



The Travel Society

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Magazine

Winter Adventures in Newfoundland
British Virgin Islands
Costa Rica

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David LeDrew and
Moose at the
Newfoundland
Emporium (Wallace)

editor's letter ...

Yet more terrible events ... this time, of course, the hotel bombings in Amman, Jordan. Again all at The Travel Society wish to express their condolences. Exactly one week before this tragedy, a small delegation of charming Jordanians from their Tourist Office had been in Toronto. Several tour operators, free-lance travel writers and editors (myself included) met them over breakfast and enjoyed much travel talk and an excellent slide presentation. Many present had been to Jordan and all who had, without fail, confirmed that it was a fascinating and welcoming destination. The Jordanians lamented that, being in an area susceptible to violence and terror, they were often - and inaccurately - associated with such acts, but they assured the gathered company that they were, indeed, a safe destination and that tourism was very important to their economy. Seven days later the bombs went off. I sent a message to the Jordanians I had met and they responded, expressing the hope of course that visitors would continue to come to their country. Let's hope they do (just as people have continued to go to New York, London and Madrid). If any of you have tips or stories about travelling in Jordan, I'd love to hear them.

Now to some good tourism news. Every November the world's largest travel trade show is held in London, England. It's called the World Travel Mart, or WTM. Reports are that this year's WTM has been by far the biggest ever, with trade deals sealed amounting to billions of dollars. Obviously tourism continues to be big business. Canada has had a strong presence at the event, I hear, with a big launch of our **Canada - Keep Exploring** slogan, tourism awards and a show revealing some glimpses of the theatre presentation *Lord of the Rings*, coming to Toronto soon. Let's hope 2006 will be a great year for tourism in Canada.

Time now to wish you all a happy, fun, peaceful and safe holiday season and exciting and safe travels in 2006.



Below we reproduce – with Margot Wood's permission – copy of an e-mail message she sent to Cyril Payle, leader and organizer of The Travel Society's South African tour, and his wife Bridget.

Hello Bridget and Cyril,
 Lovely to hear from you and thank you so much for your best wishes. Yes, we arrived home safely and with such a lot of wonderful memories. They say that Africa is a continent of contrasts, how true this is. As I sort through my pictures of South Africa along with listening to the music of Brenda Fassie, I feel I am back in your wonderful country, reliving all the days and remembering the magical moments of the tour. May I share my special memories with you:

- * Entering Nelson Mandela's humble home and feeling such a closeness to this man; a man who was given a mission no-one else could fulfill.
- * Getting up very early and watching the sunrise appear through the mists over aptly-named Hazyview.
- * Listening to the women playing tribal music in the village near Blyde River Canyon.
- * Arriving at Kruger National Park and viewing our first animal. We were all filled and overflowing with excitement.
- * Viewing our first pride of lions ... an image that will remain with me forever.
- * Watching the sunset in Kruger National Park and wishing that one moment could last forever.
- * Listening to you Cyril ... we learned so much from you.
- * Making our way up to Pigg's Peak in Swaziland and experiencing the magnificent countryside and its lovely people.
- * The beautiful traditional mud and straw huts of the little hamlets.
- * The happy children sharing their music and laughter in Shakaland.
- * I think my favourite area was Transkei, with its endless hills and valleys and the sound of the

never-ending wind. But beyond that sound, I think there was something greater: a sacredness and a beauty that had found its way home.

- * The magnificent countryside almost everywhere. South Africa truly is a place of wonder and the people are so beautiful.
- * Watching the elephants at the water hole in the Addo National Park and noting their attention to the baby elephants.
- * The beautiful countryside of the Little Karoo desert where every turn and bend presented something different.
- * Experiencing Robben Island and walking the route that was taken by so many political prisoners.
- * Journeying to the Cape of Good Hope, where the two oceans meet.
- * Joking about fellow-traveller Jack's red shorts after learned that red is the colour that elephants like to challenge!
- * Sharing and developing friendships with our new travelling companions and laughing so much together.

To sum up, this was an adventure that we will never forget. There were so many magical moments that I could write pages and pages about them. Cyril: most of all, we want to thank you. You are so passionate and knowledgeable about your country and its people. Your voice of inspiration and hope was a joy to hear. You filled every day with knowledge and understanding of your wonderful country and its people. It was a privilege to meet you and Bridget and we thank you so much for all the care and attention that you gave to each and every one of us. We know that your business will succeed, because of your total commitment to the visitors that you welcome to South Africa. We do hope that one day we will welcome *you* and your family to our country. Thank you for everything.

Yours truly, Margot Wood.

More on St Kitts

Judging from Editor Ann's recent article on St Kitts, we probably unknowingly crossed paths with her. My husband and I were on the island on a Signature Vacation package earlier this year and had opted for the Frigate Bay Hotel. This was a good choice – a very pleasant, modestly-sized hillside property set in lovely tropical gardens – and we were pleased to read that Ann agreed.

St Kitts is a fascinating island with an interesting landscape and local people who are exceptionally friendly, helpful and welcoming. The centre of the island is dominated by a massive, dormant volcano the sides of which are cloaked in rainforest. There is a lot to do and see and if this destination is on your agenda we have a couple of suggestions.

First of all, a round-the-island tour provides a good introduction to St. Kitts. You could take the train tour that Ann mentioned but, as she points out, at US\$89 per person it is over priced and largely aimed at cruise ship passengers. At US\$20 per person a round-the-island, four-hour mini bus tour, that most hotels or your tour company representative will arrange, is much better value. On the

tour that we took we found ourselves part of a congenial group of eight. Our driver/guide, Annette, a local cab driver, was outgoing and knowledgeable. She stopped at places of interest so that we could look around. One of these was the impressive, restored Brimstone Hill Fortress reached via a hair-raising switchback road. Here we had plenty of time to explore and to gawk at the view. We learned that the earliest fortifications on this site date from 1690 and were subsequently fought over by the British and French until the island became British under the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. This fortress, often referred to as the Gibraltar of the Caribbean, is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Don't miss it.

Secondly, a number of companies run organized hikes on St Kitts. Hikes into the rainforest or up to the volcano's crater are popular. Be warned, however, that any volcano hike on St. Kitts takes about eight hours and should not be attempted unless you are reasonably fit and have packed proper footwear. Even a half-day rainforest hike will require that you walk up and down some fairly steep slopes. That being said, these are great outings and the company we highly recommend is Greg's Safaris,

www.gregsafaris.com, owned and operated by Greg Pereira. Greg offers three fascinating outings: a sugar plantation tour, a rainforest hike and a volcano hike. On the hikes Greg provides walking sticks, a wonderful selection of island snacks and juices to make sure that everyone has the energy for the trek, and tremendous insight into the ecology of the island. Later, back at your hotel, tired from the exertion, that rum punch beside the pool tastes even better than usual.

*Helen E. Parson
Baden ON*

Those Seven Wonders

I do not like the pyramids being out of the Seven Wonders of the World list! I would rate them near the top, with perhaps the Taj Mahal number one. And let's not forget the terracotta warriors of X'ian in China. They surely rate in there somewhere? But then, are these things not in the eye of the beholder? We can all have our own lists.

*Werner Bachmann
Toronto, ON*

The Adventure of a Lifetime

On 14 January 2006, with the pyramids of Egypt behind them and the African continent stretching out before them, a group of intrepid men and women from many countries will begin an epic adventure – a bicycle race/expedition through ten African countries, ending in Cape Town, South Africa.

Out of the 51 participants currently registered from Belgium, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Holland, South Africa, Switzerland and the United States, 15 are Canadian. One of these Canadians is Michael Coo, a forty-something father of two who describes himself as 'an average Joe.' But this bartender-by-trade and one-time bike courier from Ottawa is anything but. Although initially drawn to the expedition solely because of its challenge, Coo soon realized that the expedition could offer him a chance to fundraise for a cause he's passionate about – water.

As an avid traveller, Coo says he is continually struck by the fundamental necessity of access to clean drinking water, which can make the difference between a community that thrives and is healthy, and one that struggles and is plagued by illness.

Other Canadian participants are Sam Bail, the youngest at 19, and James Malone, the oldest at 67. Participants can race, can be part of a relay team, can travel at their own pace or can ride a section. To follow the progress of this race/expedition (or to register!) visit www.tourdafrique.com or call 416 364 8255. And if you would like to learn more about WaterCan – the charity that Michael Coo will be pedalling for – visit www.watercan.com or call 1 800 370 5658. Good luck to all the participants!

Winter Adventures in Newfoundland

story and photographs by
Ann Wallace



Marble Villas at the foot of Marble Mountain

Calling all winter lovers! Yes, we do exist! We love the challenges and adventures to be found in being out-of-doors in a Canadian winter and we love, perhaps even more, the warm glow experienced indoors later, enjoying a brew and a hearty meal and some good company. Over my considerable number of years, this love of winter (and enjoyment of downhill skiing) has led to quite a few ski vacations in quite a lot of fancy places in North America and Europe: fancy ski gear, fancy restaurants and fancy prices. They have all been wonderful, but I do have to admit that after a few days on the same slopes I sometimes start to think how nice it would be to have some different winter adventures. Enter a winter vacation in Newfoundland.

As some readers may remember, I paid my first visit to Newfoundland in the winter of 2004. After a tourism conference, I remained in St. John's to explore the B&B's, restaurants and museums there and nearby. But some of my colleagues headed out to Deer Lake for some outdoor fun and I remembered the stories they told of all the fun they had had (and the account published in *TravelScoop*, Nov. 2004). So ... early this year some friends and I took their advice, made some plans and soon I was heading, once again, to Newfoundland in the winter. We planned to ski, of course, but my friends agreed they would join me in any other adventures I might find so that I could produce a 'winter-fun' story for this magazine.



*There's
David LeDrew and
Moose again at the entrance to the
Newfoundland Emporium*

There's no use pretending that a winter vacation in Newfoundland is remarkably different from anywhere else in Canada. There's snow, there's the full range of winter sports on offer and it's cold ... though not nearly as cold as you might expect. But what's different in Newfoundland is that old cliché ... the friendly people! No big-resort attitude here; everyone is truly delighted you have come to visit and they make sure they show it.

So ... make the decision right now, as I did, to go after the holidays! A week around Deer Lake will clear your head, help you lose those extra holiday pounds, introduce you to some adventures you've probably never dreamt of and make you new friends in friendly Newfoundland. And if you're a complete novice at all or any winter sports, rest assured this is a great place to learn.

You'll land at the international airport at Deer Lake, but Corner Brook is the main town here and the second largest in the province. In summer, its beautiful long harbour and large port are home to ships from just about every major cruise line on the seas. "International visitors find this destination exotic," I was told, "especially when travellers are lifted from the decks of their ships by helicopter and flown to remote fishing camps or spectacular Gros Morne for the day." I didn't have a helicopter ride on my visit, but I did have lots of adventures. Here's what to expect.

First of all, make a quick visit to the town of Corner Brook. Get all your gift-buying out of the way early with a visit to the Newfoundland Emporium – www.nfldemporium.com – on Broadway, a fascinating store where everything comes from, or relates to, Newfoundland. There's something for everyone here: crafts and folk art, local preserves, antiques, stamps, coins, books both new and rare and, as their banner over the door states, "flotsam and jetsam". When your purchases are done, or if you're not in the shopping mood, you'll still have a great visit with owner David LeDrew and his magnificent dog (yes, a Newfoundland of course!) called Moose, who will patiently

pose for photographs for your "Newfoundland Vacation" album.

Next day, knowing that a spot of cross-country skiing is a good way to warm up before tackling the mountain, we headed off to Blow-Me-Down Ski Park, located within the city limits of Corner Brook. Here there's a cozy lodge with a laid-back restaurant and bar, fireplace, ski rentals, lessons if you wish and 40 km of groomed trails in the great outdoors. If you can cover a total route of 9 km you'll find a log-cabin outpost called the gazebo located 4.5 km from the main lodge where you can enjoy a plate of *toutons* (fried bread with molasses) and, naturally, a warm welcome.

A day of downhill skiing at Marble Mountain was in our plans for the next day. We'd seen the 'mountain' from its base and while it certainly looked pleasant enough it certainly didn't appear to be outstanding. How wrong we were. We hit the slopes on a Monday morning and were surprised when the lift carried us to terrain that couldn't be seen from the base area. It was sunny, not too cold, the slopes were perfectly groomed and ... oh joy, we almost had the mountain to ourselves. We swooped and whooped and raced each other to the almost-empty chair-lift to do it all over again ... and again ... and again. Not once did we line up for the lift. "It's always like this during the week," our cheerful 'liftie' told us. Here are the statistics: 1,700 feet from the top to the base of the mountain, 34 different runs for all levels of skiers and snowboarders spread over 175 skiable areas, high-speed modern lifts and, of course, rentals and lessons.

Soon it was time for these senior skiers to take a break. The ski lodge at Marble Mountain is an architectural wonder: a 54,000 square foot wood and glass chalet with every amenity, and on this perfect Monday it was almost all ours! We took our drinks and lunch trays to the fireplace to relax and chat about Marble Mountain. No, it's not terribly high; no, it doesn't compare with swish resorts that offer five-star hotels and expensive clothing stores and restaurants. It doesn't want to. It offers excellent skiing, all modern facilities such as high-speed lifts, slope grooming and snow-making, and a fine lodge in a laid-back atmosphere without crowds. If you're of a certain age and wish to enjoy a few relaxed days on the slopes, Marble Mountain fits the bill. And talking of bills, the \$42 per day lift tickets are a bargain these days.

The next morning we wished we could ski some more, but we'd made a date with Ed English to go ice-caving. Ed's name had been given to me by a colleague at Newfoundland Tourism, assuring me we were in for a great time. Ed was waiting for us in a parking spot down the valley as arranged. After greetings and introductions Ed got 'the gear' out of his truck ... bright red survival jackets, waterproof pants, helmets with flashlights mounted on them and snowshoes. My companions were quiet and rolled their eyes at each other. I was worried. What *had* I got us in to? But Ed seemed such a dependable guy and he assured us we were going to have

fun. We donned the gear over our winter clothes and off we set, clumsy and tripping over our snow shoes. Soon we got the hang of it, which was lucky because after a while we left the marked trail and headed off into the woods where the snow was much deeper and the terrain slightly hilly. Eventually, after much hilarity in the thigh-high snow, we stopped at the mouth of a cave. My, we were hot! Ed advised us to take off our own winter jackets, and leave them at the cave entrance, assuring us that we wouldn't find the caves cold. We did so, then donned our helmets, switched on our flashlights and set off.

I admit caving isn't for everyone and even in large, well-lit, touristy caves I'm always worried I'm going to feel claustrophobic. But this experience was so much fun, so challenging and so different that I didn't have time to think of any phobias. Ed obviously knows the caves like the proverbial back of his hand ... he told us what was ahead, discussed our route options (some are easier than others), pointed out interesting features along the way and helped us when necessary, once standing waist deep in the underground river as he held our feet and guided us along a narrow ledge. It was one of those times in life when I could hardly believe what I was experiencing ... yes, what *was* a senior, a city-gal from London, England, doing caving among the icicles in the middle of a Newfoundland winter? Ed described what the underground river was like during the spring thaw and his stories made us happy to be there in winter! On our return to the crisp outdoors, we felt thrilled and all agreed we wouldn't have missed the experience for the world. But oh, were we tired!

Visitors can't go to this remarkable region of our country without a visit to Gros Morne National Park ... even in winter. So next day we set off with Ed and his snow shoes once again. "We'll head for the Tablelands," said Ed. "If the weather is fine and you're feeling fit we can try snow-shoeing to the top." More eye-rolling from my companions! But the weather didn't co-operate. It was windy with occasional white-out conditions and we ended up walking just a short distance in our snow-shoes, taking photographs of each other and the bleak, tree-less terrain. With the extra time now at our disposal we were able to drive around the park a little more, to visit Woody Point – a quaint village about 3 km from the Tablelands where, Ed told us, the Old Loft restaurant beside the water is a popular summer stop. We also stopped at the Sugar Hill Inn – another renowned eatery – at Norris Point, where hosts Vince and Marina gave us a warm welcome and showed us around their cozy inn.

As I feel I can only ski competently on well-groomed slopes I was not ready for cat skiing. However, if you're an expert or intermediate skier who likes the powder, Glenn Noël of Blomidon Cat Skiing (located about half an hour's drive along the bay from Corner Brook) is the man to contact. \$275 brings you an all-day excursion involving back country skiing with snacks, hot drinks and a good packed



(above) One of the rental villas at Humber Valley Resort



(left) View of the Humber River from the dining room at Strawberry Hill Resort

lunch included. You'll be accompanied by a lead skier; the staff has radios and all participants wear avalanche beacons. If you decide not to ski but would like to experience what it's all about, Glenn also offers a sight-seeing excursion for \$50 per person, which is what I opted for. Even this was quite the experience ... riding in the cat in what turned out to be white-out, dream-like conditions across slopes above the tree line. But Glenn told us riders are rewarded with some glorious views on a clear day. All the information is at www.catskiing.net.

Investors and outdoor enthusiasts are finding Deer Lake in considerable numbers, taking vacations in all seasons and returning to invest in villas from places as far away as Britain and South Africa. In summer the Deer Lake region offer beaches, water sports, boat tours and whale watching, kayaking, golf, fishing (famous for salmon), wildlife and what must be some of the world's greatest hik-

ing as 90% of Newfoundland is crown land. I hope I can soon visit in the summer (and I hope some of the details below may also help you plan a summer vacation in the region). But I loved my winter days spent near Corner Brook and came home with lots of happy and unique memories and new friends. Include Newfoundland in any season in your travel plans soon.

Some details ...

* For accommodation right in Corner Brook the Tudor-style Glynmill Inn is always popular. This property is the *grande dame* of the town and its history is closely linked with that of Corner Brook. The property was originally built in the 1920's to house the senior staff supervising the construction of the nearby paper mill, the largest project ever undertaken in the history of paper making at that time. This 'Staff House' eventually became an advanced-for-the-period hotel where much of Corner Brook's history was shaped with business meetings, war meetings, clubs and functions. Even if you don't stay here it's well worth popping in for a meal or a drink and there are some attractive art works for sale in the lobby art store. Tel: 1 800 563 4400 or visit www.glynmillin.ca.

* Talking of meals in Corner Brook, **Sorrento's** Italian restaurant is an extremely popular spot whose hearty dishes are very welcome after a day in the great outdoors. And there are lots of other popular restaurants on Main Street ... this town is easy to walk around and then you can choose somewhere that appeals.

* There are two accommodation choices at the foot of Marble Mountain. **Marble Villas**, adjacent to the lodge, are the closest, at a wide range of prices

depending on size. They offer new and tidy condominium-style units of varying sizes but no other facilities such as bar or restaurant. Across the road from the base of the mountain stands the laid-back **Marble Inn and Cabins**, offering basic but acceptable rooms (from \$99) and cabins, bar and restaurant in a relaxed atmosphere. These, and many other properties, together with all the Marble Mountain information you need, can be found at www.skimarble.com or call 1 888 462 7253. The region offers many B&B's too, many listed on this skimarble.com website and all listed in the province's official *Travel Guide* (see below).

* If luxury accommodation is your wish, you won't be disappointed at the relaxed but elegant **Strawberry Hill**, just 8 minutes from Marble Mountain Resort on the sparkling Lower Humber River. The Queen and many other important visitors to the region have stayed there. It looks delightful. Suites in the main house from \$130, self-catering chalets which sleep 4 or more from \$300. Tel: 1 877 434 0066, www.strawberryhill.net.

* The **Humber Valley Resort** is another accommodation option. This award-winning 'international development' consists of an ever-increasing number of freehold luxury villas that are being built on a hillside above the Humber River and Deer Lake (the real lake, not the town!). In addition to the private villas (many of which are offered as rental properties when not being used by their owners), there's a club house and beach house each with a bar and restaurant, a spa, 18-hole golf course and marina. With a direct charter flight from London's Gatwick to Deer Lake, the majority of these properties have been bought by people living in the U.K. and Ireland. As mentioned, these villas can be rented via a Maxxim Vacation or visit www.humbervalley.com. All villas sleep six, are fully furnished and equipped and are lovely. (I asked to be taken around some of them one afternoon.) On line at the moment is a five-night Christmas or New Year package for six which includes the villa and either Christmas lunch or New Year's Eve dinner from \$530 per person. I'm tempted!

* For **Sugar Hill Inn** in Gros Morne, tel: 1 888 299 2147 or visit www.sugarhillinn.nf.ca.

* **Blow-Me-Down Ski Club** (cross country), day pass \$10, rentals \$11.50, private lesson \$30, semi-private for 2 or 3 - \$15 each. Call 709 639 2SKI, www.cornet.nf.ca for information.

* **Ed English** offers a variety of adventure experiences in all seasons through his companies **Explore Newfoundland** and **Linkumtours**. He's also owner of the famous Quirpon Lighthouse Inn, located on an uninhabited island near L'Anse aux Meadows (it's been recommended in *The Travel Society Magazine* before and rated 'one of the world's top five most secluded destinations' by Britain's *Sunday Times* newspaper.) Ed would be delighted to help you plan your visit to Newfoundland in any season. He can be contacted at 1 877 497 5673, www.explorenewfoundland.com or 1 877 254 6586 www.linkumtours.com 1 877 254 6586. His 3-hour Cool Cavern Cave Tour costs \$79 per person. It's



*Snowshoeing
in a storm on
the Tablelands*

... continued on page 19

Intimate Hideaways on the British Virgin Islands

story and photos by Ann Wallace

Marcia has insisted she help me with my little suitcase. I follow her up the stairs. Pausing for a moment I look up and see her smiling down at me from a landing wall. But I have to shake my head in confusion, for Marcia's life-size image is on a large poster. "Oh my," I say, "that's you!" "That's right," she replies with a smile, "it was taken here." The large poster shows Marcia standing on a balcony of her hotel. Below the poster, a creation of the local tourist board, runs the line **1,500-ROOM RESORT AND CASINO. NOT COMING SOON.** I could finish this article right now ... and that line would have summed up the British Virgin Islands for you. But I won't, because there is a lot more I'd like to tell you.

Moments later Marcia opens the door of what is to be my room for the next two nights. I am enchanted. Sheer white curtains are drawn back to reveal a little balcony with whicker table and chairs overlooking an exquisite bay where

private sail boats are riding at anchor. We are facing west and already the sun is flooding this pretty room with late-afternoon rays. Close to the windows stands the king-size bed with a pretty blue and white coverlet ... a colour scheme that is repeated throughout this self-catering room: an en suite bathroom, sitting area and very well-equipped kitchen area at the rear. Welcoming and helpful notes are everywhere and it seems that Marcia has thought of everything. There's even a first-aid kit! It is all that a Caribbean room should be and the property is called The Lighthouse Villas.

I am here in the BVI after my sojourn in St. Kitts; a visit that has been arranged for me by the local tourist board as, after meeting their representatives at a tourism convention in Canada, they know I am interested in promoting small, locally-owned properties. The tourism people had just launched their *Intimate Hideaways, Charming Cottages, Inns, Hotels and Villas Programme* (now changed to *Jewels of the BVI*, I've just learned) via an illustrated brochure and



One of the Ridge Road murals



The bedroom section of my room at The Lighthouse Villas

a reservations network. And, apart from a handful of low-rise luxury properties, ‘intimate hideaways’ is what tourism in the BVI is mainly about. Oh ... that and, of course, sail boats!

The slogan for the British Virgin Islands is “Nature’s Little Secrets”, an apt description for the 60 unspoiled islands in this chain. Their names reflect their colourful history of pirates, merchants and adventurers: Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Jost van Dyke, Anegada. It is a favoured destination for sailors, owing to its variety of islands with safe anchorages and gentle prevailing winds. Large companies such as SunSail keep a fleet of sail boats of all sizes here for charter. Most people settle for ‘bare-boat’ charters, i.e. boats you sail yourself, without captain or crew. After a brief orientation session, anyone can set off for a vacation that is just like those dreamy posters and you can visit most of the islands. Mooring cans are provided in most of the approved stopping areas, so you don’t even need anchoring skills.

But if you’re a land-lubber, what can you expect in the BVI? My time was short and I only visited Tortola and Virgin Gorda, with the *Intimate Hideaways* brochure in hand, but I was charmed. Tortola, the largest of the islands, is where most people start their vacation. It’s very beautiful. The interior is lush and hilly, the roads steep and full of hair-pin bends, the views magnificent, the flowers and birds abundant, the white-sand beaches accessible and lovely. In

fact, whenever fancy travel magazines make those ‘World’s Best Beaches’ lists, a beach on the BVI invariably makes the grade. Unlike their sister ‘country’ – the U.S. Virgin Islands – rampant development has not been allowed here ... hence the slogan on the poster featuring Marcia and her lovely little guest house. There is a handful of low-rise, luxury properties but there are no multi-national chain hotels, no all-inclusives (although various meal plans are available at some of the luxury properties), no casinos, no high-rises, no shopping malls, no MacDonalds, no Kentucky Fried Chickens. And beach vendors are not allowed.

Unless you’re a very confident driver I recommend you hire a taxi for your first tour. The main island, Tortola, isn’t large but the roads are steep and twisty and, in any case, you’ll need your eyes for the scenery. After you’ve experienced the roads you may – or may not – decide to rent a car for a few days, but be prepared for a challenge. An added difficulty to driving here is that the cars are left-hand drive (imported from the States) but as these islanders retain strong links with Britain, they drive on the left! It’s all very confusing. Drivers should also be aware that cycling is a popular sport on BVI; they boast an excellent team of international competitors and groups of cyclists are often encountered on the challenging roads. If you do decide not to drive, you’ll find taxis are readily available and not expensive.

A morning or afternoon, with a stop for lunch, is probably sufficient to familiarize you with the capital Road Town. Close to the harbour area there’s a small area set aside as a craft market. Among the ubiquitous t-shirts, sarongs and shell art there are, in fact, some tempting art and artisans’ studios where something original can be found as souvenirs and gifts. Main Street is quaint and contains a few nice boutiques, galleries and restaurants. There’s a small museum in the Governor’s House for an overview of the islands’ colourful history, and small but pleasant J.R. O’Neal Botanical Garden containing hummingbirds and butterflies and a little aviary whose peach-faced love bird is a show stopper! Admission \$3 (all prices US\$), which includes use of a little guide book which you are requested to return. A picnic here would be pleasant ... benches are provided.

Sage Mountain National Park in the interior covers 92 acres and offers some fine hiking trails. Close to the Park is the Skywalk Café for lunch or dinner with, you guessed, beautiful views on all sides and good food accompanied by a joke or two from Glasgow-born owner Allan. If you go for dinner, plan to be there before sunset to enjoy the fabulous views.

Ask your driver to take you to the Ridge Road murals – 25 paintings by different local artists on a long, winding stretch of road, depicting island life. Don’t forget your camera.

Frenchman’s Cay is probably the most touristy area of Tortola. It’s a completely protected cove containing a marina for visiting and resident boaters who choose not to

anchor out. Money is the language spoken here, with bars and restaurants, a fine food supermarket and fancy gift stores, including a Pussers store where the islands' famous Pussers rum – once the British Admiralty's choice for the daily 'tot', now discontinued – can be purchased for \$8.50 a bottle along with lots of other fancy items connected with rum drinking.

The natural features of Virgin Gorda are quite different from Tortola. Virgin Gorda is rocky, sandy and though it becomes hilly in the interior, it's not as lush. But the coast and the beaches are still beautiful. This island is home to some famous – and very expensive – resorts such as Little Dix Bay and the Bitter End Yacht Club. Unfortunately their presence hasn't made the island visibly more prosperous and, unlike Tortola, it's noticeably scruffy around Spanish Town. However, the island is worth a day trip. The ferry ride over is a relaxing way to spend half an hour and you won't want to leave this island nation without a photo of that famous beach area called The Baths. This region, with its boulder-strewn coves and anchored sailboats, is justly famous but it has become quite the tourist attraction and is busy, so you probably won't want to spend the day on the beach there. As this beach is part of the BVI National Parks Trust you will be relieved of \$3 at the head of a rocky, but well worn trail which will take you to the beach in about five minutes. There you'll find lockers for your outer clothes if you wish to scramble through the boulders, sea-water pools and ladders to Devil's Bay. (A waterproof bag for your camera may be a good idea and wear shoes that can get wet.) A pleasant and popular restaurant stands at the top of the trail with a large, view-blessed patio for a welcome drink or bite to eat and a pool which all guests are welcome to use.

Waiting at the airport for my departing flight I catch sight of the headline on the front page of the *Island Sun* ... the BVI's major newspaper. The presses obviously stopped to declare "Jost Van Dyke needs public toilets"! What more proof do you need that these islands are unspoiled and crime free, even if lacking in toilets?!

Some accommodation information ...

I don't yet have a copy of the new *Jewels of the BVI* brochure (previously *Intimate Hideaways*) but I see most of the properties I would recommend are listed on the website www.bvitourism.com (I also notice that some less-desirable properties that I checked out – or attempted to – on Virgin Gorda are *not* now included, so that's good news.) Included in the on-line **Virgin Gorda** listings now are: **Fischer's Cove Beach Hotel**, a bit shabby but acceptable; **Guavaberry Spring Bay** that offers nice houses set in the shrubs some distance from their pretty beach; **Leverick Bay**, a small and well-appointed resort right on a safe beach with lots of water sports and a dive shop etc., – a good choice if you have young people with you. I see **Bayview Vacation Apartments** on the current list too. This property seemed closed when I visited, they are on the outskirts of town, quite a distance from the beach, in a rather dark and

tangled garden.

If I go to the BVI again I will again stay on beautiful **Tortola**, even if – as I hope – I can visit some of the other islands. On Tortola many of the properties are set in the hills where they offer beautiful views, breezes, no insects and many birds and butterflies. The apartments, pool and restaurant of **Heritage Inn** atop Windy Hill looked very nice. Later I met charming Ethlyn of **Green Bank Villas** and know a warm welcome awaits me in one of her charming bungalows with their glorious views beyond the terraced swimming pool. (In fact Ethlyn and I have kept in touch via e-mail ever since my visit ... she's trying to tempt me back with my husband!) Lots of the small properties are located in, near or above the north-shore village of Crane Garden Bay. There Sandra Henley, originally from Saskatchewan, owns the **Mongoose Apartments** set in the woods behind the little town and Marcia's lovely **Lighthouse Villa** apartments, described above, are also in Crane Garden Bay. (If you visit the website and click on the 'Jewels of the BVI' panel on the right of your screen you will see that tourism poster of Marcia that I mentioned at the beginning of this article.) If you stay at the Lighthouse and happen to tire of your balcony view, you can enjoy meeting your fellow guests around the honour bar on the little garden patio here. Crane Garden Bay is a mecca for visiting sailboats with its protected bay, safe beach and lots of sand-between-the-toes beach bars and restaurants. There's also a very well-stocked supermarket in town called Bobby's. No doubt the visiting



The Baths, Virgin Gorda



(above) The pool patio and view from the Heritage Inn



(right) An artist at work in his Road Town studio

A few more details ...

* U.S. dollars are the **currency** on the BVI.

* For information on guided park tours or field trips visit www.bvinationalparkstrust.org. The islands claim to offer the best hiking in the Caribbean with lush mountains and spectacular views and many trails maintained by the National Parks Trust.

* Sailboat charters available via Sunsail at www.sunsail.com or The Moorings at www.moorings.com Tortola is a large

centre for both these well-know charter companies and you can't miss their marinas as you explore this small island. You may not wish to charter a sail boat for your entire vacation, but how about a sailing day trip? One of these trips that was highly recommended was aboard the schooner White Squall II. Ask when you arrive on the islands, or call 284 494 2564 or www.whitesquall2.com. It is also possible to create your own mini-cruise using the local ferries – Speedy's is a popular ferry company. They offer day trips to Virgin Gorda that include the ferry ride, a taxi to meet, lunch and an island tour, including time at The Baths, for \$35, while the ferry ride alone is \$20. Fishing is another popular pastime here and it's reported to be good: wahoo, dolphin fish, mackerel and tuna. Again local knowledge will lead you to these experiences.

* I can highly recommend Carlton and Michael for all your taxi needs. They are colleagues and members of the BVI Taxi Association. Call 284 494 2322

or 284 499 1876.

* A fellow traveller at the airport, where I had plenty of time to chat with strangers as our flight from St. Kitts to the BVI had been cancelled, told me that LIAT's acronym stands for Leaving Islands Any Time! Please bear this in mind if you're planning a fly-around-the-islands trip ... don't cut it too fine with your return flight to Canada, especially if you're on a charter. There are no direct flights from Canada (or the U.S.) to the BVI (their landing strip will not accommodate large aircraft). The most direct route for Canadians is via San Juan, Puerto Rico, where frequent connecting service is offered by American Eagle, LIAT and Cape Air. The islands can also be reached from other Caribbean islands such as Antigua, St. Kitts and St. Martin. The BVI take a bit more effort to reach but they are unspoiled by mass tourism and definitely worth the effort. Oh yes, I've just remembered ... there's a \$20 departure tax payable in cash or travellers cheques only.

* I'd love to visit the BVI again, but with more time to explore the other islands. Driver Carlton told me that when locals want to get away from 'the pace' on Tortola (!), many head to Anegada.

* Information on the BVI can be obtained from the Tourist Office in New York by calling 1 800 835 8530 Their literature states that "BVI's growth is expected to remain small and gradual ... in a natural, non-commercial environment." I can vouch for that! 🇧🇻

yachts create a demand for good food and a selection of wines and spirits, which also makes self-catering here very pleasant and easy. In early April every property I visited had vacancies, but I was told reservations are necessary in the busy high season – December to March.

If you like a larger, up-scale, resort-style property **Long Bay Resort** would be a good choice. It offers rooms in its hillside hotel and villas on a glorious, mile-long beach. As the largest property on Tortola, it is too large for the 'jewels' category, but information can be found at www.longbay.com or by calling 1 800 345 0356. Even if you don't stay there, Long Bay is a nice place to visit for their informal restaurant on the beach. I ate there alone after a busy day touring and the food was excellent. There's also a fancy dining room here where I joined some other journalists and some Tourist Office representatives for a very fine dinner. For another special meal on Tortola the Sugar Mill Restaurant in the Sugar Mill Hotel (tel: 495 4355 for reservations) has an excellent (and expensive) reputation. I didn't eat there, but did pop in to look around ... very romantic, with fine Caribbean art on the walls and an innovative, international-style menu.

Speaking of food, Tortola boasts over 60 restaurants in all categories. If a place looks popular, especially with locals, it's probably a good choice. And all tastes are catered to, from big hamburgers to fine fish to the local fast-food – Indian-inspired *roti*.

COSTA RICA ... THE PERFECT PLACE FOR NATURE LOVERS

story and photos by Nancy MacDonald

Our view from Villablanca, near San Ramon

A suggestion to shorten winter with a birding trip to Costa Rica couldn't be refused. There I found so much more variety than I had ever expected. Yes, we did indeed see numerous birds with the help of the expertise and sharp eyes of our Tico (local native) guide, Marco, from Costa Rican Tours. The vivid colours of toucans, parakeets and the elusive quetzal amazed us. The duller clay-coloured robin, Costa Rica's national bird, joins the melodious chorus. This bird was chosen because it is found only here. The rarity of sighting the great potoo made the whole trip worthwhile, especially for the avid bird listers.

But nature had so much more for us all to enjoy. Animals, which we only see in the zoo, became part of our days. Howler monkeys howled. A Capuchin monkey crossed a tree branch just below my balcony as I hung my bathing suit on the railing. "Don't leave food in your packs as you swim at Manuel Antonio beach," we were warned. Coatis, who look like anteaters, came to forage. Iguanas crossed the paths in all sizes and colours. Caimans, who resemble small crocodiles, swam beside our boat at the Cano Negro Wildlife Refuge. 'Jesus Christ lizards' did their walk-on-water stunt.

We needed guidance to see the tiny poison-dart frog, although he is bright red with "blue-jeaned" legs. Being on a nature-focused trip added tremendously to my enjoyment of this special country.

The cloud and rain forests give lush plant life a chance to show all shades of green interspersed with brilliant reds and yellows. Our weather was dry so we didn't have to cope with mud on the trails. Waterfalls cascaded and rivers teemed with life. From valley floor to mid-height to canopy vegetation, we saw it all as we crossed suspended swing bridges in a Rainforest Reserve close to Manuel Antonio.

On my first trip to Costa Rica, I was happy to move often to sample the wide diversity of physical geography and weather. After landing in San Jose, we headed north and west to a hilltop resort, Villablanca, near San Ramon with a 360° view of farmland and hills. All *casitas* boast a fireplace suggesting cool nights. We didn't need them but did enjoy the Jacuzzi tub. All rooms have terraces, ours overlooking the chapel. With its hand-painted tile ceiling, it would be a splendid setting for a wedding. Hummingbird feeders with nearby benches, made birding very easy on the nature trails. From here we could see the Arenal Volcano, sight of our

next stop.

The Tabacon Resort here boasts an unbelievable garden setting for hot spring pools and waterfalls. Pools offer different temperatures and there are even bar stools in one pool! Dinner is served overlooking the pools. The volcano is still active and our luck held as we had clear views of its steaming top.

We were privileged to join the 400 international students at the Earth Institute near Guapiles for our next stop. Extensive grounds provide settings for investigative study of conservation methods to be used in Central American agriculture and land preservation.

The hunt for the elusive, green and orange quetzal bird took us to the interior mountains south of San Jose where we experienced cool nights and mountain hikes at the basic but comfortable Saverge Lodge.

What a contrast in temperature and luxury was our next stop, La Mariposa Hotel, near Quepos. It is highly rated by *Condé Nast Traveler* for the outstanding views of the Pacific Ocean from every room's balcony. The 180° view from the open-air restaurant and sunset views from the bar pool justify this praise. Ocean swimming in Manuel Antonio Nature Park was delicious in the hot and humid temperatures we experienced there.

If you need a hotel close to the airport, Resort Martino is beautiful although the thoroughly Italian atmosphere is not typical of Costa Rica. Spa services, gardens, huge pool and dining room view overlooking it are stunning. The food was excellent too.

I would definitely return to explore other areas now I know what to expect. What about a "tree house" near Tamarinda on the west coast of the peninsula? As an artist, I also want to investigate the Artists' Refuge located in Alajuela, north of the San Jose airport. I concluded that if all the birds, animals and plants are so happy here, why shouldn't we share their joy.

Here are some practical details to help you plan a Costa Rican adventure of your own ...

Our **tour company** in Canada: Novacks Avid Traveller, 211 King St., London, ON N6A 1C9, tel: 519 434 2282 www.avidtraveller.com

In Costa Rica: Costa Rican Trails, P.O. Box 2907 – 1000, San José, Costa Rica, tel: 1 888 803 3344 or in Costa Rica [code 011 506] 280 6705 www.costaricantrails.com

Hotels:

Villablanca Cloud Forest Hotel, El Siencio de Los Angeles, San Ramon, Costa Rica, tel: [011 506] 777 0777, fax: 777 1093, www.hotelmartino.com, member of Green Hotels of Costa Rica www.greenhotelscr.com

Resort Martino, La Garita, Costa Rica, 433 8382, fax: 433 9052, www.hotelmartino.com

La Mariposa, P.O. Box 4, Quepos – Manuel Antonio Beach,

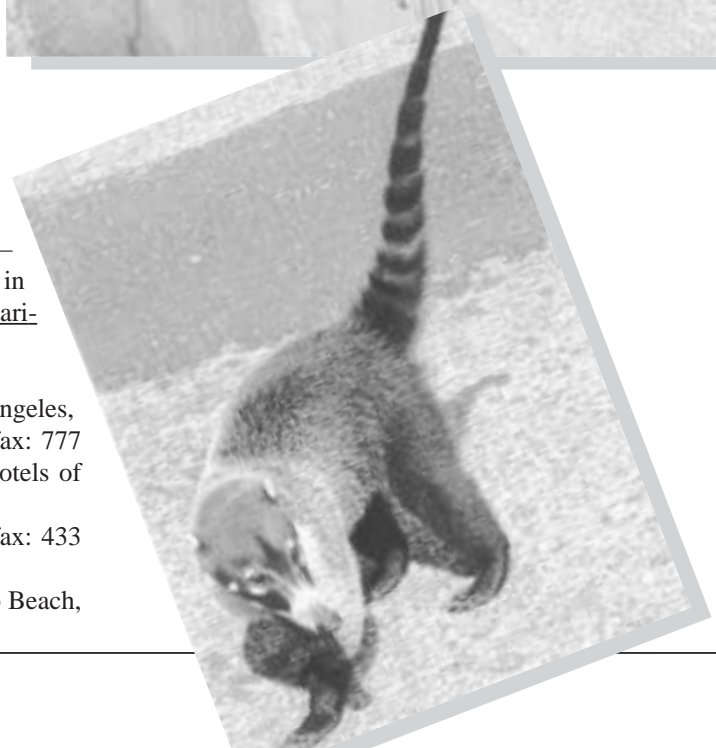
1 800 416 2747, fax: 777 0050 www.hotelmariposa.com
Tabacon Hot Springs Resort and Spa, 1 877 277 8291, fax 1 877 277 8292 www.tabacon.com

Special Interests:

Treehouse Rental: 416 921 2513 *

Art Course Alajuela, Costa Rica, tel: 416 961 1705 www.theartistsrefuge.com

** Curious about this brief mention of Nancy's, I called the "treehouse rental" number she gave and left a message. Soon my call was returned by Paul Pidcock and a friendly conversation about travel ensued. Paul does indeed own a tree house in Costa Rica that is available for rent. "We love sharing this unique place and the wonderful Costa Rican people that we know with other travellers. But ...it's not for everybody!" If you'd like to see if a stay here is for you, you can see the tree house by logging on to www.junglavista.com or by calling Paul at the above number in Toronto. And bird sightings are guaranteed! – Ed*



A Costa Rican Blessing

by Brenda Lee

In April I enjoyed a trip to Costa Rica and I must share this great new find! I discovered it totally by accident when the hotel I planned to stay in was full for the night. The place I found is called Blessing Bed and Breakfast Hotel, but it is way more than either. It was so new that the sign was not yet up. It sits in a welcoming bougainvillea-festooned courtyard where two small dogs, Connie and Coshco, mother and daughter, the larger daughter obviously the result of an illicit rendezvous with a dachshund, welcome you quizzically with their large brown eyes, and later say goodbye, sadly peering around the corner as a photogenic pair.

This property is the culmination of a dream Maria Lara Barrantes has had for thirteen years wherein she planned and designed every nook and corner of this beautiful place. It feels more like a villa than anything else, with bright spacious rooms, private bathrooms, and a grand view of distant volcanoes and the valley in which the town of Alajuela is spread. It is less than 8 km from the Aeropuerto Internacional Juan Santamaria (much closer than downtown San José itself) and a far more peaceful base for exploring the country than the noisy, diesel-fumed capital. We planned to stay for one night and ended up staying for six, returning for rest and pampering between each foray into a rainforest over the famous gravel, potholed roads. In French, these potholes are called chicken-nests (*nids-de-poule*), but you could fit a whole ostrich into some of them, or maybe even a small car!

The eight rooms at the Blessing B&B are equipped with two double or queen-sized beds and include one suite with rooms for parents and children as well as a separate kitchenette. The entrances to each unit are arranged to be almost private and open onto spacious terraces.

The breakfasts were lavish beyond imagination, featuring huge plates of fresh fruit, omelettes, toast, orange juice and coffee ... almost more than we could eat, and served at our convenience. Needless to say, we didn't need to bother with lunch. We were even served breakfast after arriving from another town near noon. All we did was mention what we liked and magically it appeared before us. Fresh strawberries, ice cream, yogurt, peanut butter! It was more like visiting the home of a loving sister who made every effort to make sure we were happy and cared for.

Maria and her husband Mariano came to pick us up at the airport and wherever possible, took us into San José to

the bus depot or arranged for taxis and reservations for other places we wanted to see. Since Maria speaks Spanish, French and English, this made things very easy for us. Not only did she take us to the Butterfly Garden, the Bird Zoo and the Lankester Orchid Centre, but when we told her our main interest in visiting Costa Rica was to see orchids and wildlife, she and her friend, Jenny, hunted for a home they had heard of where many orchids were grown. This was our introduction to the big orchid exposition taking place the following week, for the stranger on whose door they knocked turned out to be the father of the president of the San José Orchid Society, Ana Rodriguez, who invited us to the opening reception and arranged for us to go to Monteverde with the American Orchid Society judges who were in town for the show. We had an opportunity to meet all the famous authors and orchid and conservation experts and made many good friends.

Maria and Mariano were so caring that Mariano, who only speaks Spanish, would come shyly on the mornings when we were going to another town, and before he left for work, to offer us a vitamin C pill to protect our health from the change in climate. They and all their staff became very dear friends by the time we left. The last two nights I had booked the Buenavista Hotel, a property I had read about in an issue of *TravelScoop*, which was praised favourably. In fact it was they who had referred us down the road to the Blessing Hotel when they were full. The Buenavista was nice and had a small swimming pool and restaurant but was, really, just a hotel.

The evening before we left the Buenavista to return to Canada, Maria, Mariano, and all their staff plus the husband and little boy of one of the maids came to say goodbye. Everyone was there except the dogs! We had a small visit before a round of tearful hugs and kisses, repeating what we had just done two days before at Blessing!

This was not the last of Mariano, however. Although we had refused a lift to the airport from him, knowing that our hotel had already included a taxi ride at 4:30 a.m., what should we see just before drowsily entering the plane a couple of hours later, but his smiling face. Mariano, who was working delivering food for another airline company, had taken a few minutes to deliver us one last tray of fresh fruit. To say the other passengers were curious and envious about this VIP treatment would be an understatement!

This is how to find the Blessing: You can call Maria to

... continued on page 20

BRITAIN

- Britain's cities are undergoing a renaissance with new museums, galleries, theatres and stylish bars and restaurants opening in so many locations. Everyone knows that London is a vibrant capital full of excitement and culture, but visitors to Britain are invited to discover more ... from heritage cities such as **Edinburgh, Oxford** and **Canterbury** to more 'edgy' places like **Newcastle, Manchester, Cardiff** and **Glasgow**. VisitBritain, the national tourist office for England, Scotland and Wales, has announced a brand new interactive e-brochure entitled *Britain City Breaks* to facilitate visits to such metropolitan centres, with information on attractions, accommodation, restaurants and more. This online guide to Britain's renowned cities is fully downloadable, and has video clips and insider tips for visiting each of the cities. If Britain is in your plans, visit www.visitbritain.com/ca.
- Perhaps you prefer to explore a quieter side of Britain on your visit? If so, you may like to stay in one of the carefully refurbished lighthouse keepers' cottages in 12 locations around the coast. These properties, no longer needed thanks to the automation of lighthouses over the last 20 years, now have a new life as holiday homes under the banner of the long-established home rental agency called Rural Retreats. Each cottage has been furnished by an interior designer – some up to tourist board five-star standards – with the largest sleeping six (from £721 per week – approx. C\$1,470) and the smallest a 'bolt hole' for just two people (from £453 or C\$924 per week). Short breaks, for a minimum of two nights, are also available all year. Many of the properties are more than one hundred years old and offer some of the most romantic locations and beautiful views around UK shores: from Pendeen in Cornwall to Whitby in North Yorkshire. More details by calling [011 44] 1386 701177 or visiting www.ruralretreats.co.uk
- Maybe a prison stay appeals to you more than a lighthouse? Britain's first such establishment to be converted into a hotel opened in Oxford late in November. **Malmaison Oxford**, (ha! ha!) part of Oxford Castle, is located in the city centre, five minutes' walk from the railway station. This hotel comprises five separate areas: A Wing, C Wing, New Road, the Governor's House and the detached Houses of Correction. Features include 'round rooms', bathrooms with freestanding bathtubs and double showers, and plasma TV screens. Call [011 44] 845 365

- 4247 for details of log on to: www.malmaison.com. (Unfortunately this website is so trendy it's not very easy to navigate, but it gives you an idea of what to expect at these obviously-stylish properties in the Malmaison portfolio. Tip ... click on the moving red band of cities to find the location of your choice!)
- As has been noted in these pages many times before, Britain is a renowned location for a wide variety of movies. Now, 2,000 film writers, critics and editors from the UK media have been polled by the Film Distributors' Association, who asked them to choose the best settings that added a strong sense of time and place to a film. The winner? The 1983 film *Local Hero*, which was shot in the Scottish village of Pennan, Aberdeenshire. Yorkshire and London also featured strongly in the top ten. In order, the other nine titles are: *The Full Monty* (Sheffield, Yorkshire); *Trainspotting* (Edinburgh); *The Railway Children* (Keighley and Worth Valley Railway, Yorkshire); *An American Werewolf in London* (Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, London Zoo); *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Lyme Regis, Dorset); *Brassed Off* (Barnsley, Doncaster, Halifax, Birmingham); *Brief Encounter* (Carnforth, Lancashire); *Kes* (Barnsley, Yorkshire); and *Shadowlands* (Oxford and the Wye Valley). And the list was compiled before the release on 11 November of *Pride & Prejudice*. VisitBritain states that "One in five visitors are inspired to holiday in Britain because of a film they have seen. Film tourism is a growing global phenomenon, creating a new breed of tourist, known as the 'set-jetter'." (TS will give you some of those *Pride & Prejudice* locations in our next issue.)
 - Pubs are a way of life in Britain and most visitors will wish to eat in a few. But the standard of food varies widely, so having a copy of the new Michelin guide *Eating Out in Pubs* is a handy volume to have, especially if you're touring independently. The 602-page book lists a total of 525 establishments around Britain and Ireland. Each entry occupies a whole page with a map, photographs, description, practical details, some typical dishes and the beers served. The 96 pubs the Michelin writers liked best are indicated, including the 'Pub of the Year' – the 18th century coaching inn The Rose and Crown at Barnard Castle, County Durham. The publication costs £14.99 (about C\$30), available in bookshops all over Britain. Website: www.michelin.co.uk

CANADA

- Whitehorse-based **Nature Tours of Yukon**, a company well known for organizing northern tours in the

summer, is now offering a selection of packaged winter tours that showcase the beauty of the north in winter. Participants can choose between 2, 3 or 4 night Aurora Viewing Packages and spice them up individually with winter activities such as dog mushing, ice-fishing or snowmobiling. There are also three special tours built around popular cultural and sportive events in Whitehorse in February 2006: the Yukon Quest Sled Dog Race, the Sourdough Rendezvous Winter Carnival and the Frostbite Music Festival. Or there's an 8-day excursion up the Dempster Highway to Inuvik by van or small air craft. Besides crossing the Arctic Circle, the highlight of this trip is driving on the famous ice-road to Tuktoyaktuk over the frozen Mackenzie River and the polar sea. The company says these programmes are ideal for families with children. For more information call 867 667 4868 or visit www.auroraborealisukon.com.

● To celebrate the introduction of its 2006 programme, **Rocky Mountaineer Vacations** is offering an early booking bonus (of up to \$538 per couple) for those booking a qualifying rail holiday by January 2006 for travel between 18 April and 15 October next year. Train trips onboard Rocky Mountaineer Vacations' two new routes in Canada's West – the Whistler Mountaineer and the Rocky Mountaineer Fraser Discovery Route – are included in this offer. The 2006 Rocky Mountaineer Vacations' 74-page brochure outlines rail holidays to Canada's West and the Canadian Rockies, non-rail holidays to destinations across Canada through Spectacular Canada, and the option to climb aboard two rail routes, premiering in May. For your copy of the brochure see your travel agent, call 1 800 665 7245 or visit www.rockymountaineer.com

● If **Victoria, BC**, is on your winter itinerary, plan to pay a visit to **Butchart Gardens**. You may have seen them in summer, but in winter they are transformed with tens of thousands of lights; seasonal plants, berries and decorations; traditional music; an ice skating rink (new this season) and stunning poinsettia displays. This year's season will run from 1 December to 7 January. For more information call 1 866 652 4422 or visit www.butchartgardens.com. The 101-year-old Gardens are Canada's most visited, privately-owned attraction, welcoming about 1.3 million guests each year. They have recently been honoured with the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Tourism Industry Association of Canada and have also been designated a National Historic Site of Canada.

● **Fort St. John**, northern BC, will celebrate winter

with a **High on Ice Carnival** 10-12 February. This festival brings many visitors to Fort St. John to enjoy lights, the annual BC Ice Carving Championship featuring international as well as Canadian teams, and lots of winter sporting events such as dogsled races, heli-skiing, curling and more. For full details, as well as accommodation listings visit www.cityfsj.com.

● **Toronto's Black Creek Pioneer Village** is another great place for a winter outing, especially over the festive season when the village is decorated and holds special events to reveal the charm of a Victorian country Christmas in Canada. There are hands-on activities, music and story-telling, seasonal dinners and more. Their telephone number is 416 736 1733 and their website www.blackcreek.ca.

● **Ontario's Algonquin Park** is a wonderland in winter. Editor Ann has experienced the great (and affordable) week-end getaways in the Algonquin Log Cabin offered by **Voyageur Quest** and, by all accounts, this company keeps getting better. So if a week-end getaway just a couple of hours from Toronto appeals, when you can participate in a variety of outdoor adventures or just enjoy a fire-side week-end being pampered, call 1 800 794 9660 or log on to www.voyageurquest.com.

● If you feel you've read enough about winter you may prefer to dream of summer and, perhaps, a sailing adventure on the west coast. **Maple Leaf Adventures** is a Victoria-based company offering 5 to 11 day schooner, or 'windjammer', trips along the coast of **British Columbia** and **Southeast Alaska**. Trips include the Gulf Islands, the Inside Passage and Haida Gwaii. The cruises offer frequent shore trips, views of calving glaciers, humpback whales, bear watching, natural hot springs, walks on wild beaches and more. These ships accommodate only small groups, so early booking is advised. Details by calling 1 888 599 5323 or visiting www.mapleleafadventures.com or, if you're close to Victoria, you'll find Maple Leaf's offices in the Maritime Museum of British Columbia at 28 Bastion Square.

CUBA

"Cuba is more than beaches" declares the cover of Aché Cuba's brochure. This Winnipeg-based company's Cuba vacations are designed to bring participants 'close to the real Cuba' with a variety of tours. Yes, beaches are included, but so are cultural visits to Havana and other cities, eco- and history tours, bird-watching, jazz, Spanish-language courses and more. Also offered are volunteering programmes with the

Che Guevara Volunteer Work Brigade, a non-profit project of the Canadian Network on Cuba. The Work Brigade consists of a group of people from all over Canada who work alongside Cubans on agricultural or other projects for four hours per day and then enjoy leisure time and excursions to places of interest. There are Winter Brigades (commencing 18 February) and a Summer Brigade commencing 30 July. Ask your travel agent for Aché Cuba's brochure, call 1 800 508 2466 or visit www.achecubaholidays.com. And for more information on the volunteer programme: www.canadiannetworkoncuba.ca/brigade or call the organizations headquarters in Vancouver at 604 831 9821.

FRANCE

French tourism officials are getting excited as plans are made for a year-long celebration in 2006 to mark the 100th anniversary of the death of native son Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). The Year of Cézanne, organized by the city Aix-en-Provence (where he spent most of his life) and the Community of Aix area towns, will feature many events, highlighted by a special exhibition, *Cézanne en Provence* featuring 110 works by the artist (80 oils and 30 watercolours) from museums and private collections around the world. The exhibition will be held at the newly-renovated Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence from 9 June to 17 September. In addition, starting in April, many of the sites where Cézanne lived and worked will be open to the public. The website www.aixenprovencetourism.com has comprehensive details relating to a visit to the area, including many accommodation options in all categories, as well as a Cézanne section, while the year's events are well documented at www.cezanne-2006.com. The telephone number of the French Tourist Office in Montreal is 514 288 2026.

HONG KONG

If Hong Kong is in your plans, visit www.discover-hongkong.com/canada (click on e-coupons) for coupons for free gifts and valuable discounts from the Hong Kong Tourism Board, Cathay Pacific and a variety of local services. These offers include reductions on airport transfers and discounts on tours and at restaurants and attractions.

MEXICO

Do you have great memories of a visit to Puerto Vallarta? Tell your story in a creative way and you

could win a week's stay for two at one of Vallarta's leading resorts. Your story can be in any form: narrative, poem, limerick, song lyrics set to a well-known melody, even haiku and it can be on any experience enjoyed in PV. Extra 'consideration' will be given by the judges to entries which manage to include words that rhyme with 'Vallarta'. Good luck! Entries to be submitted by 15 May at www.VallartaSource.com.

ST. KITTS

If you've been tempted to visit St. Kitts after reading our articles, music and/or cricket fans make like to note the following: the St. Kitts Music Festival 2006 will be held 29 June to 2 July, and not over the last full weekend in June as usual, to avoid conflict with the Cricket Test match between the West Indies and India, to be held on St. Kitts 22-26 June. The match is one of several scheduled between now and 2007 leading up to the Cricket World Cup, which will feature St. Kitts as one of the host venues. Even if you're not a cricket fan, seeing a match on the island would be a great experience! See www.stkitts-tourism.com or call 1 888 395 4887 for tourism information.

U.S.A.

There's a new initiative underway by the tourism people of **Maui** called *Malama Maui, Preserving Maui's Agricultural & Cultural Resources*. The project aims to appeal to the growing number of travellers who wish to engage in learning about the history, natural resources and living culture of a destination. With this in mind the Visitors Bureau is supporting the efforts of the many residents of Moloka'i, Lana'i and Maui itself (the island group known as Maui Nui) who are working to reverse environmental damage and to hold onto the guiding principles of their unique heritage. University of Hawai'i Professor Dr Kent Fleming, on introducing the initiative, said, "The new-style visitor is not attracted by the increasing global homogenization that is a consequence of vast retail, food and accommodations franchises. This is a new breed of visitor, typically well educated and well travelled, who wants to learn about local cultures, traditions, environmental issues and agriculture ... which includes regional cuisine." Wonderful ... that's what we like to hear at The Travel Society! For information on visiting these beautiful islands, log on to www.visitmaui.com. (And don't forget our article in the November 2002 issue, where we gave recommendations of locally-owned businesses.)

The United Nations Recognizes 191 countries around the world. Which should you choose for your next vacation? For the conscientious traveller, certain countries are better choices than others, according to Ethical Traveler, a non-profit advocacy group which is a project of the Earth Island Institute.

Earlier this year, student researcher Kiran Auerbach of Stanford University scoured publicly available statistics, looking for ways to rate a given country's desirability as a tourist destination. Recently Ethical Traveler published the results of this study in a report titled "The World's Most Ethical Travel Destinations."

Ethical Traveler's Executive Director Jeff Greenwald explains, "This report serves as a practical guide for tourists who seek vacations that are both rewarding for the traveler, and supportive of the people and environments being visited." You can find out more about the study at www.ethicaltraveler.org/destinations.

Countries were graded across three main categories: support for ecotourism, environmental protection, and social development. Of course, as Ethical Traveler staffers point out, none of the countries named in the report are ethically "perfect." The thirteen top

countries score well across these three critical categories, says Greenwald, who helped write the final report. Greenwald adds that ethical tourism can be used as an "economic carrot," to support and reward countries pursuing high standards in these areas.

In *alphabetical order*, the list of most ethical travel destinations is: Argentina, Barbados, Belize, Brazil, Costa Rica, Croatia, Ecuador, Kenya, Peru, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, South Africa and Uruguay.

According to Greenwald, "The destinations highlighted by Ethical Traveler simply haven't received the kind of attention they warrant. Visiting these countries raises the standard of living for the population, and supports programs that protect the environment and human rights." Travellers who visit these ethical destinations may also find that the good feeling they bring home with them is a perfect souvenir of their trip.

Ethical Traveler is an international alliance of travellers who believe that travel can be a powerful tool for international goodwill and cultural understanding. The group seeks to harness the political and economic clout of tourism to support human rights and the environment. For more information, please visit www.ethicaltraveler.org.


Newfoundland, continued from page 8

offered year round and Ed promises to tailor it to match your 'thrill threshold'!

* For a package holiday in this region, **Maxxim Vacations** are well-known and well-respected. I've only ever heard wonderful things about them. They offer both escorted and independent packages (the latter with rental cars and lift passes for the ski season) in all seasons. Their Corner Brook area winter vacations include accommodation in one of the luxurious villas in the Humber Valley Resort or in the Marble Villas at the foot of Marble Mountain. See you

agent, or call 1 800 567 6666 for a brochure, or visit www.maxximvacations.com.

* Deer Lake is served by **Air Canada** and **CanJet** from Halifax ... a flight of about 1½ hours.

* For many more accommodation suggestions and all the information you could possibly want regarding exploring Newfoundland, you need to have a copy of the excellent **Newfoundland & Labrador** official *Travel Guide* available by calling 1 800 563 NFLD, e-mail tourisminfo@gov.nl.ca, www.gov.nl.ca/tourism. 

The Travel Society website

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pick you up at the San José airport at [code 011 506] 442 4769, or fax her at 443 2786 or e-mail at blessinghotel_bb@hotmail.com. Say Brenda Lee (and The Travel Society) sent you!

If you are driving yourself or already nearby in a taxi, you can tell the taxi driver to take you to the Blessing Hotel (which they may not know) at Pilas de San Isidro, contiguo al Restaurante El Mirador. The important part is **Pilas**, which is a tiny village and part of a larger village called San Isidro. It is right beside the El Mirador Restaurant, so if you take the road toward San Isidro, it goes past Pilas. This road goes right past the Central Park of the town of Alajuela in front of the church on the side of the park parallel to but away from the church (if you are driving). After a few kilometers there will be a sign indicating a sharp switchback in the road leading to the Mirador Restaurant a few metres from the turn and you will know you are there. It may seem strange, but they do not use addresses in Costa Rica. People just refer to places by landmarks, then when they get near, they stop and ask people on the road until they narrow down their search to the desired destination. If the taxi driver doesn't know where to go, you must encourage him to ask a local driver. If they have never been there, they may even ask you how much they should charge you! Ticcans (Costa Ricans) are very nice people who prefer to maintain harmo-

ny and avoid conflict. They are very friendly and hospitable and like Canadians. The taxi ride shouldn't cost you more than 1400 *colones* from the airport (about C\$7). At the B&B we paid US\$75 per night for a spacious double room at the Blessing. This included breakfast and was the high-season price; it drops to US\$65 in the low-season.

Another note from Editor Ann: Worried when Maria did not reply to my e-mail requesting confirmation of the above contact information, I telephoned and got straight through. Maria answered the phone. She speaks excellent English and was very excited to hear Brenda Lee's name. I confirmed her e-mail and her rates. "I hope you will come and stay with us one day," she said. I certainly hope I do. I haven't been to Costa Rica but have gathered a great deal of information about it over the years. Now I have Paul's tree-house and Maria's 'Blessing' to add to my list!

And here's another location to make a note of if Costa Rica is in your plans. If you visit Manuel Antonio (and its popular National Park), we are invited to find La Hacienda Restaurante, recently opened by Torontonians Alana Duggan and Geoff Polci (who met and became engaged at La Hacienda Restaurant on Queen Street in Toronto!.) You can take a peek – and even read the menus and wine list – at www.lahaciendacr.com or call when you are near for a reservation at 777 3473. Looks good! 🍷

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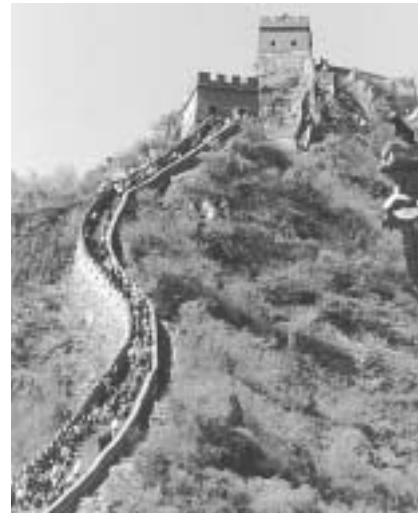
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remarkable 18 days you'll stay in Beijing; you'll take a 4-day first-class cruise on the Yangtze with many shore excursions; you'll fly to see those centuries-old terra-cotta warriors in Xi'an; you'll visit bustling Chongquin and see its pandas; stay 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:

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Vancouver	\$3,995 pp/dbl
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- Evening cultural shows
- Fully escorted by English/Chinese-speaking tour guide
- English-speaking local guides
- Free time in Beijing & Shanghai

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**New
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Galapagos Islands and Ecuador

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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!

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Your tour includes:

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We are offering a new 9-day tour to Mexico City and the Copper Canyon. The Copper Canyon is four times larger than the Grand Canyon, and you'll enjoy a journey that is considered by many to be the world's most exciting train trip, with its 87 tunnels, 39 bridges and uncountable spectacular views. You'll meet the people, stay in unique accommodations and explore the present and the past in this astonishing region.

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Fully escorted*

A Traveller's Turkey

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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. 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!"

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Your tour includes:

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Book Now
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India's Golden Triangle FULLY ESCORTED 20 days departing 6 March & 9 October 2006

LIMITED
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India is one of the world's greatest travel destinations. But unless you're a young backpacker, a tour is the way to go! And The Travel Society is offering the ultimate tour of India's fabled northwestern region, known as The Golden Triangle. This tour will show you the highlights of this fascinating region. You'll spend time in the economic powerhouse of India - Mumbai (once known as Bombay) where you'll drive along Marine Drive, visit the Hanging Gardens, enjoy the Prince of Wales Museum and stroll through Neru Park. On another day you visit St. Thomas Cathedral, the Jain Temple and see the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi as well as take an optional tour to Elephanta caves. Then it's on to Udaipur, the most romantic city in all of Rajasthan, known as the city of lakes. Here there are palaces and temples to visit as well as beautiful gardens with pools, fountains, pagodas and carvings. Mt. Abu-Ranakpur is next on the itinerary, famous for its 15th century temples, before you proceed to the famous medieval city of Jodhpur, home of the massive Mehrangharh Fort and many exquisite palaces. Then how about a camel safari ... sure to bring lots of laughs and some great photographs! Khimsar and Nagaur are next on the itinerary, where there's more sightseeing and lots of leisure time for relaxing, shopping or wandering alone with your camera. Bikaner is next - a royal walled city with a wealth of architectural heritage - where you'll visit Lalgarh Palace Museum, a combination of European luxury and Oriental fantasy and Junagarh Fort, which was started in 1587 and houses 37 palaces, pavilions and temples. You'll then travel on to Mandawa, known for its exquisite frescoes where you'll stay in Castle Mandawa, a unique desert resort. Jaipur - the pink city - is next; a city of beauty famous for its bazaar full of wonderful gifts. Here you can take an elephant-ride excursion to Amer Fort and also see the Palace of the Winds and the stone Observatory. Of course Agra is on the itinerary, for that never-to-be forgotten dawn visit to the Taj Mahal, before you travel on to famous Delhi, the capital of India. Throughout this trip you will stay in first-class hotels, travel in deluxe a/c, fully-equipped coaches and enjoy wonderful meals, banquets and entertainment. Many days will be full, but there's plenty of free time too. Haven't you always wanted to visit India? Make this the year and come with The Travel Society this fall.



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From \$2634 all inclusive

Long Stays in Mexico

departures throughout

Jan, Feb, Mar and Apr 2006 for 1-, 2-, 3-weeks or 1 month

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Every day – but only if and when you wish – you'll take part in an incredible variety of cultural activities, workshops or excursions. Workshops include cookery lessons, painting and sculpture, music appreciation, Tai Chi and others. Short excursions include theatrical, musical and dance events; a bull fight; museum and gallery visits; sporting events; birdwatching; traditional Mexican evenings and more, while a week-end trip will take you to Cancun and the Mayan Riviera. Again all meals, accommodation and admissions are included. In luxurious coaches you'll visit Campeche and Izamal, the fabled Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza and Uxmal, the Celestial Biosphere and much more.

To add to the experience of this trip you may also choose to take daily Spanish lessons in a pleasant Merida language school. This is the only 'extra' of the trip ... other than that you will rarely open your wallets except to purchase personal items, souvenirs and gifts.

Because Mexicans really know how to enjoy life, you will return to Canada with wonderful tales of all the fun you have had while enjoying your rich learning experience. You will have made new friends and have many wonderful memories. You can choose to go for a week or two, or for a month. On subsequent weeks you may remain with your original hosts or move to enjoy another home and make new friends. This programme has been designed exclusively for The Travel Society ... it is a unique and wonderful experience. Enjoy!

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3 weeks	\$2,490 pp/dbl
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