travel world

INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE





Letter from the Editor

Winter brings stories of fun and snowy adventures such as skiing in the Republic of Georgia, tobaganning in Quebec, and mushing with sled dogs carrying mail in British Columbia. In this issue of TravelWorld Magazine these seasonal stories are woven between an exceptional variety of tales from the worldwide travels of our NATJA writers.

There is the comedic tale of our roving pals as they trek across Route 66, where Part 11 of their story continues with more hilarious escapades.

An incredible safari experience in Uganda is shared, with photography of all sorts of animals, the native people, and the source of the Nile.

The Venice Carnival in The Time of Casanova depicts a colorful fantasy world of costumes and drama where people enjoy altering their identies.

While a winter tour of Fredericksberg, Texas presents a look at the festive and extensive German culture in an American town, a Travel Guide of Düsseldorf, presents the history and growth of an actual Geman town.

Some classical and unusual adventures can be experienced in New Brunswick, Canada, such as gourmet dining on the sand while awaiting the incoming tide, the Canadian Ballet's unique, outddoor "Ballet at the Ocean", and tales of Sturgeon fishing and Caviar.

The extensive knowledge of a wine conneseur shares how the Willamette Wineries in Oregon have much to offer.

Spend 48 hours in Tyrol and experience the cultures of Italy, Austria, and Germany, all in one beautiful location.

Enjoy!!

Joy Bushmeyer, Editor in Chief

Cover Photo

Cover Photo provided by Tim Leffel

Not only does Tim Leffel (NATJA Board Member and Advisor) love to ski, but he likes to do it in style, without crowds, and without excessive spending! He found the perfect spot, Gudauri, in the Republic of Georgia! It's groomed and gorgeous and Tim and friends enjoyed tasty cuisine and beverages with like snow enthusiasts and even paragliders!

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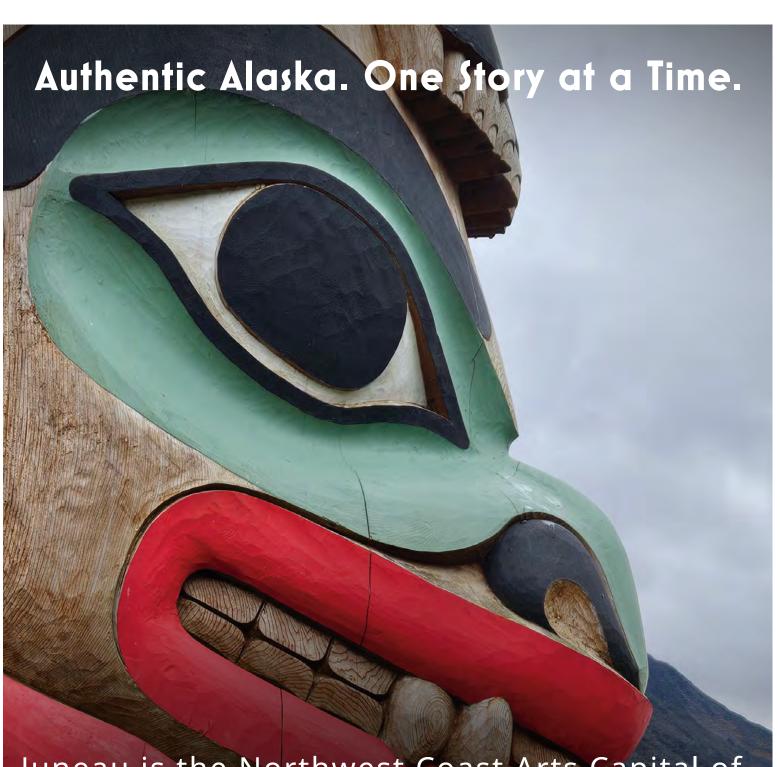
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SKIING ABOVE THE TREE LINE

In Gudauri, in the Republic of Georgia

Story and Photos by Tim Leffel



ollow me!" Phillip said as he headed over the hill from the lift toward an area where I didn't see any other skiers.
"Is there a trail here?" I asked as we avoided a boulder sticking out of the snow and made fresh tracks on a steep slope.

"We're making one!" he replied with glee.
There was no turning back at that point, so I made quick survival turns down the face of the mountain, watching for hazards. Ten minutes later, we ended up on a flatter, groomed run.

When you go skiing or snowboarding in the Republic of Georgia, you're completely above the tree line, with trail markers more of a loose suggestion than a required path. With lift tickets priced at less than \$30 a day, there are few rules on the mountain and even fewer workers to enforce them. Sure, ski patrol will show up eventually if you do something stupid and get injured, but it's nobody's job to police where you're headed when you make your way down from one of the four gondolas and 10 chairlifts.

Officially, there are 75 kilometers of trails (47 miles) at Gudauri Ski Resort, but that only measures what's named and maintained. When you count the off-piste areas, this winter wonderland rivals the terrain you'd experience in the Rocky Mountains at resorts costing 10 times as much. This might be the best ski or snowboard bang for your buck in the world. You can spend days here without getting bored, with fun cruising trails that go on for miles, double black diamond equivalents that host giant slalom races, and hidden chutes that challenge anyone looking for adventure.



Gudauri trail markers in two languages



Groomed slopes + off-piste options



Spring skiing pit stops with a view at Guduari



Spring skiing pit stops with a view at Guduari



Spring skiing pit stops with a view at Guduari

saw that the season officially runs until mid-April, so I got a group together to head there in early March, figuring we'd get some nice spring skiing rather than blizzard conditions requiring a dozen layers of clothing. We ended up getting more sunshine than we wanted at the end — layers down to one or two on the last day as the snow started turning to slush. Even the locals who didn't know much English knew the phrase for this.

"Global warming," they would say with a sigh. This was usually followed by a more encouraging phrase: "Snowstorm coming next week." We'd be gone by then, but the local business owners had their fingers crossed.

At the prices we were experiencing — including \$2.50 slopeside beers or glasses of Georgian wine — it was hard to complain about the weather getting too warm. We would hit the far side of the resort in the morning and ski the longest, steepest slope until the line for the gondola started turning into a free-for-all. Then we'd explore the other mountains and lifts, taking a break somewhere for a bite or a drink, and doing it all again until the snow got too soft. That was our sign to meet up at our favored après-ski bar. One benefit of the weather: the bar was outdoors, and we could keep soaking up the mountain atmosphere without ever getting cold.

In a country like Georgia, a foreign visitor earning dollars or euros can order nearly anything on offer without worrying about the price. Since I will never know that feeling in Park City, Aspen or Whistler, I savored it at Gudauri. We could act like we were loaded as we debated which restaurant in the ski village was worth trying that night, then ordered a feast once we sat down.



A sampling of Georgian wine

he dining selection was better than expected in this purpose-built collection of condos, hotels and places to feed skiers. We had some passable Italian, some quite good Indian and loads of hearty Georgian food. If you're gluten-free and avoiding dairy, it's trouble, but if you like comfort food after a day of hard skiing, it's hard to beat Georgian khinkali (dumplings filled with meat or mushrooms), Adjarian khachapuri (baked bread with egg, butter and aged cheese) or nigvziani nadrijani (rolled eggplant stuffed with walnut spread).

Thankfully, there were English versions of the menus since the beautiful Georgian script looks like something a fantasy author invented — all swirls and circles that must give schoolchildren penmanship nightmares. The biggest bar in the ski village, Drunk Cherry, had its large sign in Georgian letters, one character resembling the number 3 in English and another looking like a three-fingered hand with a curved thumb pointing down.

I've been skiing since high school but never encountered a place so easy on the wallet, even though this is the biggest ski resort in the country. I've also never been to one this large where there wasn't a single tree to avoid. The trails are groomed and well maintained, but with the snow as soft as it was during our spring visit, we could veer off almost anywhere without worrying about hitting an ice patch.

After three days of exploring the mountain — and with a few people in my group even going up for a paragliding experience — we spent the last day away from the ski village to see more of Georgia. We set out for the town of Stepantsminda, renamed Kazbegi by the Russians a century ago and still better known by that name in excursion descriptions. This scenic area attracts plenty of Georgians and curious Russians, too: the border is only seven miles away.



Adjarian khachapuri (baked bread with egg, butter, and aged cheese)





Georgian khinkali (delicious dumplings filled with meat or mushrooms)



Leffel on the slopes



Skiing above the treeline in Georgia

f 8

he main attraction is a monastery at the top of a Gergeti Trinity Church, built in the 14th century. The dramatic views of it from a distance are almost matched by the Mount Kazbek close-ups from the monastery itself. It's easy to imagine monks feeling the power of a higher being when looking out at nature's geological drama from up here. up even more in the capital city of

We also visited sculptor Merab Piranishvili's head statues in Sno mountain, the centerpiece being Village, the artist himself sitting nearby and taking donations. We had one of the best meals of the trip at Rooms Hotel, where the food and cocktails lived up to the mountain panorama visible through the glass wall and from the terrace.

After we left, the temperatures heated

Tbilisi, where we finished our trip. I was walking around without a jacket in the afternoon. A few days later, though, word came that a huge snowstorm had hit Gudauri and the mountains got a fresh dumping of powder. Maybe the season kept going into April after all, but we already had our great memories of swooshing down the slopes and exploring the nearby mountain towns of Georgia.



Tim Leffel is the author of several books, including The World's Cheapest Destinations, and is the editor of the online magazine Perceptive Travel, founded in 2006. He also runs the Substack newsletter Nomadico. See more at TimLeffel.com.

"Drunk Cherry"



Ski village bar with a view

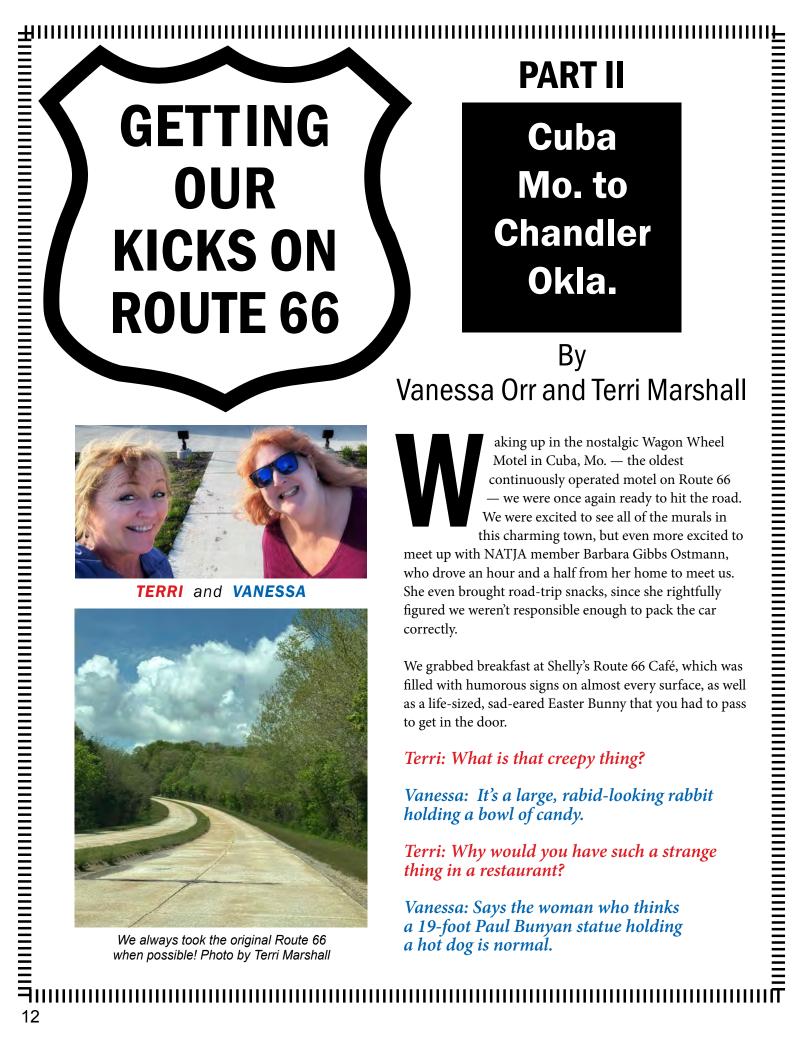


Gergeti Trinity Church



Sculptures of historic Georgian figures at Sno Village







Welcome to Cuba, Missouri's Mural Mecca Photo by Terri Marshall



Perhaps the world's creepies Easter Bunny Photo by Terri Marshall



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A.J. Barnett was the first cashier of People's Bank in Cuba and owned the first Model T in town. Photo by Vanessa Orr

While eating breakfast, we almost convinced Barbara to hop in the car and head to California with us,

but because she has better sense as well as a trip to Mexico two days later — she politely declined. But we did spend a few hours together enjoying "Route 66 Mural City" before saying our goodbyes and heading to Fanning, Mo., and the Fanning Outpost General Store home to the world's largest rocking chair.

There, we picked up some Route Beer (spelled correctly) for the road and attempted to find the bathroom. The owner has a peculiar sense of humor, as evidenced by his labeling every door "Not the bathroom," which is amusing until you actually need one. After a bit of searching and some luck, we were able to leave with our dignity intact.

Dignity went right out the door, however, when we came upon Uranus Fudge Factory and General Store in St. Robert, Mo., where Terri made us pose as the ass-ends of various animals. Yes, you read that right.

Terri: Come on! It will be fun! You can pose in a giraffe, or an elephant or a zebra! Think of the pictures!

Vanessa: I am. Which is exactly why I'm saying no.

Of course we did it, and now we shouldn't show our faces in public—especially considering where they've been.



Amelia Earhart mural in Cuba, MO. Photo by Vanessa Orrl



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The World's Largest Rocking Chair at the Fanning Outpost General Store. We never did figure out how to get on it. Photo by Vanessa Orr



At the Fanning Outpost General Store, there are a lot of doors. And only one of them is the bathroom. Photo by Vanessa Orr



On the Mother Road, you've got to have some Route Beer. Photo by Vanessa Orr

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Terri in a zebra's uranus. Photo by Vanessa Orr.



Worlds Largest Belt Buckle Discovered in Uranus Photo by Terri Marshall

ranus is filled with every touristy product imaginable, as well as every imaginable pun on the word — just like this sentence. It is a must-stop, if only to experience the sensory overload of the store, sideshow museum and the world's largest belt buckle all in one place.



You can see exactly how thrilled Vanessa is about being a giraffe's ass. Photo by Terri Marshall ≒......π



Uranus Police Car because someone has to keep Uranus safe. Photo by Terri Marshall



You haven't had real fun until you've spent some time in Uranus. Photo by Vanessa Orr.jpg

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Rolling into the Sunflower State Photo by Terri Marshall

MOTORMOUTHS AND GEARHEADS

Only 13 miles of Route 66 run through Kansas, but each one is utterly amazing. Vanessa couldn't hit the brakes fast enough when we saw cars and trucks with big googly eyes looking at us — who knew characters from the movie "Cars" were alive and well and living in Galena, Kan.? We visited with Tow Mater and friends and spent time with Melba "The Mouth" Rigg — one of the owners of Cars on the Route — who talks so fast that we had no idea what she actually said, but we enjoyed the conversation anyway.

Right down the street, Gearhead Curios owner Aaron Perry has built the most amazing bathroom (stay with us here) in an old Texaco station. You enter with a key connected to a full-sized hubcap — no way anyone is pocketing that key anytime soon.

Aaron designed every detail of the blue-lightlit bathroom, which features a 1952 pink toilet, a pink-and-white checkered floor, a powder-coated funnel stand-up urinal for women, and lights made from car parts. There's even a brass horn to let people know when the deed is done. Of course, we had to take another embarrassing photo while inside, because we still haven't learned any better.



You have to stop and say Hi to Tow Mater in Galena, KS. Photo by Vanessa Orr



We figured we had a good chance of outrunning this cruiser. Photo by Vanessa Orr



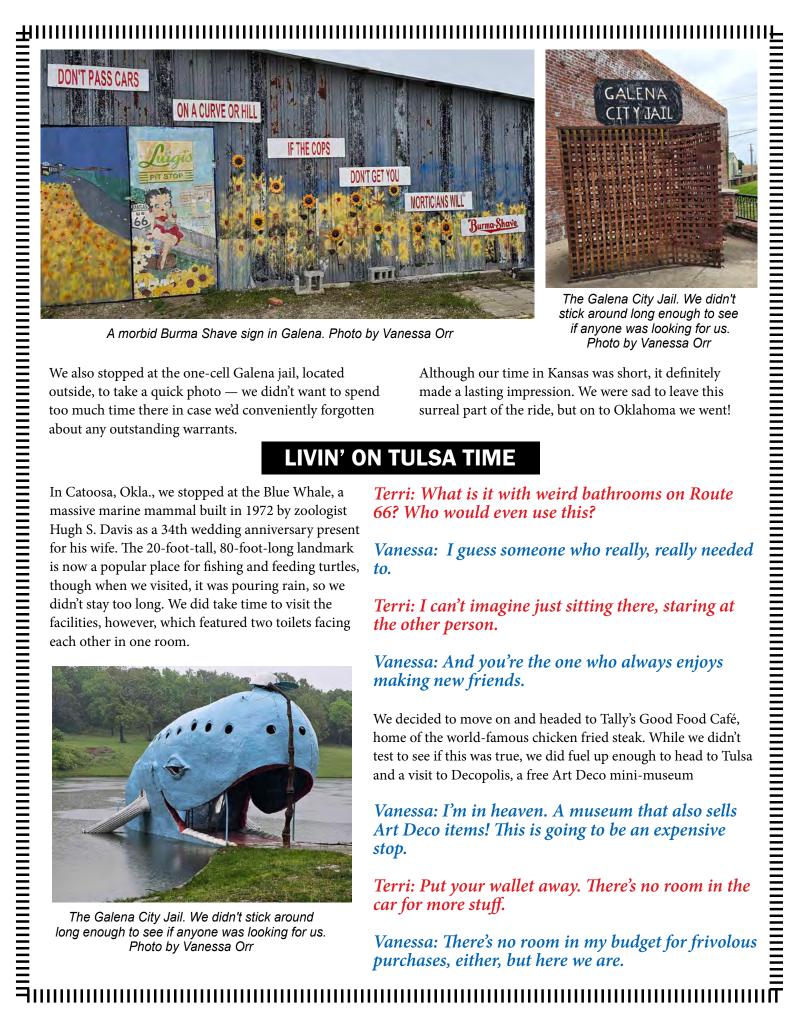
Melba the Mouth with friend in Galena, KS. Photo by Vanessa Orr



Aaron Perry of Gearhead Curios loves to share his story and his insane motorhead bathroom. Photo by Vanessa Orr



Gearhead Curios' ceiling is filled with license plates gifted by visitors from across the world. Photo by Vanessa Orr









A stunning Art Deco mural in Tulsa, OK. Photo by Vanessa Orr



The beauty of Art Deco! At Decopolis in Tulsa, OK. Photo by Vanessa Orr

fter much discussion (and

only a few small purchases), we left the store to tour Tulsa, which has one of the largest collections of Art Deco architecture in the U.S. Many of the city's buildings especially in the Art Deco District were erected during the town's oil boom in the 1920s and '30s.



A stunning Art Deco mural in Tulsa, OK. Photo by Vanessa Orr



Oklahoma Giant Native American Chief Photo by Terri Marshall.



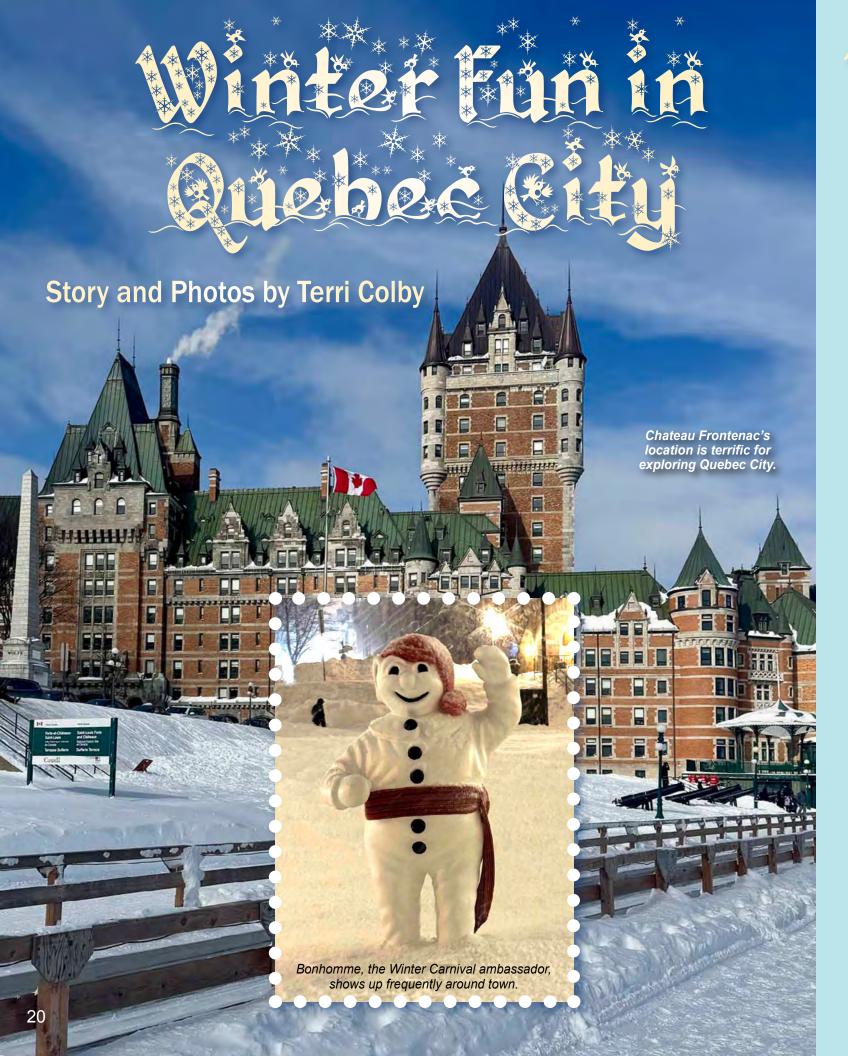
The Lincoln Motel welcomes weary visitors with a bright neon sign. Photo by Vanessa Orr

We turned in for the night at the retro Lincoln Motel in Chandler, Okla., beckoned by its 1950s bright red and green neon sign. We needed rest before heading into Texas, where everything is supposedly bigger and better something we couldn't possibly imagine at that point.



It's actually not that surprising to see a massive space cowboy on Route 66. Photo by Vanessa Orr

Follow us all the way to Santa Monica, CA in the next two TravelWorld International issues!





hen snow blows sideways and temperatures drop well below freezing, my happy place is a comfy chair in front of a crackling fire with a warm drink and a good book.

But earlier this year, I discovered the thrills of outdoor winter vacations,

and now there's no going back. My February welcome to Quebec City came amid threatening snowstorms and plummeting temperatures.

Celebrating winter is simply what they do in the capital of Canada's province of Quebec. The seasonal average snowfall is 120 inches, and locals know how to make the most of it.

So on a Saturday morning, as temperatures hovered near 1 degree Fahrenheit, I traded my heavy coat and boots for a bathing suit and spa robe and jumped into an outdoor pool. Yes, the pool was heated — but still, I surprised myself.

At the Strøm Nordic Spa, less than a half-hour drive from downtown, locals were lined up before the doors opened, eager to visit the sauna and steam rooms, as well as the lazy river that starts indoors and meanders outside alongside mounds of snow. Some people wore knitted hats, but most were bareheaded and smiling, their breath visible in the cold.

There's also a salt room, a cold-plunge pool and a heated infinity pool overlooking the St. Lawrence River. It was so cold that rising steam from the warm water occasionally obscured the view. Invigorating — and memorable. (stromspa.com)

But that wasn't the only winter activity that made me want to return. I was lucky enough to be in town during the 2025 Quebec Winter Carnival, billed as the world's largest, drawing more than 500,000 people.

Night parades, musical performances, ice canoe racing, ice and snow sculpting, and groups of revelers brave enough to play in the snow wearing only bathing suits are all part of the fun. Games and competitions for children and adults add to the festivities.

The carnival is presided over by Bonhomme Carnaval, a 7-foot-tall snowman wearing a red hat and traditional Quebec arrow sash. You'll see his friendly likeness all around town.



The heated infinity pool at Strom Nordic Spa is a delight, even with temperatures cold enough to produce steam over warm water.



Snow doesn't keep spa goers inside, but there are plenty of warm places to relax after an outdoor swim.



The heated infinity pool at Strom Nordic Spa is a delight, even with temperatures cold enough to produce steam over warm water.



Snow doesn't keep tourists away from the Petit Champlain shopping district, and it is worth a visit.



Snow doesn't necessarily force artists indoors during Quebec City's winters.



The Hotel Glace, or Ice Hotel, is built anew each winter in Quebec City.

Note the bartender's warm gloves as he preps drinks. You'll need something similar if you choose to imbibe, the glassware is made of ice.



he carnival is presided over by Bonhomme Carnaval, a 7-foot-tall snowman wearing a red hat and traditional Quebec arrow sash. You'll see his friendly likeness all around town.

The 2026 Winter Carnival is scheduled for Feb. 6-15. Details are available at quebec-cite.com/en/what-to-do-quebec-city/events/quebec-winter-carnival.

But winter celebrations in Quebec City don't happen only during carnival season.

During the holidays, twinkling lights transform the city's cobblestone streets and centuries-old stone buildings into a fairy-tale setting, especially when snow is falling.

Make time to stop for a hot chocolate at one of the cafés in North America's oldest shopping district, the Petit-Champlain in Old Quebec's lower town. Boutiques line the picturesque pedestrian streets. It's fun and easy to take the funicular near the famed Château Frontenac hotel down to the lower town and the Petit-Champlain.

Quebec City was founded in the early 1600s as the capital of New France, and echoes of that history remain in modern Quebec City, where French is predominant. Named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985, the historic district, according to UNESCO, "is the only North American city to have preserved its ramparts, together with the numerous bastions, gates and defensive works which still surround Old Quebec."

One structure with a much shorter history adds delight to winter festivities: the Hôtel de Glace, or Ice Hotel. Now in its 26th year, it is the only ice hotel in North America and is rebuilt each winter. You can book an overnight stay in one of 30 rooms or tour the larger facility during the day. (quebec-cite.com/en/businesses/hotel-deglace)

Built with about 3,000 blocks of ice and 35,000 tons of snow, it's a must-see even if you don't spend the night. Intricate carvings and sculptures create an icy art gallery, and you can stop at the ice bar for a drink — just be sure to wear mittens to hold onto the ice-forged glassware.

Weather permitting, the Ice Hotel is scheduled to open Jan. 4-March 15, 2026. The year will also mark the second season for its ice restaurant, serving a three-course menu on select nights for adventurous diners.

Even if you're not spending the night, you can stop by the Ice Hotel for a cocktail.



nother winter must-do in Quebec City—carnival or not—is a toboggan ride on Dufferin Terrace beside the Château Frontenac. The wooden slide, built in 1844 before the château itself, may be the city's oldest attraction. For about \$5 U.S., you grab a four-seat toboggan at the base of the slide and get ready to fly. The only downside: You must carry the toboggan

all the way to the top. But the exhilaration — and the hoots and hollers from other riders — make it worth it.

There's a wide variety of places to stay.

The Château Frontenac can be pricey, but as a grand dame hotel opened in 1893, it has hosted world leaders and celebrities in its castle-like perch over the St. Lawrence River. It offer

Other options include the Monastère des Augustines, a former convent now focused on wellness, or Le Germain Hotel Quebec, a boutique property that is part of a Canadian chain.

Foodies will find plenty to love. This year, the famed Michelin Guide awarded nine stars across the province of Quebec — five of them in Quebec City. That includes Tanière³, the only restaurant in the province with two stars.

Beyond fine dining, visitors should try poutine, one of Canada's most famous foods. This traditional Quebec dish is a warm, comforting mix of French fries, cheese curds and gravy — perfect for a winter day.

A few places worth trying include Le Chic Shack, with a creative variety of toppings; Brasserie Artisanale La Korrigane, a microbrewery; and Frite Alors! with its classic version.

Don't miss your chance to embrace the wonders of winter in a city with endless outdoor options.

But if a crackling fire calls your name, you can do that too.

The city's tourist office even offers a list of restaurants with fireplaces: quebec-cite.com/en/restaurants-quebec-city/restaurants-with-fireplace.

The two pleasures are not mutually exclusive — and both are best enjoyed when snow is swirling.



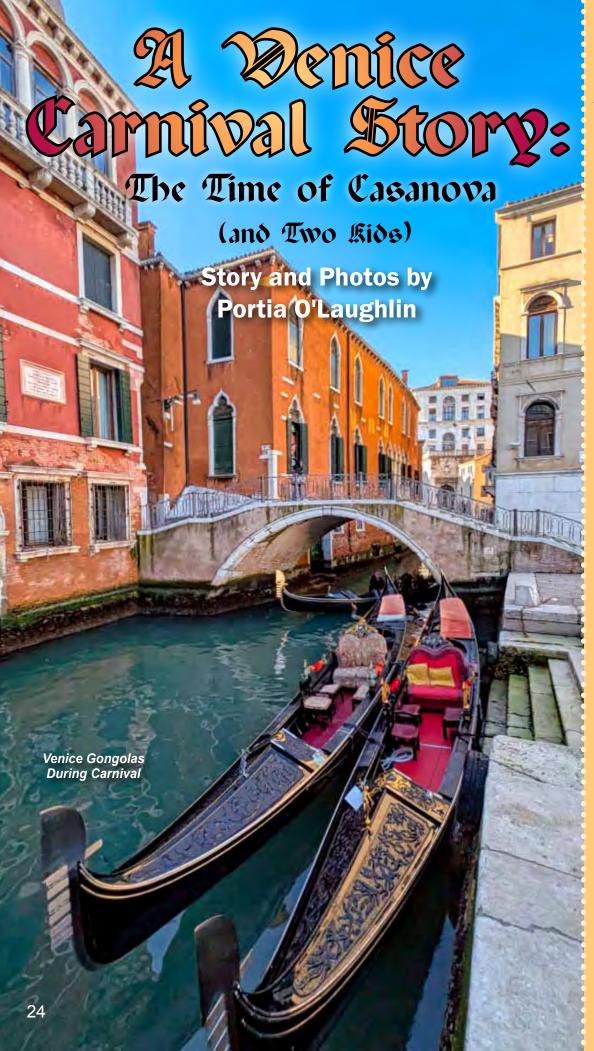
The toboggan slide on Dufferin Terrace adjacent to Chateau Frontenac is great fun during winter in Quebec City.



The toboggan slide in Quebec City has been a popular attraction for a long time.



Chateau Frontenac is a magnificent and often photographed backdrop to a winter holiday.





f you've ever watched your smooth start to the day sail away, then you'll know

the feeling of seeing the hotel shuttle pull off as you watch through the window. I scrambled to draft a backup plan and led the kids toward Giudecca Palanca B — the ferry stop just down the block (which meant crossing two bridges, by the way).

I was second-guessing every step. Checking the map. Hoping I'd gotten the stop right. I still wonder if I ended up at the correct meeting point, but this is exactly why I book free tours in cities I don't know: minimal risk, lots of upside.

Yesterday had been a full travel circus, from missed ferries to wrong stops. So I promised myself today would start better. At least breakfast exceeded expectations. The Hilton Molino Stucky buffet made up for everything: fresh pastries, fruit, espresso and, surprisingly, prosecco chilling beside the glasses like an invitation to be slightly fancy before 9 a.m. You could pour a mimosa or skip the juice and just call it self-care.

We boarded the ferry to San Marco, the lagoon's cool breeze telling us to get ready. We arrived too late for the tour, so we pivoted and wandered instead, turning what felt like a setback into one of the best starts of the trip.



Pausing on one of Venice's quiet bridges.



rossing a small bridge, I caught a flash of pastel color: three people gliding toward us in full Venetian costume — ruffles,

brocade, pistachio green and candypink swirls. The kids lit up. I fumbled for my phone as fast as I could manage, hoping not to miss the shot.

My son whispered, "Whoa. Is that what you meant?" Exactly.
We had been traveling for nearly two months. We'd watched the sun set behind Portugal's sea cliffs, posed with Spider-Man at Disneyland Paris and taken the Agadir cable car to the Oufella.

But this — one of our final stops before returning home — was what I had been looking forward to. My milestone 50th-birthday trip. The one I'd promised myself. In that moment, every missed shuttle, late ferry and improvised plan had led us right here.

Every turn revealed another surprise: bridges stacked over still water, alleys ending in café tables and mask vendors inviting you to choose one or maybe even two. Costumed strangers moved through it all like living art and reveled in the attention.



Three strangers in pistachio green and pink swirls, the AHA moment.



The queen of hearts had never looked so Venetian.



Up close, the details blur between art and imagination



Lady in Peacock costume passes by in alley.



between beauty and the macabre — Carnival is also about confronting masks of mortality.



Venice Carnival under the spotlight



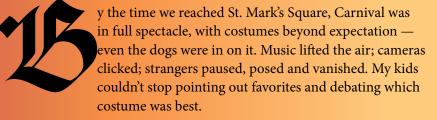
a living artwork inspired by East and West in dialogue.



Carnival transforms strangers into characters.



Even the dogs dress for Carnival.



Inside Doge's Palace, the world changed tempo. I lingered on the Golden Staircase, a gilded ascent that once marked the entrance for visiting nobility. It's one of those places where everyone pauses, waiting their turn to take it in before they ascend to the third floor. The kids were looking forward to the armory. I lingered under the goldceilinged room, frozen for a moment, trying to take it all in.

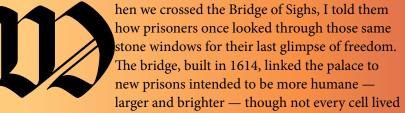


Winter spirits of Venice. A costumed couple posing in St. Mark's Square, part performance, part living art, and entirely Venice.



Bridge of Sighs at night, where Venice exhales its history.

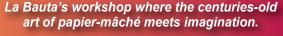
up to the promise.



shops. It was mask heaven, with walls and shelves completely covered. I don't think there was a single square inch left open. In the workshop area, blank white models waited for color and imagination. My daughter chose pink and gold with feathers and glitter; my son went with long-nosed and mischievous. We painted, laughed and paused time in that little room. I realized it would've

been the perfect place to rent a costume, too.

We hurried to our next stop, La Bauta, one of Venice's oldest mask





Wearing her hand-painted mask near the Rialto Bridge.

hat afternoon, we took a
Casanova walking tour.
Our guide was animated,
her stories part history,
part neighborhood
gossip. She told us about
his escapes, his charm
and the blurred line between myth and
truth while pointing out significant stops
in his life.

On her suggestion, we stopped for fritelle at Rosa Salva — warm, sugary and exactly the kind of indulgence a long day requires. The Venetian hot chocolate was so thick it bordered on dessert sauce and made the perfect pairing.

She explained how Carnival once allowed everyone to be equal for a few days, how the mask erased class. We loved that idea



Fritelle from Rosa Salva, a sweet victory after a long day of wandering.



Daughter in her princess mask

— that everyone gets to play the same game.

Venice has always known how to turn life into theater. That's what makes Carnival so disarming; it's not a show, it's an event you take part in. You can paint masks, wander alleys or simply watch strangers play royalty. You slip into a centuries-old habit of pretending until pretending feels real. For a few days, you're liberated from the responsibility of who you normally are.

That night, we made our way back to St. Mark's Square. The 2025 Venice Carnival theme seemed fitting: The Time of Casanova, celebrating the 300th anniversary of the adventurer's birth. On stage, the Cutting of the Bull's Head was underway. Compagnia L'Arte dei Mascareri reenacted the centuriesold ritual with the Pantakin theater company. The performance replayed a piece of Venetian history: the Doge's 1162 victory over a rebellious patriarch and his 12 feudal lords. What began as a grim warning centuries ago had become pure spectacle, complete with laughter, music and masks shining under the floodlights.

When the ceremony ended, the energy shifted. Music flooded the square. Smoke drifted through beams of red and gold light. People began to dance. It was just another night of Carnival, but it felt like the grand finale. You know that feeling when you don't know if it's the last time you'll experience something? That's what it felt like for me.

As I danced in my own little corner of the square, I caught the eye of a woman in costume across the crowd. We both laughed and connected in spirit, sharing a moment before my kids tugged on me, wiped out and ready to go. I couldn't stop smiling. Maybe I looked ridiculous. I didn't care. Venice stretches a moment until it fills your whole heart.

The walk back through the quiet alleys felt almost private — the kind of silence that belongs only to people who stayed out too late — though it was barely 9 p.m. In truth, we were searching for an open WC and failing miserably, laughing as we gave up. At the pier, the water slapped against the stone in a soft rhythm. The air smelled salty and sweet, like a surprise you couldn't have imagined. Venice still glowed, but slower now, as if even the city was ready for sleep.

I thought about how Carnival began as an invitation to let go and step outside yourself for a while. That's why it worked so perfectly for us.

For those few days, I wasn't the organized mom keeping everyone on schedule. I was just there — laughing, painting, dancing and taking it all in alongside my kids.

Next year, Venice will celebrate

Olympus: The Origins of the Game,
a Carnival honoring the spirit of the
2026 Milan-Cortina Olympics and
the city's ancient love of play. It's the
perfect evolution from Casanova's
year of imagination. From masks
to regattas, from tightrope walkers
to human pyramids, Venice has
always blurred the line between art,
sport and spectacle. It tested my
balance between control and wonder,
discipline and joy.

We did not find Carnival. It found us, reminding us that life itself is the game — unpredictable, messy and amazing. Venice simply gives us permission to play again. That, I think, is the real trick to travel.



St. Mark's Square at night. The Time of Casanova brought to life in light and music.

IF YOU GO:

Venice Carnival 2026

"Olympus: The Origins of the Game"

DATES: January 31-February 17, 2026

THEME: A tribute to play, imagination and the Olympic spirit celebrating the connection between body, art and freedom.

DON'T MISS:

- The Venice Carnival Street Show is bringing performances to Mestre, Burano, and beyond.
- The fantastic water spectacle at the Arsenale is a breathtaking fusion of dance, light, and music.
- La Bauta Mask Workshops are still one of the best hands-on family experiences in the city.
- Fritelle at Rosa Salva. Venice's sweetest victory lap.

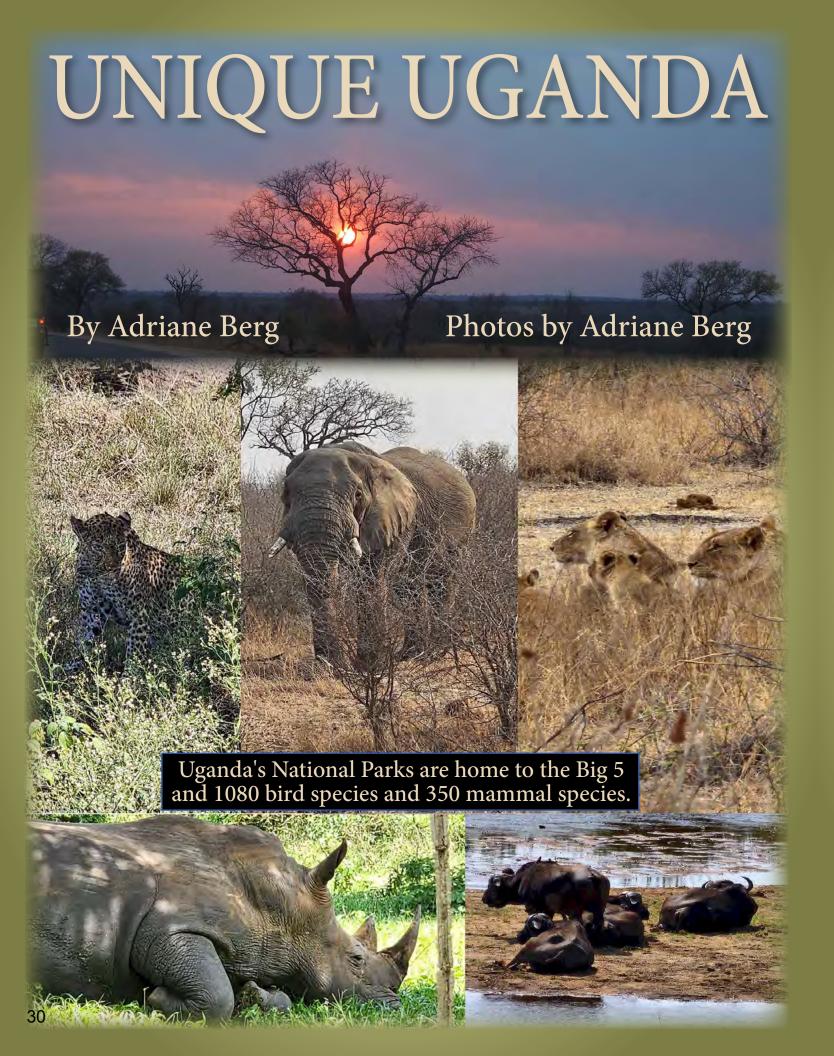
FAMILY TIP:

Stay on Giudecca or the Lido for quieter nights and easy ferry rides into the main festivities.

MORE INFO: www.carnevale.venezia.it



Venice Carnival Street Show





There are 20 Mountain Gorilla families in the Impenetrable Forest and five in the area where I trekked.

ituated on the Equator in East Africa, Uganda is The Pearl of Africa.

For wildlife adventure and cultural immersion, Uganda is a stellar choice. During my 20-day visit, I encountered the Big Five: lion, elephant, buffalo, rhino and elusive leopard.

Uganda is poised for a tourism explosion with 3,300 square miles devoted to its 10 national parks (and six more recently announced).



There are 20 Mountain Gorilla families in the Impenetrable Forest and five in the area where I trekked.

Currently, the country is best known as a destination to trek to see mountain gorillas. Uganda is home to more than 50% of the world's population of silverbacks and their families.

So, let's go trekking!

The Impenetrable Forest

My gorilla experience began in Bwindi, the gateway to Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Before I got on my way, I was treated to a community show and outfitted with leg gaiters, a walking stick and a face mask to protect the gorillas from my germs. Tip: Bring your own collapsible poles. The stick is heavy.

The guides paired me with six other trekkers for an early morning start. Tip: Tell the guides about your walking pace preference so they can organize you with people of similar speed. My group was well matched, down to our mutual anxiety that we wouldn't find gorillas. We all bought a one-day pass (\$800), and this was our only shot

Not to worry. Professional trackers set out early to trace the gorillas' movements from the previous day. When I arrived at the Buhoma Visitors' Center, the guides had a fair idea of the locations.

My group walked ever so quietly through the richly biodiverse forest with our guide and two armed guards. Then ... suddenly ... we came upon a family headed by a watchful silverback, four children and two females, grooming, eating and dozing, but ever aware of our presence.

We were told the gorillas would not disturb us unless we seemed dangerous to them. If there is any danger, the guards shoot in the air and the family disappears. We spent two hours absorbing the family's every movement, taking photos and inescapably anthropomorphizing. Did that one look me in the eye? Did the silverback pose for my camera?

If you want an even more immersive experience, consider a two-day habituation pass (\$1,500). You'll trek in a part of the forest where gorillas have recently been introduced. You can stay



Male gorillas weigh upwards of 485 pounds. The largest females reach 250 pounds.. four hours observing them as they observe you. You might even get a poke in the chest from a curious primate.

Don't Miss the Chimpanzees

Chimpanzees are the fun uncle of the primate family. I trekked to see them at Kibale National Park. As with gorilla trekking, a guard and a guide accompanied me. But this time, even the trackers couldn't pinpoint where or whether we would see a family. Chimpanzees are swift, clever and spritely tree climbers, playing hide-and-seek with us.

Unless we were incredibly quiet, the chimps would scamper off, leaving us to trek after them through the dense, pathless forest.

Throughout my treks, I was suspended in a surreal world of raw nature, face to face with creatures for which I felt human kinship. It was with pride that I accepted my certificate of trek completion. Our group members applauded each other and felt a special connection from sharing this seminal experience in the wild.



Looking up during the trek, I got a nice surprise.



Chimpanzees can be harder to trek than gorillas.
They are fast and skittish.



Imagine my pride when I received my trekking certificate.
Frankly, the trek was not that hard.

Come On and Safari with Me

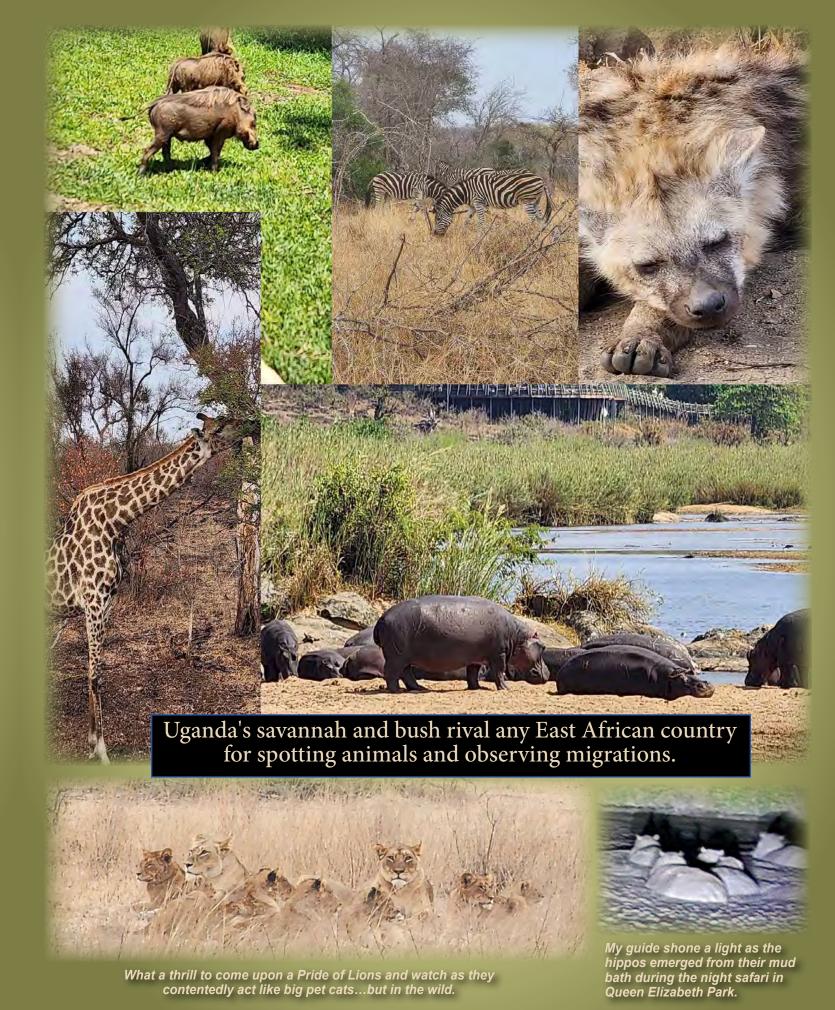
While Uganda is best known for primate trekking, its Big Five safaris in the bush, savanna and on water are equally rewarding. In both Queen Elizabeth National Park and Murchison Falls National Park, open Jeeps are the vehicle of choice. As we shared our "Lion King" moment, I could stand up for a better look at the hippos, zebras, giraffes, warthogs (the guides call them Pumba), hyenas and kudus.

For me, animal spotting was best in the early morning when I could catch the glorious sunrise. But leopards and other elusive animals are more likely to be seen at sunset, when they emerge from their afternoon sleep.

My favorite adventure was in Queen Elizabeth National Park in the dead of night. A pod of hippos swimming in the muddy black water looked and acted quite different from how they behaved during the day. Older elephants and the ubiquitous kudu antelope separated themselves from the herd in the evening and got closer to the road for better viewing.



Nile Hippos



Ziwa Sanctuary near Kibale has been so successful that the rhinos will soon be relocated to the National Parks.



The Batwa support themselves through tourism. I thank Derek, the CEO of Ronick Tours, for arranging the visit and bringing an interpreter.



Batwa, Batwa, Batwa". The community is determined to preserve its heritage.



Find fabulous fashion at the R4W Co-op and support Bwindi Women. https://www.ride4awoman.org/

Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary-A Walking Safari

Uganda's white rhinos are the secondbiggest mammal on Earth and were near extinction until now. They are massive animals, and I was nose to horn with them on my Ziwa walking safari. Truth be told, I was a bit scared.

I asked my guide what would happen if they got upset. "Don't worry, rhinos can't see very well. If they get feisty, hide behind the tree," was his unflappable answer. The guides know every rhino by name and can sense their moods

Visiting the Batwa Tribe

For 800 years, the Batwa were hunters in the Impenetrable Forest. In the 1990s, the government displaced the 1,200-member tribe to protect the gorilla population, as the Batwa's hunting snares occasionally caught a primate.

Today, the Batwa have carved out a tourist niche that should not be missed. I met the community in Bwindi, where they demonstrated their style of hunting, cooking and playing unique instruments. I was privileged to interview the tribal leader through an interpreter. I asked what he hoped for the future of his people. His answer was, "I want the children to be literate and educated. And I want our skills to be taught and remembered."

To accomplish this mission, visitors are asked to repeat "Batwa, Batwa, Batwa" when taking photos with tribe members. "The camera will catch our lips," he said, "and we will remember we are the Batwa who ruled the forest."

The Source of the Nile and Other Surprises

Uganda offers endless surprises.
The Nile River begins in Uganda, originating from a mysterious fountain spouting from under the riverbed.
On a boating excursion from Jinja, the adrenaline capital of East Africa, I arrived at the tiny wooden platform that marks the source of the Nile. A rare hailstorm stranded us for hours. The boat's canvas awning barely shielded us from the hailstones. The Nile waters roiled.

What a contrast it was to visit
Lake Bunyonyi, one of Africa's
most beautiful and placid lakes.
Accommodation includes a private
island stocked with zebras and giraffes
and an array of five-star hotels with
meals included at bargain prices (\$220
a day).

As I sailed around the islands that dot the lake, I was fascinated by the story of diminutive Punishment Island. Girls who became pregnant out of wedlock were abandoned here. One of these women is still living and will tell you the tale.

Unique Uganda Offers More Than I Ever Expected.

From the chic clothing sewn by the women's NGO R4W Co-op, to the baby elephants that seem to dance for you on safari, to the longhorn cattle that graze along the village roads, Uganda offers much more than trekking. In 2027, Uganda will co-host the Africa Cup of Nations. Hopefully, it will attract greater tourism and shine a light on this Pearl of Africa.



You can hike to the top of Murchison Falls before your morning or sunset cruise.



The view from the wonderful Arcadia Lodge is enchanting at sundown, after a day of boating.



Unmarried pregnant girls were abandoned here by their brothers as punishment for preventing the family from getting a marriage dowry.



Elephant herds in Murchison have tripled since the 1980s.

A Winter Visit to Fredericksburg:

History, Wine, and Texas Cheer

Story and Photos by Meryl Pearlstein



Just over an hour's drive from San Antonio and Austin, Fredericksburg blends small-town Texas. hospitality with European flair. A winter visit to this Hill Country town offers the chance to shop, sip and saunter along streets lined with historic limestone buildings dressed in holiday finery. With its deep German roots, Fredericksburg celebrates both European and American traditions, where heritage, resilience and winemaking are woven together.

Determination and a Desire for Harmony

Fredericksburg was founded in 1846 by German immigrants under the Society for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas, the Adelsverein. Looking for a better life and a community of their own, these pioneers struck a harmonious deal with local Comanche people, who welcomed and provided for the settlers in return for farming privileges along the Llano River.

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Das Solheid Sunday House



Kirche Verein

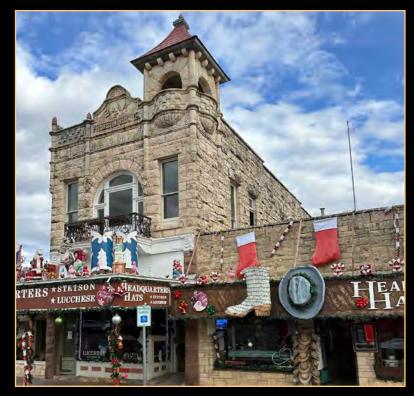
Weihnachtszeit: the Texas-German Christmas Season

Through early January, Fredericksburg becomes a light-filled showplace. Main Street's limestone buildings are decked with wreaths and garlands, and the town's Marktplatz becomes a focal point for Weihnachtszeit celebrations. Each evening, Fredericksburg's Christmas Night of Lights begins with an audio presentation about the town's German heritage, followed by caroling and the illumination of a 26-foot wooden German Christmas pyramid, a towering community Christmas tree and 16 oak trees strung with red, green, blue and white bulbs.

Adding to the festivity, music fills the square, and the adjacent Eisbahn outdoor ice skating rink hums with skaters and spectators sipping mugs of hot chocolate or traditional glühwein.

History Woven Throughout

An illuminated pyramid, surrounded by colorful trees, the Vereins Kirche is an everlasting symbol of freedom, perseverance, and endurance. Now a museum made of stone instead of wood, the original octagonal structure was Fredericksburg's first church, community center, school, and town hall. A timeline and exhibits invite visitors to learn about the building and the town's pioneer beginnings.



Main Street holiday decor



German Christmas Pyramid and marktplatz



Pioneer Museum Barbershop and bath



Pioneer Museum Schoolroom

Also built to welcome those seeking acceptance, the Hill Country Wedding Chapel is a 19th-century white-frame church with handmade pews. Open to the public and still a favorite wedding venue, the chapel was originally used by the local African American community.

The Pioneer Museum preserves Fredericksburg's early days with a collection of restored buildings, including a schoolhouse, Sunday house, barn and barbershop. Docents lead tours, while period-costumed interpreters demonstrate blacksmithing, wool spinning and hearth cooking.

A short drive away, the Sauer-Beckmann Living History Farm at Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park immerses visitors in early 20th-century Hill Country life. Farmhouse rooms, a barn, a garden and a smokehouse showcase daily life and German agricultural know-how.

An Immersion into American History

The year 2025 marks an important milestone for Fredericksburg's National Museum of the Pacific War. Honoring Fredericksburg native Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet during World War II, the Smithsonian-affiliated museum traces events in the Asiatic-Pacific theater. The George H.W. Bush Gallery has been revamped to increase visitor engagement through artifacts, interactive displays and storytelling.

In a new dedicated space, the multisensory exhibit The Rescue simulates a wartime jungle encounter on the Philippine island of Negros and a submarine mission aboard the USS Crevalle, placing visitors in a high-stakes rescue operation.

Also in the museum complex, the Japanese Garden of Peace — a gift from the people of Japan — stands as a testament to postwar reconciliation and the mutual respect between Japanese Adm. Heihachiro Togo and Nimitz. A walk through the adjacent Memorial Courtyard encourages reflection at the granite walls covered with photos and names of those who served and died in the war.



National Museum of the Pacific War



National Museum of the Pacific War artifacts

Showing true Texas pride, Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park pays tribute to the nation's 36th president and his legacy, including the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Visitors can explore the president's birthplace, first school, family cemetery and Show Barn on a self-guided driving tour of the LBJ Ranch. The Texas White House is currently closed for renovation.

A Holiday Shopping Haven

Fredericksburg has become a destination for design lovers and antique collectors. Along Main Street and its side streets, boutiques and retrofitted warehouse spaces highlight Hill Country craftsmanship and style.

Many Texans visit the warehouse district, where Blackchalk Home + Laundry — in a former laundry building — is a go-to for whimsical and sophisticated decor. Sofas, pillows, carpets and eclectic home items reflect the curator's passion for design.

If antiquing is your passion, the 30,000-square-foot warehouse at Carol Hicks Bolton Antiquités overflows with French and European furniture, linens, lighting and home goods.

On nearby Main Street, you can while away hours at the holiday-festooned Auer Haus Home, filled with decorations, jewelry, art and furnishings.

Aspiring and accomplished cooks will want to stop by the Fredericksburg Cast Iron Company for heirloom-quality cookware that blends
Texas durability with German precision.

For ready-to-enjoy gourmet treats, Fischer & Wieser on Main tempts with award-winning peach preserves, pineapple habanero sauce and roasted raspberry-chipotle sauce. Sample while browsing the specialty foods lining the shelves. At their original Das Peach Haus location, book a dinner featuring seasonal dishes made with house products or try a class at their cooking school.



Historic plaques mark buildings in the historic center



Der Lindenbaum limestone exterior



Blackchalk and Laundry design store



Auer Haus Home exterior



Fischer and Wieser specialty foods



Auslander taps



Mesquite Warehouse BBQ plate



Breakfast basket at

Hoffman Haus

Lest You Go Hungry

Fredericksburg's German heritage is on delicious display at Otto's German Bistro, where wild boar wurst, duck schnitzel and homemade shokoriegel pair well with German beer or German-Austrian wine. On Main Street, colorful Ausländer serves Bavarian dishes and Texas favorites such as chicken-fried chicken, jägerschnitzel and apple strudel. A few doors down, classic German fare such as schweinekotelett, beef gulasch and potato pancakes highlight Der Lindenbaum, a cozy dining room in a historic limestone building.

Hill Country's farm and dairy heritage takes a modern twist at Hill + Vine. In the contemporary dining room, a menu headed by the words "Willkommen Y'all" introduces dishes like redfish, Hill Country ribeye and fried pie, alongside Texas wines and beverages.

Texan tastes shine at Mesquite at the Warehouse in the historic Woerner Warehouse, a former feed store. The restaurant's updated BBQ platter is a must-order, with slow-cooked brisket, sausage and pork spareribs served in generous, shareable portions. Sides include peanut coleslaw and cornbread, paired with beer from local Altstadt Brewery or a mesquite margarita.

If German food and barbecue feel heavy after glühwein and holiday cookies, retreat to Hill Country Herb Garden for fresh juices, energy shots and veggie-forward dishes. While there, check out the Sunday house-style guest cottages, each with its own porch, swing and rocking chairs. Alla Campagna adds a Tuscan option with pastas, salads, pizzas, seafood and chops. Seasonally appropriate, the Holy Cannoli dessert will have you bowing your head in gratitude.

A Spirited Winter

German beer at Otto's and Ausländer makes a relaxing choice after a day of sightseeing and shopping, but evenings call for something stronger. At Dietz Distillery, the house gin anchors cocktails like the spicy Texas Dove, a mix of gin, prickly pear, habanero and citrus. The Saloon at the Albert Hotel is a popular gathering spot with a nod to the original 1888 White Elephant Saloon. Show your Texas spirit with a "Tour of Texas" flight of locally crafted bourbons. Also rich with history, 78625 The Bar specializes in craft cocktails enjoyed amid antique settees and portraits of notable residents.

Texas Wine Country — the second-largest wine region in the United States by acreage — offers a warm welcome in winter. More than 60 wineries dot Fredericksburg's Gillespie County landscape, many using European winemaking techniques. With limestone-rich soil and warm days turning to cool nights, the region is well suited for varietals such as tempranillo, viognier, syrah and sauvignon blanc, as well as reds like mourvèdre, tannat and grenache and whites such as roussanne and albariño.

'Holiday cheer flows at Pedernales Cellars, known for Spanish- and Rhone-style organic wines. A trio of wineries makes for an enjoyable tasting at the Texas Wine Collective, where GSM blends from Brennan Vineyards, Lost Oak Winery and McPherson Cellars showcase balance and complexity.

Accommodations from Luxury to Quirky

Fredericksburg's hospitality scene has reached new heights with the Albert Hotel, which opened in January 2025.

The 105-room property connects restored 19th-century limestone buildings with modern construction and abuts the shops of Main Street. Guests enjoy a limestone pool, spa, Texan-gourmet dining and public spaces that blend heritage and comfort. Two casual dining outlets and the Saloon recall the town's early days.

Quirky and quiet, and a short walk from Marktplatz, Hoffman Haus is a sprawling bed-and-breakfast complex with boutique accommodations ranging from rooms and suites to standalone houses. Breakfast arrives each morning in a picnic basket — a gracious, homey touch that defines Texas hospitality.



Auslander



Auslander



Wine educators represent all 3 vineyards at Texas Wine Collective tastings

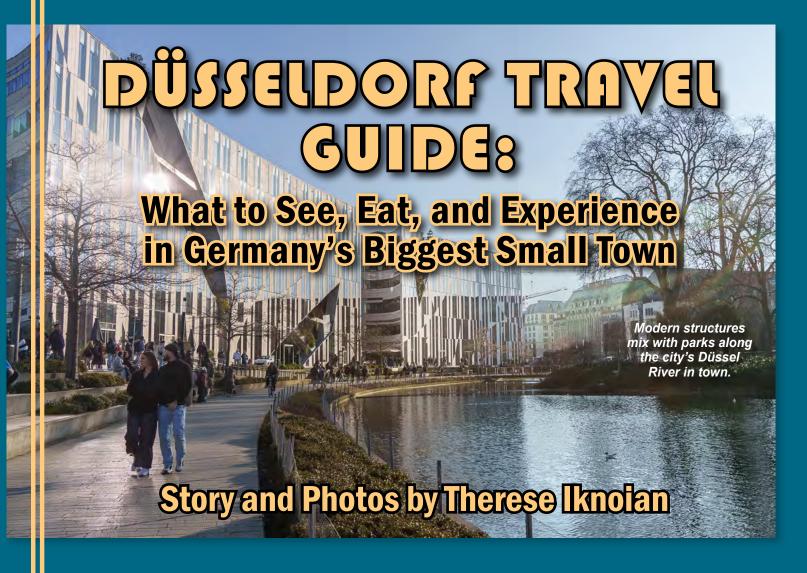


Albert Hotel Exterior courtesy of Guerilla Suit

If You Go:

Get your bearings with a Fredericksburg Tours trolley tour. The tour takes you through Freder-icksburg's historic district for a look at the city's landmark buildings, churches, and Sunday houses. Specialty tours include the winter night lights Jolly Trolley and the wine trolley for a tour of wine country with guided tastings.

For more information visit: VisitFredericksburgTX.com 41



In the last 30 years, Düsseldorf has transformed itself into a city worth every minute, yet it remains under the radar for many. It's a large city disguised as a small town — walkable, friendly, historic and charming, with a great riverfront and greenbelts begging for picnics, not to mention food and beer specialties. Locals call it the "10-minute city" because lore says you can get to most places in 10 minutes. What city of 650,000 can say that?

Missing Düsseldorf on any tour along Germany's romantic Rhine River would be a shame. Everybody goes to Cologne to gawk at the fantastic — if somewhat overtouristed — Gothic cathedral. Want to get away from the masses? Düsseldorf is a mere 30 minutes north on public transit.

DIG A TUNNEL FOR THE RIVERFRONT AUTOBAHN, AND PEOPLE WILL COME

The true catalyst for Düsseldorf's urban renewal was the Rhine Tunnel, built in 1993. After extensive planning, the city dismantled the Bundesstrasse 1 highway that ran along the riverside. This concrete ribbon, which carried 55,000 cars daily, had severed the city and its Old Town from the beautiful riverfront. Once the road was moved underground, everything changed. The last coal mine in this formerly industrial trade center closed in 2018, further propelling redevelopment. The city's business focus shifted to fashion, arts and tourism — with a drizzle of its Altbier heritage and famous Japantown.

As for the city's name: Dorf means village in German, and the Düssel is a small nearby river. So why not call it Rheindorf since it sits on the Rhine? In the 1200s, when the settlement was founded, Rheindorf already existed. The city fathers pondered, then opted for Düsseldorf, named after the tiny tributary instead.

Eight hundred years later, the city is a lively metropolis full of iconic sights — nearly impossible to see in one visit, but worth trying.

RHINE TOWER AND OLD PORTS

What city doesn't love a towering landmark with a view? St. Louis has the Arch, Paris has the Eiffel Tower, and Berlin has the TV Tower. Düsseldorf's answer is the Rhine Tower (Rheinturm), completed in 1981. Its 551-foot observation deck offers sweeping views of the riverfront and skyline. The tower's shaft features a vertical digital 24hour clock that lights up at night. (Tip: Read it from top to bottom top two rows for hours, next two for minutes, last two for seconds — but you'll need to count the lights.) The Media Harbor (Medienhafen) is another architectural marvel. Once an abandoned industrial port, it is now home to international companies, especially in media and fashion. Some of the world's top architects — Frank Gehry, **David Chipperfield, Claude Vasconi** and others — crafted the striking structures here. Visitors can stroll the promenades, stay in a waterfront hotel or choose from a variety of bars and restaurants. At night, illuminated buildings and footbridges shimmer across the water.



Old Duesseldorf Riverfront

An historic photo shows the pre-1993 riverfront with the autobahn sans greenspace.

Courtesy of Düsseldorf City Archive



The transformed industrial port is a glamorous mix of old and new.



The ramen soup at Düsseldorf Japantown restaurants is rich, creamy and slurpy good.



Visit the Löwensenf mustard shop in Old Town to taste a variety of exotic flavors.



When in Düsseldorf, don't automatically default to schnitzel and potatoes. Instead, explore Little Tokyo, a lively Japantown just a half-mile from the main train station. Centered around Immermannstrasse, the neighborhood ballooned when Japanese professionals moved to the city after World War II to work for Japanese companies — bringing their families, culture and food with them.

Having traveled to Japan many times, I was transported back just by walking through Little Tokyo, smelling seaweed, tea and simmering broths. I haven't tasted ramen as deliciously slurp-worthy as that at Takumi's several outlets or the low-key Zero Banchi. Small boutiques offer delicate art, tea varieties (stop by Kyoto by Japan Art Deco for an elegant selection) and manga merchandise.

And the mochi — oh my. Daily fresh at

Aiko's Mochi, with traditional flavors like red bean paste or green tea, plus modern takes like Oreo Cream Cheese and Tiramisu. I'm still dreaming of those soft, creamy pillows of rice dough.

You can also visit the Löwensenf mustard shop in Old Town. Düsseldorf has been the hometown of this global favorite since 1920. Mustard enthusiasts can explore flavor twists such as coconut-curry, honey-dill and red wine-plum. Samples help you choose unique gifts impossible to find outside Germany.

After taking in the views from the Rhine Tower and indulging in mochi and ramen, head to Old Town to experience Düsseldorf's brewery culture. Visit one of the historic public houses that still brew their own beer, such as Uerige. It's barebones. Ask for wine and the waiter will instantly know you're a tourist. Ask for water and you'll get a scowl. The Altbier, however, is renowned — dark in color but not heavy like a stout or porter.



OLD TOWN HISTORIC SIGHTS ALL READY TO EXPLORE ON FOOT

Having risen above the city, walked the riverfront and indulged in its flavors, continue wandering through Old Town's cobblestone streets. Here you'll find ancient castle towers, a church tower with a twist for stability, a statue of cartwheeling children, a riverside tide clock marked with historic high-water levels and a musical clock.

Then there's the hulking bronze "Stadterhebungsmonument" (City Founding Monument), commemorating the city's 700th anniversary. Take a few moments to explore the intricate details — skulls, swords, soldiers and city charters. Sculpted by Bert Gerresheim, it was unveiled in 1988.

Find the city emblem of cartwheeling kids in statues and flags all over the city.



Riding on a carnival parade float, you toss treats to hundreds of thousands of spectators.

ABOUT THOSE CARTWHEELERS

You'll see the city's emblem everywhere, from fountains to manhole covers. No one is certain of its origin, but one story suggests that children began cartwheeling in joy after the city's 1288 battle victory that granted Düsseldorf city rights. Embracing its acrobatic heritage, the city has held an annual cartwheeling tournament since 1937. Keep an eye out for the cartwheel symbol throughout town.

THE SPECTACLE OF PRE-LENT CARNIVAL

If your travels bring you to Germany in late winter, Düsseldorf's carnival — especially its final parade — is not to be missed. The floats are famous for satirizing global issues and political figures. Nobody is spared from the sharp wit of float creator Jacques Tilly, who has been designing papier-mâché wagons for the Shrove Monday parade since 1983. Considering his no-holdsbarred portrayals of Putin, Trump and even the pope, one wonders how he still walks the streets unbothered.

A RHINE RIVER TRIP IN YOUR FUTURE?

Whether summer or winter, don't dream of skipping Düsseldorf.

•••••

Storyteller, camera bug, wordsmith and official cheesecake tester, Therese Iknoian specializes in insider travel insights, the people who make a place tick and abandoned-places photography. See more photos by Therese Iknoian and check out the HITravelTales website and newsletter she runs with her husband, Michael.



Today the riverfront without the highway is an attractive expanse of parks and walkways.



How to Enjoy British Columbia's Gold Rush Trail Sled Dog Mail Run

Story and Photos by Jill Robbins

My final day in British Columbia: As my boots crunched across the snow, I felt the bump of the chemical warmer nestled under my toes between two pairs of wool socks. I was dreaming of 60-something-degree weather

IATIOAL

These dogs love winter and are built for this type of activity.

at home in Texas, hoping feeling would eventually return to my feet. This was nextlevel cold, and as beautiful as the winter scenery was, the words "I'm not a winter person" had run through my head a million times during my weeklong trip to Canada, followed by "What was I even thinking?"

I heard the dogs before I saw them, high-pitched, joyful yips rippling through the icy morning air. I rounded the corner, and there they were — multiple teams of sled dogs barking, jumping and wiggling with impatient excitement. We were minutes from the start of the Gold Rush Trail Sled Dog Mail Run, a yearly event in Quesnel, Wells and Barkerville, British Columbia, where the mail is carried by dog sled. These dogs knew they had a job to do and were eager to get to it.

The enthusiasm was contagious, and suddenly, I didn't notice the cold so much.

The 2026 Gold Rush Trial Dog Sled Mail run takes place February 6-8.



The Cariboo Chilcotin Coast goes down is the absolute coldest place I've visited.

HISTORY OF THE GOLD RUSH TRAIL S LED DOG MAIL RUN

The mail run dates to 1992, when it was a qualifying event for the Yukon Quest and the Iditarod, both intensely competitive and rugged dog-mushing competitions. In 1998, the competitive focus was dropped, and the emphasis shifted to participation and community spirit. The event is also open to skijorers, cross-country skiers, kicksledders, snowshoers, runners and, according to the event website, "probably any other form of self-propelled transportation capable of navigating a snow-packed trail."

Participants are sworn in as honorary mail carriers, and yes, they transport real mail, which is handed to Canada Post officials at the close of the event. Volunteers are a major force behind the event, and 2026 marks the 34th year. There are usually about 25 teams participating in the three-day event, and they are a sight to behold as they fly through the snow.

RUBBING PAWS WITH THE SLED DOGS

I live in South Texas, so a dusting of snow every few years — and maybe an annual road closure due to ice — is about it as far as winter weather goes. Hip-deep snowdrifts and teams of dogs invigorated by subzero weather are a true novelty for me. I had the chance to hang out with a few of the teams before the run and to pet a couple of the pups. Most were too pumped to begin running to care much about my presence, but it was fun to see them up close. The consensus: This event is akin to a Super Bowl for sled dogs.

The mushing teams take off on a staggered timetable, and each time one leaves, the decibel level of the dogs still waiting rises. I believe a dog's bark means something. We don't always know what they're saying, but they know. The intent behind these barks couldn't have been clearer. These teams were ready, and although they may not have understood their part in the mail-carrying mission, they knew it was their job to run.

Watching the dogs break into a run was pure poetry. When the handler released the harness, sending them out with a shower of snow in their wake, it felt like the rest of the world melted away for a few fleeting moments. This event might not be a race anymore, but I'm pretty sure the dogs don't care.



The mushing teams and volunteers during the pre-mail run huddle



February in British Columbia is c-o-l-d but these dogs love it.



These dogs love winter and are built for this type of activity.



Until the harnesses are released, these dogs are very vocal about wanting to go.



The Barkerville Post Office is the best place to see the dogs return from the run.



A Canada Post official accepting the bag of mail from the mushing team.



Chinese immigrants played a big role in early Barkerville, running grocery stores and tea rooms.

HISTORIC BARKERVILLE

The best place to see the sled dogs in action is on the final mail run from Barkerville. You can see the dogs take off from their staging area, then walk up the main street to watch the teams zip through as they complete the run.

Barkerville Historic Town and Park is an openair living history community offering a snapshot of life during the mid-1800s gold rush. While summer is the primary visitor season, there's also a winter season with scaled-back services and self-guided tour options. Historic Barkerville comes alive during the Gold Rush Trail Sled Dog Mail Run, with locals coming out to see the dogs deliver mail and a handful of businesses opening their doors for the event. To fully experience Barkerville's charm and history, visit in summer, although winter is undoubtedly picturesque.

Historic Barkerville is comparable to Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, where visitors can immerse themselves in the history of a bygone era. It's the next best thing to teleporting back in time and interacting with some of the region's early settlers.



NEARBY WELLS, BRITISH COLUMBIA

The nearby community of Wells is an artsy small town with brightly colored buildings that pop against the stark white snowy landscape. The Wells Hotel is a great place to stay to experience the Gold Rush Trail Sled Dog Mail Run. It's a cozy inn with comfortable rooms and an on-site gastropub featuring one of the largest private Scotch collections in Western Canada.

The snow reached my second-story window during my February stay, but there was a roaring fire in the lobby and a rooftop hot tub to keep me warm.

HOW TO ENJOY THE EVENT FROM ANYWHERE

Although seeing the dogs run in person is hard to top, anyone can take part. If you're in the Cariboo Chilcotin Coast area, there are designated spots where you can purchase a mail run envelope. Place completed envelopes in a special drop box with whatever personal message you wish to include, and your chosen recipient will receive a piece of mail stamped "Carried by Dog Sled." Each year's envelope features unique artwork.

You can also order envelopes online and have them delivered anywhere in the world. Make sure to observe the timeline posted on the mail run's website to ensure your envelope is included.

MORE ABOUT CANADA'S CARIBOO CHILCOTIN COAST (AND WHY IT'S SO DARN COLD)

The Cariboo Chilcotin Coast covers a vast area in the middle of British Columbia, stretching from the Fraser Canyon in the east to the Pacific Ocean in the west. Winter weather typically lasts from November through March. The region's cold winters stem from its inland location; without the ocean's moderating influence, Arctic air pushes down into the area, resulting in frigid temperatures. It is stunningly beautiful, a little wild and worth experiencing in winter — if you're dressed appropriately.

I'll be honest: A climate where I have to wear three pairs of socks and so many layers that my knees don't bend all the way is not my jam. I was pretty stoked to get back to "winter" weather where a sweatshirt is an adequate February outer garment, but spending my last afternoon with the sled dogs helped me appreciate the majesty of a Canadian winter.



Colorful painted buildings pop against the white snow.



Each year's Dog Sled Mail Run envelope has unique artwork.



It's easy to imagine what life was like for early settlers in winter.

What Can You Do on Vacation in Mew Brunswick?

Story and Photos by Julie Hatfield

ho knew that the quiet, unassuming, sparsely populated and heavily forested Canadian province of New Brunswick would be filled with unusual and exciting things for a summer tourist to do?

> My husband and I had heard, for example, that the Bay of Fundy has the highest tides in the world some as high as 53 feet, equal to a five-story building — with enough water coming in every six hours and 13 minutes to fill the Grand Canyon twice. But what can a tourist actually do with that besides

Chef Joel Gallant cooks a lovely dinner on the ocean floor

look, gaze and marvel at the power of the tide?

Well, Roland Firth, director of food and beverage at Hopewell Rocks Provincial Park, came up with a brilliant idea last year, and we got to experience the resulting "Taste the Tides" dinner held on the ocean floor at low tide. Firth asked popular chef Anthony Seamone to create three dinner menus, then gathered his kitchen staff, who hauled food, tableware, glass centerpieces and a Blackstone grill in carts down the two-thirds of a mile to the ocean floor. There, they prepared a four-course gourmet meal for nine guests (they can accommodate

up to 24), seated at white-tablecloth tables at the bottom of the ocean. They work under a tight deadline: By 8 p.m., all guests, equipment and staff must vanish so no one gets caught under the incoming tide

Seamone is a stickler for local foods. Among his dinner specialties was lilac syrup drizzled over strawberry shortcake — made from sous chef Joel Gallant's own lilac bushes. Seamone has also been known to create syrup from dandelions.

The next morning, we returned to the park to check out our unusual "dining room" and found a group of kayakers paddling over the very spot where we had enjoyed dinner hours earlier.



Waitresses in waterproof shoes serve the dinner to nine guests at low tide



Lobster, cheeses, and fiddlehead ferns are on the menu



Sommelier Ginette Landry offers wine for each course



Glass centerpieces contain quests' name cards



The tables are set on the ocean floor for a gourmet dinner



Our dining room "floor" the next morning, under five stories of water. Kayakers paddled where we had had dinner.



At low tide, the limestone "stacks," called "flowerpots," stand out.



Outdoor dinner performance by the Atlantic Ballet Theatre of Canada

nother clever New Brunswicker businesswoman and Atlantic Ballet of co-founder

Canada Susan Chalmers-Gauvin — also transformed a challenge into a brilliant idea. Five years ago, when the coronavirus forced her company to stop performing indoors, she thought, "Why not take it outdoors?" She set up a stage on the sweeping front lawn of her home overlooking the blue waters of the Northumberland Strait — and "Ballet by the Ocean" was born. The experience includes elegant dinners and exquisite performances by the only professional ballet company in Atlantic Canada. The food is as local as it is creative: The butter for the house-made brioche, for example, was infused with New Brunswick seaweed, and the lavender meringue dessert, named "Pavlova" after the famed Russian ballerina, was sprinkled with haskaps, a local blueberry-like fruit.

As if that wasn't enough, we had also heard about a dynamo named Cornel Ceapa, a former Romanian



Dancers from the Atlantic Ballet Theatre of Canada perform while we dined by the sea.

Ballet by the Ocean-A linner performance by he only professional

who created a highly successful New Brunswick company called Acadian Sturgeon and Caviar Inc. He offers sturgeon-fishing trips ("Sturgeon Safaris"), followed by a sevencourse, three-hour lunch in which every course — including dessert — features one of his three kinds of caviar, which he proclaims "the best in the world." (He says Russian caviar used to be called the best simply because it was the only caviar available.)

Ceapa has a doctorate in sturgeon biology. He is a fisherman, scientist, conservationist, researcher, businessman and salesman — and also a comedian. As he motored down the Saint John River in his skiff with us on board, he sang lustily of "virgins and sturgeons,"

adapting Madonna's famous lyrics: "Like a sturgeon..."

Sturgeon are the oldest fish in the world; they swam in the oceans when dinosaurs walked the land. We had expected to cast baited lines, but instead his two crew members netted the fish as they swam upstream to spawn, much like salmon.

Sturgeon are surprisingly large; many we saw were 6 feet long and weighed 100 pounds. Their meat and their caviar are coveted worldwide, which has led to significant overfishing throughout history. The U.S. government bans sturgeon fishing, and the Canadian government enforces strict quotas. Ceapa is one of only two fishermen in Canada licensed to take them. He reports meticulous data on every catch and helps augment Canada's sturgeon population by raising and releasing fish from his large hatchery.



The caviar luncheon includes sturgeon gravlax and sturgeon cakes

ack on land, at the elegant al fresco lunches following the fishing trips, Ceapa begins by describing his three caviars: Acadian Gold ("mild, buttery"), Acadian Emerald ("nutty, more robust") and Acadian Wild ("complex with a saline flavor"). As a flourish, he serves champagne or sake and opens the bottles with a scimitar, slicing off the cork.

Dessert for this unforgettable meal was white panna cotta topped with a small "bump" of caviar. The combination of sweet creamy pudding with salty roe enhanced both flavors, creating a savory profile reminiscent of salted caramel ice cream.

Ceapa sells his caviar worldwide. Next spring. he plans to open a visitor center on his Saint John property, offering hatchery tours and overnight stays before or after a Sturgeon Safari.

New Brunswick's new tourist experiences on land and water have a counterpart in the sky.



The "Pavlova" dessert, blue meringue with mint from the ballet company founder's home garden

With 85% of New Brunswick forested and just 3.9 people per square mile, the and stargazing from an Indigenous province is home to four official Dark Sky Preserves, designated by the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. The Bay of Fundy Dark Sky Corridor has the densest cluster of certified dark-sky reserves on Earth.

Dark Sky Preserves are ideal for stargazing, free from intrusive artificial light, with residents and businesses agreeing to follow lighting rules. Astrotourism has become a hot pursuit.

Stephane Picard, an astronomer from the Royal Astronomical Society, had promised to stargaze with us in St. Martins using his telescope, red flashlight, binoculars and starmaps, but the night was too foggy. We're already planning to return for one of the province's star parties — which can include nighttime kayaking, paddleboard outings and guided forest walks. New Brunswick's First Nation communities offer their own interpretations of the night sky; the Metepenagiag community,

for example, hosts dark sky tours perspective.

Day or night, this quiet province has much to offer the visitor.

Hopewell Rocks Provincial Park 131 Discovery Road Hopewell Cape NB E4H 4Z5 Canada 877-734-3429

Atlantic Ballet Theatre of Canada 68 Highland Street #200 Moncton, NB E1C 1H1, Canada 1-506-383-5951 X102

Acadian Sturgeon and Caviar, Inc. 248 Saint John Avenue Saint John NB E2K1E6 506-639-0605

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Three Willamette Valley Wineries Wine Lovers Should Know

Story and Photos by Janice Sakata-Schultze

Between Portland and Eugene, Ore., mountain ranges surround a river valley on three sides. The Cascades, the Coast Range and the Calapooia Mountains form the oval shape of this 150-mile-long region. When pioneers moved west along the Oregon Trail two centuries ago, some called the Willamette Valley — which follows its namesake river — the "promised land of milk and honey" for its rich soils and ideal climate. While many kinds of crops have been grown and livestock raised here, it's only been in the last 60 years or so that vineyards have emerged and wineries have achieved world-class status. And in this extensive wine region, Pinot noir dominates.

Nearly all of the 600-plus wineries in the Willamette region produce this delicate varietal in a bowl-like environment that creates ideal grapegrowing conditions, with warm days and cooler nights from Pacific Ocean winds and fog. Many who aren't familiar with wine or are novice connoisseurs appreciate Pinot noir for its complexity and light to medium body. It doesn't seem as intimidating as equally impressive, along with the heavier reds like Cabernet Sauvignon. Thus, if I lived in this part of Oregon, I would likely spend my spare time exploring as many wineries as I could and discovering my favorites.

With such an overwhelming number of wineries to visit, I am glad that, with the help of local wine journalist and public relations specialist Carl Giavanti, I can. He arranged visits to three wineries for my husband, our friend and me to taste some incredible wines. But while I appreciate a wonderfully crafted Pinot noir, I wanted to discover varietals that were unique stories of the three wineries. Two were on the outskirts of Newberg, while one was near Carlton — both small towns just outside Portland.

For more than a century and through six generations, the Bower workers have occasionally reported family has cultivated 234 acres of vineyards atop a hill with a haunted past. While Ghost Hill's main complex — which includes an expansive tasting room with a stunning 360-degree view of the Willamette Valley below is impressive, its legend nearly matches the superb wines they produce. When locals discovered gold in southern Oregon in the late 1800s, prospectors descended on the area. A road passed through the current property, and when a claimant and his horse camped out, robbers stole the claim and

murdered both. As such, winery ghostly activity.

But visitors shouldn't let minor hauntings deter them from visiting this picturesque winery, which is a popular wedding venue during the warmer months. The valley where Ghost Hill sits has a sunny climate tempered by foggy, cooler air from the Coast Range to the west. It's ideal for Pinot noir blanc, one of the winery's most awarded varietals. Made from red Pinot grapes without skins, it has bright, clean fruit notes with a slight

mineral finish and pairs well with white fish and shellfish. While I was hunting for wines besides Pinot noir, I sampled several Ghost Hill vintages. We tasted the 2019 and 2021 Prospector's Reserve (there was no 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Made from four Pinot clones, both had medium body and acidity, with dark berry notes and a hint of vanilla. The 2019 vintage was slightly more mellow. But neither was as smooth as the 2016 Bayless Bower, which benefited from nearly 10 years of aging. Savoring a Pinot like this confirms that fine wines take time.

Shost Hill Cellars



Four vintages of Pinot Noir were part of the tasting at Ghost Hill Cellars.



The exterior of the main tasting room at Ghost Hill Cellars, Carlton, Oregon

A table setting featuring Bill Sanchez's works at Potter's Vineyard



Two white wines and three red wines for the tasting at Potter's Vineyard, Newberg, Oregon



Two white wines and three red wines for the tasting at Potter's Vineyard, Newberg, Oregon

Potter's Vineyard

Perched on a hill 700 feet above sea level, this property resembles a neighbor's rural farmland. But instead of a backyard, there's a five-acre vineyard guarded by a friendly yellow Labrador retriever named Terra. Next to the family home is a pottery studio and airy shop selling artwork by the vintner and artist, Bill Sanchez. He and his wife, Sandy, started their boutique winery in 2012 after an inspirational trip to Italy. Combining his extensive career as a nutritional scientist with her background in family food and winemaking traditions, they've created a beautiful wine-tasting experience ideal for private parties and small groups.

That's exactly how we enjoyed our time at Potter's. Bill and Sandy designed a completely personalized tasting menu for our party, including two whites and three reds. Since their property only allows for grape growing, they make their wine through a cooperative winemaking facility with other small vintners and contract with other vineyards for grapes. Bill explained that they maximize space on their own property by using densely planted vines that produce more fruit. Trellising allows more sun to ripen grape clusters. They optimize volcanic and loamy soil for sustainability and regeneration. With deep-rooted vines, minimal irrigation and tilling are necessary.

All this great care in the vineyard shows up in the finished product — the bottles. While I loved the 2014 Sauvignon blanc and the 2022 Chardonnay (both made from grapes sourced elsewhere), I truly enjoyed their two Pinot noir offerings — both proprietary to their property — as well as the Cabernet Sauvignon. The Pinot wines had a wonderfully full body and complexity, with notes of cherry, dark berry and pepper; the 2016 Estate Reserve was naturally smoother than the 2023 Barrel Select Estate. Of the two excellent white wines, I especially enjoyed the Sauvignon blanc for its citrus notes. It also happened to be one of Sandy's favorites.

Bells Up Winery

The first time I heard of this micro-boutique winery, I assumed its name had something to do with literal bells raised to the sky. But co-owner Dave Specter explained that "bells up" refers to holding a French horn ready to play in an orchestra. I knew then this place would bring a sense of enjoyment and casualness often missing at larger wineries. Dave left his high-pressure career as a corporate tax attorney in Ohio after he and his wife, Sara, visited the Willamette Valley and decided on winemaking as their second act.

In their compact but spacious tasting room, adjacent to the barrels aging their wines, Dave explained that they purchased a five-acre vineyard, blackberry bushes and Christmas trees — all of which initially impeded their vineyard progress — along with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. With persistence, the couple grew and harvested their grapes to create award-winning wines, nearly all named after classical music pieces. We tried seven of them — two whites, one sparkling white, one rosé and three reds. With each pour, Dave brought a sense of fun as we guessed which foods would pair well.

Keeping with my objective to find wines beyond Pinot noir, I enjoyed the Rosé Prelude, made from Pinot grapes, and the two whites — Pinot blanc and Seyval blanc. But the Pinot noir vintages were also noteworthy, especially Jupiter, which offered an excellent balance of dark berries and acidity. Titan was another Pinot noir with fantastic structure and would pair well with salmon or poultry. But I knew Bells Up was a place I could feel comfortable when Dave suggested their Rosé Prelude could pair equally well with a holiday feast or a cheeseburger. That essentially epitomizes the Willamette Valley experience.



A picturesque view of the Willamette Valley from Bells Up Winery, Newberg, Oregon



Hopewell Ro kkRoland Firth, Acadian Sturgeon and Caviar Inc..

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48 Hours in Tyrol, a Culture In-Between Italy, Austria, and Germany

Story and Photos by Michelle Serafini

o, we were headed to Italy ...
As we checked out of our boutique hotel in the hamlet of Kiens, my

husband, Franco, was speaking German to the innkeeper. I was listening because my German is rather rusty. As we got into our SUV rental, I asked Franco, "Did she just say that we were heading to Italy today? Aren't we in Italy?"

He chuckled. "Yes, technically we are in Italy; however, here, people think of themselves as Tyrolean." As we drove out of Kiens and toward our journey through the Dolomites into "Italy," I started to think about the last 48 hours and how much nuance there is to life in this small pocket between the Austrian border and the Dolomites.

Our trip started with a nonstop flight from San Diego to Munich two days prior. This trip was part leisure and part family visit. Franco grew up in Alto Adige in the city of Trento. This northern region of Italy is full of history, tasty regional cuisine, smaller cities rich in architecture and postcard views of Heidi-style homes that dot the alpine landscape. The people in this region embrace outdoor activities such as hiking, skiing and

biking. There is an appreciation for the past and a mix of innovative businesses shaping the future.

We have learned that when we fly intercontinental overnight flights, we shouldn't kid ourselves that we won't have a serious bout of jet lag. Now, when we travel internationally, we land, get our rental vehicle — or, if we're not renting, take public transportation or a taxi — then arrive at a nearby hotel with a restaurant. In Europe, that is easy, as many hotels include restaurants, and the breakfasts are always one of my favorite meals.

When we landed at the airport in Munich, we picked up our rental SUV. We had reserved a basic car; however, with the encouragement of the rental agent, we opted for a larger, sturdier SUV. The agent strongly suggested the upgrade because the SUV came with tire chains, which we might need in case of snowy weather.



The lobby/bar area of the Radisson Flightgate Hotel, Munich, is spacious, contemporary, and inviting.

On this trip, we proceeded to a nearby Radisson Hotel. Located close to the airport, the hotel was minimalistic, catering to business travelers with an open-concept bar and lobby area, a light evening menu and that full-on European breakfast room I so adore.

This is a good trick: land, get to a hotel, settle in, check and respond to emails and calls, and then let the jet lag hit. Once the tiredness takes over, take a nap for an hour or two, then freshen up and head down for a light dinner. This relaxed approach sets you up for success.

The next morning, with our bellies full from a European breakfast spread of amazing meats, cheeses, yogurt, fruits and an array of homemade bread — all washed down with juice and a fantastic cup of coffee or tea — we were ready to hit the road.



The breakfast room at the Radisson offered a wide selection of meats, cheeses, breakfast, and of course, Bavarian pretzels.

s we made our way into the Südtirol region of Italy, I began to feel the Alpine influence while gazing at the approaching Alps, where green grass peeked through the remaining snow of the winter season. It was early March, and the first signs of spring were apparent, yet the air still held a crisp winter feeling.

Our first stop: Brixen (Bressanone in Italian). Art, culture and history play an important role in this historic city center, the oldest town in Tyrol. Originally a settlement, Brixen gradually grew into a town; a local parish was established, and construction began on the cathedral and bishop's palace, as well as town walls completed around 1150. For centuries, Brixen was an influential seat of prince-bishops and acted as a bridge between southern Germany and northern Italy. The Renaissance left its mark, but the Baroque period truly shaped the town and its architecture. Later, following the construction of the Brenner Railway in 1867, Brixen became a flourishing spa town.

As we strolled through the city center, we stopped at a café for a light bite. We didn't want a full lunch, still satisfied from our breakfast. An order of sausage and bread did the trick. I love wandering old European city centers because you are truly walking through history. Franco spotted a bäckerei (panificio in Italian) and made a beeline for the door. Growing up in this region, he is very particular about his bread, and he knows traditional varieties I've never tasted. The shop buzzed with locals picking up their daily bread. Franco noticed Schüttelbrot — a traditional, hard, crunchy flatbread from South Tyrol. Historically, it was baked only a few times a year in Alpine farmhouses so it could last through winter.



The city center of Brixen offers a charming atmosphere, with pastel-colored facades, cobblestone lanes, and a variety of shops, cafes, and cultural sites, all set against a backdrop of Alpine scenery.



The city center of Brixen offers a charming atmosphere, with pastel-colored facades, cobblestone lanes, and a variety of shops, cafes, and cultural sites, all set against a backdrop of Alpine scenery.



Franco is enjoying his Schüttelbrot.



60 Bavarian pretzels.

hat is one thing I appreciate about traveling with my husband: I can be immersed in local customs and traditions. Over the past 25 years, these experiences have broadened my knowledge through a more hyperlocal lens.

Often this drives our choices on where to travel and what to do, spending time in smaller villages rather than touristy cities.

Our next stop was il Maso dello Speck, an entire shop and museum dedicated to speck, the lightly smoked ham specific to Alto Adige. After our speck stop, we popped over to the cathedral, which was



Il Maso dello Speck is a delightful shop with a mini museum in the cellar of the store, a fun way to learn about this traditional smoked ham specific to Alto Adige.



Ceiling of Spec

well worth the visit. Brixen Cathedral seems almost out of place in such a small town, but its grandeur reveals how important medieval Brixen was. The exterior, with its Austrian-style bell tower, feels Baroque; inside is a blend of Baroque and medieval styles.

If you are visiting Brixen during Christmas market season, the Domplatz is the center of the action, and the Light and Music Show at the Hofburg is a must-see.

After leisurely touring Brixen, we hopped back in the car and made our way to Kiens (Chienes in Italian), where we would spend the night. A quiet village, Kiens is known for its sunny location in the Val Pusteria (Pustertal) valley and its proximity to the Kronplatz (Plan de Corones) ski area. It's popular with outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy hiking, cycling and skiing. The hamlet features a historic parish church and sits near Issengo Lake and other natural attractions.

We were at the tail end of ski season, so the village was quiet and mostly void of tourists. As we pulled into the parking area of Hotel Elisabeth, I was delighted by the ambience. The hotel looked more like an Alpine residence than a hotel. An open patio area near the main entrance was occupied by local men in Austrianstyle jackets and hats chatting, playing cards and sipping drinks. A couple of ladies nearby soaked in the sunny day.

As we unloaded our luggage, one of the women greeted us in German and escorted us to the small lobby desk. After checking in, we proceeded to our room.



Hotel Elisabeth
One of the delights of traveling outside of large
cities is staying in traditional inns where traditional
decor offers a glimpse into local design and style.

e were delighted
when we opened
the door. The design,
furnishings and view
transported us to a time
when travel was simple:
well-kept rooms, crisp
clean linens and feather
beds. Our view opened to the

Alps, accompanied by the soundtrack of a babbling stream below. The hotel was quiet, and the restaurant served only breakfast because we were between seasons — ski season ending, and the Freiluftleben season of hiking and biking not yet begun.

We settled in and decided on an afternoon drive. The valley is picturesque, dotted with tiny hamlets and homes perched on alpine mountainsides that make you marvel at how they were built. Winding roads revealed postcard-perfect views at every turn.

As we drove back into Kiens, we passed a hotel next to the village church with a restaurant. Research revealed it was a family-owned hotel and restaurant — Gassenwirt — dating back to 1602. The Michelin-recommended spot specializes in South Tyrolean cuisine and has earned a Bib Gourmand Award. Decision made: this would be dinner.

We arrived right at opening since we didn't have a reservation. They seated us at a Stube-style table near the bar and kitchen. I noticed the owners dining at a nearby table, warmly chatting with staff. The

at a ficulty tubic, warmly charting with stall. The

The Schlutzkrapfen ravioli is homemade comfort food from this Alpine region

atmosphere felt like eating in someone's home.

As fantastic as the food was, the atmosphere was the highlight. Mostly locals, along with a few hotel guests, filled the room with laughter and conversation — and then the accordion player arrived. Dressed in traditional Alpine attire, he moved around the restaurant, playing and entertaining diners.

We finished dinner, strolled through the historic hotel's common areas and were reminded why traveling off the beaten path is so rewarding.

Back at Hotel Elisabeth, we walked along the nearby brook, snapped pictures of the moonlit sky and took in the feeling of village life in Tyrol. After a restful sleep, we headed down to breakfast — plentiful, traditional and graciously served, as if we were staying in someone's home. Only one solo traveler joined us.

After breakfast, we finished packing and headed to check out. The innkeeper was curious and began speaking in German. Franco explained that we were heading to Trento through the Dolomites, that I had never driven through them, and he wanted to show me the scenic route. That's when she said, "Oh, so you are headed to Italy today," then pointed to the sky and warned that a storm was coming.



The Knödel (dumpling) sampler plate was savory. The restaurant serves generous-sized portions; pace yourself.



Even though it was the end of the ski season, driving through the villages of the Italian Dolomites, skiers were everywhere, taking in their last opportunity before the slopes closed for the season.



Coffee and a pastry are always a treat in a European café.

s we made our ascent into the Dolomites, we passed ski villages where skiers walked to pickup spots, the click of ski boots echoing along the sidewalks. We stopped for coffee and pastries a couple of times, enjoying the Alpine architecture, jovial atmosphere and crisp air. Signage in the area appeared in three languages —

German, Italian and Ladin, a Romance language spoken in the Dolomite Mountains.

Higher into the jagged peaks, the weather began to turn. The summits disappeared into snow-filled clouds. Smaller cars pulled to the roadside to put on chains. We were extremely glad we had upgraded to an SUV.

As we started our descent, we passed through Calfosch, the highest permanently inhabited village in Val Badia. I snapped a photo for my friend and ski travel agent with Ski.com, Shanon Jensen, who has taken groups there to ski.

Continuing downward, the sky began to open, the snow dissipated and we entered "Italy," where we would end the day in Trento. Those 48 hours made me appreciate that while I thought we were traveling to Italy, Austria and Germany, I had forgotten that we also spent 48 hours in Tyrol.



Calfosch is a charming holiday destination offering a variety of stay options from luxury hotels, apartments, farmhouses, B&Bs to hotels and guesthouses. In summer, visitors explore the majesty of the pikes on foot and by bike, and in winter, it is all about skiing!