Great ESCAPES

10 amazing destinations—and how to do them right

Plus: Hot new hotels, airline deals and events worth flying for
Herald the New Year and experience the revelry as we welcome 2015 with a festive countdown party at Atrium. With live entertainment and a DJ adding to the festivities, the countdown will reach a breath-taking conclusion at the stroke of midnight with one of Singapore’s largest balloon drops, as 50,000 balloons are released to usher in the New Year.

Tickets to this electrifying countdown party are now available. For enquiries and reservations, please speak with us at +65 6826 8240, email celebrate.sin@pan pacific.com or visit pan pacific.com/singapore.

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7 Raffles Boulevard, Marina Square, Singapore 039595
Tel: +65 6336 8111 singap ore@panpac ific.com

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Serviced Suites
- Bangkok
- Ningbo
- Singapore
- Tianjin
- New openings: Xiamen (2014)
It’s that time of the year again, where you’re eating and spending more than you should be, and searching relentlessly for cheap flight deals to escape the country. And why not—we totally understand the need to get away after a hard year’s work. Fortunately, planning the next holiday doesn’t have to be a total pain in the neck. We’ve done the legwork and scoured the region for the best that this part of the world has to offer.

This year’s Great Escapes features inspiring destination guides and tons of insider news, from flight deals to events to new hotels and restaurants. There are all kinds of off-the-beaten-path ideas—like a half-marathon in Cambodia, an arts festival in Perth and a sushi-making course in Japan—that will definitely take your trip to the next level. So whether you’re traveling to a place for the first or the fifteenth time, there’s no reason for you to stick to the tried-and-tested tourist options. (After all, getting caught in the tourist crush does not make for an ideal vacation.)

The guide includes nine countries; Australia, China & Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam & Cambodia, along with exciting news and deals for each country. For easier browsing, sections are divided by country. We’ve also got luggage picks (see page 14) and travel tips by local photographer Philipp Aldrup, to ensure you come back with the most Instagram-worthy pictures.

On top of that, we’ve partnered with Airbnb to give you the lowdown on some awesome alternative accommodation wherever you’re heading.

Happy reading and bon voyage!

Get Packing

Who’s in charge?
Publisher & General Manager Ric Stockfis countrymanager@asia-city.com.sg
Managing Editor Mrigaa Sethi editor@asia-city.com.sg
Senior Writer Eimear Elkington
Junior Writer Letitia Tandean
Custom Content Editor Clara Lim
Custom Content Writer Joyce See
Associate Art Director Beverly Chong
Senior Designer Carmen Louise Ho
Designer Fishy Toh
Multimedia designer - Photographer Mossy Chew

Director, Business Development Intan Agustina advertisings@asia-city.com.sg
Senior Manager, Media & Marketing Sheran Plameras
Executives, Media & Marketing Lee Wee Keong, Joy Yao, Roderick Wong, Swathi Raj

Marketing Manager Silver Adrienna Ng marketing@asia-city.com.sg
Marketing & Admin Assistant Geraldine Tan
Finance Manager Lynn Legaspi finance@asia-city.com.sg
Accountant Huang Huiping

GROUP DIRECTORS
Chief Executive Officer Gretchen Worth gworth@asia-city.com.sg
Group Digital Director Greg Duncan gduncan@asia-city.com.sg

SINGAPORE
Asia City Publishing Pte. Ltd.
Block 211 Henderson Rd.
#14-02 Henderson Industrial Park
Singapore 159552
Tel: 65-6323-2512
Fax: 65-6323-2779
editorial@asia-city.com.sg
sales@asia-city.com.sg
marketing@asia-city.com.sg

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Custom Content Editor Clara Lim
Custom Content Writer Joyce See
Associate Art Director Beverly Chong
Senior Designer Carmen Louise Ho
Designer Fishy Toh
Multimedia designer - Photographer Mossy Chew

Director, Business Development Intan Agustina advertisings@asia-city.com.sg
Senior Manager, Media & Marketing Sheran Plameras
Executives, Media & Marketing Lee Wee Keong, Joy Yao, Roderick Wong, Swathi Raj

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SINGAPORE
Asia City Publishing Pte. Ltd.
Block 211 Henderson Rd.
#14-02 Henderson Industrial Park
Singapore 159552
Tel: 65-6323-2512
Fax: 65-6323-2779
editorial@asia-city.com.sg
sales@asia-city.com.sg
marketing@asia-city.com.sg

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To many Singaporeans, Johor Bahru (JB) across the causeway is something of a weekend playground. It's no wonder, with everything from food to massages being cheaper in JB. But it's definitely not widely regarded as the coolest place to hang out. Trust us, though: there's plenty of great things to do there and it's getting hipper by the second.

From JB to Iskandar

Johor Bahru is Malaysia’s second most populous city after Kuala Lumpur, but in terms of tourism, it lags far behind. Founded in 1855, it was long regarded as only a transport hub between the mainland and Singapore. That's changed recently. In 2006, the Malaysian government announced the mega development project Iskandar Malaysia, aimed at revamping 2,216.3 sq km of land on the southwest corridor of Johor Bahru. Iskandar Malaysia, named after its former name, contains residential, business and recreation areas, and has already attracted big international investors, including theme parks Legoland (7 Jalan Legoland, +607 597-8888) and Sanrio Hello Kitty Town (Nusajaya, +607 530-2701).

Back to the Old Town

JB’s old town is worth a visit for heritage buffs. As most of the traditional sites are along the coastal road, you’ll have no difficulty finding them. The recently renovated Dataran Bandaraya Johor Bahru (or city square), which sits in front of the Thistle Hotel, was constructed in 1994 and has since been regarded as the town’s signature landmark.

Meanwhile, Sultan Abu Bakar State Mosque is probably the must-visit cultural attraction of the town. Despite being named the state mosque, this beautiful structure built from 1892-1900 is more British-colonial than Moorish with architect Tuan Haji Mohamed Arif bin Punak taking inspiration from the late Victorian architectural style.

Cut-price Pampering

With massages, manicures and pedicures costing a fraction of what you’d pay in Singapore, spa days out are cheaper affairs across the causeway. A good place to get your nails done is Nails Studio at City Square Mall.

Essentials

Getting There

By car: It’s a 30- to 40-minute drive from central Singapore during off-peak hours, but can take up to three hours during busy periods. Enter via the Woodlands or Tuas checkpoint—a round-trip for Singaporean cars will cost $12.80.

By bus: Take 170 from Kranji MRT, 160 from Jurong East bus interchange or bus 950 from Woodlands bus interchange.

By taxi: Singaporean taxis are typically not licensed to enter JB, so they can only take you as far as the Kotaraya Taxi Stand (near JB City Square).

Getting Around

Taxis are fairly convenient and reliable in JB. Fares start from RM3 for the first two kilometers and then 10 sen for every 115 meters. If you ask the hotel to call a taxi for you, RM2 will be added to the total price. You can also take a bus but it’s pretty difficult for visitors to know which number goes along which route.

Exchange Rate

RM2.57 = $1
Experiences you won’t find elsewhere.

Whether you’re a budget traveler or a luxury globetrotter, Airbnb has got it all. From cheerful rooms starting from as little as $59 a night in Berlin to extravagant castles in France, you know that you can go to virtually any part of the world and find an awesome, one-of-a-kind place to stay. No matter how exotic your destination is, you can get a taste of local life by staying in an igloo in Greenland, a houseboat in Amsterdam, a treehouse in the Himalayas or an authentic hanok in South Korea. Or live out your rockstar fantasies in a super-sleek mountaintop apartment in Lisbon or a sexy beachside pad in Boracay.

Insider tips from friends you didn’t know you had.

The best way to get to know a country is through the eyes of a local and who better to ask than your Airbnb host aka new found friend? You’ll be that cool kid who knows about all the hip underground joints and food haunts frequented only by locals. To make things even easier for you, Airbnb Neighbourhoods is a cool online guide available for some cities that gives you the local’s perspective on what you need to know about your destination, accompanied by gorgeous imagery, all written and shot by locals.

A trusted and easy-to-use booking engine.

To get the most out of your browsing and booking experience, take your time to read through the listings and profiles of the hosts for accommodation that you like. The reviews you’re reading are only contributed by real people who have actually stayed in the Airbnb home you’re looking at. Airbnb also provides a safe messaging platform that allows you to message and learn more about hosts without giving any of your contact details away. Also, there is 24/7 customer service so that you can travel with a peace of mind wherever you go. Insider tip: the more information you share about yourself, the more comfortable hosts will feel about having you in their homes. So go ahead and build up your profile.

More space, more fun.

Time spent indoors can be just as exciting as time spent roaming the city. A bigger space means more possibilities and thus more fun to be had. With all that extra floor space, the options are endless. You can sip on wine and dance in the garden under the stars, play boardgames in the living room of your host’s sweet pad, or take a dip in your own private pool.

Feel at home wherever you go.

Being invited to live in a stranger’s home in a foreign land is an unbeatable opportunity. Not only can you meet someone from a totally different culture, you also get to see first-hand what life is like for them. Not only do you get to explore the destination of your dreams, you’ll also experience the genuine hospitality of its people, making your trip that much more intimate and meaningful. Now that’s something even money can’t buy.
Also located at Jalan Dhoby is the humble van at PP Food Centre (Jalan Kelewang, open 7pm-4am). Conveniently, it’s just a few doors down from Restoran 59, which is famous for abalone noodles.

**Hipster Movement**

Breathing new life into their hometown are hip entrepreneurs like Kenny Lim and friends, who are behind Roost Juice + Bar (9 Jalan Dhoby, +607 221-4203), a vintage-style eating room that quickly has become a hot favorite among local trendsetters. “Jalan Dhoby is the only street that has so many historical buildings. It’s the perfect match for our 70s concept inspired by indie rock and roll movies and music,” says Lim. The group also owns Roost Bistro (88 Jalan Ibrahim Sultan, +607 226-6177) and coffee and beer bar Roost Repurposed & Recycled (14 Jalan Trus, +601 7726-7489).

Also located at Jalan Dhoby is The Girl Next Door (8A Jalan Dhoby, +601 6663-3577), a quirky clothing store that doubles up as a salon, the brainchild of local fashion designers Beverly and Cally. They also recently opened lifestyle boutique and cafe Bev C (54 Jalan Tan Hiok Nee, +607 221-3530), stocking their monochromatic, edgy streetwear. Another must-visit is Joho concept store (Jalan Abiad, +601 6663-3577), which posts regular updates on the city’s news and openings.

**Street Food Galore**

One of the main draws for Singaporeans is JB’s tasty street food. A popular haunt is the Restoran Kin Wah (Jalan Irus), known for its perfectly cooked half-boiled eggs and delicious nasi padang. Another must-try in JB is authentic Malaysian lok lok (everything from mushroom wrapped with bacon to prawns and scallops on skewers). A good place to get your lok lok fix is the humble van at PP Food Centre (Jalan Kelewang, open 7pm-4am). Conveniently, it’s just a few doors down from Restoran 59, which is famous for abalone noodles.

**ISLAND GETAWAYS**

**Off the Grid**

Tianman is not just for divers anymore. We recently stayed at the island’s boutique beachside hideaway Japamala Resort, which occupies its own seaside stretch and is almost completely cut off from everything else on the island. The landscape is all very dramatic: think jutting cliffs, luxuriant jungles and crystal clear waters (great for snorkeling), and there’s a bar-restaurant all the way out on the jetty so you can dine surrounded by sea and sky. The resort currently offers promo rates from MYR750 ($292)/night, plus discounts when you book stays of three to six nights. If the monsoon hits, you can literally take a raincheck and move your dates—no cancellation fee—under their Rainy Season Privilege. Book at www.japamalaresorts.com.

**Penang’s Throwback Town**

Get nostalgic in Penang with a stay in a stylish comfy loft in a refurbished shophouse situated in the heritage city of George Town. Wake up to the sound of the temple bells, smell the aroma of fresh bread at traditional bakeries and befriend the friendly locals. To get around the city, the best method is just on foot, so you can gawk at the awesome street art it’s so well-known for. And of course, Penang is a foodie paradise with unbeatable street food finds. Just ask your host for pointers and off you go on your gastronomic journey.

For more on Airbnb, turn to page 5.

**ESCAPE ROUTES**

**KL in a Snap**

Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur has teamed up with hip camera makers Leica for a new accommodation package which involves a photography-focused tour of the city. You get to ride around in a chauffeur-driven car and stop by the usual highlights accompanied by a pro photographer from Leica, who will dish out advice on composition, lighting, texture, patterns and contrast. The package is MYR1,875 ($727) and includes a two night hotel stay; find more info at www.mandarinoriental.com/kualalumpur.

**HERITAGE HOTELS**

**Royal Retreat**

After a 30 year hiatus, historic KL establishment The Majestic Hotel has reopened with an impressive interior featuring 1950s-style Neo-Classical elements. Originally built in the 1930s, the property has welcomed noted figures such as author Graham Greene. It was closed in 1984 to house the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. Conveniently located opposite the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station, the space has 300 rooms and five F&B establishments including modern restaurant Opus One. Rates start from MYR450 ($174); book your stay at www.majestickl.com.

**RESURNTS**

**Herbal Remedy**

At the top of the must-eat list in KL is the recently-reopened Cilantro Restaurant & Wine Bar, where acclaimed chef Takashi Kimura’s French-meets-Japanese creations are drawing in the crowds. A five-course degustation menu, featuring seasonal items, will set you back MYR340 ($131). More info at www.cilantrokl.com.

**SHOPPING**

**Stock Up**

Malaysia’s answer to our Great Singapore Sale is the 1Malaysia Year-End Sale, which conveniently takes place over the festive season. Heaps of sales, promotions and events will be running at shopping malls, flea markets and bazaars all over the country, all the way through Jan 4 2015.
Love them or hate them, the busy beaches and booming beach clubs of Surin and beyond are the first thing that come to mind when thinking about Phuket. But over on the remarkably unspoiled east coast, canny developers are beginning to take advantage of the breathtaking views out over the still blue waters and craggy outcrops of Phang Nga Bay (it’s not for nothing that the island’s top marinas are all on this side of the island) with some world-class resorts and now some serious dining destinations. And with the military-imposed curfew having been lifted, now’s a great time to get up there.

Among the most spectacular new spots is the development at Cape Yamu, a sliver of island halfway up the coast. Nahmyaa, at the Point Yamu by COMO (225 Moo 7, Paklok, Talang, +66 7636-0100, www.comohotels.com/pointyamu), focuses on spicy Southern Thai cooking and street food. It’s a casual space right by the poolside, enlivened with bright orange colors and a playful sea-inspired theme (fishscale walls, fish-shaped bowls, hanging lights like fish-eyes), though the cooking, under Executive Chef Dan Moran, previously of The Metropolitan, is seriously good and reassuringly spicy. (Moran tells us he’s inspired by the depth of flavor of southern Thai cooking, citing gkaeng dtai bplah as an example. “It’s this incendiary fish innards curry that’s freaky on your first encounter, but it grows on you!”) Among the highlights of our visit: spiced oxtail Wagyu soup, coconut smoked duck (both THB300; $11.50), a dark southern curry with black kingfish (THB600; $23), a massaman lamb curry with sweet potato and cucumber (THB800; $31), and a humble but pretty wonderful stir-fried spinach in coconut milk (THB400; $15.40). There’s a strong signature cocktail list, too, with creations like The Fighting Duck (plum jam, ginger and hoisin, shaken with ruby port and reposado (barrel-aged) tequila, served over ice with cherry wood smoke) nicely judged to accompany the meal.

Nearby Breeze (+66 8 1271-2320, www.breezecapeyamu.com) is part of the same development, though unconnected to the hotel. Launched in 2012, this open-on-all-sides spot is still a relative newcomer, though their Sunday sharing brunches by the pool (12:30-4pm, THB1,650 ($63) or THB2,800 ($108) with freeflow drinks) have built up a deserved reputation on the island. But it’s what goes on in the kitchen that’s really

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE
Jetstar, Tigerair, AirAsia and SilkAir all fly direct from Singapore to Phuket. Jetstar (www.jetstar.com) is the best after-work option: the flight leaves at 8.30pm, arriving at 9.20pm. Prices start from as low as $92 return, including taxes. In-flight meals ($12 for a pre-ordered main) aren’t gourmet, but we enjoyed the vegetarian Thai curry in our recent in-flight taste test: is.gd/inflightfood.

STAY
Aside from Point Yamu (225 Moo 7, Paklok, Talang, +66 7636-0100, www.comohotels.com/pointyamu), another highly-regarded newcomer on the east coast is Regent Phuket Cape Panwa (+66 2653-0555, www.regenthotels.com/phuket) where rooms start from $180. For something more affordable, the very cool Phuket 346 in Phuket Town (9 Soi Rommanee, Talang Rd., +66 7625-8108; www.phuket346.com) offers Sino-Portugese charm, an on-site art gallery (the proprietor is also behind Bangkok’s beloved WTF) and rooms from just $33.

EXCHANGE RATE
THB25 = $1
KOH KOOD
Wendy The Pool
Opened earlier this year, this new hotel is located on the quiet island of Koh Kood. Set on Khlong Chao Beach, the beachfront boutique is all modernist wooden cubes with whitewashed furniture. Beachfront villas with their own private pools that fits four adults, start from THB45,000 ($1774) a night.
43 Moo 2, Baan Klong Chaow, +66 29 661-8002, www.wendythepoolresort.com

PHUKET
Eastin Yama Phuket
Among this year’s offerings is Eastin Yama Phuket, which opened on Kata Beach in October. Situated 20 minutes from the touristy Patong Beach, this one is surrounded by luscious greenery and overlooks the Andaman Sea. Rooms start from THB1387 ($55).
5 Patak Soi 2, Karon Muang, +66 7 630-3456, www.eastinyamaphuket.com

KANCHANABURI
Cinque Terre Resort
Set next to the quiet town of Huai Au Long and surrounded by rolling mountains making it the ideal location for an unplugged getaway. The resort’s exterior is styled after classic Italian architecture, while the rooms are decorated in a flashy and ornate Parisian fashion. It’s a stone’s throw from Kanchanaburi town and there is a free pick-up service for guests. Rates start from THB1750 ($69).
266/69 Thongphaphum, Kanchanaburi, +66 81 493-3377, www.facebook.com/cinqueterreresort
interest. Alongside a number of locals, many of the kitchen staff are here, effectively on secondment, from Montreal’s acclaimed Toque! restaurant. It’s an idea dreamed up by the latter’s former sous-chef and now Exec Chef here, Cheryl Johnson. The dinner menu changes every few days, but the focus is on fine dining, using local ingredients wherever possible. Expect dishes like duck confit with kale, baby corn, leeks, shiitake and a honey glaze; and scallops with endives and radicchio flambée with brandy, snowpeas, orange and mint (both THB750; $29). The in-house pastry chef knocks out some pretty special creations, too. You’ll need to watch out for mozzies if you’re dining there after dark, but the trade-off is widescreen views out over the water.

The east coast might be relatively under-developed, but boat owners have been wise to its charms for years, and a short drive down the coast from Yamu, tucked away on the quieter side of one of the more upmarket marinas, is Le Winch (20/31/32 Boat Lagoon Marina Moo 4, Thepkaew Rd., Koh Kaew, +66 (0) 8484-2822). It’s not new, but this 40-seat spot draws a loyal crowd, at least in part due to the fantastic outdoor deck right by the waterfront and facing the lighthouse; it’s perfect for daydreaming about that yacht you’ve always wanted to own. The food tends toward Gallic classics—steak tartare (THB850; $32.70) frog legs “en persillade” (THB420; $16.20), pork cordon bleu with Serrano ham and parmesan (THB480; $18.50)—and, if it’s more solid than spectacular, that’s made up for with charmingly personal service (it’s pretty much a one-man show for chef-proprietor Vincent Meuwly). The plat du jour is a great way to sample the best of what’s on offer and the daily lunch sets are deservedly popular, too. Mains go for $20 and up.

**GREAT GUIDES**

**True North**

If you’re over the Bangkok shenanigans, head for the hills. The northern capital of Chiang Mai is packed with boutique hotels, riverside eats and hipster haunts. We partnered up with Thai Airways for The Insider’s Guide to Chiang Mai, a handy guide to the best food, drink and accommodation in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Don’t worry, we’ve thrown in a little bit on Bangkok for good measure. Download your free copy at is.gd/chiangmai.

**HOTEL DEAL**

**Life’s A Beach**

Centara Hotels and Resorts recently rolled out its Life’s A Beach package (through Mar 31 2015) that lets you soak up the sun at some of Thailand’s most gorgeous beaches, at bargain prices. Take your pick from resorts located in Koh Samui, Phuket, Krabi or Khao Lak. The package includes two way airport transfers, daily breakfast, welcome cocktails and one 60-minute aromatherapy massage for two. Prices start from THB2,736 ($107.65) per night at their Centara Coconut Beach Resort Samui, with a minimum stay of five nights. For more info, visit www.centarahotelsresorts.com.

**DETOX RETREAT**

**Get Your Glow Back**

Located atop a jungle-covered mountain, Kamalaya is one of Thailand’s leading integrated wellness retreats. Newcomers should try the full-board introduction program which features a diet of pure organic food and a number of body treatments over three days. Priced at THB53,700 ($1,919), the package includes a three-night stay in a hillside room, three detox meals a day, round-trip airport transfers, access to yoga classes, a wellness gift pack and numerous spa treatments like a detoxifying body scrub and wrap, traditional Asian massages and lymphatic drainage therapy. Find more information and book a stay at www.kamalaya.com.

**OFFBEAT TOURS**

**Scoot around Bangkok**

Everyone knows that riding on the back of a motorcycle taxi is one of Bangkok’s iconic, if slightly hair-raising, charms. Now you can incorporate two-wheeled backseat driving into your sight-seeing, too, with a bit of retro appeal thrown in as well. Best Bangkok Tours has tour guides who ferry you around on the back of a scooter while you soak up the energy of the city. There are three tours to choose from: The Real Deal covers major attractions like Sukhumvit Road, Wat Po and Grand Palace, the Jim Thompson House and Chao Phraya River; The Drink & Ride Tour takes you to five of the coolest and hippest bars in the city; and The Eat & Ride Tour lets you stuff your face with food from three restaurants of your choice. Tours start from THB1,500 ($57) per person, visit www.bestbangkoktours.com for more info.

**Live the Slow Life in Chiang Mai**

www.airbnb.com

Take the pace of life down a few notches and check into this quiet village on the fringe of Chiang Mai. You won’t have to stay in a dim-lit hut; instead, picture huge, light-filled wooden houses surrounded by lush greenery. And no rowdy tourists around to break the peace. From here, it’s an easy trek up to the nearby hill tribe villages, where you can explore rice paddies, and (if you’re lucky) stumble upon a hidden waterfall. Finish the day with a foot rub at the street markets as you watch villagers go about their daily lives.

For more on Airbnb, turn to page 5.
It’s not immediately apparent why people rave about Ubud. The alleged tourist highlight—the Monkey Forest—is underwhelming. The main streets through town are terribly tacky. What with the crowds of holier-than-thou yoga devotees and earnest Eat Pray Love pilgrims, it’s tempting to write the place off as yet another spoiled stop on the tourist trail. But step away from the center and Ubud’s charms become more apparent, especially if you treat your stay there as a chance to get fit and healthy rather than simply sight-see.

7am. It’s worth getting out of bed early to beat the heat and run the Campuhan Ridge. The hilly 7.5km circuit is by no means easy, but it affords stunning views into the lush valleys on either side and the path beyond takes you through neon green rice fields, past faded old temples and quiet villages; it’s a shame, though, that to complete the loop you have to run a couple of clicks on the road. The starting point is hidden away to the left as you enter the Ibah Resort (see map).

8:30am. Time for a well-earned breakfast! Start with the healthy dishes on the menu at Kemiri, one of the on-site restaurants at Uma by COMO Ubud (see STAY next page). Recent offerings include an egg white tortilla and a tropical fruit salad with bee pollen (both IDR200,000/$21) as well as juice blends like the Lean and Clean Greens (apple, fennel, cucumber, spinach, green pepper, celery, sunflower seeds, macadamia nuts and spirulina powder; IDR65,000); but the menu does change regularly.

10am. Straight back into the fray. Join a white-water rafting expedition (US$50 ($63)) organized by the Ubud-based Bali Bike Baik Tours (Banjar Laplapan, Petulu, +62 03 6197-8052, www.balibike.com). The 14km route along the Ayung River (half an hour drive from Ubud) involves some Class III rapids, so be prepared to get wet. They also offer full-day bike tours, which see you freewheeling (most of) the 20-something kilometers downhill from Mount Kintamani.

2pm. Ubud’s first raw food restaurant, the vege-vegan Garden Kafe, is a great spot to grab a quick bite before your next physical activity: it’s on-site at the The Yoga Barn (Jalan Raya Pengosekan, +62 3 6197-1236, www.theyogabarn.com). You’ll hear this five-studio center talked about in hushed, reverential tones by the type of folk who come to Ubud to find themselves—but it really is among the best places in town to practice your downward dog. Classes start from 7am and all run for 90 minutes, but those in the middle of the afternoon (3pm) are typically pitched at an introductory level and run the gamut from meditation and Vinyasa flow to acro-yoga and even Capoeira.

5:30pm. There are few places better to watch the sun go down (and catch your breath after the day you’ve just had) than Pomegranate (+62 878 6080-3632, www.cafepomegranate.org), a canvas-roofed, open-to-the-elements café and bar perched right in the middle of the rice fields, with mountains looming on the horizon. It’s a delightful 15-minute walk up a single-track (and somewhat secret) pathway from the main road. Drinks are far from fancy, but with views like this you don’t need them to be. Get there early to grab a seat near the edge—and bring a flashlight if you’re planning to walk back down in the dark.

8pm. If you want to end the day on a healthy high then walk just a minute further uphill for dinner at Sari Organik (+62 3 6197-2087, www.sari-organik.com), which serves up dishes like lontong (rice cooked in banana leaves with vegetables, tofu and tempeh in curry sauce) and raw Thai soup (a mish-mash of cashew nut, cucumber, mushrooms, turmeric, pepper and coriander) made from produce grown in their own garden next door. If, on the other hand, all this talk of...
wellness is getting a bit too much and you just want to have fun, it’s time to head back down to the main road and grab a seat at Naughty Nuri’s Warung (Jalan Raya Sanggingan, +62 3 6197-7547). This ribs and grill specialist is packed most nights, with clientele spilling out onto the streets. Anthony Bourdain reckons they serve the best martinis outside of New York, so odds are you’ll need to run through the whole cycle again tomorrow just to undo the damage.

**ESSENTIALS**

**STAY**

Ubud isn’t exactly short of accommodation, but it can be hit and miss. Luxe spot Uma by COMO Ubud (Jalan Raya Sanggingan) is well located for the itinerary above and ideally suited for anyone looking for a holistic, healthy weekend. Rates start from US$820 ($1,030) for a minimum two-night package, with their pool villas going for US$1,180 ($1,480) for two nights. The on-site COMO Shambala Retreat is the perfect tonic for over-exerted bodies, with a 90-minute deep tissue massage available for IDR730,000 ($80). The hotel also offers complimentary yoga classes and early morning walks, as well as healthy cuisine at both Kemiri and Italian restaurant Uma Cucina. Packages include “Discover Ubud Culture” (an additional US$305 ($382) for two nights), which involves tours of the markets, group yoga and a choice between white-water rafting, a freewheel mountain bike ride and a chauffeured tour of Ubud. Book with Mr and Mrs Smith (800 321-1098; www.mrandmrs smith.com/luxury-hotels/uma-by-como-ubud) for special rates.

**GETTING THERE**

Singapore Airlines, Garuda, Tigerair, AirAsia and Jetstar all have daily direct flights from Singapore to Bali. AirAsia’s 9:05pm flight (www.airasia.com) is your best bet if you’re looking to head off straight after work, with fares starting from $225 return, including taxes.

**VISA AND GETTING AROUND**

Singaporeans don’t need a visa to enter Bali, but most other nationalities do: it’s US$25 ($31) on arrival. You’ll also need to hold onto IDR200,000 ($22) for the departure tax on your way home.

Getting from Denpasar to Ubud takes an hour by taxi: the official rate is IDR300,000 ($33).

**EXCHANGE RATE**

IDR10,000 = $1.10

For more on Airbnb, turn to page 5.
ESCAPE ROUTES

Ayana Bali

HOTEL DEAL
White (Sandy) Christmas

Have your white Christmas on Bali’s pristine pure beaches this festive season. Ayana Bali and sister property Rimba Jimbaran are rolling out a slew of promos and events. Ayana’s got traditional bales in their property with a special Champagne dinner, while Rimba’s got “birdcages”, private poolside cabanas and candlelit lawns. There are also cooking classes, afternoon high teas, changing festive menus, and a New Years’ party featuring American DJ Mr. Best. Rates start from US$251 ($320); find more info at www.ayanaresort.com.

HOTEL OPENING
Boutique Berth

The world’s oldest passenger ship is going through a major facelift and will soon become a heritage hotel with resort-style facilities, berthed in Bintan. The owner, Singaporean businessman Eric Saw, bought the 100-year-old ship from a scrapyard in 2010 and later renamed her Doulos Phos. Once the refurb is complete, there be all-day diners, 100 cabins and a piano lounge, swimming pool and alfresco dining area—as well as an onboard maritime museum.

NEW FLIGHTS
Archipelago Adventures

Garuda Indonesia has introduced new “Explore” flights to remote Indonesian islands to promote travel to offbeat locations. These include routes to Tambolaka, known for its traditional villages and culture; Lombok and Ende, both exceptionally scenic spots; Bima, for the nature lovers; and Labuan Bajo, which is home to Indonesia’s Komodo dragons. Find more details and book at www.garuda-indonesia.com.

HIKING
Conquer Rinjani

At 3,726m, Rinjani is the second highest volcano in Indonesia promising stunning views across the northern Lombok coast for those willing to make the trek. The climb itself is a three-day, two-night affair, so it’s not for the faint hearted, but anyone of reasonable fitness should be able to manage (the best hiking season starts in April so you’ll have time to get training). Book with John’s Adventures (+62 81 7578-8018, www.rinjanimaster.com) who offer packages ranging from 2D/1N to 6D/5N; with the 3D/2N package costing 2,450,000IDR ($256) per person.

RESORT RETREAT
Luxe Lombok

If you’re in Lombok, consider staying at the stunning Oberoi Resort, occupying a stunning plot of oceanfront land. Rumor has it that much of the undeveloped land along the same peninsula will be built on soon, so you’ll want to get in on the exclusivity while it lasts. The resort has 20 villas and 30 pavilions, spread across 24 acres, a tennis court, a beach club (with PADI dive center) and its own boat launch. It’s also conveniently situated for excursions up to Mount Rinjani and boat trips to the nearby Gili Islands for snorkeling and turtle watching. Rates start from US$380++ ($485)/night. Find out more at www.oberoihotels.com.

Prospero Año Nuevo!

NEW YEAR’S EVE

31 DECEMBER 2014
8PM TILL LATE
FEATURING HAVANA SOCIAL CLUB BAND


PARTY PACKAGE:
• $42 per person, includes welcome champagne
• $208 per couple, includes a bottle of Laurent Perrier Champagne
• $258 per couple, includes a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label/ Bombay Sapphire/ Jack Daniel’s/ Belvedere

Pan Pacific
ORCHARD, SINGAPORE

10 Claymore Road, Singapore 229560 Tel: +65 6737 0811 Singapore toll free: 1800 7222 342 Fax: +65 6737 9075 orchard@panpacific.com Visit panpacific.com/orchard
Stay
There may be lots of reputable hotels in the more tourist-friendly District 1—the city’s center, where the main attractions are located—but skip those and head to the more picturesque District 2 for resort-like vibes. We stayed at Villa Song Saigon (197/2 Nguyen Van Huong St., +84 8 3744-6090, www.villasong.com), a boutique hotel under the Secret Retreats (www.secret-retreats.com) umbrella, and could hardly tear ourselves away from the near-private saltwater pool and riverside restaurant. Rates start from about VND2,900,000 ($172) per night for a solo room.

Eateries typically close at 10pm here, so if you’re the type to get midnight munchies—who isn’t?—you can stock up on cheese at the nearby Annam Gourmet Market (41A Thao Dien St., District 2, +84 8 3744-2630, www.annam-gourmet.com) and booze at one of the few craft beer shops we found, Zebrafish (25 Thao Dien St., District 2, +84 8 3744-6863, www.zebrafish.com.vn). Plus, there’s a handful of quality restaurants and amenities like Harmony Spa (34 Tong Huu Dinh St., District 2, +84 8 3744-6575, www.harmonylvietnam.vn) for cheap manicures (from US$7, or $8.80) and massages (from US$20, or $25).

Do
The best way to take in HCMC is definitely on a scooter: try a night tour with Vietnam Vespa Adventures (from US$65, www.vietnamvespaadventures.com), essentially a bar crawl on a Vespa. This excursion to eateries and bars in different districts—lots of street food, local music and the occasional cockfight—is pretty eye-opening, and once on a bike you’ll come to appreciate the methodic madness of Vietnamese traffic. If you have time, catch a day trip by boat; Vietnam’s waterways and rivers are gorgeous. Les Rives does full-day tours (from VND1,697,000, or $100, www.lesrivesexperience.com) to destinations like the Mekong Delta and Can Gio Mangrove Forest for small groups.

Eat
We recommend that all visitors make the journey to hipster mecca L’Usine (151/1 Dong Khoi St., District 1, +84 8 6674-3565, www.lusinespace.com), which is hidden behind a dilapidated but very charming alley full of antique art (but of course!). The crowd is photogenic and the grub is good quality and almost Melbournian—a simple but lush garden pasta; grilled octopus tossed with caramelized onion and chorizo, for example.

Also check out Work Saigon (267/2 Dien
Bien Phu, District 3, www.worksaigon.com), a co-working space and café for designers. On our last visit we found a garden growing basil and strawberries for their homemade sodas and salads, and caught The Cinephiles (www.facebook.com/thecinephiles) setting up for one of their regular outdoor arthouse film screenings.

**Play**
If there’s one venue in HCMC we’d kill to transplant to Singapore, it’s live music café Vung Oi Mo Ra (17 Ngo Thoi Nhiem, District 3, +84 8 2215-7813). For the full experience, head there in the evening—you’ll have to navigate through a somewhat scary back alley—to watch Vietnamese musicians perform by candlelight. We didn’t understand a word they were crooning, but they were pitch-perfect.

Then there’s art space (by day) and club (by night) The Observatory (junction of Le Lai & Ton That Tung, District 1, +84 8 3925-9415, www.theobservatory-hcmc.com), where the good-looking and left-leaning congregate. Get the chilli-flavored Saigon Cider (www.facebook.com/peaceloveandapples), produced by a local brewery that collects and reuses the empty bottles from their stockists.

**EXCHANGE RATE**
10,000VND = $0.60

**ACCESSORIES**
**Leader of the Pack**
Globetrot in style with the sexiest travel luggage.

**Samsonite Cullmen Backpack** ($200)
This casual backpack is lined with heavy nylon, and has a color point zipper puller, mesh side pockets and a chic embroidered logo.

**Kapok Voyager Duffel** ($497)
Part of a collab with chic fashion brand MISCHA, this sturdy overnight bag has reinforced leather handles and an adjustable shoulder strap

**Tumi Alpha 2 Continental Expandable 4 Wheeled Carry On** ($1,075)
The improved Alpha 2 range has new features like three-stage telescopic handles, better wheels and a stronger ballistica nylon shell.

**River Island Black Quilted Wheelie Suitcase** ($164.90)
This synthetic leather suitcase has a textured surface, a gold tone brand plaque on the front, along with an extendable 53cm handle. Available from www.riverisland.com.

**American Tourister Prismo** ($180 upwards)
This cheery suitcase is every neat-freak’s dream: interior packing straps, detachable pouch and a divider for efficient packing.

**ESSENTIALS**

**GETTING THERE**
Singapore Airlines, Tigerair, Jetstar and Vietnam Airlines have daily direct flights from Singapore to Ho Chi Minh City, from $120 round trip.

**GETTING AROUND**
Cabs are plentiful and cheap, but to reduce the risk of scams, book a taxi rather than flag one down. Most venues will happily do it for you.

**VISA**
Singaporeans do not require a visa for trips (up to 30 days), but most other nationalities do. Avoid the dodgy visa websites and go straight to the Embassy of Vietnam (10 Leedon Park, 6462-5938, www.vietnamesebirthday.org).
NEW FLIGHTS
Can Go Can Tho
Travelling to and around Vietnam has gotten a little easier with VietJet’s (www.vietjetair.com) new route between Hanoi and Can Tho, which started in October. Best known for their floating markets and old colonial Vietnamese architecture, Can Tho is the country’s fourth biggest city and is situated on the Mekong Delta. To get there, passengers will have to transit at Hanoi and catch a 2-hour flight (round trips start around $100). Alternatively, VietJet also offers a route to Can Tho through the seaside port city of Da Nang, which has a shorter flying time of 90 minutes (round trips start around $60).

HOTEL OPENING
A Lot of Hotel
The new 65-story Lotte Hotel, in Vietnam’s capital Hanoi, is also the country’s tallest—and it’s pretty darn swanky. Located between the city’s Old Town and New Business District, it’s a mix of old and new, with lots of glass, modern decor and a hint of colonial Vietnam. The 318-room hotel has 83 suites and Michelin-starred dim sum restaurant Tim Ho Wan. We also know that the Vietnamese are pretty good at partying, so there’s a bar-lounge with craft cocktails perched on the 64th floor as well. Oh, and for those weary moments, Evian Spa has you covered with their slew of signature water-based treatments, a pool, a salt studio and six treatment rooms. Rates start from $149; for more info, head to www.lottehotel.com.

ISLAND GETAWAY
Private Paradise
2015 will see boutique luxury hotel experts Akyran open the Akaryn Koh Krabat (www.theakyra.com) on a small private island in the Gulf of Thailand, situated a 20-minute boat ride from the coastal town Sihanoukville, in the southwest of Cambodia. There will be 40 villas with private pools, all serviced by their very own butler catering for your every need. There will be three restaurants on site, as well as the luxury Ayurah Wellness Centre covering everything from executive stress relief to meditation and anti-ageing treatments. Prices will start from US$900 ($1,184) a night.

NEW RESTAURANT
Fancy Feast
Looks like sybarites now have one more excuse to visit Phnom Penh—the opening of posh French restaurant La Pergola in charming boutique hotel The Plantation. Housed within a purpose-built glass structure overlooking the hotel’s pond, the restaurant is helmed by chef Sébastien Rubis, a recent import from Luang Prabang, where he ran a Lao restaurant in the upscale 3 Nagas resort. He’s earned a reputation for reinventing traditional local recipes, and will be serving up inventive dishes like foie gras cooked in strawberry wine and Kampot pepper. Oh, and the hotel—the former Ministry of Labor, located just behind the Royal Palace—isn’t too shabby either.
NEW FLIGHTS
Springs in your Step

Tigerair is on a roll with a recent focus on brand new routes to China. The budget carrier will open a direct route to Jinan, the capital of Shandong province, famous for its 72 hot springs. Flights from Singapore are scheduled to take off every Tuesday at 12:30pm, while return flights from Jinan will depart Wednesdays at 7:30am. This is the 10th of Tigerair’s China destinations; it also offers flights from Singapore to Guangzhou, Haikou, Lijiang, Ningbo, Shenzhen and Xi An. Find out more at www.tigerair.com.

HOTELS
Warehouse Pop-Up

Don’t get any funny ideas, but it’s now possible to spend the night in a warehouse—a fancy one, of course. Hong Kong’s new Ovolo Southside, a former warehouse converted into a chic boutique hotel, in the middle of the burgeoning Southside arts district. The 162-room industrial building is located on the South Coast, and much like its arty neighbors, has its own gallery space and a mandatory so-chic-it-hurts rooftop bar. Décor-wise, think minimalist aesthetics with utilitarian steel furniture, poured concrete floors and rough brickwork. While the ceilings are full of exposed steel water pipes and foil-clad air conditioning units, the views are of the Hong Kong cityscape and urban greenery. This hotel has six room categories from Mini Twin to a Corner Deluxe, as well as a Mediterranean-style East-Asian restaurant Cirqle, rooftop bar Above and a 24-hour gym. Rates start at HKD1150 ($189). More info at is.gd/ovolosouthside

RESTAURANTS
More Than Dim Sum

Hong Kong already has a plethora of top-notch restaurants like L’Atelier de Joel Robuchon, Mandarin Grill + Bar, Sushi Shikon and BO Innovation, to name a few. And now that impressive list has grown even more, with Brit chefs Gordon Ramsay and Jamie Oliver both opening restaurants. Jamie Oliver’s 200-seater branch has opened at Causeway Bay in the new Soundwill Plaza II on Tang Lung Street. Meanwhile, Gordon Ramsay’s brought his Bread Street Kitchen concept to the Lan Kwai Fong Hotel in central Hong Kong serving up British-European cuisine, with many dishes derived from the original London menu. Check out www.jamieoliver.com and www.gordonramsay.com for more info.

HOTEL OPENING
Lavish Castle Living

Check yourself in for some royal treatment at The Castle Hotel, which recently opened its doors in Dalian, northeast China. Modeled after a Bavarian castle, the majestic structure sits atop Lotus Mountain and overlooks the Xinghai Bay and the Yellow Sea. The hotel comes complete with 292 guestrooms, including 29 suites, featuring lavish interior designs with a nod to European heritage. You can soak your feet in the hotel’s indoor heated pool, get pampered at the plush spa or treat yourself to some German beer, brewed on-site at the Royal Cellar Restaurant. Rates start at CNY1800 ($375). Find out more at www.starwoodhotels.com.

WINTER FESTIVAL
Frozen Treats

For the ultimate winter travel experience, China’s celebrated Harbin ice and snow festival returns to the capital of Heilongjiang Province, from Jan 5 to Feb 25 2015. The spectacular wintry set-up includes Ice & Snow World, the International Snow Sculpture Expo that features dramatic sculpted pieces by artists from around the world, and an ice lantern art fair. Visitors have the opportunity to ski and snowboard, try out dog-sledding, ice skating or snowmobiling, and watch performances of winter swimming, diving and fishing, while the snow-covered forests and surrounding mountains make a stunning backdrop for sleigh rides. Find more information at www.icefestivalharbin.com.

Hotel Jen Orchardgateway Singapore 277 Orchard Rd #10-01, 6708-8888, www.hoteljen.com/orchardgateway

The next time visiting friends are looking for chic, affordable and centrally-located accommodation in Singapore, send them straight to Hotel Jen Orchardgateway. Here are 5 reasons to love the new Hotel Jen experience:

1. Hotel Jen Orchardgateway is interconnected with four shopping malls; Orchard Central, 313Somerset Centrepoint and Orchardgateway, one of Singapore’s newest and most premiere fashion destinations. Say hello to a seamless, weather-proof shopping experience right from your hotel door.
2. No more struggling to hail a taxi! Hotel Jen provides direct access to Somerset MRT station offering effortless connectivity all around Singapore.
3. The rooftop pool and Baywatch@jen bar are perfect for a leisurely dip or afternoon cocktail looking over panoramic views of Singapore’s dramatic skyline, including Marina Bay and the CBD.
4. Hotel Jen Orchardgateway has striking room options all with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out across Orchard Road or CBD. Guests have the options of Superior (27m²), Deluxe (from 32m²) or Premier Panorama (from 41m²) rooms.
5. No visit to Singapore is complete without a culinary adventure. Look no farther than Makan@jen, a vibrant all-day restaurant with a la carte and buffet options and a variety of diverse cooking stations offering local and international treats.
Manila is not for the faint of heart, but it’s also full of hidden gems. With busy bees in mind, we focus on Pasay, which houses many of Manila’s tourist faves, and Makati, a burgeoning commercial district known for its cool bars and restaurants. Here’s what you can do in just 48 hours:

Day One
9am: Visit Intramuros (Bonifacio Dr.), known as the Walled City because of the imposing stone walls constructed by Spanish colonialists to protect the city from foreign invasion (oh, the irony). Next, head to San Agustin Church (General Luna St., Intramuros, +63 2 527-2746, www.sanagustinchurch.org), a UNESCO heritage site that boasts intricate baroque architecture.

1pm: The SM Mall of Asia (J.W. Diokno Blvd., Mall of Asia Complex, Pasay City, +63 2 556-0680, www.smmallofasia.com) is supposedly the 10th largest shopping mall in the world, with high-street labels like Mango, Warehouse and Zara. Grab lunch at one of the 360 F&B establishments including Yabu (+63 2 511-7202, www.yabu.ph), a safe bet for delicious Japanese katsu. For dessert, try the traditional halo-halo from fast food chain Razon’s of Guagua (+63 2 556-0277, www.razonsofguagua.com) for PHP100 ($2.86).

6:30pm: Pick fresh seafood from the stalls at Dampa (Diosdado Macapagal Ave., Pasay City), and have it cooked to your liking at nearby restaurants (PHP380 or $10.88 upwards for a kilo of shrimp).

8:30pm: Have a fun cocktail, like A Girl With Violet Eyes (a concoction of mixed berries, honey, apple rum, lychee and mint, PHP225; $6.45), at Rocket Room (G/F Bonifacio High Street Central, 7th Ave., Taguig City, +63 2 621-3222, www.facebook.com/RocketRoom). The place does weekly DJ parties from Thursdays to Saturdays.

Day Two
9am: For breakfast, tuck into waffles, red velvet cookies (PHP50; $1.43 upwards) and a 12-hour cold brew (PHP16; $4.58) at the quirky, not-crazily-packed Yardstick Coffee (106 Esteban St., Legazpi Village, Makati City, +63 2 845-0073, www.yardstickcoffee.com).

12pm: Local fare like herb-roasted pork belly (PHP685; $19.63) and milkfish braised in vinegar, sea salt and pepper corns (PHP365; $10.46) at XO 46 Heritage Bistro (G/F Le Grand Building, 130 Valero St., Salcedo Village, Makati City, +63 2 553-6632, www.facebook.com/pages/XO-46-Bistro-Filipino) make a good midday meal.

3pm: See ethnographic and archaeological exhibits at Ayala Museum (Dela Rosa St., Makati City, +63 2 757-3000, www.ayalamuseum.org), a small but very well-curated gallery.

7pm: Popular roadside joint El Chupacabra (5782 Felipe St cor. Polaris St., Makati City, +63 2 895-1919, www.facebook.com/Elchupacabraph) has some of the best street tacos (PHP80; $2.29 upwards) in town—the spicy chipotle shrimp version is especially tasty. Word of advice: book ahead.

9pm: Catch live music performances at cozy boho hangout SaGuijo Café + Bar (7612 Guijo St., San Antonio Village, Makati City, +63-2-897-8629, www.saguijo.com).

48 Hour Manic Manila
 Spend two days soaking up the restaurants, music and quirky characters of Makati and Pasay. By Delle Chan

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8:30pm: Have a fun cocktail, like A Girl With Violet Eyes (a concoction of mixed berries, honey, apple rum, lychee and mint, PHP225; $6.45), at Rocket Room (G/F Bonifacio High Street Central, 7th Ave., Taguig City, +63 2 621-3222, www.facebook.com/RocketRoom). The place does weekly DJ parties from Thursdays to Saturdays.

Day Two
9am: For breakfast, tuck into waffles, red velvet cookies (PHP50; $1.43 upwards) and a 12-hour cold brew (PHP16; $4.58) at the quirky, not-crazily-packed Yardstick Coffee (106 Esteban St., Legazpi Village, Makati City, +63 2 845-0073, www.yardstickcoffee.com).

12pm: Local fare like herb-roasted pork belly (PHP685; $19.63) and milkfish braised in vinegar, sea salt and pepper corns (PHP365; $10.46) at XO 46 Heritage Bistro (G/F Le Grand Building, 130 Valero St., Salcedo Village, Makati City, +63 2 553-6632, www.facebook.com/pages/XO-46-Bistro-Filipino) make a good midday meal.

3pm: See ethnographic and archaeological exhibits at Ayala Museum (Dela Rosa St., Makati City, +63 2 757-3000, www.ayalamuseum.org), a small but very well-curated gallery.

7pm: Popular roadside joint El Chupacabra (5782 Felipe St cor. Polaris St., Makati City, +63 2 895-1919, www.facebook.com/Elchupacabraph) has some of the best street tacos (PHP80; $2.29 upwards) in town—the spicy chipotle shrimp version is especially tasty. Word of advice: book ahead.

9pm: Catch live music performances at cozy boho hangout SaGuijo Café + Bar (7612 Guijo St., San Antonio Village, Makati City, +63-2-897-8629, www.saguijo.com).
ISLAND RETREAT

Private Paradise

If you want to feel like a baller but don’t have the dollars, here’s a heads up: the Philippines’ 125-acre Ariara Island is available for private bookings. The island resort features accommodation styled like a private home, personal chef and even spa services, with lots of activities including kayaking, diving, boating and trekking through the island’s forests. Bookings are available for groups of 15 to 17 for US$295 ($375) per person per night, for a minimum of seven nights. All activities and food are included in the price while return transfers cost US$600 ($763). For more information or to book, visit www.ariaraisland.com.

DESIGN FAIR

What Price Fame

Design-savvy travelers and obsessive knickknack collectors should check in at the Philippines’ massive annual design/lifestyle fair Manila Fame. The mega-event houses several smaller events, like Manila Wear, which features creations from local fashion designers, and the OTOP (one town, one product) showcase of local crafts. Happening on Mar 13-16 2015, it will take place at the SMX Convention Center. For details, head to www.manilafame.com.

HOTEL RENOVATION

Colonial Star

Built by the Americans after they acquired The Philippines from Spain, the Manila Hotel is located on Roxas Boulevard, facing Rizal Park, a memorial park named after a national hero, with Manila Bay to its back. After a major renovation a few years back, its 70 rooms now feature local decor touches, which basically translates to Spanish-influenced architecture using local materials like natural linens and rattan. Manila Hotel has hosted numerous American stars and politicians, including Michael Jackson and John F. Kennedy. Rooms start at 7000 PHP ($198) book online at www.manila-hotel.com.ph.

Live it up like a rock star in Philippines’ trendiest beach getaway, Boracay. We love this modern villa which comes complete with a rooftop infinity pool overlooking the clear blue sea, where you can just spend lazy days topping up your tan on the lush sun beds. It’s just a short walk from the beach, so other than strolling along the pristine beaches, you can also enjoy a spot of snorkeling or diving (adrenaline junkies should give cliff diving a shot). Boracay also has amazing seafood; you even pick up fresh seafood from a wet market and have it cooked for you at one of the nearby restaurants.

For more on Airbnb, turn to page 5.

A celebration of Singapore

The fourth edition of the where®GUESTBOOK™, the premier luxury guide for discerning travelers, will be published in March 2015.

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Yes, it’s perfectly possible to zen out in fast-paced, bustling Tokyo. The key is to live as the Japanese do: sleep in traditional tatami rooms on comfortable futons and meditate to calming views of manicured little gardens. You’ll soon be experiencing a whole new side to the city. While you’re there, you can’t possibly tire of Tokyo’s many wonders. If you have time for a relaxing day trip, take a scenic 30-minute train ride to the quaint district of Ota. There, tuck into fresh sashimi at local sushi bars, hit up Tsukiji Fish Market, take a dip in a public hot spring or visit the many local temples.

For more on Airbnb, turn to page 5
Darwin

Just a short drive from the airport is the biggest city in NT. Don’t expect a huge metropolis, though; walking from one end of the city center to another takes only half an hour.

**Do:** It sounds strange, but watching sunsets is a real obsession here. We got awesome views at Mindil Beach Sunset Market (www.mindil.com.au), which is touristy but worth it for cloud-watching on the beach while listening to trippy didgeridoo electronica. Outdoor movie screening series Deckchair Cinema (Jervois Rd., +61-8-8981-0700, www.deckchaircinema.com.au, from A$16) is also a must-do, with an impressive line-up of critically-acclaimed art house films and its own bar. Also nice at dusk are posh waterfront dining enclaves—a la Quayside Isle—Darwin Waterfront Lagoon (Kitchener Dr.) and Cullen Bay Marina (3/68 Marina Blvd., Larrakeyah, +61-8-8942-0400, www.cullenbaymarina.com.au).

**Eat:** Ducks’ Nuts (76 Mitchell St., +61-8-8942-2122, www.ducksnuts.com.au) is our pick for divine brunch food and coffee. At night, pan-Southeast Asian restaurant Hanuman (93 Mitchell St., +61-08-8941-3500, www.hanuman.com.au), which draws a dressed-up crowd night after night, is good. You can also go on a boozy dinner cruise with Darwin Harbour Cruises (www.darwinharbourcruises.com.au, A$89)—the buffet fare isn’t all that, but the setting and sea breeze more than make up for it. For drinks, there are plenty of backpacker pubs along Mitchell Street, but edgy, gay-friendly club Throb (1/64 Smith St., +61-8-8942-3435, www.facebook.com/Throbnightclub) offers a real alternative nightlife scene.

**Stay:** Rydges Darwin Resort (1 Sir Norman Breatly Dr., Marrara, +61-8-8920-3333, www.rydges.com, from A$209/night) resort is perfect for making the most of the tropical weather, although it’s next to the airport and you’d have to take a shuttle to the town center. If you want to stay in the city, there’s DoubleTree by Hilton (122 Esplanade, +61-8-8943-3600, doubletree.hilton.com, from A$169/night). Get a room on the top floor for a view of the harbor.

There’s not much literature on the Northern Territory (NT), one of the least populated parts of Australia. It’s not as glam as other regions—no lush vineyards or happening cityscapes here—but it does have a certain tropical charm. And since it’s only a four-hour flight away, it belongs in your rotation of long weekend getaways.
Edith Falls
If you’re driving or getting driven south, make time to stop by for a dip in this incredible natural plunge pool. It’s a little rocky underfoot, but swimming in the cool, clear water (fish and all) is to die for, especially when it’s hot out.

Nitmiluk National Park
This aborigine-owned national park is HQ for most travellers looking to visit the stunning Katherine Gorge (actually 13 linked gorges). Since it’s a half-day drive from Darwin city, we’d recommend staying for at least a couple of nights to really appreciate the sights.

Do: See Katherine Gorge, obviously, which you can do from above on a breathtaking 15-min helicopter ride from Nitmiluk Tours (www.nitmiluktours.com.au, A$99). They also do boat cruises and walks if you want to see the gorges up close. But it can be tricky to see more of the outback on your own, especially since mobile data coverage is spotty and it’s hard to get around. It pays to arrange a bespoke tour, try the excellent Indigofera Ecotours (www.indigofera.com.au, from A$189/person per day).


Tiwi Islands
NT is home to the country’s most significant indigenous community. Somewhere of an Aboriginal reserve—visiting permits required—the Tiwi Islands are one of the best places to learn about their culture and buy Aboriginal art. Tiwi Art Network organizes day trips to the islands (www.tiwiart.com, from A$128).

Adelaide River
About an hour’s drive away from Darwin is the Adelaide River, home to lots of big, fat crocodiles. You can see them up close, along with birds of prey, on the highly entertaining, crocodile-baiting Spectacular Jumping Crocodile Cruise (Anhem Hwy., +61-8-8978-9077, www.jumpingcrocodile.com.au, A$35). Nearby Fogg Dam Conservation Reserve is also a nice spot for birdwatching. II

ART
Marionettes and Butterflies
The 2015 Perth International Arts Festival is the longest running annual international multi-arts festival in the Southern Hemisphere (currently in its 63rd year). From Feb 3–Mar 7, festival-goers will see giant mechanical marionettes roaming the city by world-renowned French street theater company Royal de Luxe and a production of the late Anthony Minghella’s Madama Butterfly (based on the Puccini opera), along with other music, film, visual and street arts and literary events. Find out more at corporate.perthfestival.com.au.

PARTY
Rainbow Bright
The world’s most famous LGBT celebration, Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras (www.mardigras.org.au), is back Feb 20–Mar 8 with a packed schedule of vibrant parties and cultural events. The two-week long celebration includes free and ticketed parties, theater and musical performances, film screenings, visual art exhibitions and the iconic Mardi Gras parade, which will take place Mar 7.

ADVENTURE
Heartbreak Bridge
And while you’re in Sydney, check out the Harbour Bridge. Everyone does the walks, but with good weather from December to March, there are some other “elevated” options: The Bridge Climb (www.bridgeclimb.com) gives you all the climbing equipment and know-how you need to climb the 134-meter Harbour Bridge—there are stunning views when you get to the top. For something even more adrenaline-packed, take a ride on the Oz Jet (www.ozjetboating.com), a white-knuckle boat trip with breakneck turns, 360-degree spins and rapid stops. You’ll end up soaking wet but it’s a great way to see all of Sydney’s different coves and bays.

SURFING
Suburban Surf
Not far outside Sydney, the NSW suburb of Newcastle is synonymous with beaches. The best way to experience them is with a stroll along Bathers Way, from the dining hub of Honeysuckle around Nobby’s Lighthouse and Headland to Glenrock Reserve. This scenic, 5km stretch of coastline packs in some spectacular views of six beaches, as well as reminders of Newcastle’s industrial and convict past. And, if you’re a surfer, don’t miss Australia’s biggest annual surfing festival, Surfest, held Feb 11-12 which features a series of world class surfing competitions. Find out more at www.surfest.com.

FOOD FESTIVAL
Want Food, Will Travel
Who doesn’t love food festivals? All that sumptuous food paired with quality Australian wine! If you’re like us and will travel for a good meal, you’ll be glad to hear that the Melbourne Food & Wine Festival will return Feb 27-Mar 15 for 17 days of culinary fun. There will be a program of classes, lunches, wine tastings and more, with The Langham Melbourne Masterclass on Mar 7-8 and The Bank of Melbourne’s World’s Longest Lunch (which will see 1,500 people sit down at a whopping 530-meter long table for lunch) on Feb 27. More info at www.melbournefoodandwine.com.au.

Get a modern beachfront pad just a short walk away from Sydney’s famous Bondi Beach and you’ll be living the beach life in no time—just imagine waking up to amazing sea views every morning and spending long, lazy days at the beach. Plus, you can have your own backyard BBQ any time, in true Aussie style. Apart from the beach, Bondi is home to plenty of restaurants, cafés and bars serving great food with the awesome views. You can also pick up surfing and check out local live music.

For more on airbnb, turn to page 5.
What’s the best thing about the life of a photographer?
Having a camera as your tool can bring you experiences and insights you would not have thought of before, both the world around you and into yourself. It’s a bit like having a dog that drags you into the curbside’s thicket—the camera can have an equally strong pull. If you ever need an excuse to explore strange hidden places, weird friendly people or do crazy things, then become a photographer.

What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done for a shoot?
Stripping off to crawl and roll in mud. It did feel like I was re-enacting evolution and traveling through time—close to the beginning or the end of times, when the earth is ruled by mudskippers.

A few quick tips to get better shots?
When visiting unknown places and foreign countries, I believe it is foremost about seeing and experiencing, not about photographing. More and more people seem to only live the moment to post it around the world in order to prove that they have lived it. Do the opposite—take your time, linger, absorb your surroundings, the people, the buildings, streets and sounds, the smells. Respect everything, including your own hesitation. Push yourself a bit without forcing it. Feel at ease with getting lost. Get closer. Retreat if you feel uncomfortable. Visit the same places again and again if you have the time. Hang out with the people there, make friends. Forget everything you know about photography and photographers. Enjoy taking photos.

What advice would you give to aspiring photographers?
At some point you will probably ask yourself, why put photos into a world that is already flooded with millions of images every day? Ultimately the answer cannot be found in photo books, the Internet or exhibitions. If you want to creating images that are more than just a pleasant handicraft, you have to explore yourself as much as you explore the world around you with your camera. If you honestly listen to your longings, motivations, failures and fears, your work will communicate to the viewer on a profound level. It is never about the gear in the first place, but all about expression.

What equipment should an amateur photographer pack to take on holiday?
Pack two simple cameras, a digital and an analog one. Once you feel you are just shooting too much, take out your analogue camera, relax and click when you really feel it. Surprise yourself when you pick up the prints after you returned. Maybe take along two fixed lenses; leave all the zoom stuff at home. Restrict yourself in the beginning, and your restraints will guide you and most likely be liberating in the end.

Philipp Aldrup
The German photographer may be based in Singapore and busy doing great work here (he’s exhibited at Objectifs and Artistry, as well as shot The Observatory’s latest album—see his work at www.uebersee.com.sg/philippaldrup) but he still has travel photography tricks to share with Eimear Elkington.

“I is foremost about seeing and experiencing, not about photographing”
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