this would be the furthest point of our journey as honeymooners. Once we leave Doi Suthep we'll head south to the resort, then further south to Singapore, and finally home to begin the journey of marriage.

Victoria squeezed my hand gently and off we went.

### BUDDHIST CONNECTIONS

If you plan to get married in Thailand then a Buddhist ceremony will be a feature of the event you will treasure for a lifetime. Chanting monks, water blessings and Buddhist prayers are just the beginning. For advice and support on planning such an event, and logistical solutions to make the wedding legal, contact Creative Events Asia - [www.creativeeventsasia.com](http://www.creativeeventsasia.com)

### VILLAS AND SUITES

There are two distinct flavours for guests at Dhara Dhevi. The colonial suites evoke a sense of Indochine history with tall ceilings, refined interiors and the highest possible standard of comfort. The villas suites are equally indulgent and well appointed, but are more like individual homes with separate gates and elegantly styled interiors that reflect the skills of local artisans. Larger villas have their own pool, and all outdoor entertaining areas merge gently into the rice-fields - [www.mandarinoriental.com/chiangmai](http://www.mandarinoriental.com/chiangmai)

### COME FLY WITH ME

Bangkok Airways connect Chiang Mai to many parts of Thailand and South-East Asia. They are a boutique airline offering excellent value, and their private airport lounges are open to all passengers. Bangkok Airways have far more generous luggage restrictions than the discount airlines, so you needn't feel guilty about going home with a bronze buddha in your suitcase - [www.bangkokair.com](http://www.bangkokair.com)



## HOTLIST FOR 2007

DECEMBER 29, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

### Taj Mahal by Motorbike

Rajasthan is filled with romantic stories, colourful cities and British designed Royal Enfield Motorcycles. For over 50 years every bolt, cam and lever has been built brand new to the original specifications. This living piece of motorcycle history inspired Mike Ferris to design a Motorcycle tour that incorporates the most intriguing cities of Rajasthan plus a diversion to the Taj Mahal. Support vehicles, fuel and any maintenance concerns are covered, and the comfortable accommodation at the end of each day is a welcome sight.

The next departure for Rajasthan is on January 22, 2007 – visit [www.ferriswheels.com.au](http://www.ferriswheels.com.au) for details.

### Opening the Northwest Passage

One hundred years ago the northern-most tip of Canada was an untamed frontier of ice and snow, and since that first successful navigation through the Northwest Passage few vessels have dared to follow. Peregrine Adventures have embraced the theme of maritime exploration, albeit with the advantage of modern technology and a truly sea-worthy vessel. Aside from photographing whales, polar bears and migratory birds this journey aims to provide ample opportunity to explore the islands and inlets on foot, as well as close-up encounters with ice formations by Zodiac.

The Peregrine Mariner will embark on just one voyage in 2007, due to the narrow window of suitable weather. Visit [www.peregrineadventures.com](http://www.peregrineadventures.com) or call 1300 854 444.

### Melanesian Odyssey

In the spirit of expedition voyages a new cruise itinerary is on offer by Coral Princess; starting in Noumea, travelling north through Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, and then touching on remote areas of Papua New Guinea before sailing south to Cairns. The cruise is broken up with island excursions, snorkelling trips, onboard lectures and even a visit to an active volcano. This is a small ship, designed for getting into shallow bays and landing passengers on remote beaches. Everything is included, even the snorkel.

The only scheduled departure will be in March 2007, visit [www.coralprincess.com.au](http://www.coralprincess.com.au) or phone 1800 079 545.

## BEST OF 2006

DECEMBER 22, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

### Getting Married in Phuket

In October we rented a Thai villa in Phuket for our wedding. Ourselves and some close friends and family were treated like the King and Queen of Siam, with live-in staff to cook and clean and a stunning view looking across the bay to Patong. We enjoyed the pleasure of friends and family for a week long celebration leading up to the wedding day, so our guests had a fabulous holiday as well being part of the festivities. The ceremony itself was on the beach at Kata Noi, complete with chanting monks, a million orchids and a lady-boy band drumming into the sunset.





## MOROCCO BOUND

DECEMBER, 2006

VACATIONS & TRAVEL MAGAZINE

When dusk descends upon the main square in Marrakech the air is made heavy with the aroma of cooking and the sound of rhythms. Century-old traditions are relived every night as story tellers trade their wisdom for coins, street performers garner applause for their showmanship and food stalls compete to offer unique blends of spices from around the world. The mysteries of Morocco are ready to explore within these city walls.

The locals call the square Djemaa el Fna, which literally translates into "Assembly of the Dead" because Sultans once used the square to publicly parade the bodies of their executed prisoners. Today the people of Marrakech flock into the city centre to enjoy the trading influences that have constantly reshaped its markets. Russian style samovars dispense cinnamon brewed tea, snails steamed in French sauces are sold in paper cones and open grills blacken lamb chops and bread tossed with cumin and garlic.

Music and drums can be heard until the late evening. Bands of performers walk the crowded square and seek encouragement to put on their show. Just a few coins will get thing started and soon a circle forms with onlookers who are all expected to add a little to the collection. Entertainers touting for business may be as elaborate as a ten piece percussion band or as simple as an old man dressed as a traditional water-seller covered in shiny brass cups. In decades long past the water-sellers would earn a living by offering a clean cup into which was poured a modest amount of water. The modern equivalent is vastly more colourful in dress and weighed down with more metal than liquid.

Djemaa el Fna is home to the very old and respected tradition of story telling and this, more than anything, reveals the true nature of Marrakech and the history that still lives within its walls. Berber and Arabic people gather around the orator and wait patiently for a large enough group. The telling of the tale is a little like theatre, except all the events unfold from narration. Longer stories may be paused after a while to allow for more donations from the audience. Story telling is more than just entertainment; it embodies the process of cultural expression through generations where written text does not exist. For this reason it was not uncommon for orators to be banned from public spaces during periods of occupation.

In the strong light of day the Djemaa el Fna is mostly empty. The focus moves away from the open spaces and off to the souks where vendors buy and sell almost anything. What at first appears to be a chaotic maze of stalls and shops is really a highly structured series of clustered markets. The souks that reside alongside the square are in fact many small souks, each with their own principle goods being sold in close competition with neighbouring traders. As you move through the labyrinth of narrow lanes the distinct flavour of each section becomes more apparent; jewellery, silver, copper, carpets, bags, leatherwork, spices and more.

There is no doubt that the wealth of modern tourists has left a mark on the trading style of these markets, but the further you walk away from the Djemaa el Fna, and its surrounding riad-style hotels, the more genuine the flavour of the trading and the more reasonable the bargaining. Negotiating a price has the unusual benefit that, once a deal is struck, both parties are happy with the transaction. It doesn't matter what you pay for a set of artistically painted drinking glasses; you will go home with a unique reminder of one of the world's truly remarkable bazaars.

Away from the souks the Djemaa el Fna is fed by an avenue which connects the square directly to the Koutoubia Mosque. This impressive

structure towers above the streets with ornate tile-work and elegant dimensions typical of Arabic architecture. Standing in the courtyards of the mosque, surrounded by palm-trees and the scent of ripe oranges, you can see the tantalising backdrop of snow-capped peaks in the High Atlas Mountains.

A days drive to the north-east lay the imperial cities of Fez and Meknes, each offering something different and something complimentary to the souk experience of Marrakech.

The great attraction of Meknes is the annual Fantasia which brings thousands of horsemen to participate in a colourful display of skill and excitement. Teams of riders, representing different tribes, gather as one before charging the length of the field. At full speed the horses gallop ever closer, kicking a cloud of dust into the air and rolling like thunder as their hooves pound into the earth. The spectators watch with growing anticipation at the approaching riders until each man raises his rifle and fires in unison, releasing a wall of gun-fire into the air. The crowds cheer and applaud the display, but before the gun-powder has settled another team is ready to repeat the show.

The souks of Meknes and Marrakech are everything they claim to be, but Fez el Bali – the old town of Fez – is home to a medina with no equal; over 9000 alleyways crowded with souks, mosques and mules. The maze of connecting streets and passages are infamously easy to get lost in. You may often find yourself unintentionally circling back to small landmarks, such as public courtyards or leather tanneries, and wondering how you got there. Faux guides will offer to assist you, with the clear intention of steering you towards one of the large leather bazaars that overlook the tanneries. The view is unique, and as you look down into the tanning pits from the viewing balconies the odour from the process is enough to make your nostrils curl.

Back on the street donkeys carry hides in and out of the tanneries and women fashion slippers from softened leather and thread. Stopping to browse at any of the stalls within the leather souk is often greeted with a cup of fresh mint tea, as a matter of courtesy. The pouring of this boiling sweet drink from the pot is an art-form of its own; the glasses are very small and the resulting splash and froth of tea cascading from a great height provides an infinitely more pleasant aroma to that of the tanneries.

This medieval city has retained its living heritage and offers a fascinating window into the world of Arabic culture. Throughout the medina the minarets of mosques peak above the dwellings as they have done for the last ten centuries. The view across the city from the northern vantage points reveals a mosaic of red roof tiles clustered around the rich emerald-green tiles of the mosques.

As the sun fades to the horizon the sound of calls-to-prayer echoes like a chorus, uniting the people of Fez el Bali. Sunset falls over Morocco.



## ASIA UNLIMITED

DECEMBER 8, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

What's on the itinerary for the best tour of Asia? Diverse cultures, divine dining and every kind of adventure known to man. No passport required for this virtual tour, but see your travel agent for the real thing!

### Bangkok

It all begins in Bangkok. We picked Bangkok as the starting point for our tour for the total immersion in culture, sights and taste. No other city in Asia can be compared to Bangkok; the insane tuk tuk drivers, magnificent temples and tongue twisting Thai language. Bangkok is an ancient city with a modern face. It's brand new airport a shining invitation to the world to come and join the distinct flavours downtown and live it up all night.

[www.bangkok-city.com](http://www.bangkok-city.com)

What to see: Wat Po and The Royal Palace make for a spectacular day-out, and a day trip up the Chao Praya River to the ancient capital of Ayutthaya is a must.

Where to eat: Every night the streets of Bangkok turn into endless rows of cheap and cheerful dining.

Where to stay: Backpackers love the scene along Khao San rd while those looking for room with a view should head down the river to the Mandarin Oriental Bangkok.

Where to shop: Take the skytrain to Morchit station and gaze in wonder out the window as you approach 5-square-kilometres of silk, crafts and homewares at Chatuchak weekend market.

What's cheap: A taxi from downtown to your hotel will cost less than \$4, so where the skytrain train or klong ferries don't go you can get a taxi by the meter.

### Krabi

The sandy beaches and clear tropical waters of Krabi are some of Thailand's best. Snorkelling and diving are high on the list of activities during the day, and Ao Nang beach is the perfect place to stay and play between snorkelling excursions around Phang Nga Bay. For the more adventurous, the rock climbing scene at Railay Beach is world famous for its sharp rising cliffs surrounded by jade-blue waters.

[www.yourkrabi.com](http://www.yourkrabi.com)

What to see: Phang Nga Bay is a playground for snorkelling and diving. Get on a speed boat for around \$75 and spend the day on and in the water.

Where to eat: There's no such thing as bad Thai food, but for a taste of adventure the night markets in Krabi Town comes alive when the sun goes down.

Where to stay: For privileged access to the best beaches get a boat across to Railay Beach and pick from one of the modest resorts that watch the sunset every night.

Where to shop: Ao Nang caters for every travellers needs, including an abundant supply of stalls and shops selling pottery, buddha images and sarongs.

What's cheap: If you have ever wanted to learn to dive then this is the place to do it. The water is warm, the diving schools are experienced and for under \$200 you can spend a whole day learning scuba-basics and then heading out into open water.

### Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia is a nation of diverse cultural mix, ease of travelling and inexpensive air-fares. The blend of Islamic and modern architectural influences is evident all over Kuala Lumpur and at KLCC the Petronas Towers are even more impressive up close than from a distance. Chinatown and Little India remind travellers of the ethnic influences that blend with the Malay in this unique city.

[www.tourism.gov.my](http://www.tourism.gov.my)

What to see: A day trip to nearby Putrajaya is a must. Ten years ago it was decided to build a new city to accommodate government and business, and the result is architectural and landscape design on a scale not seen since the pyramids were built.

Where to eat: Starhill Gallery is the hot ticket in town for fine dining, offering restaurants for every style of Asian cuisine in the most salubrious of settings. Take the monorail to Bintang Walk and head downstairs at Starhill for the Feast Village.

Where to stay: It is worth paying a little extra for luxury in Kuala Lumpur, and the Shangri-La Hotel on Jalan Sultan Ismail is close to everything when you need it and divinely private when you don't.

Where to shop: Sungei Wang Plaza offers the best electronics shopping in Asia. Digital cameras and laptop computers are just the beginning.

What's cheap: You can't get cheaper than free, and a trip to the Skybridge at the Petronas Towers will cost you absolutely nothing. Arrive early in the morning to queue for your ticket and bring your camera to capture the moment as you walk on air between the two towers.

### Sabah

A short flight south of Kuala Lumpur and you arrive in Borneo, the "land below the wind", and the Malaysian Borneo province of Sabah. Kota Kinabalu is a modest city that serves as a gateway for travellers heading further inland in search of jungles, trekking and Orang-utans. Continuing south-east the tiny island of Sipadan is a world famous divers paradise; just metres off the shore a near-vertical drop plunges over 500m into the murky depths of the ocean, where turtles and sharks playfully swim along the edge.

[www.sabahtourism.com](http://www.sabahtourism.com)

What to see: Climbing the peak at Mt Kinabalu requires considerable determination and very warm gloves. The final climb to the summit goes from 3000m to a little over 4000m, a journey which begins at 2:30am in the hope of beating the sunrise.

Where to eat: On the hill above Sandakan is the former governors mansion is now the English Tea House, where waiters in white-suits greet you with a cold towellette and you can play croquet on the lawns while sipping Pimms No.1. The menu is a refined fusion of modern and Asian.

Where to stay: Turtle lovers can stay on a marine park island near Sandakan and watch these majestic creatures arrive during the night to lay their eggs.

Where to shop: Every Sunday the busy street of Jalan Gaya closes down to make room for an open-air market

What's cheap: For less than \$5 you can buy a jar of tiger-balm, which when rubbed inside our socks will help stop leeches from eating you alive on your next jungle walk.



## Angkor

Nothing can prepare you for the incredible scale and beauty of Angkor. Ancient cities emerge out of the jungle, and occasionally the jungle invades deep into the temples themselves. For centuries the civilised kingdoms of Khmer people have built ever larger cities of stone from which to rule. The most famous of these ruins is Angkor Wat, but there are over 40 others within a 200 square kilometre area to visit – a 3 day pass is a must.

[www.theangkorguide.com](http://www.theangkorguide.com)

**What to see:** Located in the exact geographical centre of Angkor Thom, The Bayon is a 13th century Buddhist temple crowned by over 50 towers carved with the “Smile of Angkor”.

**Where to eat:** Khmer Kitchen is located near the old market and offers the best mix of Khmer cuisine with English menus. It's locally owned and locally delicious.

**Where to stay:** Visitors to Angkor will be staying in Siam Reap, once a modest regional town with more hotels than Angkor has temples. For a touch of luxury the Grand Hotel d'Angkor has plenty of history and that famous Raffles service.

**Where to shop:** You don't go shopping at Angkor, the shops come to you. Before you can even get off the bus a team of young children will be waving their silks and trinkets through the window and shouting the price in US dollars.

**What's cheap:** Give the illegal copies of Angkor guide books a miss and spend your money on a few lotus flowers at a temple. A single dollar will get you something suitably symbolic, and maybe a little kind karma will return your way.

## Hanoi

The streets of Vietnam's northern city are filled with bicycles and baskets laden with fruit, flowers and fashion. It's a city small enough to get around on foot, but large enough to spend days relaxing and exploring. The influence of the French is still evident in the colonial architecture, tree lined avenues and delicious coffee – but the ubiquitous use of the pointy hat gives a distinct Vietnamese feel to every scene.

[www.hanoitourist-travel.com](http://www.hanoitourist-travel.com)

**What to see:** The Temple of Literature is a magnificent garden in the heart of Hanoi where stone tablets have been used to preserve religious scripts for nearly 1000 years.

**Where to eat:** Little Hanoi is the leader of the pack, located near Beer St, offering great service and the most enticing Vietnamese menu. The catfish rice-paper rolls are unequalled.

**Where to stay:** Hotels are numerous inside the old-quarter of Hanoi, but go a block further south and the quality steps up a notch.

**Where to shop:** The entire old quarter is a monument to the good taste of Hanoi traders, with handicrafts, artwork and lacquer ware filling every shop window. Pho Nha Tho is the pick of the streets, with the gentle vines of a banyan tree blocking one lane, opposite yet another small temple hidden behind a modest gateway.

**What's cheap:** Hanoi's Water Puppet Theatre is a cultural show unlike any other. All the action takes place on a water-filled stage and features hilarious characters, ingenious animation and fire-breathing dragons. Tickets to the show start at \$2.

## Hong Kong

Besides having the best visitors centre in the history of mankind, Hong Kong sports stunning harbour views, an effective public transport network and is the home of Dim Sum – the Asian alternative to a tapas bar. Shopping is a major tourist attraction in Hong Kong also, and the western blend to Chinese traditions makes this an easy place to spend your money. Tram rides to The Peak and their very own Disneyland are just a few of the Family attractions.

[www.discoverhongkong.com](http://www.discoverhongkong.com)

**What to see:** Every night at 8pm the harbour and skyline are lit-up with a light show. Lasers and neon fill the sky in every direction. Head for the star ferry terminal at Kowloon and take a seat along the esplanade.

**Where to eat:** Ming Court at Langham Place is the gold standard for Dim Sum lunch. You won't see surly grandmothers pushing dumpling trolleys here, just excellent service and the preparation of Dim Sum made into an art-form.

**Where to stay:** The age-old dilemma for travellers is whether to stay on Hong Kong Island or Kowloon, Shangri-La hotels offer one of each to ensure you won't be disappointed.

**Where to shop:** Cat Street and Hollywood Road offer the most enticing examples of jade, antiques and tea pots anywhere in Asia. Don't get up too early; nothing really opens in Hong Kong before 11am anyway.

**What's cheap:** For less than \$1 you can ride the star ferry across the harbour, take as many photos of the scenery as you like, and then ride it back again.

## Guilin

Gentle rivers carve a path through limestone hills as bamboo rafts punt up and down carrying cormorants, farm produce and tourists. Bullocks plough rice fields along the valley floors while early morning hot-air balloons drift overhead. Nothing happens quickly in Guilin. An hour's drive from the city is the town of Yangshuo, a place where travellers can enjoy cheap accommodation, friendly bicycle tours and the best apple crumble in China.

[www.glvisit.com](http://www.glvisit.com)

**What to see:** A cruise down the river to Xiping takes you past the most scenic stretches of the Lijiang River, including the very same scene pictured on China's 20 yuan note.

**Where to eat:** Pam and her lovely ladies at Yangshuo cooking school not only teach you how to cook a feast but you'll enjoy the bounty of your labour by dining amongst pomelo trees.

**Where to stay:** Get out of the city and enjoy the relaxed style of Yangshuo. The Magnolia Hotel offers boutique accommodation in the best location.

**Where to shop:** Head down the river to Fuli Town and not only do they sell ornate hand-painted fans, they make them too.

**What's cheap:** For \$10 you can have a custom work of calligraphy painted on a scroll – easy to pack and lovely to hang when you get home.

## Shanghai

China's most modern city combines a touch of elegance with the mystique of the orient. At one extreme it's a race to build to the highest skyscrapers, while an hour outside the city the Ming dynasty water towns rest calmly on the Grand Canal with old men punting up and down the waterways. Shanghai is a gateway between cultures, but has managed to keep her own. For travellers this is the place to experience the best of everything China has to offer, old and new.

[lyw.sh.gov.cn/en](http://lyw.sh.gov.cn/en)

**What to see:** A day trip out of town by tourist bus gets you over the Grand Canal and into charming little water towns like Wuzhen and Xitang; centuries old character built from timber and stone.

**Where to eat:** Grandmother Restaurant offers a superb Shanghainese menu with most items in English (unlike their business card).

**Where to stay:** The newly built tower at Pudong Shangri-La is not just great for filming Hollywood movie stunts, but offers the most spacious suites in Shanghai, stunning views of The Bund and the best hot-stones massage in town.

**Where to shop:** A few blocks west of Old Shanghai is the antique market, a few narrow streets filled with Mao-morabilia, grasshopper cages and groovy trinkets.

**What's cheap:** Keep an eye out on the streets for bamboo steamers cooking up “xiao long bao”. These crab and pork dumplings cost \$2 for ten, but careful with the first bite as the steaming-hot soup escapes into your mouth.

## SLOW BOAT TO XITANG

OCTOBER 13, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

In the water-town of Xitang, a few hours outside of Shanghai, a gentle mist of rain dampens the timber decking of the row boats and the first colours of autumn have begun to appear on the trees. This is one of those places where a little rain somehow adds to the charm. Xitang is an historic town that became prosperous during the hey-days of China's Grand Canal but in recent years has been rediscovered by Chinese tourists.

This town is a treasured jewel where a traditional way of life has been preserved, and travellers who venture out of Shanghai for a day-trip are greeted warmly and with the most sincere of smiles.

Xitang sits elegantly on top of nine rivers, and the water-ways dominate every aspect of life. Over one-hundred bridges have been built, each offering a vital connection between laneways and corridors and each enhancing the beauty of the town. Bridges are given lyrical names such as "Rainbow across the river" and "Lying dragon over ripples".

The oldest bridge was built in the 17th century Qing Dynasty and the great joy of Xitang is that so much architecture from this period has been preserved. Temples, gardens and halls of residence are tucked away behind modest facades, many now serving as cultural centres for displays of artistic crafts like bamboo carvings, stone inscriptions and tile collections.

The laneways in Xitang are a world removed from modern cities. The stone paved paths were a feature of the original residences and there is always a sense of mystery as to what lies at the other end. Some lanes connect to another river, or a hidden temple or a snack shop selling tea and ice-cream. One particular lane is popular with local tourists for its "skin of stone" – the flags of granite have been chiselled very thin and are often described as walking on a beam of light.

But it's the water that defines the character of Xitang, and those points where the village meets the river. Covered corridors feature above many paths that follow the canal, the longest being made from dark-red timber and stretches over a kilometre. Red lanterns drop down from the beams and vendors politely conduct their business as I pass by. If it rained all day I would still be dry and happy.

While rice-wine is a local custom in Xitang, as in any town in China, Tea is the drink of choice for socialising. All manner of tea-houses line the water-ways to offer a steaming-hot cup of cha and a few delicacies to snack on. The five-spice-beans are a local offering of green soy beans smoked through with Chinese five-spices and whole chillies, so I take a little extra care when grabbing a handful.

Fragrant tea and Pu'er are the most common varieties for sipping, and the latter is discernable from its intense red colour and slightly burned flavour.

If a more substantial dining experience is required then head for the town centre and chose from the many restaurants built high above the water view.

Most menus adhere to the more traditional cooking style, and are far less ornate than you find in Shanghai. Dishes are simple but elegant and always very fresh. Ordering is a little tricky because English is rather a new phenomenon in these parts. The simple phrase "sui bian" instructs the owner to decide on my behalf – ensuring a good mix of vegetables and seafood and, invariably, way too much of everything.

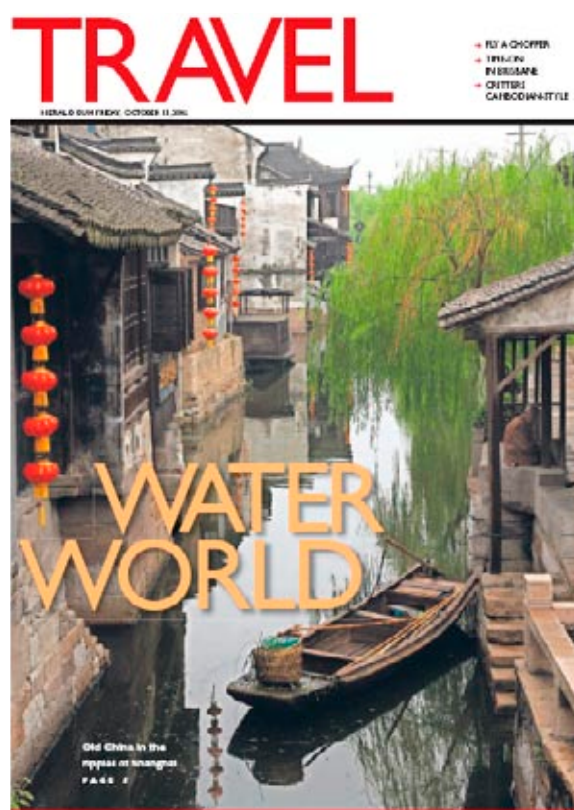
As a plate of steamed shrimps with ginger hit the table I watch a boat punt up the river, possibly carrying a catch of freshwater fish, eels, or crabs.

The larger boats offer protection from sun and rain for sight-seers, and for a few dollars you can enjoy the town of Xitang from the river. Your driver will stand at the rear of the boat and rocks the single steering oar from side to side to gently propel the craft forward.

Traffic on the water largely consists of scenic tours, rubbish collectors and the occasional cormorant fisherman. I ask to take a photo and am greeted with a friendly acceptance, and no money required – such is the nature of this charming little town.

Taking a stroll back from the water and I notice the stonework is embellished with timber tones and window shutters, and the occasional tune of a song bird calling from its cage. The older generations who live here spend a lot of time watching people go by, and perhaps very little else.

My pale and round face is as interesting to them as the narrow and winding lanes are to me. Now I just need to find the right laneway out so I can get home again.



## DINING DOWN THE RIVER

OCTOBER, 2006

VACATIONS & TRAVEL MAGAZINE

The Lijiang River in China's south-eastern province of Guangxi gently flows along a meandering path far below the peaks of limestone karst-mountains. For centuries it has been the source of trade, fishing and irrigation for the villages of the low-lying flood plains. Today it carries a select few travellers away from the town of Yangshuo and far into the rural landscape for a unique dining experience overlooking the riverbank.

Yangshuo is a thriving melting-pot of Chinese tradition and western tourism that caters well to the needs of travellers seeking a relaxing break from the bustle and thrust of China's big cities. Western style comforts such as apple-crumble and wi-fi internet access are blended with soft-adventure activities like bamboo rafting and cooking classes. The main street in town offers some of the best souvenir shopping anywhere in the country – competitive in price and appealing in quality. Locally produced leather bags, individually painted paper fans and hand-crafted bamboo flutes are just some of the hot items to bargain for.

Getting out of town and into the country-side is the main attraction. The landscape of the area lends itself naturally to bicycle tours; smooth roads, flat terrain and an endless supply of farmers steering bullocks through paddy fields. Karst hills provide the backdrop to every scene and the natural beauty of the region lives up to its reputation in full. But a visit to Guangxi province would not be complete without a journey down the river.

There is no shortage of boats that motor, punt or raft along the waterways, but one service in particular tempts us to believe that the destination can be more important than the journey. Not only does it take in scenic views along the river, but it finishes seven miles downstream at Liu Gong for a sumptuous sunset banquet in an imperial pavilion by the water. The restaurant is called Liu Gong Pavilion, and the lucky guests who travel by private boat on any given evening will find themselves the only tourists for miles around. This is the most exclusive dining experience Yangshuo that has to offer.

The journey begins near Yangshuo's main river boat port. This crowded bend in the river is jammed with passenger ferries and barges that connect with the northern city of Guilin for nine months of the year; the peak of the dry season renders the water level too low for boats of any substantial size. On a quiet stretch of river bank, a few hundred metres further along, the Liu Gong special service is ready to depart. It's a long and shallow boat with enough plastic deck chairs to seat ten people, and probably spends more time catching fish than passengers.

Heading down the river the karst hills always seem to be visible in the distance. Occasionally they appear bunched together and the effect is dramatic; sharp rising peaks towering above the flat plains surrounded by wave upon wave of far away hills disappearing into the haze. As the sun drops low in the sky their silhouettes etch the horizon and reflect off the glassy still water of the Lijiang. With the right combination of clouds and haze the colour at dusk becomes rich in yellows and reds.

Life on the river is as gentle as the current. Bullocks are brought down to swim and drink, fields of crops are tended by women and fisherman glide past silently on bamboo punts. The infamous cormorant fishermen of Guangxi have been popularised with long beards and pointed hats, usually pictured on an immaculately still stretch of river with rich sunset colours behind them. Genuine cormorant fishermen head out after dusk, with a small lantern on the bow, to attract the fish, and their brood of trusty cormorants to catch them. The birds have constrictions around the neck to prevent them from digesting fish above a certain size, while the fishermen employ some skilful massage to retrieve them. Every seventh fish is given to the cormorant in order to keep them happy.

Midway along the journey the boat stops in Fuli Town to allow some photographs of the sunset and a quick spot of shopping. Most of the town is engaged in manufacturing and decorating paper fans; the narrow streets lined with displays of work while the production takes place inside. Song birds watch and sing from their bamboo cages to attract customers and good fortune. If you happen to be in the market for several hundred metre-wide fans then this is the town for you. Watching the effort and skill that goes into making them will give you a greater respect for the final product and you may be less inclined to bargain so hard when you decide to buy one. The creative flare required to paint the fans is also applied to calligraphic scrolls; expect to be spoiled for choice when selecting a painted scroll featuring goldfish, the four seasons, or those beautiful karst mountains that Yangshuo is famous for.

Once the sun has gone over the horizon the boat continues on to Liu Gong. Tourist ferries return to Yangshuo well before dusk so the only traffic on this stretch of river will be families and fishermen heading to or from their villages. Pulling into the unspoiled village of Liu Gong is a remarkable sight; steps wind up the hill and lead directly to the pavilion with its imperial style architecture and ornate roof-charms. The laneways are rough cobbled and the houses present very little in the way of decoration. The occasional motorcycle parked outside and electricity cables connecting most homes are the only real signs of the modern world.

The restaurant dining room is on the top floor of the central pavilion – the first building you see when arriving by river. When seated on the balcony level the view looks down to the water. Bundles of harvested greens are tied to rafts in preparation for travelling to market early in the morning, fisherman make repairs to their nets and ducks wander amongst the boats looking for scraps. Inside the pavilion the only ducks to be found are served with pickled-ginger sauce and a bowl of rice – and they're delicious.

Banquet style dining is the convention in China; whether it's a meal at home with the family, lunch at a hotel in the city, or exclusive dining along the remote reaches of the Lijiang River. Each dish that greets the table is intended to be shared and passed around – no single plate is a meal in itself and no meal can suffice with a single plate. It also provides the perfect way to cater for a wide variety of culinary tastes.

Dishes at Liu Gong may include leafy-vegetables with garlic, wok steamed beer fish, egg-wrapped dumplings and steamed chicken with mushrooms and wolfberries. Expect to be treated to creations you won't find anywhere else in China, prepared with an experienced hand and presented with an eye for elegance.

Serving too much food is another convention in China, so never be ashamed to leave food on the table no matter how exquisite it may be. When the time comes to head back to Yangshuo the thought of a slow journey up the river, against the current and in the dark, is not everyone's cup of jasmine tea. Thankfully a private van is supplied to collect and deliver you back to the hotel. The roads closest to Liu Gong are bumpy and slow, but that's the way to locals like it. The idea of fixing them up to allow more vehicles through has been quickly dismissed, so the dining experience at Liu Gong will remain idyllically exclusive for a little longer.



## ADVENTURE BY CHOCOLATE

SEPTEMBER 15, 2006

HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

If your idea of 'adventure' travel extends to learning the correct way to order a hot chocolate or in five different languages then you're not alone. I enjoy getting off the tourist trail to explore the sweet underbelly of a city, but also love getting back to my hotel room to relax with a hot bath. Autumn in Europe has much to offer in this regard, with crisp clear days to explore the outdoors and somewhat cooler evenings to encourage the consumption of local delicacies.

### Vienna

#### Mit schlag – With impact

The words "Mit schlag" are shamelessly superfluous in Austria, because ordering hot chocolate "with impact" is a bit like ordering your waffles "with syrup". The two make a fabulous combination I might add. Museums, cathedrals and gardens in Vienna offer a compelling induction to life and history in Central Europe, while the street performers are unavoidable but entertaining. If you prefer your chocolate solid and wrapped in foil, Cafe Mozart is the home of Vienna's proudest tradition of schokolade.

### Český Krumlov

#### Ovoce buchtý – Fruit buns

This delightful Bohemian town is straight out of medieval Europe, paved with charm and home to some of the finest artisans in the Czech Republic. Our cocoa loaded treat found a companion in a local delicacy of fruit dumplings. Berries of the forest are buried deep within a soft and fluffy bun, topped with mascarpone and nutmeg. Day trips on the river are popular adventures here, but of special note is the bicycle tour. They drive you out to the farmland and forests surrounding the town and you spend the day riding back at a gentle pace, stopping for chocolate and fruit buns when required.

### Prague

#### Horká čokoláda všech nám – Hot chocolate for everyone

Nothing helps to work up an appetite like climbing up to Petrin Hill and admiring the view across the river and the old city blocks. The centre-piece of the park is a scale replica of the Eiffel Tower, the top of which stands at the exact same height above sea level as the original. If you are taking a day off from adventure then music and art combine to charm pedestrians on Charles Bridge. The Creperie Cafe, tucked behind the old square in Krizovnicka Lane, is not to be missed for breakfast either.

### Krakow

#### Pierogi jablko – Apple dumplings

A city that is famous for fine chocolates and amber jewellery. But the real gems here are the selections of sweet and savoury pierogi. Picture ravioli-like parcels stuffed with the tastiest fillings every devised by man. Apple and cinnamon is highly recommended, not to mention a side serve of melted chocolate to dip them in. At the height of summer they may be devoured with a cold glass of apple cider instead. Amber, however, makes for a better souvenir than a plate of pierogi; so do visit the Clock Tower's amber market before you leave. Lovers of the piano accordion and polka music will enjoy the live entertainment in the main square.

### Bratislava

#### Horúca čokoláda – Hot chocolate

The old town in Bratislava is its major attraction. The highlight here is not the town hall, the flea market or the funky manholes with sculptures of people climbing out. It's the little shop named "Horúca čokoláda" – which translates literally into Hot Chocolate. Fifty kinds of melted cocoa designer creations fill the menu. Hazelnut and Orange contains just that – chunks of hazelnut and shavings of orange rind. Fold in a little extra cream if you find the lava-like dark chocolate is too dark.

This is how hot chocolate was meant to be.



**THE DIAL**

- Hot chocolate
- Prague
- Bratislava
- Krakow

## Sweet cred

Little treats await the sweet tooth who ventures into central Europe. Ewen Bell shares some sugary secrets.

**PRAGUE**

It's the idea of "with impact" that makes ordering hot chocolate "with impact" a bit like ordering your waffles "with syrup". The two make a fabulous combination I might add. Museums, cathedrals and gardens in Vienna offer a compelling induction to life and history in Central Europe, while the street performers are unavoidable but entertaining. If you prefer your chocolate solid and wrapped in foil, Cafe Mozart is the home of Vienna's proudest tradition of schokolade.

**ČESKÝ KRUMLOV**

This delightful Bohemian town is straight out of medieval Europe, paved with charm and home to some of the finest artisans in the Czech Republic. Our cocoa loaded treat found a companion in a local delicacy of fruit dumplings. Berries of the forest are buried deep within a soft and fluffy bun, topped with mascarpone and nutmeg. Day trips on the river are popular adventures here, but of special note is the bicycle tour. They drive you out to the farmland and forests surrounding the town and you spend the day riding back at a gentle pace, stopping for chocolate and fruit buns when required.

**BRATISLAVA**

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## HILL TRIBES OF VIETNAM

SEPTEMBER 08, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

Vietnam is a country of great diversity, and to the north-west of Hanoi the fertile landscape of mountains and valleys is home to a broad range of ethnic minorities. The village of Mai Chau is a base camp for those fortunate travellers who possess a fascination for rural life and a tolerance for basic styles of accommodation.

After a scenic half-day journey from Hanoi by private bus I was curious to know what sort of village would be home for the next few days. The village of Mai Chau sits awkwardly in the middle of a valley filled with rice cultivation and lotus flowers. The irregular boundaries of the communities are a reminder that any land used to build a house is land that cannot be used to grow food.

As the sun drenched the rice fields in yellow light the children of the village ran along the narrow trails that divide one paddy from another. They wave big nets in front of them, constantly swinging them from side to side. It wasn't until dinner-time later that evening that these playful antics made sense; when I was confronted with a plate of freshly cooked grasshoppers, among other things, and the broad joyous smiles of my hosts. It was impossible to refuse their generosity so I limited myself to just a few and filled my plate with cat fish, greens and rice.

Accommodation in the Mai Chau valley is typically a large open room to share with your group and a thin mattress to soften the bamboo floor beneath you. It's significantly more comfortable than it sounds and the addition of a fan for airflow and mosquito nets for protection ensures a good night sleep. There are a few genuine guest houses that offer air-conditioned rooms and eggs on toast for breakfast, but that would hardly be getting into the spirit of the hill tribes in my view.

Not unless they liberally sprinkle fried grasshoppers over the eggs.

In the cool air of the mornings a fine mist blankets the rice fields for the first few hours of daylight. The valley is closed in by steep mountains and the sun takes a few hours to rise above the peaks. At different altitudes the rice crops will be progressed to different stages; so harvesting can be taking place in the flood plains outside of Hanoi while in Mai Chau the paddies are still being tilled and worked in preparation for planting out.

Age is no barrier to productivity and toil. The wise and wrinkled face of an elderly woman is just as likely to be seen bending over in the mud beneath a conical hat as the young and unweathered skin of a child. In either case the presence of an interested tourist carrying a camera is usually greeted with a kind smile and genuine warmth. Women do most of the detail work to produce rice, such as planting and weeding, while men conduct the heavy lifting and ploughing.

The supple hands of a woman are essential where silk weaving is concerned. Locally produced silk cocoons are heated in water to release the strands from their sticky binding, and then spun together using a reel to form manageable sized threads. Women engaged in spooling these threads are a common sight as you walk through the village, as are their large looms designed to weave traditional textiles.

The elder matron of my guest house was keen to show me her silk items. Her and several other houses in this part of the village have realised the potential for helping travellers go home with a unique souvenir. Some of the fabrics sold are not locally made, but they are easily differentiated from the raw silk and traditional designs of the genuine articles.

The textiles are a valuable source of income for the village, as one quality silk item can return significantly greater profit than the accommodation. Once you've made a purchase the expectation is that you will buy more. Fortunately the desperate persistence of vendors in places like Hoi An is not repeated here, so a polite and firm conclusion to business will be met with respect.

The mountains surrounding Mai Chau are inhabited with many different ethnic groups and sub-divisions of hill tribes. Mai Chau itself is mainly White Thai people – they are not related to the people of Thailand, rather the name is pronounced a little like D'tai. The tribes of White Thai, Red Thai and Black Thai are so named because of the colour of specific elements of their traditional clothing.

Most day or overnight treks leading out of Mai Chau will take you through Hmong villages. The houses of the Hmong are built on solid earth foundations, unlike the stilt homes of the Thai tribe. The name Hmong means 'free', and reflects the borderless existence of this race in the modern nations of Laos, China and Vietnam.

If you're travelling with an organised tour group then chances are your package will also include transport and short treks through villages of the Muong people. In contrast to the Thai and Hmong, who both have origins connecting them to distant lands, the Muong are regarded as truly indigenous people to Northern Vietnam.

Returning to the guest house in Mai Chau valley is a comforting experience after spending a day hiking up and over mountains and villages. The simple pleasure of a warm shower and dry towel can have a most rejuvenating effect, and sitting down to a feast of local specialities and toasting the hosts with rice wine brings everyone closer to an early bedtime and a sound sleep.

When you awake the next morning you can claim some peaceful solitude in the nearby rice fields to enjoy the murmurings of bullocks and the graceful sight of lotus flowers emerging from a muddy pond. Please try not to step on too many grasshoppers as you return along the path.



## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

AUGUST 25, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

### The Greek Islands

The beauty of the Greek Islands is their ability to be whatever you want. From small villages serviced by infrequent ferries to tourist hotspots thumping with nightclubs and bars. Whatever your fancy the Greek Islands can cater to that style and make your dream holiday in the Aegean Sea a reality.

Have you ever heard of anyone coming back from visiting the Greek Islands and saying “Oh well, it was ok but I wouldn’t want to go back there”. Of course not. Ask anyone who has been seduced by the soft sands of Koufonisia or the precipitous cliff views on Santorini – they will pause for a second and drift back to happy memories of the beautiful life on the islands and the endless blue of the water.

[www.vacation-greece.com](http://www.vacation-greece.com)

### The Serengeti

Sometimes bigger is better, and the Serengeti National Park is one of the biggest wildlife reserves Africa has to offer. Regardless of whether you’re sleeping in a tent or living large in the 5-star resort, the real attraction here is the wildlife. Big cats, elephants, hippos and giraffe are just a few of the star attractions of the Serengeti, but perhaps it’s the sheer magnitude of the park that makes it so special. After three days of spotting antelope and their predators on wildlife drives the magic still stops a heartbeat at the possible sighting of lions, leopards and cheetah. The endless plains of the Serengeti are also home to the wildebeest and their annual migration. Take a long lens and twice as much film as you think you will need.

[www.serengeti.org](http://www.serengeti.org)

### The Taj Mahal

This temple to love is an inspiration to a nation, if not the entire world. Few buildings on earth can evoke the same intensity emotion. As you clear the archway and take your first few steps towards the Taj Mahal it draws your eyes ever inwards to admire its geometric perfection. The minarets that flank the main dome were built at a gentle angle to compensate for the distortion of perspective. When viewed from the gardens they appear straight. Similar tricks of the eye are employed for the fine Arabic lettering engraved into the tiles. The presence of thousands of other onlookers somehow adds to the majesty of this unique experience – you are one of millions of people who have gazed upon the lovingly created facade and watched the afternoon sun cast shadows across the dome.

[www.tajmahalindia.net](http://www.tajmahalindia.net)

### Marrakech

The very name Marrakech evokes a particular blend of exotic and rustic, a place where the roughest of rogues deal in the finest of valuables. Jewellery, textiles and leather goods are just a few of the delights that fill the ancient souks of the bizarre. The confluence of Persia, Africa and Europe are blended to form a uniquely Moroccan style. Marrakech is a city of private courtyards, lavish gardens and accommodating riads. Here at the edge of Africa the most enticing of all cuisines are offered in a nightly celebration in the city’s old square – music, performers, story tellers and vendors compete to entertain and profit from the delighted passing of tourists and locals alike. To leave Marrakech is to head into the desert and the unknown, like watching the gates of the last known civilization disappearing behind you in the distance.

[www.visitmorocco.com](http://www.visitmorocco.com)

### Angkor

Centuries of kingdoms have been etched into the dense forests of north western Cambodia, so many that even today they are still being discovered. The region of Angkor is known to contain at least 70 temples which cover an area of 400 square miles – in some parts the jungle has begun to reclaim the ancient temples, as Banyan trees extend their roots into the solid rock foundations. The lineage of temples across the region of Angkor reveals the changes in religious dominance of the land. Successive waves of Hindu and Buddhist influence can be seen not only between the different temples for each ruler, but the largest and most famous of the ‘temple cities’, Angkor Wat, retains elements of both its original Hindu heritage and the latter adaptation to a Buddhist shrine. Even knowing what treasures have been lost to the pillage of recent empires the magnificence of Angkor is no less impressive. The scale, elegance and beauty of the carvings and temples will never leave your mind.

[www.theangkorguide.com](http://www.theangkorguide.com)







## AEGEAN BLUE

AUGUST 04, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

On the Greek island of Milos the yellow haze of a late afternoon sun brings a warm glow to your cheeks and a touch of gold to the otherwise blue waters of the Aegean. A few fishing boats motor past the village of Klima as they head for a mooring, while others bob gently in the wake like old friends saying goodbye. After travelling for three weeks from one end of the Aegean Sea to the other, the need to head back to port and catch my ferry to Athens was something I wanted to postpone for just a little longer.

It was a statue that attempted to capture the beauty of the Greek Goddess of Love which made Milos famous – the Venus de Milos – yet the island itself is far more seductive than any piece of carved marble, its rugged coastline dotted with secluded little fishing villages and their blue domed chapels. Klima doesn't see many tourists and the locals enjoy the sunset with open doors and family gatherings. Homes are arranged along the waters edge in double story fashion, upstairs for living quarters and downstairs for a boat shed. Minimal effort is needed to get out onto the water.

Milos is part of the Cyclades group of islands, which are close enough to Athens to be easily reached by ferry yet far enough away to retain their charms and secrets. Even the most well known islands reserve themselves a quiet side.

The postcard scenes of Santorini draws wave after wave of couples seeking romance and indulgence, but privacy and escape are still possible. If you cannot afford to rent your own villa with private courtyard and pool, there is always the option to stay on the beach at Kamari and just take the bus across the island when you want to partake of the caldera views and shopping that makes Santorini so unforgettable.

With over 200 islands in the Cyclades, and another 160 islands in the Dodecanese, the opportunity to island hop the Aegean Sea is compelling. Ferries come in all shapes and sizes but the most travelled routes are operated by the same few companies. Really big slow boats are cheap, while more efficient high-speed cats cost a little more. It is possible to travel from Athens to Turkey by ferries for as little as \$100 but if you're doing lots of short trips, and the islands are too numerous and varied to simply sail them by, then plan to average about \$25 for each short hop.

Ferry schedules are tricky to work out. The abundance of ferry timetables makes the task somewhat overwhelming, but the port on every island will feature a handful of ferry agencies that specialise in getting traveller between the islands, and they can usually give you the best option that takes into account your available time and budget.

Not everything goes according to plan of course, and even a seasoned traveller such as me can make mistakes. I got off a ferry on the wrong island and had to wait two days before the next one came along. Sikinos was one of the less well travelled islands in fact, but the experience gave me a chance to get familiar with goat herds, play Greek Rummy with the locals and enjoy a wonderful holiday-unit to myself for just \$50 a night.

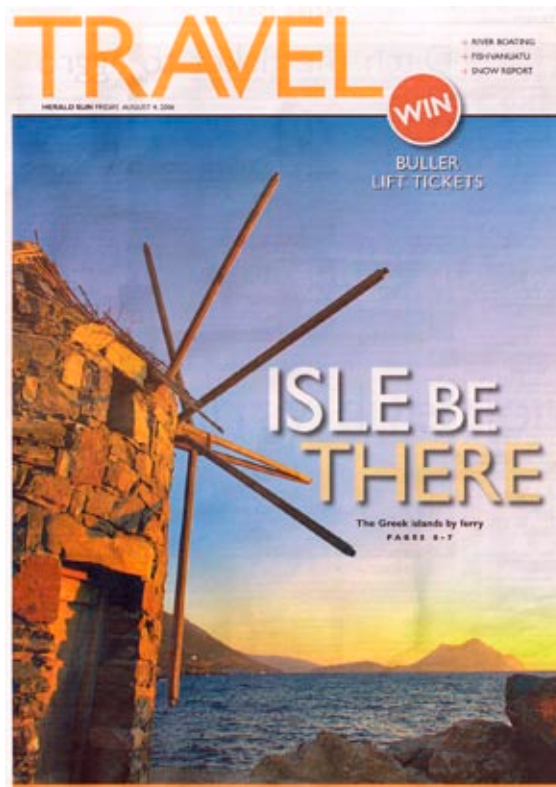
The high season in the Greek islands is regrettably popular. From mid-July to the end of August the only way to beat the rush is by chartering your own yacht and exercising the option to pull into harbours that are

less readily accessible by land. The months of May, June, September and October are the best months, with enough activity to make sure that all tourist options are available but enough peace and quiet to allow you to enjoy the islands for what they are. Goats and all.

The difference between a good holiday and a great one is when you really enjoy the food, and Greek island cuisine is truly memorable. Seafood dining is usually a sensation of flavours with simplicity and freshness the key elements to preparation. Even a tuna salad done Greek style becomes a delicacy. My favourite eats are the tavernas found in small villages and quiet harbours. The experience is more like visiting an old friend for dinner than buying a meal, the menu on any given day usually determined by what Yannis and his mother have prepared the day before.

On the island of Paros the balance between white-washed villages and tourist amenities has been perfected. At one end of the island sits the ancient city of Paroikia with its endlessly fascinating laneways filled with white and blue churches, old Greek women offering rooms by the night and elegant shops and courtyards to suit every budget. At the other end of Paros is the town of Naoussa, which has retained its fleet of little fishing boats and in more recent years has also gained a collection of exclusive resorts and villa style accommodation. Because of this the harbour in Naoussa has been overwhelmed with very small seafood restaurants where you can sit and watch the fishermen come and go while enjoying a seafood feast that rivals any other in the world. Reaching Naoussa from Paroikia takes just 30 minutes by bus through the rustic hillsides of farms and vineyards.

There are many shade of blue in the Greek islands; painted on the domes of churches, unbroken across the horizon of the sky and lapping onto the shores of hundreds of islands. My favourite is that partly weathered blue of a painted boat shed; the kind of colour that suggests the owners care enough to make their sheds look pretty, but patient enough to be in no hurry to repaint it.





## FASHIONABLE FEAST

JULY 15, 2006

HERALD-SUN "WEEKEND" INSERT

Kuala Lumpur is one of the world's truly great cities, a vibrant melting pot of Asian cultures where tradition meets modern style. There seems no end to its diversity and depth. Kuala Lumpur is world famous for the blends of culinary tastes that grace her streets and night markets, quality and choice that rivals Hong Kong, Penang and Bangkok. But sometimes a traveller needs a little luxury when eating-out and for pure dining pleasure Kuala Lumpur can boast the Feast Village at Starhill Gallery.

Only one-year old this July, Starhill Gallery is the new kid on the block along Bintang Walk. This richly cosmopolitan shopping district is popular with locals and foreigners alike, offering the best in international fashion labels, luxury hotels and hi-tech gadgets; all this just a few stops by Monorail from Kuala Lumpur's central railway station.

Starhill Gallery is a standout concept that has no peer in Malaysia. It moves away from the concept of large scale malls, instead presenting carefully selected outlets on thematically consistent floors – each with their own distinct style and character.

The net result is a home for the very best retailers in Asia and the world, attracting names such as Louis Vuitton, Jim Thompson, Suzie Wong and Kenzo. Starhill has no department stores, no box stalls and has even thrown away the floor numbers in favour of descriptive names such as Feast, Pamper, Explore, Muse and Adorn – the latter of which is home to over 70 brands of luxury watches.

As you take the escalators down to the Feast Village you enter a world of exquisitely crafted interior design that is surpassed only by the hedonistic delights of thirteen select restaurants. The first thing you notice about Feast is the combination of opaque and translucent walls that create distinct yet connected spaces. Open kitchens are partitioned by artistic screens and translucent panels, allowing air and light to move through the space. The dazzling array of reflections and colours draw you through the village like a playground for food lovers.

The accent on decor and dedication to detail is a reflection of the primary architect, Yuhkichi Kawai, whose work can also be seen around Tokyo at Bespoke Gallery and Sushi Kyotatsa. The elaborate use of glass, stone, and timber to create individual touches for lantern-lit dining areas is just part of the successful balance between continuity and character – each restaurant offers a unique element to the mix and yet together they achieve a sensational visual effect.

The menus are varied and the price is very reasonable, especially when considering the rare quality and creative expression on offer. Taste, presentation and ambience are exceptional from one end of the village to the other.

Malay food is the flavour at Fishermen's Cove, and here you have the option of cosy bamboo-lined booths in case a little romantic privacy is desired. Enak explores the continuum of Malay and Indonesian cuisine in a modern environment, MyThai presents the best influences of Thailand and Koryo Won sizzles with a Korean barbeque on every table. Indian flavours are served in a colourful ambience created by beaded glass lamps at Vansh while the middle-eastern fare of Tarbush escapes into a theme of camels and caravans.

Meat eaters can fill-up on the semi-western grills of Shook! and Jake's Charbroil Steak House, and the mood switches to something European at Sentidos Tapas Bar and the Norwegian Bakery Moments. A breath of Hong Kong rushes out of the steamy kitchen at Pak Loh Chiu Chow, but for me the highlight of them all are the dim sum and Cantonese specialities from an elegant menu at Luk Yu Tea House. Here you will also find a broad range of fine teas to accompany the delicate dishes.

Choosing one restaurant is not easy, but the semi-open spaces of the Feast Village also reflect an open invitation to order from across the village. You can enjoy the spicy mint lamb and the velvet ambience of Tarbush and still permit your friend to order the otak-otak from Enak. This works just fine if they don't mind eating their steamed fish while sitting on tassel fringed couches under Moroccan lamps.

Even the task of washing your hands takes on an element of luxury. The rest rooms are artfully lit spaces lined with sandalwood and sandstone – the wash basin is serviced by an attendant who pumps water along a bamboo aqueduct and hands you a fresh towel to dry off. They take such good care of you in the Feast Village that I am tempted to try a spa and massage in the Pamper Zone.

A few floors above on the Relish floor are two more outstanding establishments of note. Gonbei will appeal to anyone with a refined taste for the Japanese palette and especially those with an appreciation for the Robotayaki style of Japanese grilling. Not to be outdone the uniquely Taiwanese Jogoya will immerse you in a live-buffet of freshly prepared Japanese and Chinese influences.

By my counting there are at least two weeks worth of unique dining options available at Starhill Gallery, so the next time you buy an airfare through Kuala Lumpur you may want to consider the stopover option and treat yourself to something typically Malaysian – a taste of everything Asian and beyond.



## East's best feast

A Kuala Lumpur mall offers a taste of the world. Words and pictures Ewen Bell

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The night markets that line the street along Bintang Walk.

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The best influences of Thailand, Korea, New Africa with a Korean barbecue an every table.

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What opens can fill up on the grills at Shook! and Jake's Charbroil Steak House. The mood switches to something European at Sentidos Tapas Bar and the Norwegian Bakery Moments.

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## PALACES AND PROSPEKTS

JUNE 09, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

A city of palaces, cathedrals, columns and canals, St Petersburg offers a gentle introduction to Russian style blended with a contemporary connection to Europe.

The best way to see St Petersburg is on foot and there is no shortage of eager young locals to proudly disclose the charms and character of the city and its history. The better walking tours include a taste of the underground art scene in pre-Glasnost USSR, following a trail of punk bands, Beatles fans and unauthorized art exhibitions through the pallid staircases and courtyards of urban apartments. The domestic architecture and everyday street life of the modern city present a fascinating insight into the cultural changes the city has undergone.

Artists and cafes now grace the streets and promenades that line the network of canals. The charm of these waterways is enhanced by the three hundred or more bridges which cross them, all of which are unique works of artistic expression in their own right; it is for this reason that St Petersburg is called 'The Venice of the North'. The pier at Anichkov Bridge is a good place for negotiating a boat tour to explore the Neva River and canals.

The Italian Bridge is possibly my favourite, decorated at either end with ornate street lamps and overlooking the 17th century styled Church of Spilled Blood; so named because the Tsar Alexander II was assassinated on that very site, two years before the church began construction. The view along the canal is often accompanied by the busking of a piano accordion player and women selling flowers.

Behind the cathedral a street market operates for locals and tourists. Expect a little more than just Matryoshka dolls and jewellery boxes, this is an ideal place to shop for high quality paintings and drawings by local artists. Stall-holders also compete to sell the most intricate and detailed Christmas-ornaments, regardless of the time of year, and you can find everything from tiny angels that hang from branches to gnome sized Saint Nicholas' carved from wood and painted by hand.

One of the best guides to sight-seeing in St Petersburg can be found on selected bottles of St Petersburg Vodka – the glass etched with a 360

degree view of the city's architecture. Bridges, monuments, cathedrals and domes are silhouetted against the sky. Standing on the edge of the Palace Square along Nevsky Prospekt gives a similar view, including the golden dome of St Isaacs Cathedral, the Winter Palace and the Alexander Column.

You may wish to upgrade from a vodka bottle to a Lonely Planet guide if you want to find all of the great 19th century buildings that St Petersburg has to offer. The Hermitage Museum alone is in fact a collection of buildings, not just one, and you should allow at least two days in full to explore the entire public collection. The main building of the museum is the Winter Palace which overlooks the River Neva to one side and the Palace Square to the other.

The Summer Palace, also called the Peterhof, is an imperial estate situated 30km west of the city. The scale of the grounds and gardens is immense and an avenue of water leads from the shoreline, meeting the Gulf of Finland, up to the cascading fountains at the steps to the Grand Palace. Once inside the building you can tour in an orderly procession through room after room of lavish interiors and decorations, meticulously restored after great devastation during World War II.

Parading through the opulent treasures of Russian royalty is likely to give you an appetite for some premium dining, and this is one category in which St Petersburg sets itself apart from other Russian cities. Streets such as Nevsky Prospekt and Admiralteysky Prospekt offer culinary experiences that elegantly complement their historical facades. A fine example is Paris, one block back from the Mariners Monument on Bolshaya Moroskaya Ulitsa, where patrons dine amongst converted wine cellars and order from a five star menu. The creme-brulee alone is worth a trip to St Petersburg – velvety smooth and tinted with lemon-zest and vanilla.

The romantic nature of St Petersburg reaches its peak in the last week of June when the White Nights banish darkness from the city. Midnight strolls along the river bank are imbued with the soft colours of a sunset that never falls. The phenomenon has given rise to countless acts of literary indulgence, theatrical themes and operatic festivals.

Summer in such a northern city is enjoyed with fervour, in contrast to the harsh conditions of winter when the River Neva freezes like steel and the nights are anything but white. In true St Petersburg style this simply means an opportunity to hold different kinds of festivals; the backdrop of darkness allows the fireworks the chance to light up the sky and bring down a shower of colour upon the domes and spires of a great city.







## CUBS ON THE RUN

APRIL 29, 2006

HERALD-SUN "WEEKEND" INSERT

After a spectacular day of animal spotting in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve we began the drive back to our camp. We had watched a lion devour a freshly killed zebra, stood across the riverbank from a family of hippos and followed a herd of elephants in their search for a mud-bath. Beyond all expectations the best was yet to come.

Had my hat not flown out the window we would never have seen the cheetahs. At the very location we stopped to rescue my cap a mother cheetah and her five cubs were hiding in the line of thick grass a few metres back from the road. The final minutes of daylight were upon us and at first we only saw the mother as she walked through the golden stalks. It wasn't until the cheetah was right alongside our van that we realised she was not alone. Several minutes pass without a word spoken, just the clicking and whirl of our cameras.

Tall grass is even taller for a pint sized cheetah cubs, just three months old. Cubs this young have an extra fluffy mane running down the neck which reminds me of children dressed as grown-ups. One by one they emerged from the veil of camouflage and headed silently towards us. Not only did they look identical to each other but they moved in harmony as well – the curve of their tails as they slink down low, the haunch of their shoulders and that cat-like bouncing stride were all exactly synchronised. They gathered next to our van and halted; they appeared to comprehend their mothers wish and stayed put on the spot without wandering so much as a foot in any direction.

Cheetahs in the Masai Mara are very tolerant of cars and cameras. The mother of a litter is usually more annoyed by the incessant playfulness of her cubs than the eaves-dropping of a telephoto lens; safari vehicles are not considered an intrusion, provided they do not crowd or block the cheetah cubs. The first rule when close in with wildlife is to talk very softly and very little. I feel more comfortable watching a cheetah than to have a cheetah watching me.

Our attention was diverted to the other side of the road. The mother cheetah stood hiding behind the ditch, poised and ready, locked in contemplation of her target. We were locked in observation of the cheetah, eagerly anticipating the strike. The cubs made no sound and remained hidden from view near our vehicle.

Suddenly there was movement. In the space of just four seconds the adult cheetah launched herself into the chase, ignoring several zebra and impala in her path, and brought down a juvenile topi. As soon as the cheetah had made her kill the herd ceased running. Less than 50 metres away they simply stood and watched for a moment, before slowly wandering off.

A fully grown topi would have been a difficult catch for the cheetah, demanding several minutes of intense exertion to suffocate, but the juvenile was quickly killed with a lethal bite. This was a relatively easy strike but not all hunting trips are so successful. A longer pursuit can drain the cheetah of her strength and she may lose vital minutes recovering from exhaustion before she can eat. Cheetahs are easily separated from their prey by hyenas or lions and even a persistent pack of vultures can send a cheetah running. Cheetahs in the Masai Mara eat less than 50% of what they catch.

Our successful cheetah mother wasted little time in calling the cubs over to enjoy their share of the spoils. She released a high pitched cry, which could be heard by her young from more than 100metres away, and guided them to her location; each cub returned the call with vigour and together they ran into the grass and vanished.

The sad statistic for these cubs is that their survival rate beyond the first year is just 1 in 10. Hyenas, lions and leopards are the biggest threat because a cheetah mother will not defend her cubs from attack. Cheetah mums will often leave the park in advance of giving birth, migrating to areas where competing predators are less likely to venture. It is estimated by the Cheetah Conservation Fund that 90% of cheetah that survive in Kenya today are living outside the protected reserves.

Travellers to Kenya's Masai Mara wanting to experience first hand the sight of a cheetah in the wild will need a touch of luck. By November each year a great number of lions and hyenas have headed south with the migrating wildebeest and the Masai Mara becomes a safer place for young cheetah families. Any organised safari within the park will be aware of where the cheetahs were last spotted and will make every effort to locate them. The Masai Mara is also home to a few resident cheetahs that rarely migrate out of the park; they are the focus of research and observation by the Kenya Wildlife Service and the Cheetah Conservation Fund.

If you would like to find out more about the preservation and protection of the endangered cheetah then visit [www.cheetah.org](http://www.cheetah.org); or head to Kenya and see for yourself what makes the Masai Mara one of the world's truly great wildlife reserves.



## Cub scouts

A safari truck of tourists is the least of a cheetah mum's worries. Words and pictures Ewen Bell

**• Why litter?** Cheetah cubs hide in the long grass.  
**• Mother's pride:** A cheetah mum keeps a lookout for her cubs' food waste.  
**• Like always today:** If you find yourself this close to a lion, use a telephoto.  
**• Safari:** A cheetah mum's encounter a cheetah as an adult that guaranteed to provide a good feed.



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It was a spectacular day of animal spotting in the Masai Mara Reserve. We had watched a lion devour a freshly killed zebra, stood across the riverbank from a family of hippos and followed a herd of elephants in their search for a mud-bath.

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Each cub returned the call with vigour and together they ran into the grass and vanished.

Unfortunately for cheetahs, they are just as often the hunted as the hunters. Only one in 10 cubs makes it beyond its first year. Hyenas, lions and leopards are the biggest threats.

A cheetah mother will not defend her cubs from attack. Cheetah mums will often leave the park before giving birth, migrating to areas where competing predators are less likely to venture.

Travellers to Masai Mara who want to experience first-hand the sight of a cheetah in the wild will need some luck. By November each year, many lions and hyenas have moved south with the migrating wildebeest and the Masai Mara becomes a safer place for young cheetah families.

The Masai Mara is also home to a few resident cheetahs that rarely migrate out of the park; they are the focus of research and observation by the Kenya Wildlife Service and the Cheetah Conservation Fund.

Ewen Bell travelled to Kenya courtesy of SAF Adventures. [www.cheetah.org](http://www.cheetah.org)



## BEIJING BLOSSOMS

APRIL 28, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

Peach blossoms herald the coming of spring and the people of Beijing are warming to the new season. Colour is coming back to the city.

The narrow laneways and courtyard homes of the Hutongs hum gently with passing bicycles, corner vegetable stands and steaming fresh dumplings. The rhythm of life is quickening as the days grow longer. With the snow long melted it is easier to get around on two wheels than by walking – metro stations provide parking for bicycles and are near filled to capacity. I can rent myself a bicycle for the entire day for a little under \$3, but I decide against it for fear of becoming hopelessly lost and unable to find this same street corner to return the bike.

Once out of the Hutongs the streets come alive with tourists and souvenir stalls. Statues of Chairman Mao and copies of his little red book appear along side framed dragons, brass buddas, faux jade amulets, sandalwood fans and seals carved from stone with your name written in Chinese. Tucked behind Wangfujing Dajie there are many stalls selling tasty bits of Chinese cuisine, but back on the main street you can find specialised dumpling restaurants with entire menus featuring 'Jiao-zi'; dumplings made from thin pastry and filled with delicious ideas.

Stepping onto Tiananmen Square halts your thoughts for a second while its history and scale sinks in a little. The absence of wind breaks for a kilometre in any direction makes this a great place for flying kites and there is no shortage of sweet old ladies who are eager to sell you one. The larger kites are best left to the experts but the little ones strung up in series can be flown by small children aged five and above – me included.

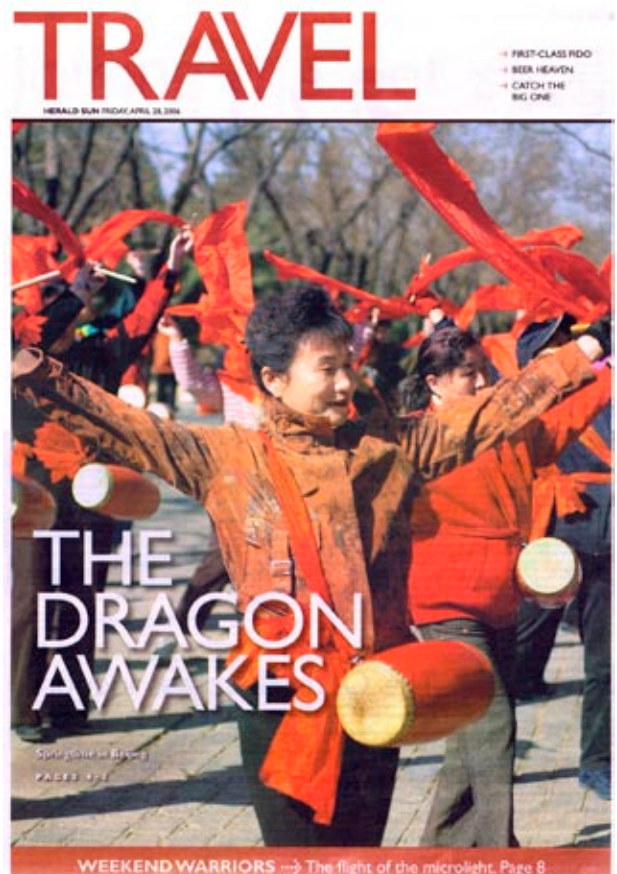
The best thing about Tiananmen Square is that foreign tourists are regarded as exotic and interesting. Many people who visit the square come from far away provinces of China, eager to see the resting place of Mao Zedong, and may never have before seen blonde hair or white skin. Each time someone grabs at my shoulder and points to their camera I think back to how often I have done something similar on my travels, and so I just smile back and enjoy the brief moment of fame.

To the south of the city centre the Temple of Heaven provides wide open spaces for the pursuit of health and pleasure. Local people come and go to participate in Tai Chi classes, practise their singing or rehearse choreographed routines with ribbons and drums. Where the trees are thickest the older gentlemen like to gather with their caged song birds, removing the shaded covers and allowing their treasured pets to enjoy the surrounds of tree branches and fellow feathered companions.

Just outside the metropolis of Beijing the Summer Palace rests gently into the landscape as an oasis of beauty and harmony. The lake shores alone would make the trip worthwhile, or the extensive imperial gardens for that matter. Add to this a collection of majestic buildings and fine artistry that reveals the discerning eye of Chinese craftsman and the Summer Palace becomes a lasting highlight of Beijing. Early spring adds one more touch of elegance to the setting in the form of peach blossoms. As the afternoon breeze whips off the water, willow branches flow across the horizon and flower petals scatter into the air.

No visit to Beijing would be complete without a day-trip north to visit the Great Wall. Several sites are within reasonable driving distance and within a few weeks the weather will be warm and the landscape green. Mutianyu is a well restored section of wall and easy to visit in a day trip from Beijing, while Simatai is popular for hikers who are travelling west to other sections of the wall. Some sections are better restored than others, and both aspects have their charms. In winter the restored ramparts of the Great Wall provide better protection from cold winds, but in spring and summer the unhindered growth of trees and shrubs makes it easier to appreciate the remarkable endurance of the structure itself.

Having climbed to the second highest tower I turn around to head back. I enjoy one final view of the hills sweeping away in the distance, and next to me is another peach blossom just coming into season.



## COLOURS OF MOROCCO

MARCH 24, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

The people of Morocco take inspiration from the natural colours around them. The golden sands of the Sahara Desert, the blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the living green of oasis palms. This richness of colour is matched only by their diversity of cultures.

Marrakech is the heart of Morocco for travellers. Just a few hours flight from European cities you are quickly immersed in Arabic and Berber trading souks. The narrow winding lanes are famous for exotic wares made of silver and brass, leather and textile, glass and pottery. The souks extend from the main square, the Djeema El-Fna, where the fall of dusk invites story tellers, dancers, musicians, and stalls filled with fruit, samovars and freshly prepared. The air is filled with Moroccan spices and beating drums, until the evening wears thin and locals retire to their riad-style homes for the night.

The fishing port of Essaouira is readily accessible from Marrakech, by bus or car, and appeals to anyone who enjoys seafood markets and dining. Stalls setup near the fishing pier every lunchtime; just look for the flocks of sea-gulls hovering in the wind.

Travel a few hours in the opposite direction and you find yourself nestled deep into the High Atlas Mountains. The village of Imlil is a popular choice for people who want to enjoy a blend of the old and the new. A few hundred metres above the township, and 1800 metres above sea level, sits the Kasbah du Toubkal, a magnificent example of citadel architecture. For those with an allergy to comfort and luxury you will find more communal-styled accommodation at one of the 'gits' scattered further along the valley.

Even if you do not intend to stay at the Kasbah, it's worth having lunch or just a Moroccan mint tea in order to steal a moment with its commanding views and tasteful interiors.

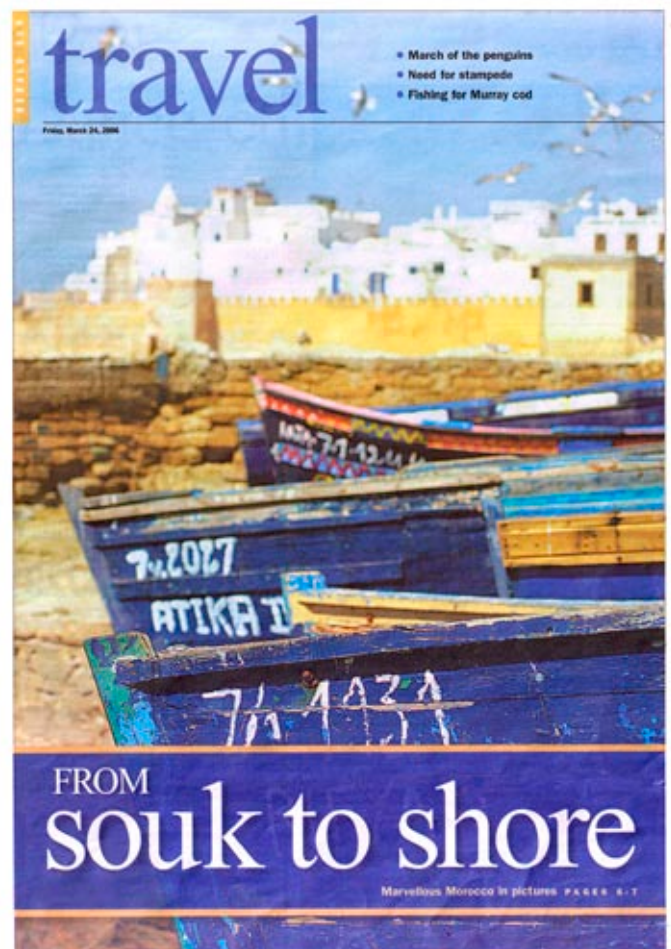
Heading east across the Atlas mountain range the colours of spring crops recede into the rock and dust that borders the Sahara. It's a long journey before you reach the desert itself, so an overnight stay in a town like Ait Benhaddou is essential. One of the more famous Kasbahs in Morocco, this heritage listed site has benefited greatly from its popularity with major film productions. Palms trees line the outer walls of the Kasbah near the river. When the water is low the river bed becomes a preferred route for camels and donkeys.

As you approach the main gates expect textile traders and snake charmers to be on hand, ready to negotiate a bargain. Fortunately, they are more harmless than they look. Once inside the ancient city the locals have taken to artistic expression to tempt to the tourist eye. The view from the highest point, however, is far more compelling than any water colour to be bought.

The golden sands of the Sahara Desert lie just a few hundred miles further east. The dunes themselves are the real attraction. Riding a camel for a couple of hours gives you a sense of respect for the Berber tribesmen who call this region home. The traditional blue turban is worn with great pride, a genuine reflection of cultural heritage. It also makes it easy to see the leader as your camel-train wanders over and down the maze of dune hills. Spending the night in the dunes is not really a hardship, but the woven tents and camel droppings do give an adventurous feel to the scene.

Leaving the dunes to the north will take you to some remarkable cities. Chefchaouen is famed for its brilliant blue walls, Volubilis for its ancient Roman mosaics and Fez for its medieval medina; Fez El-Bali is by far the easiest place in Morocco to get lost in the souks. Deep in the heart of the medina you will find the tanneries still in action, adding colour to raw leather using the most pungent of concoctions of vegetable products and farm manure.

If your navigation skills are not that good, just follow your nose. If you still can't find the tanneries then perhaps head up the hill and relax with a cocktail at the Sofitel Palais Jamai. The view from the balcony overlooks the old city in a most harmonious junction between east and west.



## SLOW BOAT TO PAROS

MARCH 12, 2006

COVER STORY, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH TRAVEL SECTION

There's nothing like the feeling of holding the wheel on a 49ft cruising yacht, watching the gentle roll and passing of the waves below and peering across the horizon to the hazy silhouette of a distant Greek island. This dream may be easier to achieve than you think. You don't need to charter an entire boat, you don't need to hustle ten of your best friends to fill it and you don't even need to know how to sail!

My whole life I have wondered what it would be like to sail the Greek Islands. It's the stuff of dreams. I have listened to my yacht buddies for years recalling tale upon tale of their adventures. They speak of sparkling islands that shimmer against the blue waters, easy passage from port to port and tempting culinary offerings at every Taverna. Every word was true.

The only challenge with this style of holiday is finding the yacht. Marinas at Kos or Santorini, for example, cater for hundreds of vessels so knowing the name of your boat before arrival can be useful. Once on board you have a maximum of eight passengers plus an experienced skipper who doubles as your guide. Think 'small group adventure' on the water.

A cruising yacht is more than just transportation; it also doubles for accommodation. Below deck the living quarters are cosy but comfortable, this is a yacht after all, but step up to the cockpit and you have the entire Mediterranean to play in.

Making passage from island to island is a relaxing affair. For those who wish to get more involved this is a golden opportunity. Steering a modern yacht is very easy and with a well informed skipper aboard, to trim the sails and navigate a course, you are always in good hands.

The local knowledge on the water is just as valuable when you get off the water.

Pulling into the small granite-lined harbour of Vathi, on Kalymnos, you are greeted with three Tavernas, a handful of local fishing boats and a pair of white domed churches that sit high above the cliffs. Next to the boat builder's yard patrons are treated to the kind of home-cooking you could never replicate in your own home. The menu on any given day is determined by Yannis and his mother, who cook up a batch of this or that according to what they had yesterday and what remains in the vegetable garden.

When you've had enough to eat and drink, or possibly too much of both, it's a short walk back to the boat and lights out. No need to set an alarm, you have all day to get to the next island.

The beauty of cruising on a sailboat is the flexibility. Ios earned a less than salubrious reputation for drunken youths in the 90's, but on the far side of the island lies a sheltered cove with two

Tavernas, one beach, and no pier to speak of. It's a simple matter to throw out the anchor and motor a rubber dinghy to the beach; but if you're in a hurry then just jump in the water and swim across yourself.

The gentle pace of the islands is what gives them character. It seems the further you sail from Athens the more pleasant the locals are, and the less attention anyone pays to their watch. "Slowly, slowly." The reason the majority of Greek Islands are not filled with tourists is because they can't get there in a hurry. Those lucky few who own a yacht, or were clever enough to buy a week on one, have it all to themselves. Only the brightly painted fishing vessels outnumber the cruising sailboats, which is why calamari is such an abundant delight.

When you do hit one of the more populated ports like the charming town of Paroikia, on Paros, you can enjoy exploring the island in greater detail and get a little lost in the winding narrow streets. Fine dining options are nestled into the white washed town centre, but the best seafood is still found closer to the water.

At the end of my cruising adventure I caught the next available ferry back to Athens and onwards. Shuffling along with hundreds of back-packers I could hardly be further removed from the intimate luxury of the sailing boat. Now when I hear someone drifting back to their days sailing the Greek Islands, I simply smile and drift back with them.



## SANTORINI FOR LOVERS

FEBRUARY 12, 2006

COVER STORY, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH TRAVEL SECTION

The first time you step out of Fira's winding laneways and glimpse the Aegean Sea your heart skips a beat and you simply stop to stare out at the view. How many people before me have stood on that same patch of stone pavement and enjoyed a momentary absence of time?

I remember that day very clearly because it was the day I decided to propose to my girl.

Such a life-changing moment was probably inevitable, in hindsight, but Santorini is precipitous by nature. Her steep plunging caldera has embraced falling hearts and new love for centuries. And so I fell for her charms. Santorini that is - I had long ago fallen for my girl.

The history of the island reads like a tragic love story. Once a thriving seat of Greek culture, in ancient times Santorini is devastated by a volcano that destroys nearly half the island. Nature's fury leaves behind a remarkable caldera which later becomes an inspiration for beauty and love. Not all Greek tragedies end badly.

Many of the smaller islands in the Mediterranean will offer you rustic charm and old world traditions, but Santorini is flavoured by a sensual expression and prosperity that differentiates her from all others. Postcard views of exclusive villas rise up from the caldera's edge like bubbles in a glass of champagne.

Courtyard gardens stretch along the ridge as far as the eye can see. They are secluded yet open. Most of them are visible only from a distance, their enjoyment limited to the pampered guests and residents.

Choosing a place to stay is made difficult only by the abundance of options. Stepping up the budget to avoid the hostels will get you some genuine luxury in a small villa. Few places offer more than a handful of rooms and many have their own pool, perfect for those of us who prefer views of the Aegean Sea to walking down the hill and jumping in it. It's a simple luxury but a luxury doubled when you and your companion have some privacy.

A world of colour awaits you just outside the villa, just a few white-washed steps away.

Blue domed chapels mirror the water far below, with their white crosses floating in the sky above. I tried counting them one day but I kept losing my number whenever a new view of the caldera popped out beyond someone's garden.

I was invited into one courtyard by a friendly old man. His cats lay sleeping among the potted flowers and cactus. The steps leading from the street to his balcony provided a home for every imaginable shade of red and orange flowers. A little wooden gate, painted in blue, broke the lines of low white walls and led away to the rocky slopes. Splashes of purple and pink bougainvillea lit up the open yard like strokes of paint.

You can't take a villa home but you can happily treasure a reflection of your time in Santorini represented in silver and stone. Jewellery, for many, is the language of love.

The shop windows of Santorini literally shimmer with colour and charm. Glazed enamel is the hot trend in accessories this year. I spent an afternoon shopping for just the perfect shiny something to give my loved one. I could have spent all week but my head hurt from the endless array of bedazzling colours.

On this, my advice is simple. If you find something you like just buy it. Trying to backtrack to the shop you found earlier that day is a bit like online dating - you may think you're headed in the right direction but most of the time you're totally lost.

The lanes are white, the villa walls are white and the rooftops and residences are white. Don't leave home without a good pair of sunglasses.

Dining out will possibly test your relationship, as the sheer breadth of choice will demand compromise on the part of one or the other. If for this reason alone a Santorini escapade should be given the entire week before moving on to another Greek island.

The finest restaurants offer international flavours and cosmopolitan menus. The very best of Greek cuisine is also available, but sometimes the view surpasses the food. If your preference is for a quick bite and sneaking back to the villa then do as the locals do - get a takeaway gyros wrap with chips. Simple, savoury and saucy.

My favourite eating in Santorini is in fact drinking. As the sun starts to dip a little, and the afternoon heat is tempered by a sea breeze, there is no finer way to pass time than 'people watching' on ice. Iced mint tea with a shot of Pimms No.1 goes nicely with the moment.

As you sip and mellow with the sea view be aware that, from another cafe nearby, you are part of the view too. Good thing you can't stop smiling, you never know whose photo album will unwittingly include your better side in the corner of an irresistible sunset.

Between 4:30 and 6pm all the buses heading west from Fira are packed silly with tourists. They are headed for the town of Ioa to watch the sun go below the horizon. It may be one of the most photographed settings on earth.

Spectators crowd the narrow lanes and spill over every vantage point and cafe. Further down the hill a lookout gives another view of the sunset, and the sunset seekers. After the sun has ebbed away, and the crowd along with it, the sky becomes rich with gentle colours and an overwhelming peacefulness.

Many popular destinations lose their character by virtue of that very popularity. Not Santorini, for her brand of fame has led to greater things.

The influx of travellers has encouraged a celebration of all things Hellenic; a distillation of that elegance and refinement which is unique to classical Greek style. Friendly locals, superior lifestyle, and breathtaking natural beauty.

Santorini is for lovers.

