



BEEN THERE, DONE THAT, PAID A BIG BILL? **CYNTHIA ROSENFELD** PRESCRIBES SOME HIGH-END CURES FOR A CHRONIC CASE OF DESTINATION FATIGUE

Traveler

Outside the Box

W

HAT A DILEMMA: so many hot new places to visit and only 365 days to get there in 2011.

From Scandinavia to South America and all points in between, innovative operators are

opening up fresh frontiers for the luxury traveller. We're holding our collective breaths for the sybaritic pleasures popping up in some unexpectedly cool locations across the globe. Here are some of the best.

¶ **Paris** delivers an embarrassment of pleasures, but service in the French capital has always been *un peu* surly at best. We look forward to our Asian brethren showing the French a thing or two about hospitality with the opening of Raffles Paris-Le Royal Monceau. Philippe Starck transformed this once stuffy grande dame into 149 retro glam pads in an extensive two-year renovation. It's worth a visit for the rotating contemporary art exhibitions alone. ¶ A short stroll away, Shangri-La Hotel, Paris opened in the 16th arrondissement in December 2010, in an 1896 heritage building.

The former private home of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte's grandnephew now offers 81 rooms, nearly half with unobstructed views of the Eiffel Tower. Most desirable will be the penthouse Suite Panoramique, with its spectacular sprawling outdoor deck above the Seine.

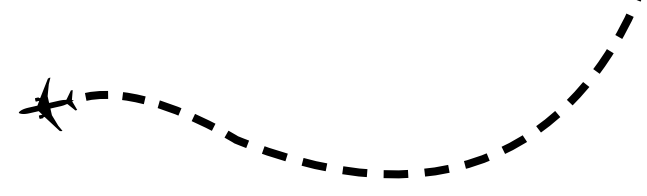
Elsewhere in Europe, Scandinavia has always been a scheduled stop on design-orientated itineraries, but environmentally focused adventure seekers, as we like to think of our Patagonia-clad selves, will start looking north during 2011. **Norway's** crop of visionary operators are inventing memorable alternatives to the traditional hotel concrete box. Deep in the Norwegian wilderness Basecamp Explorer's ship Noorderlicht sits frozen in the waters surrounding the Von Post glacier. This unusual accommodation at the centre of the historic kingdom of Hilmar

PARISIAN PLEASURES
FROM TOP The Raffles Paris-Le Royal Monceau's grand entrance; one of hotel's suites; artworks dot the hotel's garden; the Long Bar
OPPOSITE Shangri-La Paris boasts jaw-slackening views



Paris delivers an embarrassment of pleasures

IMAGES ON THIS PAGE: PHILIPPE GARCIA/L'ASOCIÉTÉ ANONYME



Damascus deserves its blossoming reputation as the next Marrakesh

more with each new 18th-century courtyard home recreated as a boutique hotel, like the nine-room Old Vine. Don't let your friends convince you otherwise: this once-dangerous nation reveals a treasure trove of bronze age, classical, biblical and Islamic artefacts to be collected among the Silk Road bazaars of the capital and Aleppo. First, though, why not take a mad dash through history? Start in Damascus' Old City under the Roman archway that leads to the eighth-century Umayyad mosque complex which was built atop a Christian church dedicated to St John the Baptist during the Byzantine era.

South America is calling in 2011. A one-time no fly zone for adventurers with hedonistic expectations, **Peru** now deserves our attention, thanks to Aqua Expeditions. They offer high-end cruising aboard the M/V Aqua, a floating pleasure palace with 12 cabins by Jordi Puig, one of Peru's top architects. The Amazon's less explored Peruvian stretch offers year-round access, while trained naturalists point out red kinkajou honey bears, spectacled caiman crocodiles and even the rare pink dolphin, before returning to the ship's air-conditioned refuge. A second cruiser, the M/V Aria, sets sail this year with notable upgrades such as floor-to-ceiling picture windows in all 16 custom cabins and an air-conditioned observation deck.

Replacing Buenos Aires on our must-visit list for the year ahead is Colombia's former colonial port city of **Cartagena**. Check in at Hotel Agua in the Old City to cool off in its rooftop pool, then head to the nearby Café del Mar for a cocktail before swinging your hips salsa-style at local favourite Quiebracanto.

Then, as the mercury shoots up come summertime, skip Asia's air-conditioned bolt holes and head to the other end of the Americas where Churchill Wild brings you face to face with the wildlife of **Canada's Hudson Bay**. It's a 30-minute flight from Winnipeg to Churchill Wild's four intimate lodges, strategically located along the edge of the Arctic Circle. The season is expand-

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE
CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT
 Activities on offer at Juvet Landscape hotel; Damascus' Silk Road bazaars are treasure troves; M/V Aqua; one of the nine rooms at Juvet
OPPOSITE
 Interiors of the Gangtey Gumpa Lodge (inset); polar bears at Hudson Bay



ing to accommodate rising guest curiosity, as well as that of the curious polar bears that stroll right up to the lodges in the warmer months. New summer programmes allow visitors to witness the Beluga whales breaching and to pick wild cranberries.

AFTER LAYING LOW FOR some time, the high Himalayas make the cut for 2011. We can't help but daydream of joining the mile-high club aboard the world's highest commercial balloon flight while in residence at the soon-to-be-completed Gangtey Gumpa Lodge, a haute farmhouse in **Bhutan's** lush Gangtey Valley.

Soon after sunrise, the Lloyd's of London-insured balloon drifts slowly over high mountain pastures, traditional farmhouses and intricately painted Bhutanese temples, against a backdrop of Himalayan peaks. When your feet finally do touch the ground again, expect a glass of celebratory brandy.

Elsewhere on the roof of the world, at 3,700 metres above sea level, leave the Dalai Lama photos at home and check into The St Regis, which upgrades the accommodation on offer in the Tibetan capital of **Lhasa**. Here 162 Tibetan-inspired butlers attend rooms overlooking the roof of the world. Among the innovations at this newly opened property is the world's highest luxury spa with 11,700sqft of indigenous healing, using Tibetan herbs and plants such as cypress and azalea leaves. Expect yoga, meditation and high cuisine at Si Zi Kang, the world's first gastronomic Tibetan restaurant, not to mention Tibet's first wine bar serving more than 100 different vintages, liquors and aged cigars.

Closer and cooler than St Tropez, search for cutting-edge luxury in 2011 on the sifted flour-soft sand of the **Maldives**, particularly at two anticipated new properties. Per Aquum made its name with the hi-tech, barefoot chic of Huvafenu. Now at the 84-villa Niyama, on Dhaalu Atoll, be among the first to party underwater at their sunken nightclub, accessible only by boat. Then unwind with spa treatments at any hour of the day or night. Upgrade to an overwater villa with a private cinema, just to rub



FISHY BUSINESS
FROM TOP
 The Siam Hotel, Bangkok; Six Senses Con Dao; sights on the Dive Damai
OPPOSITE
 Niyama on Dhaalu Atoll in the Maldives

it in back home, while languishing alongside the surrounding Indian Ocean.

Vietnam has been slowly shedding its reputation as a backpacker haven, and it's time to return in 2011, with the country's decidedly sexier ambitions. Skip Saigon's traffic and head straight to **Con Dao**, an archipelago of 16 islands off the relatively undiscovered south-east coast. Six Senses' 35 low-impact, high-comfort villas offer instant access to Vietnam's most pristine marine reserve, inhabited by endangered species such as green and hawksbill turtles along with dugongs, or sea cows, which ancient sailors took to be mermaids.

We'll stay at sea but head to Indonesia's **West Papua** region in August 2011 when Dive Damai launches Damai II. The vessel is a traditional gaff-rigged wooden schooner, constructed by traditional Bugis boat-builders in Sulawesi. Known

locally as *phinisi*, these craft have been plying the trade routes of the Indonesian archipelago for 300 years with little change to the 120-foot modern versions, other than upgrades to the standards of a floating five-star hotel. You'll feel properly pampered, since each one-to-three-week launch is limited to eight passengers, who spend days diving along the



planet's most diverse bio-reefs. Revel in the 1,320 species of reef fish, half of the world's soft coral species, and more than 70 per cent of all hard corals known to man. Come up for air and marvel at untouched islets covered in impenetrable hardwood rainforests.

SOMETIMES THE URGE TO ESCAPE can be dashed by an already crowded diary. Thankfully, there's no need to go too far to get away from it all in 2011. Much-lauded American architect Bill Bensley, whose talented hands are behind the St Regis Bali and Cambodia's Hotel de la Paix, brings his dramatic touch to The Siam Hotel in Thailand's City of Angels. Owned by the hip Thai family behind the nation's successful Bakery Music record label, it opens next summer in **Bangkok**. This 39-suite urban retreat will mix the owner's private collection of Southeast Asian treasures with polished woods and oversized ultra-plush furnishings, all under impossibly high ceilings. The deco setting is inspired by Old Siam, yet infused with all mod cons. Turn that next Bangkok business trip into something more romantic by booking the private Thai House. This unique teakwood structure, brought from the ancient capital of Ayutthaya to Bangkok by the silk tycoon Jim Thompson, has been pimped up in a prime location on the timeless Chao Praya River. **✎**

WHERE TO STAY

- EUROPE**
Raffles Paris- Le Royal Monceau, Paris www.leroyalmonceau.com
Shangri-La Paris, Paris www.shangri-la.com
Juvet Landscape Hotel, Valldal, Norway www.juvet.com
- MIDDLE EAST**
Old Vine Hotel, Damascus, Syria www.oldvinehotel.com
- SOUTH AMERICA**
Hotel Agua, Cartagena, Colombia www.hotelagua.com.com
- ASIA**
St Regis Lhasa, Tibet www.starwood.com
Niyama, the Maldives www.peraquum.com
The Siam Hotel, Bangkok www.thesiamhotel.com
Six Senses Con Dao, Vietnam www.sixsenses.com

WHAT TO DO

- The **Noorderlicht** is the world's only hotel anchored in frozen seas in Tempelfjord, Norway. www.basecampexplorer.com
- Churchill Wild** offers close encounters with the wildlife of Canada's Hudson Bay, including polar bears and Beluga whales. www.churchillwild.com
- Dive Damai** is the best way take to the seas in Indonesia's West Papua region. www.dive-damai.com