

Exciting exhibitions at Canadian museums ... page 19.

Travel Scoop

*The Newsmagazine
for Members of
The Travel Society*

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Holy Week in Antigua, Guatemala

by Ann Wallace

The work goes on all night, and as the sun rises over Antigua Guatemala on Good Friday the most beautiful streets in the world are revealed. An exaggeration? I think not, because every year, during Holy Week, the boulevards of this ancient city become the canvases on which the devoted inhabitants create unique and beautiful carpets of flowers or coloured sawdust, some of them vast in size, all of them vibrant in colour. They are fashioned with loving care, only to be destroyed within a few brief hours. They are created to honour the men and women – over ten thousand of them – who solemnly take part in the religious processions of Holy Week and they are created to honour and commemorate Christ and the Virgin at this, the holiest time in the Christian calendar. The religious make pilgrimages to this glorious annual event, while tourists of all religions – or, perhaps, no religion at all – join them to marvel at the handiwork of the carpet makers and to share the dignity and devotion of all



One of the many brilliant alfombras in the streets of Antigua on Good Friday (Wallace)

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TravelScoop

The Newsmagazine for Members of
The Travel Society

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October 2003

Vol. 21, No. 8

From your Editor's desk...



As I write this the rain and wind are lashing Toronto in the wake of Hurricane Isabel and I am thinking of that fair and fragile place that is North Carolina's Outer Banks. I visited the Outer Banks in March and October last year and the region was the subject of an article in *TravelScoop* in January of this year. I've sent messages to the friends I made while there and eagerly await their replies, thinking how meaningful the news becomes when one has visited the regions concerned, enjoyed what they have to offer and met welcoming people. Let's hope the news isn't too bad. 2003 will certainly go down in history as a big year for the Outer Banks ... first a major hurricane and then the eyes of the world will be upon them again in December this year as they celebrate the centenary of 100 years of flight in Kill Devil Hills. We wish them speed in clearing up after Isabel and a wonderful commemorative event.

Of course we didn't hear so much about it, but there have also been serious weather disturbances in Asia recently. First of all a cyclone in Hong Kong and then another in Korea. I left Busan, in the southeast of Korea, just a week or so before their major cyclone hit, so of course I was thinking of that region and the friends I had made there too.

Fortunately most of these major weather systems occur at specific times of the year, so most leisure travellers can plan accordingly. And, of course, modern technology makes the weather news so immediate and is so detailed we are all becoming weather experts.

Let's hope for some lovely fall days everywhere in Canada in this, my favourite time of the year. Enjoy!

coming in November

- *Amorgos, Greece*
- *Budapest, Hungary*
- *The Hidden Costs of Cruising*
- *Florida and Amtrak*

Update Items

The European Travel Commission, which represents 33 countries in Europe, has launched a new website for Canadian travellers:

www.VisitEurope.com/Canada.

Visitors to the site will find comprehensive trip planning information on a variety of themes: Art and Culture, Great Cities, Landscapes and Landmarks, History and Heritage, Active Vacations, Culinary Europe and Fall and Winter travel news.

There's also a complete list of the European Tourist Offices which serve the Canadian market. So all you shoulder-season travellers or winter lovers ... think about Europe in the coming months.

Still on the subject of Europe, we're happy to report that the Eurail Pass increase for 2004 is zero % in an effort to persuade more North Americans to visit Europe and use the rail network. On offer will be the classic 17-country Eurailpass, the popular Selectpass for any combination of three, four or five adjoining countries, and more. These passes must be bought in North America before your departure. Your travel agent will be able to help you with these passes, or visit www.Eurail.com

Some quick airline news: new non-stop service from **WestJet** between Hamilton, ON and Newfoundland with one-way fares starting at \$204. And **Jetsgo** have introduced a frequent flyer programme that claims to "put passengers in the sky for free, quicker and more often than any other Canadian airline." Ask your agent for details or visit www.jetsgo.net

This Month's Winning Scoop

Cultural Pursuits in Havana

by Michael Robinson, Kingston, ON

Last year, during the first two weeks of December, my twin brother and I travelled to Havana, Cuba. (My brother is a fluent Spanish speaker, which was a great asset.) Our travel agency was Skylink in Toronto (tel: 416 923 2003 or 1 800 262 6818) and I mention them especially as they were the booking agent for the 20th International Havana Jazz Festival which was being promoted by Jazz 91FM in Toronto. Our accommodations were at the Hotel Vedado, a very adequate hotel, with an excellent breakfast included, located in the Vedado district.

We booked our trip for two weeks so that we could enjoy the 24th International Festival of New Latin American Cinema as well as the Jazz Festival and I'm writing this article because I would like to highlight the very rich cultural life that takes place in Cuban cities which visitors to beach resorts would miss. Details of all cultural offerings in Cuba can be obtained from the Cuban Paradiso Cultural Tourism Agency, which publishes an events booklet. Their e-mail is paradis@paradiso.artex.com.cu, website: www.paradiso.cu

We attended many films from Spain, Cuba, Argentina, USA and Mexico at several cinemas located all around Havana. These were attended by many Cubans, who love their movies almost as much as their music. Each movie cost about US\$2 for visitors, less for locals. Everyone can enjoy these movies, but obviously some knowledge of Spanish – or at least a Spanish-speaking companion – adds greatly to the enjoyment.

The Jazz Festival featured many fine Cuban musicians, the most famous of whom was Chucho Valdes, who also organized the

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TS rewards members for all submissions published.

The Winning Scoop receives a 1-year membership extension.

Your Scoops receive a 3-issue membership extension.

Favourite Places receive a 3-issue membership extension.

Reader Reports receive extensions depending on length.

Submission Guidelines: TS welcomes reader submissions but cannot guarantee they will be used. We reserve the right to edit submissions should they be used. It is very important to include specific travel details: costs, discounts, addresses, telephone and fax numbers, etc., for the benefit of other readers. Submissions can be sent by mail, e-mail: ann@thetravelsociety.com or CD.

festival. He played along with several other international groups, including Canadians.

Soon after arrival we took a bus tour of Havana in order to get the 'big picture' of the area. It cost us \$15 pp and was an excellent way to get us oriented to Havana, including the Malecon waterfront area, Old Havana, the modern embassy area of Mirama, together with Vedado and Castillo del Morro. Having taken this tour, we were able to get around either on foot, or sometimes in a regular taxi, or more often in the little yellow cocotaxis which are three-passenger scooters. We also tried a regular bus a couple of times, but they can be very crowded. Tourists can also rent bicycles in Havana. The bikes are, in fact, funded by CIDA; they are pre-owned, fixed up and usually given to Cubans, but some are also for rent in order to generate money to run the repair shop. The organization is called Bicycles Crossing Borders and the rental shop is located in Old Havana at # 412 Calle O'Reilly, behind the Plaza Hotel. It is quite easy to find.

There are some very beautiful luxury hotels in Havana, especially the Hotel Nacional, which was the headquarters for the film festival, but they are pretty expensive. A three-star hotel should be sufficient for most visitors. One can also stay in private homes, called *casas particular*, which cost around US\$25 pp, pn. But these are best organized after your arrival, when you can check that everything is to your liking. Make a hotel reservation for a day or two and then enquire around.

Of course US dollars are welcomed with open arms, but some establishments – for example the

Coppelia Ice Cream Parlour and the vegetarian restaurant we occasionally frequented – operate on the peso economy. You can change dollars to pesos at the CADECA booth in the park located kitty-corner to the Habana Libre Hotel and in other convenient locations. But generally we used the welcomed US dollar. For example, visitors going to the opera (we saw an excellent production of *Carmen* at the Theater Nacional) pay a very reasonable \$10 per ticket, but a Cuban would pay 5 pesos (about 20 cents)!

Walking around Old Havana looking at the restored buildings or listening to music in the Cathedral Square, is a pleasure. Here there are many museums, art galleries and other sights, but there are also some in Vedado and other parts of town. There are a few markets that sell crafts, woodwork, and paintings both in the Old Town and along Calle 23 in Vedado and on the Malecon near the foot of Ave. de los Presidentes. For souvenirs, we decided to buy some Cuban rhythm instruments and we could not have wished for a more charming sales person. Lachisu spent over an hour demonstrating how each instrument is played. She works with Reynaldo, who has a stand in the laneway at # 206 Calle O'Reilly in Old Havana. Right across the road is the lovely Café O'Reilly which had some fine young musicians playing. Not far from there, just off Cathedral Square, is a cul-de-sac where a print-making atelier and art school is located. They have an historic location, use old-fashioned lithography equipment and have a shop on the second floor where one can buy prints.

A couple of cultural institu-

tions that welcome visitors are the Casa de Amistad, on Paseo, which has a good restaurant and, twice a week, offers cultural performances in its beautiful gardens; and UNIAC, the Centre for Cuban Writers and Artists. Cubans are very keen to communicate with visitors and are most hospitable. One night, when we got caught in a rainstorm, we were sheltering in the doorway of a home and the inhabitants invited us into their living room. The electricity had gone off in that block for a while, but they had kerosene lamps. We soon got talking and they offered us rum drinks! Another evening, my brother was eager, if possible, to have a chat with the musician who played double bass in the Buena Vista Social Club band. Knowing roughly where the man lived, we enquired and soon were able to establish the musician's exact apartment building, where he and his wife invited us up to talk and have a beer.

This article has just scratched the surface of all there is to see and do in Havana, and I'm sure similar experiences would be enjoyed in other historic Cuban cities such as Trinidad and Santiago de Cuba. I hope to visit these in the future and also spend more time in Havana. Of course, it is possible to combine city visits with a stay on the beach, either by using a rental car or tourist buses. A good website for independent travellers is www.cubalinda.com, a site set up by Phillip Agee, an American who used to work for the CIA and who eventually wrote a number of books criticizing that agency. I hope you all enjoy Havana as much I did. 🇺🇸

Editor Ann has also become a fan of Havana and her report can be found on page 12.

Your Scoops

With a comprehensive story on Laos in this edition, we thought readers might also welcome these tips for Bangkok, Thailand, and Siem Reap, Cambodia.

An Address in Bangkok

During my recent travels in Thailand I found a very nice guest house in Bangkok that I hope other readers may like to hear about.

A walk from the Si Phya Pier between the Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel and the River City Shopping Centre will take you past some lovely architecture such as Wat Kalawa (Rosary Church), old houses and numerous food stalls. Not far from there is a small lodging named the Riverview Guesthouse, tucked away in a small lane of Chinese shops off Panurangsri Road. Once travellers find this place they tend to return to it year after year, yet it's nothing fancy.

The seven-storey guest house is, in fact, a little shabby and has just one elevator for its 45 rooms. Those with a fan and shared bathroom cost 450 Baht (approx. C\$15), while air-conditioned rooms with en suite bathrooms cost 690 Baht (approx. C\$23). But the rooms are spacious, well ventilated by river breezes and there is a rooftop restaurant open from 7:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. ... ideal for watching the river traffic with the Temple of Dawn as the gorgeous backdrop. I think being right next to the river in this bustling city is far more important than a new coat of paint and plush

furnishings. And the price is right!

Riverview has a tour counter, fax and e-mail facilities, safes and laundry facilities. Their address is 768 Soi Panurangsri, Songvad Road, Josue Kona Shrine, Talad Noi, Bangkok 10100, tel: 011 66 2 234 5429, fax: 011 66 2 237 5428.

*Sheila Kingsley
Toronto, ON*

If you decide to follow this month's contributors to Laos, it is probable that Cambodia is also in your plans. If so ... here are a few more tips for that country's highlight: Angkor Wat.

More Tips for Siem Riep

The temples of Angkor Wat were the subject of two articles in *TravelScoop* last July and we arranged a tour there while we were in Hong Kong. After some difficulty we found a Dragonair tour to Cambodia which we thoroughly enjoyed. But that being said, we do have some pointers for anyone who wants to visit Cambodia from Hong Kong. Don't book a tour! Arrange your own air through Dragonair, Mekong Air, President Air, Bangkok Air or Siem Riep Air and arrange your own hotels. There is lots of choice in Siem Riep but we highly recommend the Sofitel.

When you get to Siem Riep you can pick up a taxi at the airport or the local-style *cyclo* - a motorbike with room for two in the attached quite comfortable buggy. The advantage of the *cyclo* is the slow speed that allows you to really see the area of Angkor Wat. Good guide books to the site can be bought right there for \$5. The popular time to see Angkor Wat is at sunset, but we

thought there were too many people around. Much better to get up very early and be at the temples for sunrise.

The area is vast and as well as the temples there are Buddhist monasteries and shrines, plenty of stalls with things to buy and restaurants. The two things you will need to visit Cambodia are American dollars and a visa. Yes, they have a local currency but as far as a tourist is concerned, it's US dollars all the way; a fact we were not aware of and it did cause us some problems. You need those dollars for airport departure taxes, hotels, the entrance fees for Angkor Wat, taxis, gifts, etc. etc. The visa can be obtained at the Phnom Penh airport on arrival, US\$20, but you will need a passport-sized photo. Don't miss Phnom Penh itself. It's well worth a day of your tour. There is a lot more to see in Cambodia but if you can only spare 2 - 3 days you can certainly cover the highlights.

If you would like to book a tour from Hong Kong, we highly recommend contacting Jonathan Kao (jonathan_kao@aitl.com.hk) of AIT, a Canadian citizen who is most helpful.

*Judy Morley
Stratford, ON*

History in the Hudson River Valley

The properties along the Hudson River are to New York State what Newport is to Rhode Island. But, while in Newport properties tried to outdo each other in an ostentatious display of wealth, the Hudson Valley homes pay tribute to the often quite extraordinary talents and achievements of their former

occupants.

The scenery is exceptionally beautiful, especially in the Fall, and attracted a number of artists. Not content with creating some masterpieces they wished to be surrounded with such scenic splendour for the rest of their lives and many built their homes here. Albert Bierstadt who travelled extensively and is most famous for his paintings of the Rocky Mountains built his home, The Malkasten (Paintbox) near the Hudson. Unfortunately it was destroyed by fire.

The Englishman Thomas Cole founded the Hudson river School of Art and his home, Cedar Grove, is well worth a visit. Nearby is Olana, the Persian style fantasy home of Frederick Church. Thomas Cole was his mentor and under his guidance Church painted spectacular views of the Catskills. When building Olana his instructions were that every window had to be placed in such a way that it would frame a view so beautiful that an artist would immediately be tempted to set up his easel.

States Dyckman, a descendant of early Dutch settlers, became an ardent Loyalist. When the War of Independence started he went to England and worked for a British Army Quartermaster. This earned him a large annuity, enough to build his dream home in the Hudson Valley when he returned. He named it after Boscobel in Shropshire where, following the battle of Worcester, the future Charles II hid in an oak tree and successfully escaped the Roundheads, an important step towards the restoration of the British monarchy. The house contains Duncan Phyfe furniture, col-

lections of English china, silver and glass and is now also the site for the Hudson Valley Shakespearean Festival.

Locust Grove was the home of multi-talented Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph and the Morse Code. He studied painting in England and after his return to the U.S. gained a considerable reputation for portrait painting, becoming the founder and president of the National Academy of Design in New York City.

The rich and famous had properties here too. Kykuit was built for John D. Rockefeller and has been the home of four generations of Rockefellers and pays tribute to their philanthropic endeavours. John Jr. was instrumental in the building of the Cloisters, part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. His wife Abby was one of the three women who founded the Museum of Modern Art. Art collections are everywhere. In the grounds is a display of quite incredible sculptures. Among other works of art is a most intriguing series of Picasso paintings. Prices for an original Picasso were too high even for a Rockefeller. But JDR found a way to acquire a vast collection by having talented weavers reproduce them on their looms ... absolutely unique. Tours of Kykuit start from the Philipsburg Manor on Route 9 in Sleepy Hollow.

This is just a small sampling of the area's attractions. Among others are the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the Vanderbilt Mansion, FDR Historical Site at Hyde Park, the Church of Pocantico with Marc Chagall windows, to name just a few. Opening times and days vary

greatly. Detailed information can be obtained by calling 845 677 8241, www.hudsonvalleyguide.com taguides@midhudsoncentral.com

We stayed at the Hampton Inn in Fishkill, at the junction of Route 9 and I-84, conveniently located halfway between the various attractions. It is in a quiet location, features a pool and an excellent complimentary breakfast. For reservations call 1 800 426 7866. A number of good restaurants are close by; we liked the Cornerstone Inn best.

*Barbara Redlich
North York, ON*

Reader to Reader

We are seeking information about renting a house in Antigua, Guatemala, for February and March next year. We are looking for a 2/3 bedroom house, centrally located so that we don't have to rent a car, with full kitchen and some kind of laundry facilities. Our price range is in the neighbourhood of US\$1,200/1,500 per month.

If any readers have or know of such a property we would be delighted to hear from them. We'd also like to know how accessible the grocery stores are and also details of tours/side trips that are especially worthwhile.

We can be contacted at steliand@eagle.ca. Thank you in advance!

continued from page 1

those involved and to experience the excitement in the city at this time.

The events of Holy Week in Antigua shape the largest celebration of Holy Week in the Americas and, in the world, their events are second only to Seville, Spain. It is, quite simply put, a series of most wonderful and moving events. Let me tell you more and how you, too, can enjoy Holy Week in Antigua as I did.

The night I arrived in Antigua was to be a magical evening. In fact, it was to be a magical week, full of glorious sights, in what must be one of the world's most beautiful small cities. But I'm jumping ahead; I must go back to the beginning of my story.

You may remember the Winning Scoop in our January 2003 edition, when Ron Waldie brought us news of the unique festival that takes place during Holy Week in the ancient capital of Guatemala – Antigua. After publication I had the opportunity of chatting with Ron and he made an exciting suggestion. “Why don't you come to Antigua and experience the festival for yourself? We have a small group joining us, including some ‘TravelScoopers’ who read the Winning Scoop. Then you could tell your readers more about it yourself and we could put together a group of *TravelScoop* members to come and experience it all for themselves in 2004. So that is exactly what this story is about. Read on to hear about Holy Week in Antigua and hear how you, too, can be a part of it all next year.

Now back to the magic. I arrived in the city of Antigua, Guatemala, on the Friday before Palm Sunday. It was close to 9 p.m. and the airport transfer bus had brought me from Guatemala City in less than two hours, but I had been dozing until I sensed that we

were dropping from the highlands and thus knew my destination was close. As I gathered my belongings together I noticed through the bus window that there was still no sign of habitation. But suddenly it was as though we had driven into a vast film set. Old-fashioned street lamps illuminated the cobbled roads, house lamps revealed ancient carved doors, fairy lights twinkled in the trees in the city squares and floodlights bathed the soaring cathedral, the many churches, the handsome palaces and the historic ruins.

The dreamlike quality of this arrival was not to end. I was soon being welcomed by Ron and Don to their wonderful Antigua home/bed and breakfast inn. Candles flickered from every nook and cranny, while vases of white lilies caught the soft light. Soon we were seated, martinis in hand, on their moonlit patio in the warm and fragrant evening air catching up with our news. It was hard to believe the Toronto I had just left was in the grip of a spring ice storm.

After a while Don disappeared to work his magic in the kitchen for a delicious late supper and soon I was enjoying a splendid night's rest as their “b&b guest”.

Next morning, after breakfast, we walked the short block to the little hotel that was to be my home for the following week. This was where the group of Canadians was to stay for the first Antigua Holy Week

tour. A pretty courtyard and friendly staff greeted me and soon I was making my nice room feel a little like home.

Meeting Ron again a little later, we set out on a walking tour of Antigua. What an amazing city! What a beautiful location with the surrounding mountains, hills and volcanoes rising all around. What gentle spring weather! It truly seems like a museum (and has accordingly been proclaimed a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and it comes as no surprise to learn that it is renowned as a ‘colonial beauty’. Ron gave me a



Fine shops and the Arco de Santa Catarina adorn the roadway to Antigua's famous La Merced church, seen here soon after sunrise (Wallace)

copy of the little map he designed and then he showed me the city highlights while telling me some of its history. We walked to see the Stations of the Cross and the ruined façade of the church Nuestra Senor de Los Remedios which, along with many images of Antigua's Cathedral, was featured in Rolof Benny's famous, long-ago book *The Pleasure of Ruins*. I was fascinated, but it was hard to concentrate because it didn't take long for me to realize that this city, and indeed almost the whole country, is unique for another reason, namely the most wonderful clothes the local women and children wear. (I was to learn that the men also have elaborate costumes, but they tend to wear them less than the women do.) I knew about the beautiful weavings and embroideries and headdress of the people of Guatemala, but did not expect to see them worn as everyday attire. As if Guatemala were not special enough historically and geographically, these colourful costumes create a spectacular show of their own, every minute of every day. (Note: take *lots* of film!)

While Antigua has many delightful hidden corners it is easy to get around and to get to know. And I was soon to learn why the city lights come upon one so quickly ... there are no suburbs here. The city streets end abruptly and the surrounding coffee plantations begin. What a gem of a city! Alone in the afternoon I set out again to explore further, finding the lively local market where I bought a beautiful bouquet of flowers for my hotel room for about a dollar! In fact the whole town seemed to be full of flowers (I would later understand why).

By evening the rest of the group had gathered and checked into the hotel. We were all to meet for a get-to-know-everyone party, to enjoy dinner together and to hear some news about the coming week.

The next day was Palm Sunday and we gathered



The courtyard of Hotel Los Pasos where The Travel Society group will stay in 2004 (Wallace)

for a *Domingo de Ramos* tour conducted by local historian Elizabeth Bell, a tour that introduces participants to the history and pageantry of the renowned processions of Antigua. The streets were busy and we noticed that against the ochre and terracotta walls of homes, hotels and restaurants stood vast piles of flowers: chrysanthemums, carnations, roses, magnificent lilies and many others I did not recognize, that were already being used to create flower carpets – or *alfombras* – on the cobblestone streets. We reached for our cameras, but Elizabeth declared “Oh, you haven't seen anything yet! Wait until Good Friday.” We walked on to the city's beautiful La Merced Church, where the forecourt was crowded with women and children, all

dressed in their multihued traditional clothes. They were seated beside piles of palm leaves and flowers, which they were fashioning into elaborate palm crosses and selling for just a few *quetzales* (a few cents) to the many people coming and going from the church.

Participants on Elizabeth's tour are allowed access to the ancient convent adjoining the Merced Church where another amazing sight met our eyes. Here the costumed participants were gathering for the processions. The male carriers of the massive processional floats, the largest of which weigh 7,000 pounds, all wear purple robes and white headdresses, until 3 p.m. on Good Friday when they change to black robes, while the women wear white and beautiful black lace mantillas during Holy Week, also changing to black on Good Friday. I also noticed many of the women were wearing high heeled shoes. This is a difficult enough feat on cobbled streets, but imagine carrying an enormous float on your shoulders as well! Also in the convent courtyard we saw other processional participants: Roman soldiers in red and white tunics, green plumed hats and 'golden' armour with long spears; Pontius Pilot and other Roman officials; musicians, incense

carriers, priests and monks. We were to learn that, in fact, the processions involve about 10,000 participants.

The floats are the treasured possessions of Antigua's many churches. Most of the processions consists of two of them, both lavishly decorated. The first, borne by the male carriers, bear various statues of Christ as it is believed he would have appeared during and after the events of Good Friday, while the woman carry slightly smaller – but heavy nonetheless – floats depicting the Virgin. The latter, with the Virgin often shown as the Queen of Heaven in splendid robes and surrounded by flowers, are often more lavish than the float carrying Christ.

Soon we were out on the streets to see the spectacle for ourselves. Crowds had gathered and the costumed participants were taking up their positions on various street corners so that they could take over the burden of the floats at pre-ordained times. The atmosphere was a mixture of excitement and solemnity. And those beautiful *alfombras*? The leaders of the processions – musicians, soldiers and holy people – all part and march beside the carpets, while the float bearers themselves walk on the carpets, destroying the elaborate designs and crushing the flowers while behind them eager children dart forward to salvage some of the blooms. It is an amazing spectacle.

After few hours in town, the group met at a pre-ordained place and time and we were led away from the crowds to a charming outdoor restaurant set in the local flower nursery, resplendent with blooms both family and exotic. What a cool and delightful respite from the jostling crowds and the noise of the morning.

Ron and Don have designed their Holy Week tour entirely with their guests' pleasure and comfort in mind. They arrange the majority of lunches and dinners in and around Antigua, utilizing the city's most beautiful hotels, restaurants

and courtyards, complete with personalized menus and special greetings from restaurant personnel. One such dinner is on the candlelit verandah of the Mesón Panza Verde. You can catch a glimpse of what's in store for you by visiting www.panzaverde.com But you'll find the group also has some free evenings to enjoy other restaurants (I found an atmospheric Thai one – Café Flor – close to the cathedral) together with some daylight time in Antigua for you to explore and follow your own interests alone. As well as the many ruins, there are magnificent churches which are lavishly decorated at this time for the coming Easter, historic houses, wonderful photo opportunities, tempting shopping and a Jade Archaeology Museum with a large gift store. There's even a cultural centre which produces English-language plays which are well-attended by the many expatriates who call this great city home. I was lucky enough to catch a performance of Yasmine Reza's amusing and thought-provoking play *Art* there. And, of course, Ron and Don are a mine of information on the city, and indeed on Guatemala generally.

You will stay in the same Antigua hotel for the whole week, which is very relaxing. And in the quiet days following Palm Sunday, and until Good Friday arrives, there's a variety of side trips that have been organized for the group. A very nice afternoon is spent in the La Azotea, a small coffee plantation located on the outskirts of town. In April the plantation should be resplendent with the white flowers of the coffee bushes. La Azotea is also a cultural centre, offering a group of splendid small museums. One is Casa K-Ojom Musica Maya, a fine collection of traditional Mayan musical instruments, artifacts, costumes and paintings. Another is Rincon de Sacatepequez, where the customs, life styles and costumes of the local people are displayed via artifacts and dioramas. There are also tours of the



Costumed locals carrying one of the 7,000-pound Easter floats (Wallace)

coffee-producing complex and its museum, generous coffee samples and a fine gift store. Visitors are also welcome to wander through the grounds and the plantation.

Another trip takes you for the day into the surrounding hills to see villages, churches and convents and to meet Guatemala's prize-winning weaver who will pose for photographs in her splendid costume and where, of course, you may purchase some woven goods to take home. It's a great day too, but most people will probably vote the trip to the famous market in Chichcastenango the highlight of the side trips.

The journey to Chichcastenango takes about three hours. Our mini bus passed through the farms and plantations around Antigua and then rose over fairly good roads into the pine covered mountains. We stopped half way at a resthouse for coffee or hot chocolate, for clean washrooms and to browse the vendors' stalls. Then it was into Chichcastenango. This town is interesting not only for its spectacular market and the wonderful clothes of the inhabitants, but also because it

is an entirely Maya town, with a Maya mayor and a Maya police force. Much of the merchandise in the general market in the square seems to have the tourist in mind, but it is the steps of the church that is the focal point, for it is here that the flower sellers gather and tourist photographers jostle each other for the perfect

shot. It is a unique and amazing sight.

Soon Good Friday was upon us. We rose before the sun and were soon out on the streets of Antigua. Once again flower and coloured sawdust *alfombras*

were being created all over town. Elizabeth Bell had been right ... today's were far more splendid than those we'd seen on Palm Sunday. Almost every inch of the city's cobbled streets were being adorned. There were four-block long carpets designed by an association of shopkeepers; prosperous families were erecting flower shrines and charming small carpets outside their large walled houses, dressed in their Sunday best and assisted by their maids; groups of tourists were following instructions from hotel staff ... sweeping, spraying a mist of water on the flowers and – if lucky – being allowed to place a few blooms themselves! This continued as the sun rose to bathe the city in its luminous light and to reveal the *alfombras* in all their beauty. All over the city people were walking to see the artistry of their fellow inhabitants and visitors. Slowly the city streets filled, more and more and people staked out their claims to



Opportunities to purchase colourful textiles exist on almost every street in Antigua (Wallace)

good spots to watch the processions and Ron and Don led us to a busy corner where they knew the float carriers would change. It all really is a most remarkable sight and a most memorable experience.

As mentioned, each church has its own floats and its own procession route, so once one procession has

passed it's possible to duck into the side streets and proceed to another spectacle. In addition to the processions bearing Christ and the Virgin there are parades of Roman Soldiers, children's processions and crucifixion ceremonies. The streets are full, not only with the thousands of costumed procession participants, colourfully dressed locals and a variety of tourists, but also with musicians, balloon sellers and food vendors. Children dart hither and thither collecting posies of flowers rescued from the destroyed carpets before the teams of street cleaners arrive to clean up. Over all this colour and excitement, the sombre visages of a dozen or more cross-bearing Christs and Virgins look down from a dozen or so massive floats. It's all quite bizarre.

"So what actually happens on Easter Sunday?" I enquired of Ron, wondering how the most important celebration in the Christian year could be celebrated after this. "Nothing," was his surprising reply. "There are the usual church services around town, of course, by that's it. The town falls quiet after today and Easter Sunday is much like any other Sunday in Antigua. So I hope you've enjoyed Good Friday because it all winds down now."

Oh, indeed I had. What an experience. I'd like to thank Ron and Don publicly for making it all possible, for their smooth arrangements, for their hospitality and for their friendship. It was indeed a unique trip.

Footnotes:

* This article has given details of the Holy Week experience which has been designed for The Travel Society. More details can be found on page 22 together with information on a longer (21 day) general tour of Guatemala which we call **Guatemalan Grandeur**.

* Antigua is a renowned spot for **learning Spanish**, so if this appeals you might like to consider adding a week or more at one of the city's well-known Spanish

schools to your itinerary. The school I visited – **Spanish School San José el Viejo** – was delightful. There the students have their own private tutors and lessons are held in charming little cubicles set in the lush school grounds (complete with tennis court and swimming pool) beneath the ancient walls of the ruined church of the same name. Participants may arrange their own accommodation in an Antigua hotel or B&B


or they may stay at the school accommodation (rooms, casitas or suites) or the school will find a homestay where students can live with a family and practice speaking Spanish. Full or half-days of classes are available and prices seem very reasonable: US\$100 for a week of full-day classes, US\$75 for half days and US\$45 for two-hour classes in the afternoons. Double accommodation at the school ranges from US\$210 to US\$420 per week (no meals but some in-room cooking facilities), while a week with a family, including three meals every week day costs US\$185. For more information tel: 011 502 832 3028, fax: 011 52 832 3029, e-mail panish@sanjoseelviejo.com, www.sanjoseelviejo.com I



The grounds of the Spanish School San José el Viejo showing the 'learning cubicles' (Wallace)

wished I could have spent longer in Antigua and taken advantage of these lessons, but that will have to wait until another visit, because Havana called!

* Yes, another possible addition to your Guatemalan experience is an add-on in **Havana, Cuba**. Last year I did this too and my story follows. Read on and I hope you'll plan to follow in my footsteps both to Guatemala and to Cuba.

* Black and white photography really does not do any justice to the experience of Holy Week in Guatemala, nor to the wonderful costumes of the local people. We have posted a full-colour photo essay of my photographs on our website, or if you would like a copy of this story accompanied by many full-colour photos, which will give you a better idea of what's in store for you, please send \$5 to us at the address shown on p. 2. 



THERE'S NO CITY LIKE HAVANA

by Ann Wallace

My travels have taken me to many cities in the world, most of which can, of course, be described by that much over-used adjective “unique”. But even with my trusty *Thesaurus* by my side (yes, I know it’s at Shift F7 too, but I like books!) I can think of no better word to describe that faded beauty that is Havana, Cuba. As far as I know, there is no city in the Caribbean region like it (Old Havana and its Fortifications are designated a UNESCO World Heritage site) and I had long yearned to pay a visit. So, when my travels took me to Guatemala last spring and I heard the route could take me via Havana I jumped at the chance to stopover for a few days.

(One way to reach Guatemala City is via Lacs Air touching down in Havana and San Salvador en route. Those of you who travel to Guatemala on The Travel Society’s Holy Week or Guatemalan Grandeur tours can also enjoy this Cuban add-on ... just mention it when you call and they will make all the arrangements.)

I was met at Havana airport by Ana Luisa of C. Tours, Inc., and driven to my hotel, the Palacio O’Farril, located on a corner in Old Havana, near the picturesque Bay of Havana and Cathedral Square. I was to discover it is a perfect example of neoclassical architecture, in vogue here at the dawn of the 19th century. The property has been awarded a Class 1 Heritage Degree and has recently been extensively restored and refurbished by the City Historian’s Office. With its central courtyard, soaring arches, stone pillars, beauti-

ful tiles and plain but atmospheric rooms I couldn’t have asked for a better place to lay my head on my first visit to Havana.

The property’s history is a fascinating one. Don Ricardo O’Farril, whose family came from County Longford in Ireland, was a wealthy merchant who made his fortune from the notoriously lucrative slave trade. He was also the owner of several sugar mills. Don Ricardo arrived in Havana in the early 18th century and is attributed as the founder of the O’Farril family in Cuba, which subsequently went on to gain reputations in administration, commerce and in the country’s cultural development. They were further distinguished by a plethora of noble titles. Among O’Farril’s descendents were Juan Montalvo y O’Farril who owned the first steamship used in Cuba, while Jose Ricardo and Rafael O’Farril were listed among the 18 most influential and richest people in Havana under the rule of Spanish Governor Miguel Tacon.

Two splendid mansions in Old Havana perpetuate the memory of the family. One, on the corner of Habana and Chacon streets, was acquired by the Church and up until recently was the site of the Archbishop of Havana’s office. The other, on the corner of Cuba and Chacon streets, built in the first half of the 19th century by Jose Ricardo O’Farril, Don Ricardo’s great grandson, has undergone some archi-

photo above: Havana’s Gran Teatro (left), Hotel Inglaterra (right) and one of its famous American cars (Wallace)

tectural changes in the 20th century, resulting in the building as it stands today. Before becoming a hotel, the mansion housed several other important institutions: the Property Register, the Supreme Court and Attorney's Office, the Justice Secretariat and the Lawyers College. It also contained the Public Works Special Funding office, a section of the Treasury Department responsible for the registration of motor vehicles. And now you can lay your head here.

As suggested in our Winning Scoop this month, a Havana city tour is a good idea. After that, I enjoyed the two walking routes of the Old City suggested in my Fodor's *Exploring Cuba* guide (highly recommended at C\$31.00) together with much re-tracing of steps and meanderings on my own.

What an incredible city! How amazing that such a place exists so close to Florida! What strange twists of history it has seen! How noble it once must have been! Indeed many areas are being restored to their past glories, but sadly many, many crumbling buildings remain and the day-to-day lives of most Cubans is very difficult as they struggle with severe shortages of basic items in less-than-ideal homes. Yes, they welcome American dollars with which they can purchase imported goods and yes, they also welcome second-hand clothes and gifts of soap, shampoo and so on which are in very short supply. Yet the city seems vibrant and the people generally cheerful as they take



advantage of their climate to spend a lot of time on their streets or balconies. You'll see groups of neatly uniformed schoolchildren, women rushing home with gaudy cakes, flowers sellers and their customers, horse-drawn carriages for tourists, puppies for sale (or photos) in a wheelbarrow, artists offering to sketch your likeness and many roadside tables of small businesspeople who can mend your shoes or your watch while you wait. Sadly, however, some people are driven to desperate measures such as prostitution to obtain money. But, in a lighter vein, many have come up with novel ways to make a buck or two. There are some exoticallly-costumed ladies with turbans, long flounced skirts and baskets of flowers who will pose, kissing your husband or partner, for a photograph; a similar deal can be struck with the bizarrely dressed old woman who, holding a small dog in



Oh for some colour for these photos! But click on our website and you'll see what I mean! (Wallace)

ruffles and sunglasses, smokes a cigar in her doorway; and every afternoon a cacophony of trumpets and drums announces the progress through the streets of a troupe of brilliantly dressed stilt walkers and dancers. Make sure you have plenty of dollar bills and you'll be rewarded with some

great photographs.

Yes, there are bargains galore here in the way of enjoyment and entertainment. There are the old buildings and the antique American cars to photograph, there's music spilling from all the café terraces which can be enjoyed in passing or by sitting and enjoying a

beer, and at week-ends there are often public dancing exhibitions in the squares. In fact everyone is welcome to start dancing anywhere, and many people do. Perhaps you'll see the elderly gentleman who dances in Plaza de Armas to the music from nearby restaurants and who is often joined by other, younger, men who seem to be learning from him.

Generally the roads and sidewalks are in a terrible state; please watch your step. Yet the city is very clean so far as garbage goes and there are very few people begging. If you enjoy walking, you'll soon become familiar with the central, historical area of Old Havana. To give you some idea, if you have a map ... the walk from Plaza de Armas to Parque Central takes between 10 and 15 minutes. Here are some things you shouldn't miss. (And I'm sure others more familiar with the city can add many more sights, but I was only there for two and a half days.)

Many of the old hotels are worth a visit. Some have literary links with writers such as Hemingway and Graham Greene, many have rooftop terraces for good views and the courtyards, bars and restaurants offer lots of atmosphere. As I've already said, live music is to be found everywhere (there seem to be musicians at the outdoor bars in Cathedral Square all day). There doesn't seem to be any cover charge taking care of these talented people, so please be ready to tip. A drink on the terrace or the courtyard of the fabulously-restored Hotel Santa Isabel in the corner of Plaza de Armas is a great place to watch the goings-on in the pretty, tree-shaded square. And from here you can set out to visit the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales and the City Museum on the other side of the plaza. Then walk up lively Obispo to the gracious Parque Central, overlooked by the famous Hotel Inglaterra and the impressive Gran Teatro. The former is another great place for a terrace drink, before or after taking a tour of

the neoclassic/art nouveau theatre next door. An English-speaking guide will appear as soon as you enquire and take you around the theatre and into the neighbouring ballet/music school. You'll probably see ballet classes in progress, perhaps even a rehearsal, and you can enter the great gallery where the scene painters work, alongside displays of their smaller offerings adorning the walls, which visitors may purchase.

The famous tree-lined Prado promenade way leads from the Parque Central. If you ignore the colourful riot of architectural offerings on each side – from fancy renovations and fine hotels to crumbling shells of buildings standing thanks only to a few supporting beams – you could believe you were in Paris. Cubans enjoy promenading here and you'll probably encounter some school groups using the wide space for their gym classes.



Live music and outdoor drinks in the Plaza de la Catedral (Wallace)

T i m e restraints forced me to choose between the Gallery of Cuban Art and the National Fine Arts Museum (US\$5 each or US\$8 for both). But I'd been told the latter was only recently opened after extensive renovations so that was where I headed. And where I'll head again on my next

visit, for it is quite superb. To say it is 'world-class' sounds condescending, but that it is. As usual I took my time in the ground floor galleries (where there's a large oil of Niagara Falls by Regis-Francois Gignoux) and then ran short of time to see all the others. But I did realize what a magnificent building this is, how gorgeous the renovation is and how amazing – and surprising – the collection is. Many of the works, including paintings by such artists as Turner, Gainsborough and Canaletto, were appropriated from wealthy Cubans in 1959. And there are not only paintings here, but also splendid collections of artefacts from around the world, all most splendidly displayed.

Other tourist pastimes include stopping for an

overpriced daiquiri at the place where it is said they were invented – El Floridita – once often frequented by Hemingway and Castro. And don't miss the unlikely-anywhere-else La Bodeguita del Medio – “the grocery store in the middle of the block” – now a bar and restaurant, whose graffiti covered walls are said to include autographs of the rich and famous.

Talking of restaurants, don't expect too much in the way of food here. Those with deep pockets may find meals of a high standard in the dining rooms of the many fine hotels, but the offerings in general tourist restaurants are nothing to get excited about. However, they are pretty inexpensive (in places under US\$10 for a complete meal with a drink) and the live music, the wonderful courtyard and terrace settings and the *mojitos* make up for the standard fare and one must always remember the lack of imported goods. Those who spend longer in Havana than I, will no doubt find some little local places (as described in our Winning Scoop) where they can meet Cubans and enjoy some home-made food.

I hope I have convinced you that a visit to Havana is an experience that shouldn't be missed. If you concentrate on Old Havana you'll get a good overall impression in two or three days and see many of the major sites, but it would take far longer to explore all the many galleries, museums, historic homes, churches and fortresses that are open to the public. But it is the city in general that gives such a powerful impression: it's atmospheric and beautiful and romantic; it has many architectural glories, yet much is decrepit and crumbling; it's full of life, culture, music and politics; it's full of people of every colour dressed in donated t-shirts from around the world; it's seen a history unlike any other place in the region. Go once and I'm sure you'll wish, as I do, to return.

Some details ...

As mentioned, my stay in Havana was an add-on to my Holy Week trip to Guatemala, using **Lacs Airlines** out of Toronto. I found the airline to be fine, all my flights were on time (even after a late start because of April de-icing before I left) and the staff pleasant. My route to Guatemala was Toronto – Havana (deplaning not necessary) – San Salvador (a change of plane with about an hour's wait ... very modern airport with trendy shops) – and finally a half-hour flight to Guatemala City. The itinerary attached to the tickets looked a bit complicated, but everything went very smoothly. I left Toronto at 8:30 a.m. and was in Guatemala City at 2:45 p.m. with half an afternoon ahead of me to explore. Returning from Havana the flight left at 6:25 p.m. and arrived in Toronto at 11:00 p.m. ... for me, all very convenient.

Regarding **money**, as already mentioned, the US dollar is welcome everywhere in Cuba and is the method of payment usually expected from tourists. You can easily spend time here without any pesos. Credit Cards (with the exception of American Express or any cards issued in the US) are accepted in all tourist hotels and most restaurants, but do check in the latter before ordering. You can also

exchange traveller's cheques as long as they are not American-issued or AmEx ones.

Speaking of those old American cars, if you're a fan of such vehicles you may like to know that *TravelScoop's* favourite photographer - George Fischer - has a photography book and fabulous poster featuring these cars. Log on to www.georgefischerphotography.com (“works in progress”) and you'll see details of *Chariots of Chrome: Classic American Cars of Cuba* due to be published soon. 📖



Parts of Calle san Ignacio and Plaza Vieja have been beautifully restored (Wallace)

Laos? Here at TravelScoop we had to heave our atlases out! But obviously, as John and Doreen explain, this destination is well worth considering, especially if you have plans to travel in neighbouring Thailand, Cambodia or Vietnam.

LAOS ...

A BUDGET TRAVELLER'S DREAM (part I)

by John and Doreen Berg

We're in our early sixties and enjoy travelling as golden age backpackers, which translates to bargain seeking and selecting "no star" accommodations that are safe and clean with attached bathroom to accommodate those pre-dawn washroom excursions! And when selecting ground transportation, having a seat is a high priority and trip duration is a consideration. We like to think of ourselves as travellers interacting with local environments and sampling local fare as opposed to tourists viewing the landscapes through tour bus windows and rose-colored glasses. Last year, as two of our children had decided on spring weddings, our fall travel destination needed to match our slim pocket-books and from all reports Southeast Asia fit that bill. Our plan was a two-month trip beginning in October to visit Myanmar (Burma) for two weeks, on to Chiang Mai, Thailand to visit a Taiwanese friend in Pia, then on to Laos for two weeks, returning via Bangkok to southern Thailand for some beach, sun, and relaxation on an exotic island. Then it was home for Christmas!

While all destinations offered interest and enjoyment, Laos, often referred to as "the jewel of Southeast

Asia" proved to be just that and captivated us. A small, land-locked country sandwiched between Thailand and Vietnam, it is surprisingly different from the other Asian areas we visited on this, and previous, trips. For us, Laos' primary charm resided in its quietude, its slow pace, its lush landscapes and its scarcity of people.

We visited the historical, artistic and cultural icons of Luang Prabang and Vientiane with a relaxing and adventurous respite in Vang Vieng, a small town nestled riverside between the two major destinations. Contrary to travel book warnings, we felt safe and found it easy to exchange American dollars or Thai baht. However, it's difficult to obtain cash once in the country as there are no ATM machines in Laos. The people, once you extended a hand in friendship, were most helpful and friendly.

We planned to bus from Chiang Mai to the Thailand/Laos border, crossing to Huay Xai and then taking a two day slow cargo boat trip down the Mekong River to Luang Prabang. This is a popular route with backpackers, but after hearing about the difficulties encountered we decided that sitting on rickety seats or empty beer cases confined to the interior of a smelly cargo boat for two days was not



for us. Our Golden Age Rule # 2: "Avoid long trips!" came into play as we decided to fly directly from Chiang Mai to Luang Prabang. We obtained our Laos visa and flight tickets from Backpacker's Meeting Place in Chiang Mai. (Visa C\$36.80 and flight C\$120 pp. [Unless otherwise indicated, all prices Canadian which we converted from US using a 1.6 exchange rate, so they should be even lower now.]) Lao Airways flew directly from Chiang Mai to Luang Prabang. Upon disembarking we were greeted with a gentle rain and provided with umbrellas for the walk to customs.

Custom clearance was slick as we already had our visas. Bank exchange was next where 2500 Thai baht bought 620,650 Lao kip! We were now faced with the problem of counting and concealing a money wad three centimeters in thickness! (C\$1 = 5,768 kip.) A group of younger backpackers joined us outside the airport depot and nine of us, after negotiating a price of 10,000 kip (about \$1.80 pp), climbed aboard a jumbo, which is a small three-wheeled truck. Once our group was crammed inside with our luggage tied to the top or stuck at our feet,

and me grimly hanging on the tailgate, the three wheeled jumbo's engine laboured off for downtown Luang Prabang. On the approach excitement mounted and directions were called out to our driver who seemed to comprehend which guest house each group wished to be dropped at. During the confusion, Doreen spotted our first hotel choice – the Phoun Sal Hotel – so off she rushed to check on vacancies. Only one room with attached bathroom was left and we grabbed it sight unseen and agreed to meet our new found friends for dinner. As it turned out, the guest house was central, clean and safe as the night watchman shut the door around 9:30 p.m. (Hotel details will be given at the end of this article, which will appear in next month's edition of *TravelScoop*.)

The remainder of the day is cloudy and overcast, but by evening clears and a group of us meet at a restaurant overlooking the Mekong River to enjoy a Beer Lao and witness a spectacular sunset! The next three days it rains off and on thus our umbrellas became our constant companions as we visited Luang Prabang's attractions. Luang Prabang is one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites for its combination of French colonial and traditional Lao architectures.

The second day we're up early to enjoy breakfast and since our hotel restaurant wasn't busy we employed Golden Age Rule # 3: if a restaurant isn't busy move on, so we did. We strolled down the main street noting the tour offices and the many restaurants until we came to the Scandinavian Bakery where we enjoyed rather expensive croissants and coffee. On our return to our hotel we discovered the restaurant

packed. So much for rule # 3! Needless to say we ate all future breakfasts in our hotel restaurant.

Next on the itinerary was a walking tour of the north-east section of Luang Prabang as it holds most of the major historical sites. More than 30 wats and temples stand in this small, well-laid



John and Doreen ascend Mount Phu Si for a view of the Mekong River (Berg)

out sector. We visited the major attractions of Mount Phu Si, Royal Palace Museum, That Makino, Wat Mai, Wat Wisunalat and Wat Vieng Thong. The wats are extremely beautiful with high-peaked, low-sweeping, multi-layered roof lines and beautiful murals in bright colors or deep reds, blacks and gold. The monks, draped in their orange robes, are willing to discuss the different Buddha images and history of the wat or to pose for a picture. Luang Prabang is an easy town for walking and if you tire there are many restaurants along Thonon Sisavanguong, the main street, or Thanon Khom Khong, a street overlooking the Mekong River.

Our third day began with a visit to the cave temple at Pak Ou, an hour plus upstream on the Mekong River

at the mouth of the Nam Ou. On our walking tour we'd arranged a boat hire to the cave with optional stops at various villages (\$7.50 pp). At 9:30 a.m. we arrived to find our boat operator busily collecting more passengers. From the previous day's conversation two to four passengers were to be expected, but upon our 10:15 a.m. departure eleven people were crowded into his narrow riverboat. However, this proved to be fine as we all managed to find a chair or place to sit for the 25 km upriver trip.

At the mouth of the Nam Ou River, we reached the famous Pak Ou Caves (admission \$1.20 pp) and climbed a short staircase to the two lower caves known as Tham Ting. The caves are crammed with Buddha images of all styles and sizes. Steep stairs lead round to an upper cave, Tham Phum, which is deeper into the limestone mountain and requires artificial light for viewing. Flashlights are available for a fee.

Once back on the river we crossed to the mouth of the Nam Ou to view a waterfall flowing from a high limestone cliff. For us the attraction wasn't too impressive as we're spoiled with cascading

B.C. waterfalls. After a lunch stop we visited Ben Xang Hai, which means 'jar maker village' because at one time this was the cottage industry. Today the villagers have forsaken the jar making for a more profitable undertaking – the distilling of rice to fill imported jars with a potent rice wine called lao-lao! It was interesting to walk through the village viewing the many 45-gallon barrel stills with villagers maintaining the small fires under each barrel or stirring the bubbling "brew" with the clear liquid flowing from a spout into the pottery jars. On the main street souvenirs and small bottles of lao-lao are offered for sale.

Our final stop of the day was in a paper-making village where we watched a demonstration and wandered the muddy lanes and saw many tourists purchased paper-made souvenirs. These villages are not

pristine examples of Lao villages exhibiting traditional Laotian lifestyles as they sell souvenirs and tend to cater to the daily tourist crowds. But it's still a worthwhile boat trip.

A more authentic atmosphere can be observed by taking a small, local ferry boat from the river bank near the market across the Mekong River to Ban Xieng Maen. Look for a set of stairs leading to the river's edge or ask and you'll soon be directed to the departure spot. In Ban Xieng Maen it is interesting to wander its unpaved streets observing the homes and original urban grid plan. If your hunger for wats hasn't been saturated by now there are several notable temples to visit here.

One evening we attended a cultural presentation held in the Conference Hall located on the Royal Palace Museum site. Tickets may be purchased at the door prior to the show. We chose seats in the middle section for \$12 each, but it seems all seats have a fine view. The music and dances provided a glimpse of what life was once like at the royal court.



A pavilion in the Royal Palace grounds, Luang Prabang (Berg)

On our final day in Luang Prabang we rented

a jumbo and driver for \$15.00 and three of us bounced our way over a muddy, potholed road to Tat Kuany Si, a many-tiered waterfall tumbling over limestone formations forming a series of pools (admission \$1.50). Even though a misty rain was falling we climbed a steep path to a high ridge but found it too slippery to risk a venture to the top. I'm sure that on sunny days the picturesque park is crowded with locals and tourists enjoying picnics and swimming in the turquoise pools. The entrance road is lined with small souvenir and food stalls, but there was no pressure to buy.

Part II of this Laos account, which contains much practical information to help other travellers, will appear in the next edition of TravelScoop. 📖

Travel Digest

Austria

Austria is renowned for many things such as spectacular scenery and skiing. But, if asked, many people would say “music”. If that is your main reason for visiting Austria, then fall and winter is a great time to go. The Fall-Winter Festival of Festivals offers jazz and opera in Salzburg, contemporary music in Vienna, Mozart Week in Salzburg (last week of January) and a variety of smaller festivals in smaller towns where, the tourist office points out, it is possible to walk to performances or ride on public transportation. For details of all these musical events, plus information on many fine art exhibitions and Christmas market details call 416 967 3381 or visit www.austria-tourism.at

Canada

Fall and winter usually means great museum offerings, and this year Canada doesn't disappoint. For starters there are two very different offerings at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in the Capital Region. First to open will be **Across Time and Tundra: The Inuvialuit of the Canadian Arctic**, to be presented on 7 November and due to run until 9 January 2005 (yes, over a year). This exhibition will include about 200 artefacts and 150 fascinating archival photographs as well as many interactive elements including dancing and drumming. Sounds great for children on a Capital Region winter getaway! Completely different will be the same museum's

exhibition **Ancient Treasures and the Dead Sea Scrolls**, due to open on 5 December, running until 12 April 2004. On view will be rare artefacts from the biblical period in Israel, including three of the original 2,000-year-old Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in a cave in 1947. Another rare exhibit is the tiny ivory pomegranate (8th century BC), the only known relic from Solomon's First Temple, described in the Old Testament. For more information on the Museum of Civilization contact 1 800 555 5621, 819 776 7014, www.civilization.ca.

In quite a different mood altogether is this fall's major exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Straight from the renowned Victoria & Albert Museum in London, England, comes **Art Deco 1910-1939** (20 September – 4 January 2004), its only Canadian venue.

TravelScoop was invited to the preview and we can report this is a fabulous exhibition, with something for everyone, especially those of *un age certain!* There's a rare 1934 Canadian-made McLaughlin Buick model 66S, fabulous jewels by Cartier, evening gowns, household items, a ballet costume by Picasso, pictures, tapestries, rare footage of Josephine Baker dancing in Paris and so much more. This exhibition is of special interest to avid travellers, since the exhibition not only includes pieces from almost every continent, but also old travel posters ... those famous ones of ocean liners together with more unusual ones such as “Come to Soviet Armenia”! Don't miss the small jade pieces from China, the bed from India (which almost defies description!), the African-

inspired copper and ceramic mask and what the catalogue describes as “arguably the finest example of Frank Lloyd Wright's stained glass windows”. Tickets \$15 on weekdays, \$18 on weekends (seniors \$12 or \$15) with reduced rates during ROM Friday Nights (4:30 – 9:30 p.m.) of \$10 for adults and \$5 for seniors. Advanced timed tickets from TicketKing at 1 800 461 3333 or 416 872 1212 or in person at ROM, whose website is www.rom.on.ca. As the **Fairmont Royal York Hotel** in Toronto once boasted a fine art deco poster, it is only fitting that this hotel is offering an exhibition package which includes double accommodation, buffet breakfast for two in York's Kitchen and two priority access tickets to the exhibition at package prices from \$199 ... a great getaway to share with a partner or a friend. Call 1 800 441 1414 or visit www.fairmont.com for more details.

Ireland

Don't like the white stuff, but on the other hand you're not really a sun-worshipper? Then think of Ireland for a fall/winter getaway where it's (usually) emerald all year. There's a selection of well-priced trips to Ireland being offered in the coming seasons: golf, fly n' drive, a Dublin getaway, coach tours and more, all detailed in the Tourism Ireland's **Fabulous fall/winter vacation packages** brochure available by calling 1 800 223 6470 or 416 925 6033, www.tourismireland.com

Switzerland

The cover was beautiful enough, but when I opened Switzerland's

new *Gastronomy & Wine* brochure the photograph on page 2 quite took my breath away, especially as I once lived in the Lake Geneva region. This great little booklet is designed especially for travellers who love regional foods and wines. As well as its outstanding photographs, it offers clear route maps, accommodation suggestions from fine hotels to farm stays, all the vineyards that welcome visitors, boat trip information, restaurant suggestions (again with photographs), recipes and so much more, including driving times and even walking times from local stations. If you make a quick decision you could be in Switzerland before October ends, a time when this beautiful country is especially lovely (but so is spring ... when wild flowers cover the hillsides). So call 1 800 794 7795 for this brochure and be tempted, if not for this year then for next. Or visit the excellent website www.MySwitzerland.com,

designed for Canadians, where you not only find a wealth of information, but can make a variety of reservations for accommodation, train passes and so on. And while on the subject of Switzerland, there's an art exhibition on in Geneva (until 1 February 2004) that would be of special interest to Canadians as it's "Landscapes" by Ferdinand Hodler, an artist who influenced our own Group of Seven (details on the website).

U.S.A.

Palm Beach, Florida, is easy to reach from Eastern Canada and with the new Canjet Airlines service from Montreal readers may like to have the contact details for the County: 1 800 833 5733, www.palmbeachfl.com. One property travellers might like to check out is the boutique, historic Chesterfield which looks fabulous – 1 800 243 7871, www.chesterfieldpb.com – who

are offering a variety of specials during the Fall, including B&B packages and a US Thanksgiving Day Dinner (27 November) for US\$34.95.

The state of **Texas** continues to welcome Canadians with a special coupon booklet *Texas Buckaroo Buck\$ – Texas-Sized Vacation Savings for Canadian Travellers 2003-2004* (yes, they even spelled 'travellers' as we do!). Savings are available over a wide range of accommodations, attractions and shopping. And for drivers in the State, there are additional savings from 33 of the participants who will offer an additional 10% off their existing coupon offer when presented with a US gas receipt and a Canadian driver's license. Texas is, of course, famous for many things, including its 800+ golf courses and its excellent bird-watching along the Gulf Coast. For your savings booklet call 1 800 8888 TEX, ext. 2826 or print them from the website www.TravelTex.com

The Travel Society

We have a file listing several single travellers who wish to take a Travel Society tour and wish to share. Destinations include: China, Australia, Turkey and the Galapagos.

If you would like to share with another member please contact us. We will put you in touch with each other so that you can chat on the telephone - or meet if convenient - to see if you would like to share.

Call 416 926 2500, ex. 24 or 1 877 926 2500, ex. 24

Please note ...

www.thetravelsociety.com

Our website is now up and fully operational. We will constantly endeavour to improve it and welcome your input.

To access the site the password will be updated monthly and will appear on the back page of your *TravelScoop* within the address box.

It's time to go travelling!

There are so many places in the world and there's so little time. Take a look at these new destinations. We have been asked by our members to arrange tours to the following countries. Why don't you join them?

- South Africa, Botswana, Namibia
- India
- Sri Lanka

Please call now and we will send the detailed itineraries for 2004

21 days from \$4,950 including all airfares

Space limited to 20 people

A Traveller's Turkey *Departing: 1 May & 18 September 2004*

It is one of the cradles of civilization and one of the most wonderful countries on the planet. Here are fabled cities, unique landscapes, incomparable historic sites and calm, friendly people who are eager to show that their land is, indeed, both historic and modern.

Ann Wallace, our editor, has travelled extensively in Turkey and always returns claiming it is one of her favourite destinations. So now we have organized a luxurious tour of Turkey exclusively for Travel Society members. It is due to take place in September 2003 for a maximum of 20 people.

We have combined our extensive knowledge with careful research to ensure you see the very best that Turkey has to offer. You'll stay in first-class historic or very specialized hotels, travel in a 40-seat air-conditioned luxury bus, enjoy cruises on private boats, sample fine food and be entertained by cultural performances. And the itinerary? Magical Istanbul (plenty of time there); Ankara, home of one of the world's finest museums; the unique 'geological poem' called Kapadokya (or Cappadocia); mysterious and lovely ruins such as Aphrodisias, Pergamum and, of course, Ephesus; the fabled and beautiful Aegean coast; the peaceful Princes Isles in the Sea of Marmara and so much more.

Ann says, "This is the most perfect tour of Turkey imaginable; you will have an unforgettable time ... and such a small group, too! Sign up now!"

AIR-INCLUSIVE PRICES (subject to confirmation) departing from:

Toronto	\$4,950.00 pp/dbl
Ottawa & Montreal	\$4,950.00 pp/dbl
Vancouver	\$5,195.00 pp/dbl
Edmonton & Calgary	\$5,195.00 pp/dbl
Winnipeg	\$5,125.00 pp/dbl
Halifax	\$5,125.00 pp/dbl

Single supplement \$455 (Sharing can be arranged.) Taxes included, visa extra.

Your tour includes:

- Round trip transatlantic and domestic flights with Air Canada
- 20 nights' accommodation
- All meals as per itinerary
- All domestic transportation
- 40 seat air conditioned luxury bus
- Admission to all sites
- An English-speaking guide/director and a Travel Society host

28 days from \$6,750 including all airfares

Space limited to 20 people

NEW Turkey - An Anatolian Adventure

Departing: 28 August 2004

If you can travel with us for 28 days, you might like to consider our longer tour of Turkey. In addition to all the destinations in 'A Traveller's Turkey' detailed above, this tour also includes a trip to legendary Troy, a tour of the historic battlefields of Gallipoli, a visit to the walled city of Iznik, a drive to Gordion (the home of Alexander's famous knot) and to many other historic sites such as Catal Hoyuk, Xanthus and mysterious Termessos, one of Turkey's most beautiful ruins. The extra time here also means more time on the beautiful coast, where you will enjoy boat trips, picnics and beach time or you may decide to take an overnight *gulet* cruise from Antalya to Kas. This truly is a superlative tour that covers all the highlights of this wonderful land.

AIR-INCLUSIVE PRICES (subject to confirmation) departing from:

Toronto	\$6,750.00 pp/dbl
Ottawa & Montreal	\$6,850.00 pp/dbl
Vancouver	\$7,150.00 pp/dbl
Edmonton & Calgary	\$7,000.00 pp/dbl
Winnipeg	\$6,950.00 pp/dbl
Halifax	\$6,900.00 pp/dbl

Single supplement \$670 (Sharing can be arranged.) Taxes included, visa extra.

Your tour includes:

- Round trip transatlantic and domestic flights with Air Canada
- Return airfare to Turkey
- 27 nights' hotel accommodation
- All meals as per itinerary
- 40 seat air-conditioned luxury bus
- Admission to all sites
- An English-speaking guide and a Travel Society host

The Travel Society ~ tours designed for members and their friends.

Galapagos Islands and Ecuador with options to Kapawi Lodge in the Amazon and Machu Picchu, Peru

14 days departing 4 November 2003 / March & April 2004

Each tour is
limited to
20 people

The Travel Society is proud to be able to offer its members an outstanding trip to some of the world's most spectacular destinations. Who hasn't dreamed of cruising to the Galapagos Islands and seeing wildlife as Darwin witnessed it? Think of the unique adventure you will enjoy, of the stories you will have to tell and the photographs you will take! You will spend a week aboard your first-class 20-passenger ship, taking daily shore excursions to a variety of the islands with experienced naturalists in groups of no more than 10 people per guide.

You'll also visit other destinations in Ecuador, and then you can choose to enjoy the exciting optional extensions: to Kapawi - a ecological lodge in the Amazon and/or a visit Machu Picchu in Peru. We'll take care of all the travel details. All you have to do is enjoy!

PRICES INCLUDE AIR AND TAXES departing from:

Toronto	\$7,476.00 pp/dbl
Ottawa & Montreal	\$7,476.00 pp/dbl
Vancouver	\$7,797.00 pp/dbl
Calgary	\$7,797.00 pp/dbl
Halifax	\$7,394.00 pp/dbl

GREAT ADD-ONS, INCLUDING AIR:

Kapawi - from all departure points	\$1,680.00 pp/dbl
Machu Picchu -	: Toronto \$1,642.00 pp/dbl
When departing from	: Ottawa, Montreal \$1,642.00 pp/dbl
	: Vancouver, Calgary \$1,547.00 pp/dbl
	: Halifax \$1,694.00 pp/dbl

Prices are subject to confirmation

Your tour includes:

- Round-trip air transportation
- All domestic air transportation
- All accommodation
- All meals as per the itinerary
- Admissions to all sites
- Expert Galapagos guides
- Transfers & baggage handling
- Islands Park Entrance Fee (US\$100)

NEW

Guatemala Grandeur with an optional add-on to Havana, Cuba

Departing 13 February & 12 March 2004

The Travel Society is thrilled to bring you two special tours of Guatemala.

The first tour, 17 days, we've called the first tour, and it covers all the highlights of this colourful land. You'll start your tour in Guatemala City and then travel through the mountains to Chichicastenango, home to one of the world's most intriguing markets. There's another superlative waiting for you at volcano-rimmed Lake Atitlan, often referred to as the world's most beautiful lake. And many people consider Antigua one of the world's most beautiful cities. You'll spend 4 nights there and enjoy unique hotels, restaurants and tours both in the city and beyond. Visits to the Quetzal Biosphere in the highlands, a stay at amazing Tikal and a trip over the border to Honduras to visit the ruins of Copan are also on the itinerary.

AIR-INCLUSIVE PRICES departing from:

Toronto	\$4,920.00 pp/dbl
Ottawa & Montreal	\$4,995.00 pp/dbl
Vancouver	\$4,995.00 pp/dbl
Edmonton & Calgary	\$5,095.00 pp/dbl
Halifax	\$5,145.00 pp/dbl

Single supplement \$525 (Sharing can be arranged.)

Plus Taxes.

Prices are subject to confirmation

Each tour is limited to
18 people

Your tour includes:

- Return airfare
- 16 nights' hotel accommodation
- All meals as per the itinerary
- Admissions to all sites
- Transportation in a comfortable air-conditioned bus
- The services of a professional bilingual tour director and a Travel Society host

NEW

Guatemala - Holy Week and Havana, Cuba

Departing 3 April 2004

The second tour, 12 days, covers the amazing events that take place during **Easter Week in Antigua**, together with excursions into surrounding Guatemala, including a trip to Chichicastenango. A story on this unique event will be featured in the October edition of *TravelScoop* as Editor Ann enjoyed this trip this year. (If you would like to receive a more detailed account of her experience, together with a full-colour photo essay, and her story of the Havana add-on, please send \$5 with your address.) Yes, two days in historic **Havana** end this trip ... a city that every traveller should see. "There's nowhere else quite like it," says Ann.

AIR-INCLUSIVE PRICES departing from:

Toronto	\$4,696.00 pp/dbl
Ottawa & Montreal	TBA
Vancouver	TBA
Edmonton & Calgary	TBA
Halifax	TBA

Single supplement \$370 (Sharing can be arranged.)

Plus Taxes.

Prices are subject to confirmation

Each tour is limited to
18 people

Your tour includes:

- Return airfare
- 11 nights' hotel accommodation
- All meals as per the itinerary
- Admissions to all sites
- Transportation in a comfortable air-conditioned bus
- The services of a professional bilingual tour director and a Travel Society host

Please call **The Travel Society** 1 877 926 2500 x24 or 416 926 2500 x24 for the full details. All our tours are specially priced for *Travel Society* members and are only available at these prices through our office.  reg #01280649

The Travel Society ~ tours designed for members and their friends.

China is safe! Go now ... before the crowds return!

from \$3,986 for 19 days

Reserve now for 2004

China ... Yangtze Spectacular ~ 19 days!

Come with us on our most popular, unique tour and spend 18 days in China still at an amazingly low price. Reserve now for departures on

March, April, September & October 2004

It is vast, fascinating and mysterious and it has beckoned travellers from the west for centuries. Mention it to avid travellers and they are sure to say, "Yes, I hope to visit China one day." And what would they choose to experience? A **cruise on the mighty Yangtze River (now in the process of changing for ever)**; a look at the work-in-progress on the massive **Three Gorges Dam**; a walk on the ancient **Great Wall**; views of charming villages, lush terraced hillsides and magnificent mountain peaks; visits to the great cities of **Shanghai** and **Beijing**; a trip to view one of the world's greatest archaeological finds ... the 6,000 terra-cotta warriors at **Xi'an**; scenes of palaces, pagodas, pavilions and pandas; tastes of Peking duck and Chinese banquets and so much more. So how do you choose? When you decide on The *Travel Society's* tour

there's no need to choose because all these highlights are included. Yes, in these remarkable 18 days you'll stay in Beijing; you'll take a 4-day first-class cruise on the Yangtze with many shore excursions; you'll fly to see those centuries-old terra-cotta warriors in Xi'an; you'll visit bustling Chongquin and see its pandas; stay in Hangzhou and travel into the hills covered with tea plantations; explore the exquisite gardens of Suzhou, and visit Nanjing and Wuzhen. And you'll have time to explore spectacular Shanghai. Throughout the trip you'll see magnificent architecture, you'll be entertained at cultural events, you'll join your hosts at a variety of banquets, you'll have time to shop, and you'll marvel at some of the most wonderful scenery on earth, all in the company of English-speaking guides. You'll travel by plane, by luxury bus, cruise ship and river boat. Many of our members have told us it's an experience of a lifetime ... and all at an amazing price!

Editor, Ann Wallace took the China Yangtze trip and her 14-page, illustrated account is available. For your copy please send \$5 with your address.

AIR-INCLUSIVE PRICES departing from:

Vancouver	\$3,986 pp/dbl
Victoria/Nanaimo/Kamloops	\$4,099 pp/dbl
Calgary/Edmonton	\$4,224 pp/dbl
Saskatoon/Regina	\$4,428 pp/dbl
Winnipeg	\$4,392 pp/dbl
Toronto	\$4,320 pp/dbl
Ottawa & Montreal	\$4,426 pp/dbl
Halifax/Quebec City/London	\$4,540 pp/dbl
Thunder Bay/St. John's	\$4,688 pp/dbl
Single supplement \$1,090 (Sharing can be arranged.)	

Taxes and visas extra.

GREAT ADD-ONS:

Hong Kong	4 days/3 nights	\$1,188.00
Tokyo	4 days/3 nights	\$892.00

Prices are subject to confirmation

Your tour costs includes:

- Round-trip transpacific air fares on Japan Airlines
- Chinese domestic airfares
- Canadian domestic airfares
- First-class hotel accommodation
- First-class 4 days/3 nights Yangtze River cruise aboard a deluxe cruise ship
- All transfers
- Daily sightseeing
- Three meals daily
- 2 Western style dinners.
- Special banquets in Hangzhou, Xi'an and Beijing
- Evening cultural shows
- Fully escorted by English/Chinese-speaking tour guide
- English-speaking local guides
- Free day and evening in Beijing & Shanghai

Please call **The Travel Society** 1 877 926 2500 x24 or 416 926 2500 x24 for the full details. All our tours are specially priced for *Travel Society* members and are only available at these prices through our office.  reg #01280649

The Travel Society ~ tours designed for members and their friends.

Coming to your mailbox soon ... a comprehensive brochure listing ALL The Travel Society tours available for the rest of 2003 and for 2004

The 25 Day Grand Tour of New Zealand, Australia and Fiji!

Departure Date: February and October 2004

Highlights...

Auckland, Waitomo Caves, Rotorua, Agrodome sheep demonstration, Te whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve, Rainbow Springs, Milford Sound cruise, Queenstown, Mount Cook, Christchurch, Sydney, Opera House & Harbour cruise, Tropical Cairns, Michaelmas Cay, Outer Barrier Reef cruise, Kuranda rail & Rainforest, Ayers Rock, Alice Springs, The "Ghan" train across the Outback, Adelaide, Melbourne, 3 nights in Fiji

What could be more wonderful than a 25-day grand tour of New Zealand, Australia and Fiji? No matter where you live in Canada, these destinations are a long way to go ... so come with us and see the highlights in one unforgettable vacation.

Your tour costs includes:

- Fully comprehensive insurance included
- Exclusive special-interest fun themes
- The services of an experienced escort
- First-class hotels throughout
- Luxury touring coaches
- All tips included
- Full luggage service
- Return trans-Pacific airfare with Qantas Airways
- All sightseeing (with no hidden extras)
- Hotel taxes and Australian and NZ GST.
- The Travel Society neck pillow, flight bag, travel wallet, baggage tags
- 3 nights in Fiji

PRICES INCLUDE AIR AND TAXES departing from:

Table with 2 columns: City and Price. Rows include Vancouver (\$10,934), Victoria (\$11,226), Calgary & Edmonton (\$11,497), Winnipeg (\$11,545), Toronto (\$11,545), Ottawa & Montreal (\$11,545), and Halifax (\$11,629).

Single supplement \$1,999 (Sharing can be arranged.) Taxes extra
Prices are subject to confirmation

Please call The Travel Society 1 877 926 2500 x24 or 416 926 2500 x24 for the full details. All our tours are specially priced for Travel Society members and are only available at these prices through our office. TICO reg #01280649

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