



The Travel Society

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Magazine

St. Kitts Revisited
Masca ... Tenerife's Hidden Jewel
Roatan? Where is Roatan?
A Cruise to Buenos Aires

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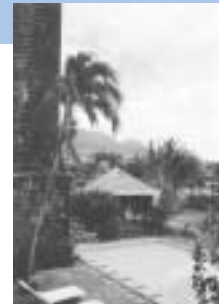
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A glimpse of the grounds at Rawlin's Plantation (Wallace)

editor's letter ...

An issue full of islands for November, from the Portuguese Azores and the Spanish Canaries way out in the Atlantic, to an assortment of Caribbean isles. Only details of a cruise to South America and a stay in Buenos Aires breaks with this month's island theme. But it does introduce a series of South American stories that we will be running over the coming months.

I spoke of tragedies last month, and now must add more condolences to those affected by the latest Bali bombings, the weather-related disasters in Central America and now, of course, the terrible earthquake in Asia. And as I write Hurricane Wilma is gathering force in the Gulf of Mexico.

With all this news it's no wonder that the passing of a new gun law in Florida has slipped under the radar. This law now states that people may legally use their guns (which, in Florida, they are allowed to carry concealed) to defend themselves in public places as well as in their homes and on their property, as previously allowed. The Brady Campaign to Control Gun Violence has run several ads in major American cities and in London, England, warning potential tourists that this law could pose dangers to unwary visitors, while the Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms (CCRKBA) has responded with harsh criticism of the Brady Campaign. There's lots of information (and vitriol) on each camp's website, and a wide variety of articles in the US press. 'Google' the two organizations if you have the time and inclination to read all about it.

Have a great November all!



If Portugal is in your plans this winter, you may like to linger longer and plan a spring visit to the Azores.

The Amazing Azores

According to their tourist literature, the Azores are that clichéd phrase 'Europe's best-kept secret'. However, after spending a mere week on the largest island, Sao Miguel, we are inclined to agree. We never would have thought of coming here, to this chain of islands, 1,500 km off the coast of Portugal, had we not had to meet our tall ship *Europa* cruise here in June this year. Since it was a long flight from Vancouver, it seemed foolish to come just in time to board the ship, so we decided to take a week to explore. It turned out to be a very wise decision. An even wiser decision would have been to spend two weeks, and see other islands; but that's for another time.

I booked our accommodation at the Convento Sao Francisco in Villa Franca do Campo on line. It was 35 minutes from the airport at Ponta Delgada, and I received what I considered were very precise directions via e-mail. When our flight arrived from Lisbon we had nearly 24 hours of travel behind us, and once in the rental car we were anxious for a shower and bed. Finding Villa Franca was very easy, but finding the Convento took nearly half an hour for the building just seemed to be one long unmarked wall. But when we finally did discover the tiny sign, we rang the bell as instructed, and almost immediately a man came to open the old gate and took our bags. We walked into a courtyard and back in time. The monastery was built in 1525, several years after a major earthquake virtually wiped out the town. We climbed up ancient stone steps and walked along wide hallways on polished wood floors, looking down at the cloisters and an inner courtyard with a fountain. The serenity of the ages seeped into our travel-weary souls. Our room was spacious

and comfortable with a lovely view of the gardens and a private patio with views overlooking the little town and out to the sea. Though a little pricey – €120 (approx. C\$172) a night including a good breakfast of boiled eggs, cheese, bread, pineapple and oranges – we decided to spend the entire week here. It was just too lovely to leave.

During the week we found lots to keep us busy. We swam every day, either in the big swimming pool in the garden at the Convento or on the beach. Our favourite swimming beach was Paia Amor (love beach) near Ponta Garca. It required a steep walk of about a kilometer from the road, but it was deserted, clean and lovely with its crashing waves. The first day, armed with a good guide book, *Azores, The Bradt Travel Guide*, (by David Sayers, available online via www.bradt-travelguides.com for £12.95 ... about C\$27) we walked to the town of Ponta Delgada. It was a holiday and the town was crowded with locals. The teenagers were swimming, the adults were drinking coffee at the many outdoor restaurants along the harbour, and the children all seemed to be dancing on outdoor stages set up in the town squares. There was music everywhere.

The following day we drove up to the town of Furnas. En route we stopped at the hot springs with their steam, hot water and burping mud. It is extremely hot, and not blocked off with fences at all. At the nearby lake we watched boats come in with catches of large carp. They were accidentally introduced to the lake, and have taken over, killing the indigenous species. There is now a campaign to rid the lake of the estimated 30,000 fish which, when caught, are used for fertilizer. In the town of Furnas itself we found Tony's Restaurant which serves the traditional local dish – vegetables, pork and sausages are all roasted together underground. A plate for two cost €15 (C\$21.50) and was far more than two people could eat – it would easily satisfy three, or perhaps even four. In fact we found all the meals very generous here. We went to lots of restaurants but

our favourite was perched just above the little harbour at Villa Franca where we had excellent swordfish. Meals generally cost between €16 and €20 for two, complete with a glass of wine or beer.

Driving was easy. The roads are all paved and well kept and there is relatively little traffic. And the views are spectacular, whether of a quaint fishing village, a tiny cove with a swimming beach, rolling pasture with contented Holsteins, or banks of blue hydrangea which grew in profusion along every road and path. It was all beautiful.

We saw lots of dairy cattle, but by the end of the second day realized we hadn't seen a dairy barn or milking parlour. We saw a number of huge tractors being driven along the highway and in town, and parked at houses in the little towns. But there were no farms, Canadian style. People obviously worked the land, but lived in town. But where did they milk all these cows? On the third day we solved the mystery when we saw a farmer drive his tractor with a trailer into a field. The cows, who had been grazing nearby in lush grass up to their knees, left their dinner and ambled down to the trailer which was a milking machine hooked up to a generator. Once the milk cans were filled with milk the farmer drove back into town for his dinner, while the cows went back to theirs. We were

Writers are rewarded for sharing!

The TravelSociety rewards readers with subscription extensions of varying lengths for all submissions published. So whether you have a letter with a travel tip or a destination to share, please write to us!

amazed and impressed with how much less work this involved than having a barn that has to be continually cleaned.

There are a number of walks described in the Azores guidebook, none prettier than Sete Cicades. According to romantic legend the two lakes were formed from tears of thwarted lovers. They lie in the middle of the caldera (12 km in circumference). The viewpoints here offer the most dramatic views of the island, and there's lots of competition. While driving, make sure to stop at the marked viewpoints. As well as the view, they offer clean restrooms, beautifully maintained gardens and footpaths for further exploring.

As well as scenery to enjoy, there is history to discover. The islands were formed millions of years ago from volcanic activity (which still goes on in Furnas) and were uninhabited when the Portuguese sailors found them in the 15th century. The oldest town is Provoacao where a tower in the town square proudly proclaims it was given a town charter in 1432. The prettiest town square is in Ribera Grande (town charter granted in 1507) where a wide stream runs through the town and waterfalls spill

prettily down through the exuberant gardens. Early settlers built water mills here and Huguenot weavers came to ply their trade.

You can fly into Sao Miguel from Lisbon. Once there, there are flights to the other six islands in the chain. This route is probably the way most people would choose to go from Canada, as of course it would be great to combine this destination with a visit to mainland Portugal. However, Air Azores offers direct charter flights during the summer from Toronto or Montreal. Their website www.Azores-Express.com at present only contains details of their year-round route from Boston, but information can be obtained by calling 1 800 762 9995. There is also much island information, accommodation options etc., at www.azores.com. To contact the Convento Sao Francisco visit www.conventosaofrancisco.com tel: [code 351] 296 58 35 32, fax: 296 58 35 34. Rates in the winter season (November to March) drop to €90, while rooms in another wing of the Convento are available for €66 (at press time €1 = C\$1.43).

Heather Allen
Powell River,, BC

More on the Movies

Yes, movies are a great way to get a good peek at a country you may be considering visiting. As I was New Zealand born, I made sure my choices for the recent Toronto Film Festival included three movies shot on the islands of my birth. They were *The World's Fastest Indian*, *River Queen* and *50 Ways of Saying Fabulous*. Catch them as soon as you can ... and visit New Zealand too! By the way, I'm sure I don't need to tell you I really enjoyed the September and October issues of *The Travel Society Magazine*!

Jenny Barber
Mississauga, ON

(In last month's New Zealand story by Maria Wu, you will find references to the Whanganui River. On 'googling' the above movies, I discovered that *River Queen* was largely filmed in this area – Ed.)

Another Niagara Recommendation

I heartily agree with everything Ann wrote about White Oaks Resort in the

New for 2006

The Travel Society's new tours, coming in 2006

- Mozart's Musical Cities - 250th Anniversary
- Chile, Argentina and Patagonia (incl. Iguazu Falls)
- Argentina - Bird Watching & Nature Lovers' tour
- Wonders of New Zealand

September edition (p. 16). It's a property that most people in nearby St. Catharines are proud of, and one that is popular for all kinds of local events, from intimate dinners to large weddings. But for a change of pace and a different dining experience while staying at White Oaks, I recommend you wander across the road to the dining room of the Niagara Culinary Institute, where students fine-tune their culinary and serving skills and guests enjoy delicious Niagara cuisine and wines in an elegant, airy dining room overlooking the vineyards. And to add pleasure to your visit, you can pop into the institute's beautiful greenhouses for some seasonal purchases and lots of 'plant talk'.

The folks at White Oaks are happy for their guests to experience the Culinary Institute as well as their own excellent dining room ... they will happily point you in the right direction. The facility is open for lunch from Tuesday to Sunday and for dinner from Wednesday to Saturday. For reservations call 905 641 2252, ext. 4619 or visit <http://niagarac.on.ca/dining> where you can read the daily menus. *Bon appétit!*

*Barry & Elsie Carpenter
St. Catharines, ON*

Affordable Accommodation on the ABC Islands

In April this year, I and three friends went on a three-week holiday to the Dutch Antilles, spending a week on each of Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao. As resort prices are high on the islands, and as we do not use most of their facilities, we decided to search for alternative accommodation. From previous visits to other islands such as Grenada and Antigua, we knew that many islands have small apartment blocks, often in excellent locations, that are most affordable. In the past, such accommodation could only be found

by turning up on the island and looking for them; which of course takes time and sometimes required that the first night be spent in less-than-desirable quarters. Now, with so many guide books and the internet, they can be located and booked ahead of time.

For this trip, I started the research in the guide books Frommer and Fodor borrowed from my local library. For Aruba and Bonaire there were recommended small apartment units which I was able to contact by e-mail after checking their web sites. For Curacao, I used Google to find listings on the island and then went through the web-sites for options. As a result, we found three excellent choices, all of which we can recommend with the caveats noted below. All the apartments had vehicles that could be rented with the units at very good rates. This was necessary as all the apartments were out of the main centres, but on or near the sea. All the apartments had air-conditioned bedrooms and all three islands have pure desalinated water.

On **Aruba**, we stayed at the Vistalmar Apartments, located across the road from the ocean. All units were one bedroom with one or two beds, so we needed two units as none was big enough for four. Each unit was fully equipped, including beach chairs, beach towels and a cooler for picnic lunches while exploring the island. Maid service was several times a week and a washing machine was available to guests. The landlady was very accommodating; for example when we arrived late and hungry she picked up some take-away Chinese food for us. She also drove us back to the airport which was close by and would have met us if we had phoned her. We had good patios outside our ground floor apartments and barbecues if we had wanted them. Aruba was probably our least favourite of the three islands, although it has fine public beaches. The town tended to be overrun with cruise ship passengers most days. However, we were able to get away and find uncrowded beaches with thatched *pallapas* for shade.

On **Bonaire**, we stayed at the CocoPalms/Casa Oleander. We were

disappointed on arrival to find that the apartment we had requested and confirmed had been rented to another party. We were given a two bedroom unit with four beds as we had specified, but without the Gazebo that the "Orchidia" unit had outside the back door, but we were able to move to the Orchidia after three nights! The apartments in this complex are attractive but do not have as many services as the Vistalmar. For example: no toilet paper and maid service only once a week. The units are all on the ground floor and located one to two blocks from what passes for beach in Bonaire. This island is a haven for divers and snorkellers, with close-to-shore sites for both all along the leeward side of the island. Beaches are often just a bit of sand for easy access to the water. There is one good sandy beach on the island owned by a bit-ghotel where non-guests can pay US\$5 a day to use the beach and sun lounges. Our vehicle on this island was a four-door truck – necessary if you wish to explore the northern parts of the island or carry oxygen tanks when diving. We are not divers, but did snorkel every day including once at night to see the moray eels. This island is much the most laid-back of the three and we enjoyed our visit here very much. And our landlady made up for the apartment switch when we left. We went to the airport for an 11a.m. departure on Bonaire Excel Airways to find the flight had been cancelled. When we returned to the apartment, expecting to have to spend the day in the pool area until our evening flight, we were given the use of our vacated apartment at no added cost.

On **Curacao**, home to a fine Dutch-style capital, we had booked a two-bedroom apartment at the Limestone Water Resort. There were seven units right on the water with their own strip of beach. The water was part of a bay called the Spanish Waters, very popular with the yachting fraternity. There was a choice of three outside table areas for meals and happy hour, two of them directly

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St. Kitts

Revisited

*story and photographs by
Ann Wallace*

View from the Golden Lemon Inn

Sun and sand; watersports and shopping; a few well-visited tourist attractions; lovely views; abundant flowers and birds; rum punches at sunset. Those words sum up most of the islands of the Caribbean, although each is, of course, different from its neighbour on or just over the horizon. Some people set out to discover many islands; others quickly choose a favourite and return time and time again. The pretty island of St. Kitts is popular with Canadians and a good choice for a winter getaway ... it is easy to reach from Toronto and is blessed with a selection of charming small places to stay. I paid a brief visit earlier this year and checked out some accommodation: a delightfully-decorated B&B on a hillside; a welcoming self-catering property set in an abundant garden in the hills; three fine, famous (and expensive) plantation inns which are a “must” for a special meal, even if you don’t stay there, and a couple of sparkling small, family-owned hotels that are an inexpensive air/hotel option from Signature Vacations.

But before I get to the places to stay, let’s consider the title “St. Kitts Revisited”. What had remained the same and what changes did I notice since my visit ten years ago? Of course the island is still beautiful, and the drive down to the end of the southern peninsula (which has remained surprisingly undeveloped) is one of the great Caribbean drives.

During my visit earlier this year, sugar cane was still rippling and rustling on the hillsides in the warm gentle breezes. But, I was surprised to learn, this will soon be history. I was witnessing the very last of the island's crop for, after a sugar-growing history of 400 years, sugar production here is ceasing. What will one see in the fields in future? I asked around but it seems there are no definite plans or policies in place.

In my opinion, apart from its natural beauty, the treasures of the island are the quaint places to stay and the nice people you will meet there. Unlike other Caribbean islands, St. Kitts has on the whole managed to keep a lid on development, but sadly there is a new, unsightly 648-room St. Kitts Marriott Resort (by far the largest property on the island) now soaring over Frigate Bay looking, from behind, strangely like a prison. It's a big beach property, just like any other, with a spa and a casino. Advantages? Well, it has no doubt brought increased employment and, by adding so many rooms to the island's roster, has meant increased airlift from a variety of departure points. It also boasts a golf course which will make it appealing to many, watered with desalinated water from a specially-installed adjacent desalination plant which is good to know. But I can't understand why anyone would choose to stay there when there are so many other, far more appealing, options ... see below!

The capital, **Basseterre**, boasts a new cruise ship terminal capable of taking the largest liners afloat. In fact, on my visit, the Queen Mary 2 (at present the largest) and another vessel – almost as large – were in port. This meant the adjacent craft market was busy with trinket and t-shirt buyers and the town bustling. Enquire if there are ships in port before you choose a day to explore Basseterre so that you can enjoy this quaint town peacefully. If you like to shop, do not miss the **Sugar Mill Art Gallery** and the **Art Glass Gallery**, both on Princes Street and close to Canadian-owned **Stonewalls**, a popular courtyard bar and restaurant. On this visit I also discovered a gem I'd missed earlier. It's the **International House Museum** on Central Street, located in one of the oldest buildings in Basseterre. If you're a history buff, book lover, librarian, archivist or something similar you will be fascinated by all this tiny house holds: yellowed copies of *The Saint Christopher Gazette* dating back to 1850, old books on Caribbean history, land deeds and – most poignant and interesting of all – slave records. Winston is the curator/collector here; he's been featured in international articles and you're sure to find him there and ready for a conversation. It's also worth a one-hour visit to the **Heritage Centre and Museum** near the Pelican Mall to see old photos and read stories of people important to St. Kitts' history.

It is probably with the cruise market in mind that the **St. Kitts Scenic Train** was devised (in fact you will probably find the train fully-booked on cruise-ship days and on other



Top: Queen Mary 2 (centre) and Basseterre (right)

left: Taking the train through St. Kitts' unspoiled countryside

days it will only run if there are at least ten passengers, so call ahead if you're interested). This new tourist attraction is a double-storey, open-topped train that circles almost the entire island, though not the beautiful southern peninsula. There is room for guests to have a seat both on the open-air level and the lower, air-conditioned section. The steep price of US\$89 pp. for the 3½ hour trip includes an interesting commentary (on my train ride the charming hostess was Ida Duinker), a few traditional songs from three young women who call themselves the "Scenic Railway Choir", rather loud piped music the rest of the time, plus rum punch and a sampling of sugar cakes. It was an experience, travelling through the high sugar canes and seeing the workers loading the real sugar train, but, as already mentioned, that crop is now no more. It won't be quite the same if the crops of the future are vegetables! If you don't plan to drive while on St. Kitts, this trip gives a fine over-view of the island and a glimpse of places you might otherwise not see, but I do think



Top: The living room at Rock Haven

right: Mule House



the price steep and would recommend putting that money towards a car rental.

Now let's get to a description of some of the places I would recommend you stay when on St. Kitts. Dr Keith and Judith Blake, who met in Canada, now call their charming house – **Rock Haven** – home. And, for your stay on St. Kitts, you can too, for Rock Haven is a two-bedroom B&B ... one room on the main floor and the other self-catering unit downstairs which opens out onto the small walled garden, lush with fountain flowers, bougainvillea and yellow-bell bushes. This pretty property is set in a residential area on a hillside overlooking Frigate and Half Moon Bays, not far from the capital Basseterre, with views of both oceans. It offers a warm welcome and traditional Caribbean décor: brilliantly painted walls, local art, English chintz on fine mahogany furniture and shuttered windows. On my tour of the island it was here that the Tourist Board had arranged for me to have breakfast and I soon understood why: an elegant dining table, fresh flowers, rich coffee, fluffy omelette and abundant fresh fruit. I was ready to slip into "island time" as I sat here chatting with Judith, hearing that they have many Canadian visitors and that she is happy to help make your visit a rich one with sight-seeing recommendations, calls for taxis or room to park your car if you rent one. But I had a full itinerary and could not linger. "But try to come back," Judith said as I prepared to leave, "if for no other rea-

son than to try my home-made ice cream in an assortment of exotic island flavours!" One day I hope I will!

My next stop was **Mule House**, another hillside property, this one set amongst the fields overlooking the spectacular north shore and distant islands. Many years ago Mule House was the subject of a 'scoop' in these pages and I'd had a long-standing invitation from the owners – Anglo Sue and Kittitian Ray Wharton – to visit. This home offers four homey, spacious, self-contained, self-catering apartments, all of which sleep four comfortably in two double bedrooms. You'll find flowers, fruit, some home-baked goodies and rum awaiting you here, and Sue and Ray, who personally meet every first-time visitor, will shop for you prior to your arrival if you wish. They are avid horticulturalists who take an

active part in promoting and preserving the flora of the island, including a project to save the flamboyant trees, but nowhere is this interest more evident than in their own garden. On a garden tour Sue pointed out (or, if out of season, told me about) her many banana varieties, papayas, pomserrats, guavas, sweet and sour oranges, West Indian cherries, rare Natal plums, limes and mangoes and more. And then there are the flowers: golden trumpets, birds of paradise, wild geranium, ginger lilies, heliconias, oleaners and, of course, hibiscus in abundance. A paradise for hummingbirds, finches, butterflies and other visitors!

Sue will also gladly guide you on a morning walk into the rain forest above their property, or, for a more in-depth hike – arrange a tour for you with Oliver Spencer, a renowned Kittitian (he's President of the St. Kitts Horticultural Society) whose company – **Periwinkle Tours** – specializes in volcano hikes or rain forest treks with an emphasis on history, flora and fauna. After full days of such activities, or merely relaxing in the garden or on a nearby beach if you prefer, the first-floor verandah at Mule House becomes a popular gathering place for happy hour. There's a small grocery store within walking distance of the house or a larger one a short drive away. Guests here are welcome to use the barbecue in the garden – and often do. And, of course, your hosts are a mine of information on the islands. "There really is lots to do here," Sue said, "and I'm happy to advise and arrange itineraries, including trips to Nevis."

For those with a sense of history, it is fascinating to imagine what the Caribbean islands were like in the past. Slavery and suffering, toil and tears in the sugar plantations were the order of the day for the majority. But the land-owning minority lived in style. Of the 300 or so sugar estates once active on the island only a handful now remain. Two of these – **Ottley's** and **Rawlin's** – have been converted into hotels. Their accommodation rates are beyond my budget, but they are well worth a visit for a meal and they

were next on my itinerary: Rawlings for lunch and Ottley's for dinner.

Rawlin's is reached via a long, bumpy drive through avenues of sugar cane and oleanders. It's worth it. Not only is it a beautiful property in a spectacular setting, but the buffet lunch, chosen from a small but delicious selection set out in their wonderful old dining room and enjoyed out on their terrace overlooking their pretty pool and gardens, was my favourite meal on St. Kitts. One of the kitchen staff stood guard over the buffet to answer questions about the locally-inspired food and to keep the finches away. Outside, pretty yellow banana quits were anxious to share my lunch with me, and an iridescent lizard slid along a nearby balustrade to fix me with his beady eye. It was all a delight. Then I asked to see some of their rooms (there are only 10) and was shown those that were vacant ... all different, each charming. As well as lunch, non-residents are also welcome for afternoon tea, sunset drinks and dinner. Don't miss it. An additional attraction to a stop at Rawlin's is a visit to the adjacent Kate Design Art Gallery. Kate Spencer (www.katedesign.com) captures the glories of this island beautifully, providing a wonderful souvenir or gift. I purchased a print of the 2003/4 painting Green Lemon (you can see it on the website) and have been enjoying it ever since.

Ottley's is also lovely for a romantic dinner in a candlelit poolside setting. If you stay you will find charming accommodation in the handsome 'great house' or fancy cottages, a spa, tennis courts, pool and restaurant set in 35 acres of gardens and forest trails. This property is popular with plummy-voiced Brits ... it's really lovely but has a rather formal atmosphere.

The other historic hotel I visited – the **Golden Lemon** – was not a sugar estate but a shipping merchant's store and house. Built in 1610 it lays claim to being the oldest occupied house on the island. Unlike the plantations it stands beside a beach. If I tell you that the property's owner – Arthur Leaman – was former editor of *House & Garden Magazine* I will not have to emphasize how beautifully this property is decorated. In one of the courtyard rooms a small swimming pool occupies part of the terrace and part of the living room! Oh wow! The food here is also renowned throughout the island, but unfortunately I did not have enough time to experience it. Perhaps one of you will let me know? Yes, all these historic properties are for the deep of pocket or for a special occasion, but no visit to St. Kitts would be complete without treating yourself to a visit to experience the atmosphere and the food.

For a far cheaper meal, I asked around for a more casual recommendation. Everyone cried "Spratnets – great food, cheap, lots of fish and lobsters, live music, popular with locals and visitors alike" and everyone can tell you how to get there!

Now, briefly, a few more accommodation options: **SeaLofts** (tel: 465 1075, www.sealofts.com), is a quaint condominium complex set on a two-mile Atlantic beach suitable for renters or holiday investment. (One of my trav-

el-writing colleagues owns one.) The people enjoying the gardens and beach here included a number of Canadians and British and everyone was very friendly. Welcoming Joyce Isaac, General Manager of the Homeowners Association here, showed me around and introduced me to several Canadian folk with whom I enjoyed a chat.

If you'd like a package air/accommodation vacation, **Signature Vacations** (www.signaturevacations.com or your travel agent will have their *tropical sun* brochure) offer six properties in St. Kitts, including the above-mentioned Marriott. I checked out several more. My advice would be to give the rather shabby 'family' resort Sugar Bay Club a miss ... it definitely shouts "budget". But **Frigate Bay Hotel** (www.frigatebay.com) is small and charming with its low-rise yellow-painted buildings circling a pretty garden and pool area, which is also the site of the split-level, indoor/outdoor dining room. All this stands above the St. Kitts Golf Course, whose 12th fairway adjoins the property, and from there it's just a short walk to the beach. Their poolside studios are self catering. I was enjoying a lone breakfast here when Managing Director Sam Ng'alla came to meet me and show me around. He was most charming and so proud of his property and his friendly staff. **Timothy Beach Resort** (www.timothybeach.com) is another Signature offering. This is a collection of pretty, self-catering suites and hotel rooms, with a terrace restaurant overlooking the beach that seemed very casual and popular. Here I received another warm welcome from Front Office Manager Virgil Williams who was only too pleased to show me around.

In fact, I'd publicly like to thank all the many great folks on St. Kitts who welcomed me to their properties, their restaurants, their shops and taxis and their beautiful island. Nature has made this island beautiful, but you all help make it a very special place.

A few more details:

Rock Haven B&B, P.O. Box 821, Frigate Bay, tel: [code 869] 465 5503, e-mail: blakekj@caribsurf.com www.rockhaven.com Rates US\$115 and US\$130 dbl. with full breakfast.

Mule House, Brighton Plantation, tel: 466 8086, www.holiday-rentals.com/mulehouse, rates US\$660 dbl. per week, a little more if four or five people stay. (Each apartment has two double bedrooms.)

Rawlin's, P.O. Box 340, tel: 465 6221, www.Rawlin'splantation.com, example high-season package: 7-nights, all breakfasts, dinners and afternoon tea, laundry, 3-day car rental, rain-forest trip and more: US\$ 3,230.

Ottley's Planatation Inn, tel: 1 800 772 3039, www.ottleys.com, an idea of the cost: a high-season package for a week (transfers, standard accommodation, all breakfasts, Sunday brunch and five dinners, deluxe island tour and guided rainforest hike or catamaran trip): US\$3,025 dbl., plus 10% service and 9% tax. If you're keen to experience this luxury, keep an eye on websites such as expedia.ca for

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Masca ... Tenerife's Hidden Jewel

story and photos by Juliet Gill

Looking for winter sun, for something out of the ordinary? The Canary Isles have it – plus a lively night life and exotic black sand beaches. Barely 120 km off the coast of northwest Africa this group of volcanic islands delight with year-round sun, a spring-like climate and rugged natural beauty to die for. Thousands of years of history and a warm Spanish heritage make this a must-see destination.

We're relaxing on the balcony of our apartment in Los Gigantes, pre-dinner drinks in hand, watching the fishing boats returning to the harbour below. The setting sun glitters on the sea, its reflection on the cliffs behind us magically changing the water to the colour of beaten gold. The boom of the surf on the beach below almost drowns out the boats' engines, and the gulls wheel and scream. Then our eyes lock, for wafting up from the lane behind us comes a mouth-watering aroma of seafood.

Minutes later we're admiring the crisp linens and sparkling glassware at our beachside table, scanning the menu. It all looks good. We're early, and the young waiter is charming and attentive; he suggests the catch of the day, a delicate, piping-hot sea bream, sautéed to perfection. We pass on dessert, opting instead for a stroll to La Vela, the home-made ice cream shop up the lane; the owner, who is Italian, makes all his own ice cream from only natural ingredients and tells you with pride exactly what's in each flavour. The sidewalk tables are a favourite destination for families, young lovers and people-watchers of all ages.

Next morning we're off to see Masca, a village clinging to the sides of a precipitous gorge in an isolated location in



In Masca

difficult terrain. The mystery is why anyone would build a village there, tucked away in the mountains, inaccessible to the outside world except by narrow goat-paths. The first phone was installed in the 1930's. Now, a narrow, unfenced road snakes its way up the mountainside offering nothing but white-painted curbstones between drivers, their passengers and a thousand-foot drop.

Our curiosity aroused, my sister and I grab a space on the small local bus and hang on for dear life for the journey up. We hold our breath, but the views are magical: every twist and turn opens up a new look at the ocean and deep green valleys far below. To the east rises Mount Teide, a cloak of snow draped over its volcanic cone.

The bus rounds another corner, and we have arrived. Little white houses with red-tiled roofs cling to the sides of the gorge, tucked among the lush green plumes of palm trees. Scarlet and purple bougainvillea drape the drystone walls, and every backyard has an orange tree, decked with ripe fruit.

We decide to explore, and set off down one of the nearby cobblestone paths. Above us a hawk circles on the updrafts; at the foot of the gorge the ocean is a vee of deep blue. Long shafts of sunlight probe the morning mists between the crags; somewhere a rooster crows, and from below comes the clank of goat bells. The crowd at the bus stop has dispersed, and all is peaceful.

Every twist of the path reveals more delight for the eye; this is a paradise for any photographer. Even the air is purer; the light isn't scattered by dust particles, so that, later, our photos startle us with their crisp sharpness of detail. The difficulty lies in deciding what not to photograph.

Below, hikers are moving off, Indian file, down the side of the gorge; there is a trailhead down to the sea, a walk of about three hours. The truly adventurous can reach Masca on foot from Los Gigantes, the resort town on the coast, by a challenging 9-km hike up narrow mountain paths. An alternative to the trek back up the steep gorge is to arrange in advance to have one of the local tour boats pick you up from the Bay of Masca, after a cooling swim in the crystal-clear water.

Tucked in a corner of the village is Masca's tiny museum; here we find the key to the village's fascinating history. The earliest settlers of Tenerife were the Guanches, who arrived hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. Little is known of them – they left no written record. Some historians speculate that they may have made the sea voyage across from Morocco. In time the Spanish explorers arrived and gradually forced the Guanches to retreat. Masca, with its caves and pinnacles, became their last stronghold. This isolation preserved Masca as a place of stunning beauty and serenity; a unique destination to hike, take unforgettable photos or even just relax on a restaurant balcony with a cool drink, soaking up the sunshine.

The Canary Isles are a longtime winter favourite of Europeans, but until lately haven't shown up on North American radar. The southern beach resorts, Los Cristianos and Playa Las Americas, are very popular, with a humming nightlife, broad black sand beaches and good shopping. They are heavy on concrete and high-rise hotels, but have a wide range of accommodation, rental cars and tours, with a good public bus service to other parts of Tenerife.

For those seeking spectacular scenery, Los Gigantes is a quieter alternative. On the north-west coast of the island, it's a small harbour nestled under 700 km cliffs, with a marina, a spotless public lido with a restaurant and a knockout view of the cliffs, and a small black sand beach. There are excellent, reasonably-priced restaurants, many clustered along the harbourfront, good shops and several bars around the small town square. There's also an interesting natural seawater swimming pool carved out of the rocks, tucked away in a residential area that's a mass of vivid flowers. Walking in Los Gigantes can be hilly in parts.

Most North American websites don't offer package deals to Tenerife; flights involve two or three changes, take up to seventeen hours and cost over C\$1,000. Accommodations can be booked at www.expedia.ca, but your best option by far is to include Tenerife as a side trip during a visit

to Europe, especially from the UK where the Canary Islands have long been a popular vacation destination. We've found that the consistently cheapest fares to the UK are available through www.canadian-affair.com, whose charter flights come with a generous 35-inch legroom, good service and generally contented fellow-travellers. From the UK, packages to Tenerife, which can also be booked from Canada, are available very reasonably at www.thomas-cook.com. A week in Los Gigantes, in a self-catering apartment with a balcony view of the harbour and cliffs, cost about C\$1,600 for two people, including airfare from London. Hotels are also available at this website, and there are many reasonable packages for other resorts though, as already mentioned, the concrete warrens of Playa Las Americas and Los Cristianos are not to everyone's liking.

Trips to the village of Masca can be arranged from your hotel desk, or any resort travel agency there (English is widely spoken). If you want to go independently, renting a car locally or taking a taxi (approximate cost one way per cab €8. about \$40 Canadian) are your best options, as they will enable you to pull off the road at designated stops to take in the breathtaking scenery.

Public bus travel to Masca is an adventure; the buses are clean and reliable, and money-saving bus passes are available in stores and newsagents. Travelling to Masca, however, involves a change at Santiago del Teide onto a smaller bus which is able to negotiate the hairpin bends. This usually leaves an overflow of disgruntled would-be passengers that can't be accommodated on the smaller bus. Lining up is also not universal in continental Europe, so only pure luck (combined, perhaps, with sharp elbows!) will

get you on board. Bus timetables for the whole of Tenerife can be researched at www.etenerife.com. It would be wonderful to stay overnight in Masca in order to enjoy the evening and following morning there, after and before the day visitors arrive, but it is difficult to pre-arrange. The bus stops at the Restaurant Aqui and enquiries for a room may be made there (take a Spanish phrase book), or ask at the Restaurant Der Alte Schule or at the museum. But be prepared to return to your departure point if accommodation is unavailable. Other helpful information can be found at: www.losgigantes.com. English language website for Los Gigantes www.flipperuno.com (check out the stunning photos of local views) for whale and dolphin watching tours and trips to the Bay of Masca. Check also www.losgigantes.com/nashira.htm www.giroguies.com/hiking-spain for walking tours. 🇵🇸



Exploring Masca



Roatan?

Where is Roatan?

story and photos by Fred Nagy

“**W**here the HELL is Roatan”. I couldn’t resist it. There we were in one of the few up-scale souvenir shops in Coxen Hole on the island of Roatan and I was looking at the inscription on a standard white coffee mug – perfect for bringing back home. Because ... before the trip, when we had told friends and family we were off to Roatan, without exception the response was always: “Roatan? Where is Roatan?” So, you see, I just had to have the mug!

Roatan IS unique and, so far, pretty much overlooked as a Caribbean holiday destination. A few miles off Honduras’ mainland, it’s part of the Bay Islands grouping made up of Roatan (the largest), Guanaja and Utila, both considerably smaller; and the Cayos Cochinos, a small group of keys barely above water. Roatan is, to say the least, underdeveloped. You don’t go to Roatan looking for casinos, à la Curaçao, or for extensive night-life and entertainment. There is little. There are no Cancun-style high-rise resort developments or expensive shopping malls. On the other hand, there are no hordes of tourists tripping over each other in a mad dash for sun and sand, either.

Oh, there is sun and sand in abundance. In fact, if you want to find that proverbial beach with only you and your mate to enjoy it, go to Roatan, just don’t expect a snack bar on the beach. Roatan has one world-class beach, West Bay Beach – one kilometer of pure white sand, gently, and I

mean gently, sloping into the sea – no crashing waves with undertow here. This stretch is being developed but with two-storey condo-style, low-impact developments. We stayed here in a one-bedroom apartment on the ground floor of a large villa, barely twenty steps from the surf. With sun, sand and palm trees in abundance, it’s all you’ll want.

Did I mention that Roatan is cheap compared with the rest of the Caribbean? We bought almost everything we needed for a two-week stay at the well-stocked supermarket and paid \$60 (all prices US). Then every couple of days we would take the water taxi to West End Village nearby (think Key West circa 1940) to meet the ‘fruit-and-veggie’ pick-up truck. There we would collect a couple of grapefruit, two or three oranges, a mango, a few potatoes, a couple of onions and so on, and pay - a dollar! There are plenty of decent restaurants both in West Bay Beach as well as West End Village. A lobster supper for two at the Argentinian Grill in West End (www.roatanposada.com/restaurant), arguably the best eatery in Roatan, with drinks and coffee and tip cost less than \$60. Main courses at most restaurants start at \$6 and top out at \$17. Accommodation at our place: “Casa de Paradise” (what a great name) cost \$500 per week, off-season. You can check out our great accommodations (we were more than pleased at what we found) at www.casadeparadise.com/savannahs.

However, if you are looking for all-inclusives, they exist as well, all low-rise, some pretty nifty, others more

basic and rustic. You can find a room with a bed near the beach for a hundred bucks a week. Or, if you want upscale, you might book in at the Luna Beach Resort, www.luna-beachresort.com, halfway between West End Village and West Bay Beach offering mahogany, mahogany, mahogany; VERY tastefully appointed grounds with cabanas and villas tucked into the hillside, a pool (a rarity in Roatan) and dining al fresco to die for. A unique experience.

Roatan: think laid-back holiday. Bring a couple of books, visit Coxen Hole and French Harbour, do some souvenir shopping, look for 'yaba ding dings' - imitations of AmerIndian artefacts once found on the island. Drink some Bahia Beer (75¢). Bargain with the taxi drivers, strike up a conversation with the local expatriate community (think Provincetown circa 1960), fantasize about spending six months of the year here.

Rent a car for a day or two (not cheap), www.roatansalesandrentals.com, explore the island; it's banana-shaped - 30 miles long by a few wide with one paved road running down half its length near the shore, the other half is dirt. Drive to the extreme east end of the island along the dirt road and find the Paya Bay Beach Club, www.payabay.com, (think Papa Hemmingway) and Paya Bay Beach of course. Stop for a drink and a swim on the deserted beach. Climb up into the hills on rutted dirt roads (4X4 necessary) to the spine of the island and look left and right to see the coral reefs fringing both sides of the island. Descend on the other side to find small beaches or Garifuna fishing villages, where the spotlessly clean children run to say hello, and hold out their hands for a treat.

Most everyone speaks English and Spanish as Roatan belonged to Great Britain during the time of British Honduras, now Belize. It's trite but true - the locals were friendly and outgoing, never did we feel threatened, even when completely alone in some remote village.

If you're looking for a dense tropical rain forest, well, you won't find it on Roatan, but the "Salt and Pepper Gourmet Club and Eco Tours" (what a name!) local tour company, will hop you over to the mainland by plane and whisk you off to Pico Bonito Rain Forest for a full-day hike with guide, food and drink, insurance all included.

Oh, did I forget to mention the coral reefs. How could I? This is THE Mecca for scuba diving in the Caribbean. Forget Cozumel or the Caymans. This place is IT. In West End Village every fourth shop is a dive shop. The largest dive fleet in the Caribbean is located at Anthony's Key Resort, the upscale dive resort on Roatan. Roatan is the top of an underwater mountain range, hilly and rugged with little flat land; these contours continue underwater, thus every dive in Roatan is a wall dive, sloping into the abyss. We dove with Bananarama, www.bananaramadive.com, a PADI Gold Palm dive shop, run by Ania and Liber, a young husband and wife team. No cattle-car diving with them, and this, for the unheard-of price (elsewhere, that is) of \$25 per dive. They also rent cabanas for \$55/day.

Diving off Roatan is spoken of in superlatives: the

steepest walls, the healthiest corals, the largest sponges, the most extensive underwater canyons, the spookiest channels, the best chance of meeting large creatures like mantas, sharks and turtles. If you just like snorkelling, nothing beats the west end of West Bay Beach and, if you are brave enough, The Wall is just 200 feet off shore.

Alas, this will not last for long. Already the cruise ships have discovered Roatan and disgorge their shiploads of tourists into Coxen Hole and onto West Bay Beach, where they own 200 yards of beach, twice a week. A nine-hole golf course is under development in the East End (where there currently is nothing but fishing villages), a couple of the chain hotels are sniffing around and real estate prices are on the rise. As an aside, we met an old man lazing on a hammock at the extreme west end of West Bay Beach, just before the iron shore begins. We struck up a conversation with him and found out that he is the owner of this last 300 yards of beach. It is the last bit of undeveloped beach front on West Bay Beach. He had recently been offered one million American dollars but had turned it down. He said to us "If I sell, what would I do with the money and where would I go?" I hope he manages to keep it pristine for a little longer.

Roatan: our kind of island. We will be going back - maybe for six months.

Some Details:

* TACA Honduran Airlines flies Direct to Roatan from Miami on Sundays and from Houston on Saturdays. Check out their website: www.taca.com. There are flights daily but then you will have to connect through either San Pedro Sula or La Ceiba on the mainland.

* Visit So Tropic on the Main Street in Coxen Hole for interesting gifts. The owner, Judy Griffith, can put just about any logo or slogan on your coffee mug, including, of course, the one quoted above. And Yaba Ding Ding is near Warren's Grocery store in Coxen hole, www.roatanisland.net/shops.htm, for locally- made clothing, rugs, throws and art crafts.

* Talk to Paul David at Salt and Pepper if a mainland excursion to the rainforest, or golf, or a visit to the Mayan ruins at Copan interests you. The day hike to the rain forest costs \$135, Fridays only, www.roatansaltandpepper.com, tel: 504 445 1306.

* Visit Anthony's Key Resort to check out the Roatan Museum (real yaba ding dings!), dive with dolphins, or just watch the sunset from their tree-house bar, www.anthonyskey.com. You can't go wrong.

* For everything you ever wanted to know about Roatan, these two web-sites will help you on your way: www.roatanisland.net www.roatanonline.com

If Fred Nagy isn't back in Roatan for six months, he's probably at home in Dollard-des-Ormeaux, PQ

A Cruise to Buenos Aires

story & photos by Barbara Bagnell

November in Canada: usually grey and dreary. November in South America: the beginning of a sunny summer. No contest! We decided it was time to leave for a continent we'd never seen. And as it was eight years since we'd had an ocean cruise we decided to combine the two ideas by exploring cruise prices on the internet. One website we like is www.vacationtogo.com which gives a long list of cruises organized geographically and sends out a regular e-newsletter. We went down the website's list to "South America" and found all the facts: the cruise line, the ship, the itinerary, the port of embarkation, and the discounted prices. When I had a question, I e-mailed the site's editor, Florida-based Alan Fox, and received a helpful reply. Two Canadian websites, among many, are www.cruisenet.ca and www.cruiseprofessionals.com. (Note: if you leave off the "s" you'll get www.cruiseprofessional.com, helpful, but different.)

We found the dates and itinerary of Crystal Cruises' "South American Serenade" close to our ideal. During the fall, this cruise was discounted as much as 59%. I inquired of a sales person at www.cruise.ca about the cost of an "inside room". She replied, "There are no inside rooms on the *Crystal Symphony*."

Soon we were off to Fort Lauderdale, excited about seeing a little of Brazil and Argentina for the first time. The large discount we had obtained made the price of this 17-day cruise less than US\$3,000 pp, without flights. (It's worth noting that of all the world's major cruise lines, only Crystal offers an unconditional price-protection policy. If you book a Crystal cruise, and at a later time the price is reduced for the category you reserved, Crystal will automatically adjust the price to the lower rate.)

We wondered if we'd find 12 days at sea on a 17-day cruise, too much sea and not enough port visits. Would day after day on the South Atlantic bore us? The short answer is that we were so busy we found the days flew by and often had to remind ourselves to take a good book and recline on the aft deck with only the ship's wake in view. Language classes, lectures, piano lessons, movies, and Broadway-type shows were only some of the activities on a long list.

Five days after a stop in Bridgetown, Barbados, we arrived in Brazil's oldest city, Salvador, where the ship's tour took us up hill to the ancient square full of ornate churches, intriguing little shops and persistent street vendors. Next was Rio de Janeiro, that city of mid-city mountains, long golden beaches



A small shop in La Boca, BA.

and the cog railway up Corcavado Mountain, where we found the head of the 30-metre Christ statue shrouded in mist.

Perhaps because of our leisurely itinerary, there were a number of physically challenged travellers on board. The ship accommodated them easily with wheelchair -accessible rooms on one deck and extra hands ready to help when needed. We really enjoyed the cruise and felt a certain regret when our days on board ended. We disembarked in Buenos Aires, the Paris of the South, where we had planned to stay for a week.

Regarding our flights: it was easy to book a one-way flight to Fort Lauderdale on-line for about \$150 each. (This was with Jetsgo, which is now no more, of course, but I'm sure cheap flights will still be available.) We booked a room at a Holiday Inn Express for the night before the cruise (about C\$100 with a skimpy continental breakfast and slow service). The Inn had opened about a month before and had a few wrinkles, but the advantages were that it, like many in that city, offers complimentary transportation to the cruise ship and from the airport on arrival. For hotel information in Fort Lauderdale see www.gflcvb@sunny.org.

For our return from Buenos Aires, I consulted airline websites and travel agents, including one who offered to sell us return tickets and "you can throw away the return portion". I visited www.expedia.ca regularly, seeing prices change every day, but at far better rates than the \$1,900 (per person, one way) that seemed to be the going rate on airline websites. On the day we thought it time to purchase, the Expedia fare was C\$736. (We noticed it actually dropped below \$700 a few days later.) It had two stops en route – Washington and New York – but at that price we took it. Something in my manipulation of the website wasn't working, so I found a travel agent who made the purchase from Expedia for me, charging his usual booking fee (\$50 pp) which still gave us a bargain. Arranging our own air to Florida, and researching the flight home from Argentina saved us about \$800 over the cruise company's price. When we arrived at the United Airlines counter at the airport in Buenos Aires we inquired if there was a more convenient route we could take, whereupon the pleasant young man readily put us on a flight for Toronto via Chicago which left earlier and got us home with a minimum of trekking through airports.

As mentioned above, we spent a week in Buenos Aires after the cruise. A taxi from the cruise docks delivered us, on the only rainy day we experienced in our South American visit, to the Best Western Art Deco Aparthotel. We'd booked it on the internet. At US\$60 a night for a double, king-bed, ensuite room with equipped kitchenette and abundant buffet breakfast we'd recommend it. Reservations at www.best-western.com or www.artdecoapart.com.ar. The front desk personnel were fluent in English, non-smoking rooms were



Cemeterio Recoleta where Eva Peron is buried

available and the lobby's internet access worked most of the time. Its location, a two-minute walk from Avenida Corrientes and Avenida 9 de Julio, the intersection where the city's famous obelisk stands, was so central that, except for some tours, we were able to walk to many sites. We could also walk to a supermarket, one of the "Coto" chain, for lunch or picnic fixings for our tiny fridge. Food prices are unbelievably low ... how about 14¢ for a baguette! The property's decor was a bit faded, but our room in the back was nice and quiet for sleeping. A room in the front could have been noisy as the city's traffic is fast, hectic and noisy.

Readers who plan to follow in our footsteps should plan in advance to pay cash for any tours they take in Buenos Aires. I had had an internet acquaintance with a travel agent who became strangely elusive when we got to her city. When I suggested we'd walk to her office to pay for the tours we wanted with a credit card, she explained the "cash-only-for-tours" policy, which was confirmed at our hotel desk. The tours she booked for us worked out, including one we took with private guide by car, but we cancelled a privately-guided day on the Pampas because of the cash-only policy and took a routine bus trip instead. Because of the extremely heavy traffic, Sunday is the best day to take a city tour. For walking, the city is laid out on a grid plan and is easy to negotiate once you're oriented to the map. We wore casual clothes, and no flashy jewellery and never felt threatened although we left major cash and documents in our room safe

We found two restaurants we'd recommend. One, with an abundance of white linen and candle light, is near the obelisk and across from the famed opera house, Teatro Colon. It's called Restaurante 9 de Julio and specializes in Argentinian beef. On certain nights tango dancers entertain here. Our dinner here started with a complimentary *empanada*, followed by generous and delicious steaks with frites, for about C\$27 for two, while a half-bottle of

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BARBADOS

This island's annual, and very popular, Jazz Festival adds an extra dimension to a visit there, not only because of the performances themselves but because they are held in a variety of locations, thus enabling the audience to enjoy a themed tour. Lionel Richie heads the all-star line-up and there are performances in Sunbury Plantation House, Heritage and Farley Hill National Parks, a rum factory and more. Ticket prices start at US\$25 and rise to \$100 for a dinner performance. The dates are 9 – 15 January 2006 and information can be found at www.barbadosjazzfestival.com and www.visitbarbados.org or by calling 1 800 268 9122. Sounds like a lot of fun!

CANADA

- If Vancouver is in your plans and you're a Picasso fan head to the Vancouver Art Gallery for a combined exhibition that is self-explanatory: *Selected Paintings from International Collections* and *Drawings and Prints for the National Gallery of Canada* on now until 15 January. Details at www.vanartgallery.bc.ca or by calling 604 662 4700, admission \$15 or less. And if you'd like to search out some budding Picassos, join Vancouver's *East Side Culture Crawl* on 18, 19 or 20 November. This annual show involves over 200 artists who live on Vancouver's East Side. Participants visit up to 38 buildings where painters, jewelers, sculptors, weavers, potters, printmakers, glass artists and so on have their creations on display and available for purchase. Details at www.culturecrawl.bc.ca
- For some very well-priced ski vacations in **Québec**, ask your agent for Skican's 2005/2006 Québec brochure or visit www.skican.com. Accommodation ranges from the fancy Fairmont at **Tremblant** or in **Québec City** to a quaint-looking new self-catering offering at **Le Massif** – Les Maisonnettes sur Le Cap. Both fly and drive packages are available, lift tickets are included and if you get that old cheque book out (rather than paying by credit card) you will save \$25 per person.
- Near-Toronto residents who love to ski may also like to investigate Ultimate Ski Vacations' package from Toronto (YYZ) direct to **Mont-Tremblant** Airport, a flight of 1 hour. "City to Slopes in Two Hours" is their slogan! Packages start at \$699 and include flights (and airport and fuel surcharges), transfers, accommodation, lift tickets, free parking in Toronto and more. Call 1 800 465 3034, www.ultimateski.ca
- Interested in combining your ski vacation with some fun at Carnaval de Québec in **Québec City**? Dates for next year are 27 January to 12 February. General information, packages and hotel reservations can be made by calling 1 866 422 7628 or on line at www.carnaval.qc.ca And, of course, there's lots of winter fun information on the website www.bonjourquebec.com

CUBA

For those interested in an in-depth tour of Cuba, have you considered renting a motorhome there? Recently visiting Canada was Roberto Cabrere of Cubamar Viajes, bringing the message that his company wants to encourage cultural tourism through camping or small-accommodation touring. Apparently there are thousands of camp sites around the island, suitable for motorhomes, caravans and tents. The company also offers itineraries that include courses and workshops from Spanish lessons to trekking. Information is available from your travel agent or via www.cubamarviajes.cu where there are details of many hotels of all types as well as the vehicles available for rent.

ETHIOPIA, SUDAN and EGYPT

While many travellers visit Egypt, the first two countries listed above may not be on your list. All the more reason to catch, if you can, the OMNIMAX/IMAX movie *Mysteries of the Nile*, for the scenery and some of the locations shown on this film are outstanding. It's an exciting story of a journey from the source of the Nile to the Mediterranean that includes lost cities in Nubia, crocodile facts and more (all with a rather clichéd script, but the visuals make up for it!). Take some children if you can!

HOLLAND

- It's not too early to start looking ahead to next year, especially if viewing Rembrandt would be high on your 'to do' list for a visit to Holland. That's because next year the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is planning a year-long celebration of Rembrandt's 400th birthday anniversary. Plans include an exhibition of *all* the master's paintings in the museum (26 January - 31 December), a *Rembrandt – Caravaggio* exhibition (24 February - 18 June) and more. Lots of details in the arts section of www.GoHolland.com
- There are also lots of details of tempting small-scale but high-quality places to stay in rural areas of the Netherland, mainly in Friesland, North-Holland and Brabant, at www.neerlandsgoed.nl Don't log on until you have time to browse, for this is a fascinating site, developed so that small-property owners, be they offering an inn, a B&B, a tavern, a farm stay or an apartment, can be marketed by one umbrella organization. All accommodations are en suite and offer breakfast. Some offer additional meal plans or have self-catering facilities. They look wonderful ... get out your atlas and plan a rural trip through this great little country.

ITALY

Another recent visitor to Toronto was Vincenzo Palumbo, owner of two properties in Ravello on Italy's beautiful Amalfi coast. I told Vincenzo that although I'd been to Italy many times I hadn't travelled in that region. He



Ravello, Italy

urged me to visit and one day I hope I will for I know it's beautiful and the slides of the region, the music festivals and the hotels that we were shown looked just wonderful. But in the meantime I can pass the information on to you, in case you're heading in the direction of Naples. Hotel Villa Maria and Hotel Giordano can be seen at www.villa-maria.it or call 011 39 89 857 255 or ask your travel agent for details.

KOREA

News of a prize is in the air from the Korea Tourist Organization. Movie-goers will be seeing a Korean travel promotion with the slogan "Go KOREA GO!" at Famous Players theatres across Canada during November, information will be in Famous Players *FAMOUS* magazine or you

can log on to the KNTTO's website at www.english.tour2-korea.com/Toronto/ to enter until 31 January 2006. The KNTTO has partnered with Air Canada Vacations for the prize: a 5-day trip for 2 to Seoul including air, hotel and tours. Good luck! It's a fascinating destination.

NEVIS

The St. Kitts article in this month's edition did not contain details of sister island Nevis. However, travellers with these islands in mind before 15 December may like to take advantage of Mount Nevis Hotel's "third night free" offer. This offer means that the property's self-catering suite for four is US\$200 per night instead of \$300 or their de luxe rooms \$166 instead of \$250. TS knows this property: a friendly welcome and a shuttle to the nearby beach club .. that's if you can drag yourself away from the pool and the gardens with their glorious panoramic views over the ocean to St. Kitts. Details by calling 1 800 756 3847 or www.mountnevishotel.com

U.S.A.

If you're planning to take the children to SeaWorld and/or Busch Gardens in Florida obtain your tickets before you leave Canada and they will be at-par. This offer runs until the end of April next year and the passes (1-day passes to either attraction, or 2-Park passes allowing unlimited access to both within a 7 day period) are available at www.atpar.ca, www.seaworld.ca or www.buschgardens.ca. They are also available from major Canadian tour operators offering Florida vacations.

from the bookshelf

Here are a few ideas for your own bookshelf and/or for giving in the coming season. Books that combine places with photography are a thoughtful gift, especially if you know your friends' or family members' destinations.

* Cuba anyone? If so, **Cuba: Portrait of an Island** by Canadian Donald Nausbaum is sure to please and provide inspiration for photography, or bring back memories, especially if you've enjoyed Havana yourself, described by the author as a 'vibrant city of elegant decay'. Although the book is comprised mainly of photographs, it does have an interesting interwoven text (by Ron Base) and many factual captions. Published by Interlink Publishers (www.interlinkbooks.com, tel: 413 582 7054), this 92-page volume costs C\$44.95.

* Ah ... Mexico ... one of my favourite destinations. And this book is destined to become one of my favourites too as I dream and seek out practical ideas for decorating a patio, arranging flowers or finding beautiful hotels to recommend (and, I hope, visit myself one day)

across Mexico. The title tells (nearly) all: **In a Mexican Garden: Courtyards, Pools and Open-air Living Rooms**. What it doesn't tell is that most of the locations featured in the 225 photographs are Mexican inns and resorts, all of which are listed with complete contact information for those who wish to see these stunning spaces firsthand. Thus it's a great travel book! Photographs are by Melba Levick, text by Gina Hyams, published by Chronicle Books (www.chroniclebooks.com, 1 800 722 6657) at US\$24.95.

* Finally, here's a great 'stocking stuffer' idea for avid travellers on your list (buy one for yourself, too!). It's **Travel Yoga: Stretches for Planes, Trains, Automobiles, and More!** by Darrin Zeer, with playful illustrations by Frank Montagna. The 'more' includes tips for relaxing, 'waiting wisdom' and exercises that can easily be done on your hotel bed as well as lots for your waiting/travelling seats. Again published by Chronicle, distributed in Canada by Raincoast (www.raincoast.com, tel: 604 323 7100) C\$12.95.

Two rail stories for you now, though you won't be riding the first for many years and as for the second ... well, it's up to you! If you go, we'd sure like to hear about it!

Work has recently begun on a new rail line through the Alps. The high-speed line will join Lyon in southeast France with Turin in northwest Italy and will include a 53 km section of tunnel under the mountains. Work has already started at La Praz on the French side of the tunnel project as the tunnel must be bored before the main work on building the line can commence. The whole project is expected to take 15 years to complete at an estimated total cost of €12.5 billion, with the tunnel section through the Alps accounting for €6 billion. The engineers in charge of the project say that they will be using many of the techniques developed in the cutting of the Channel Tunnel, but add that the terrain and geology of the Alps will present new challenges. At present the rail journey from Lyon to Turin takes about four hours, while the new high-speed route will cut travel time to less than two hours.

Italy already has a high-speed line between Rome and Florence, and new track designed for high-speed trains is being built to link Bologna and Milan. New track is needed because conventional rail lines cannot accommodate the top speeds of the high-tech Pendolino trains operated by Eurostar Italia. France, as is well known, has been in the forefront of high-speed passenger rail travel in Europe, with the first high-speed line between Paris and Lyon opened in 1981 and, since then, services into Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Germany also has fast trains – called ICE – linking many of its major cities. The European Union is backing projects that form part of a pan-European network of high-speed routes. For the faint of heart, it's good to know that the trains are fitted with automatic train protection (ATP) which automatically applies the brakes if the driver does not respond to a red danger signal.

Due to start operating next year is the world's highest railway line, which will link Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, with Gormo in Qinghai Province, China. Known as the Pan-Himalayan railway line, the 1,142 km final section has been dubbed the "top-of-the-world journey". Built at an estimated cost of US\$3 billion, the line runs across Tibet's snow covered plateau – known as 'the roof of the world' – climbing as high as 5,072 metres, which China claims is a world record. Almost 80% of the line lies above 4,000 metres and about 550 km of the track runs on ice. The track crosses hundred of kilometres of permafrost and sits on special rollers and pontoons designed to keep it in place as the ice melts and freezes each year.

China's official news agency – Xinhua – states that construction crews had to use oxygen while boring tunnels through ice during construction. The diesel-powered train cars, built of a special cold-resistant material, will be sealed like aircraft to protect passengers from altitude sickness. In addition to this automatically-supplied oxygen, the train will also contain an emergency clinic to provide medical treatment for altitude sickness.

The project was controversial at the beginning, but it's said the Chinese government has now been praised for its willingness to invest to ease poverty in the region. They have promised that Tibetans will run the railway, an initiative 'crucial to the development of this autonomous region'. The project was also the subject of protests by ecologists and non-governmental agencies concerned over the loss of the region's natural habitat. Work on the line, which started in 2001, has been suspended twice to allow for the migration of Tibetan antelopes and snow leopards and the trains are equipped with closed sewage and waste treatment systems to protect the fragile environment along the route. Not such good news comes from various National Climate Centres, who claim that rising temperatures will adversely affect operation of the railway by the year 2050. But that still leaves plenty of time for travellers to experience this train. *Bon voyage!*

NEW U.S. SECURITY MEASURES

Most of us are familiar with the on-going 'passports-not-needed', 'passports-needed' debate between the U.S. and Canada, but here's a new Department of Homeland Security measure that you may not be aware of. Apparently it caused considerable delay at some Canadian airports early in October. Now, as well as being asked your full name, sex, date of birth, citizenship, country of residence and passport details (if a passport is required) the U.S. authorities require a complete address for your first night in the U.S. So ... no more setting off across the border with plans to stop where the fancy takes you. Please make sure you have proof of your reservation with you or you will be subject to delays, which could, of course, mean missing your flight.

Invest in an inflatable pillow or neck support and remember to pack a sweater when you travel short-haul with **Air Canada**, for they are now charging passengers for pillows and blankets in an effort to offset the spiralling cost of fuel.

Air Transat is to continue flying to the UK throughout the coming winter, with departures from Toronto to London (Gatwick) and Manchester until March next year and a route to Belfast during the peak Christmas and New Year period. Transat Holidays also have Explore London packages for 3, 4 or 7 nights and a choice of 8 hotels. Hertz rental cars can also be provided with these vacations, with prices starting at \$64 per day with free upgrades until the end of March. www.transatholidays and www.airtransat.com or your travel agent will have details.

Etihad Airways – the national airline of the United Arab Emirates – arrived in Toronto on 31 October to fly passengers to Abu Dhabi three times a week and on to destinations in the Middle East and Asia, including India and Sri Lanka. Details at www.etihadairways.com or through your travel agent.

Zoom Airlines will soon be offering the only non-stop flight from **Toronto to Hawaii**. Due to commence on 17 December, and thereafter every Saturday until 29 April 2006, the Toronto-Honolulu flights are available from \$299 each way. Another Zoom launch is well in the future, but the information may affect the next-summer travel plans of western Canadians. It's the news that, beginning 10 June 2006 (until 29 October 2006) Zoom will be introducing a direct **Vancouver-Calgary-Paris** service. Again these flights will operate every Saturday with fares from \$299 each way. Both routes will be on 767-300 aircraft with 'increased legroom' promised. Bookings can be made on line at www.fly-zoom.com or by calling 1 866 359 9666.

Start up your computers! More and more airlines are charging fees for issuing paper tickets rather than e-tickets (here at TS we've just learned that **Lufthansa**, for example, now charges C\$40 for paper tickets). Other airlines – for example USAirways – has a surcharge of US\$5 for reservations made via their toll-free telephone line (rather than on-line) and US\$10 for purchasing one of their tickets at the airport or at a city ticket location.

Seven Wonders of the World: the New List

The Great Pyramid of Giza, the only one of the official Seven Wonders of the World still standing, has been relegated to eighth place by 3,569 readers of *Wanderlust*, Britain's "leading magazine for real travellers". Machu Picchu was the clear favourite with 52% more votes than its nearest rival. Here's the list (four of which, we're proud to say, can be visited on Travel Society Trips): Machu Picchu, Peru; Angkor, Cambodia; Taj Mahal, India; Petra, Jordan; Grand Canyon, USA; Great Wall of China, China; Galapagos Islands, Ecuador.

ABC Islands, continued from page 5

outside our unit! Maid service was provided on alternate days and there was t.p! Again we had very helpful hosts and they have their own dive shop. Our host advised the best snorkelling site of our whole trip ... over a sunken tug boat which was home to a array of brilliant blue parrot fish. There were also two good restaurants nearby. One was located on a floating dock just five minutes' walk away and quite affordable, popular with locals and the sailing folk. The other was in a Landhuis (old estate house) and had music some nights.

Here are the details ... all prices are in US dollars, as are most costs in the region.

* **Vistalmar**, Bucutiweg 28, South of Oranjestad, Aruba (hosts Alby and Kathlyn Yarzagaray), tel: [code 011 297] 582 8579, e-mail: vistalmar@usmessage.net, www.arubavistalmar.com. Total cost for two one-bedroom apartments including the car and taxes for one week: \$1312.28 or \$328.07 each.

* **Coco Palm Garden and Casa Oleander**, Kaya Statuis van Eps 9, Bonaire (hosts Brigitte and Marion), tel: [011 599] 7172 2108, e-mail: brigitte&marion@cocopalmgarden.com, www.cocopalmgarden.com. Cost for four in a two-bedroom apartment, including airport pick-up and taxes \$1155.00 or \$288.75 each.

* **Limestone Water Resort**, Spanish Water Bay, Curacao (host Roel Jungslager), tel: [011 599-9] 767 3007 e-mail: limesto@cura.net, www.diveatlas.com/limestone, cost for four people in a two bedroom apartment including a car and taxes \$1050 or \$262.50 each

In total we each paid US\$880 for three weeks' accommodation and rental cars, which is most reasonable for these islands. Additional savings came from the self-catering capacity of each apartment where we prepared our own breakfasts and most lunches (often picnics to take on our excursions), but we frequently ate dinners out.

*J. Helen Parkyn
Kamloops, BC*

special offers at these two properties.

The Golden Lemon Inn & Villas, Dieppe Bay, tel: 1 800 633 7411, www.goldenlemon.com, high-season dbl. B&B rates from US\$325; packages also available.


Scenic Train, tel: 465 7263, e-mail: scenicreservations@caribsurf.com, www.StKittsScenicRailway.com

Periwinkle Tours, tel: 465 6314, e-mail: oliverspenser@caribsurf.com or look for the flyer on the island.

A worthwhile excursion is a visit to the island's primary attraction: **Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park**, a

UNESCO World Heritage Site, comprised of ruins, restored historical structures, an orientation centre, a museum, a gift store and wonderful views. Admission US\$8 or less. www.brimstonehillfortress.org

Avis, Hertz and Thrifty car rentals available; enquire if you wish to visit Nevis and have a car there too ... the companies offer exchange arrangements "subject to availability". Drive on the left.

St. Kitts Tourism Authority has an office at Toronto at 311-133 Richmond St. W., M5H 2L3, tel: 416 368 6707 or 1 888 395 4887, e-mail: Canada.office@stkittstourism.kn or visit www.stkitts-tourism.com 


South American, continued from page 15

Argentina's Mendoza wine cost under \$6. The other restaurant we liked was Café Tribunales (near the intersection of Libertad and Lavalle) where we had a good pasta dinner, with wine by the glass for \$12.

As for the city's sites, visitors can go to Plaza de Mayo, the square in front of the "Pink House" (Argentina's version of the White House) on any Thursday afternoon at 3.30 to see the 'Mothers of Plaza de Mayo' arrive, wearing white kerchiefs, and setting up a table with information and a few items for sale. These now-elderly women are the mothers of the young people who "disappeared" during the military regime of the 1970's. Within minutes of setting up their display, they unfurl a long banner which asks for justice for those who caused the death of their young ones. Watching them march around the square is a moving sight.

Then, of course, there's the ghost of Eva Peron, once Argentina's first lady and the subject of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, *Evita*. An entire museum is devoted to her story, her clothes and newsreels of her life and her funeral. Info at www.museoevita.org. And one can also visit the Cementario de la Recoleta where she is buried. Aside from her family tomb, the cemetery is worth a stroll to see the many white-marble mausoleums with their exquisite detail-

ing and ornate staircases.

Out of the city, there's a tour to San Isidro and Tigre in which you'll see both wealth and poverty. San Isidro is an upscale suburb with a picturesque collection of boutiques around its rail station. Attractive crafts and jewellery are for sale there (vendors don't take credit cards). Tigre is the delta area where tour boats take you past the homes of people who live on islands without telephone or electricity. Some are summer cottages, others are year-round dwellings of the pulp and paper workers. Another out-of-the-city trip is a day in ranch country, sometimes called a "Gaucho party". It includes a bus ride of about 100 km. across the flat *pampa* land to a ranch used only for tourist purposes. Horses pull wagon loads of tourists around; wine flows; steaks, chops, sausages and ribs are on the barbecue; tables are set up in the shade and salads appear. The wine continues to flow through folk dancing and tango demonstrations before the visitors trek over to some bleachers to see the gauchos demonstrate their own and their horses' talents. The bus ride back is through rather uninteresting scenery, so you won't miss much if you take a nap! It all sure beats that grey November weather we'd left at home. 

The Travel Society website

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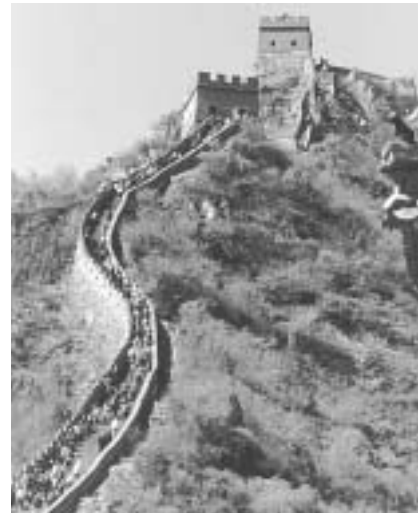
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It is vast, fascinating and mysterious and it has beckoned travellers from the west for centuries. Mention it to avid travellers and they are sure to say, "Yes, I hope to visit China one day." And what would they choose to experience? **A cruise on 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.

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Your tour includes:

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

We invite you to come to Mexico's fascinating Yucatán and to immerse yourself in this region's culture. *You will hardly believe all that this trip includes!* You'll stay in an en-suite room in a home in a gracious, residential area of colonial Mérida, where your English-speaking hosts can help you with your Spanish if you so wish. All the homes have been carefully selected by our colleague in Merida and if you would like a home with a special feature – a swimming pool, for example – we will try to please you. You will enjoy three meals a day with your hosts or away from 'home' when you are on an excursion with us. And, of course, your flights from Canada and airport transfers in Mexico are included too.

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!

ALL INCLUSIVE PRICES:

1 week	\$1,490 pp/dbl
2 weeks	\$2,075 pp/dbl
3 weeks	\$2,490 pp/dbl
4 weeks	\$3,250 pp/dbl

Prices are subject to confirmation

SPECIAL AIR FARES AVAILABLE NO SINGLE SUPPLEMENT

Optional Spanish lessons 20hr/week

1 week	\$300 pp (incl. registration)
Additional weeks	\$195 pp

prices are available from all major cities

Please call for the full itinerary

Your stay includes:

- Round trip international & domestic air fare
- Airport transfers
- Deluxe a/c coach transportation
- Homestay accommodation with English-speaking hosts
- Three meals a day
- English-speaking guides and escorts
- All workshops and activities
- All week-end trips with meals and hotels
- All entrance fees
- All departure taxes and fees

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