

World

W L T
World Luxury Tourism

Luxury Travel

Magazine

Vol. 1 ■ Issue 4 ■ November, 2012

Luxury on Track

Five Best Luxury Trains of the World



Ashram

Retreat for your mind,
body and soul



Happenings



South Africa

The Country of
Kaleidoscopic
Landscapes



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- Issue 4
- November, 2012



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World
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Magazine



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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This may not be news for some; still, we are going to say it again! We are glad to inform you that the World Luxury Travel Magazine is now available in an iPad application – iFlipViewer, where you can download the e-zine within seconds and read it at your own time and place. The e-zine is also available in other tablets and portable devices to read it on the go.

Winter is already here and we are chasing the sun this time! We have travelled to South Africa, a must visit country to enjoy the sun, sand, wild safaris and many other outdoor activities. The country is rightfully called a Rainbow Nation.

We are also discovering the train to travel in the lap of ultimate luxury. The Cover Story tells you about the Top Five Luxury Train Journeys of the World. But if you want to go to some place exotic, head towards Mexico City. This year-round destination will keep you warm with its exemplary hospitality and joie di vivre. Besides these amazing places and experiences, this issue of the e-zine also helps you plan your Christmas holidays and mark your calendar for the upcoming must attend events.

Happy reading!

Manashree Prakash
Editor-in-Chief

Feature

Santa's Calling

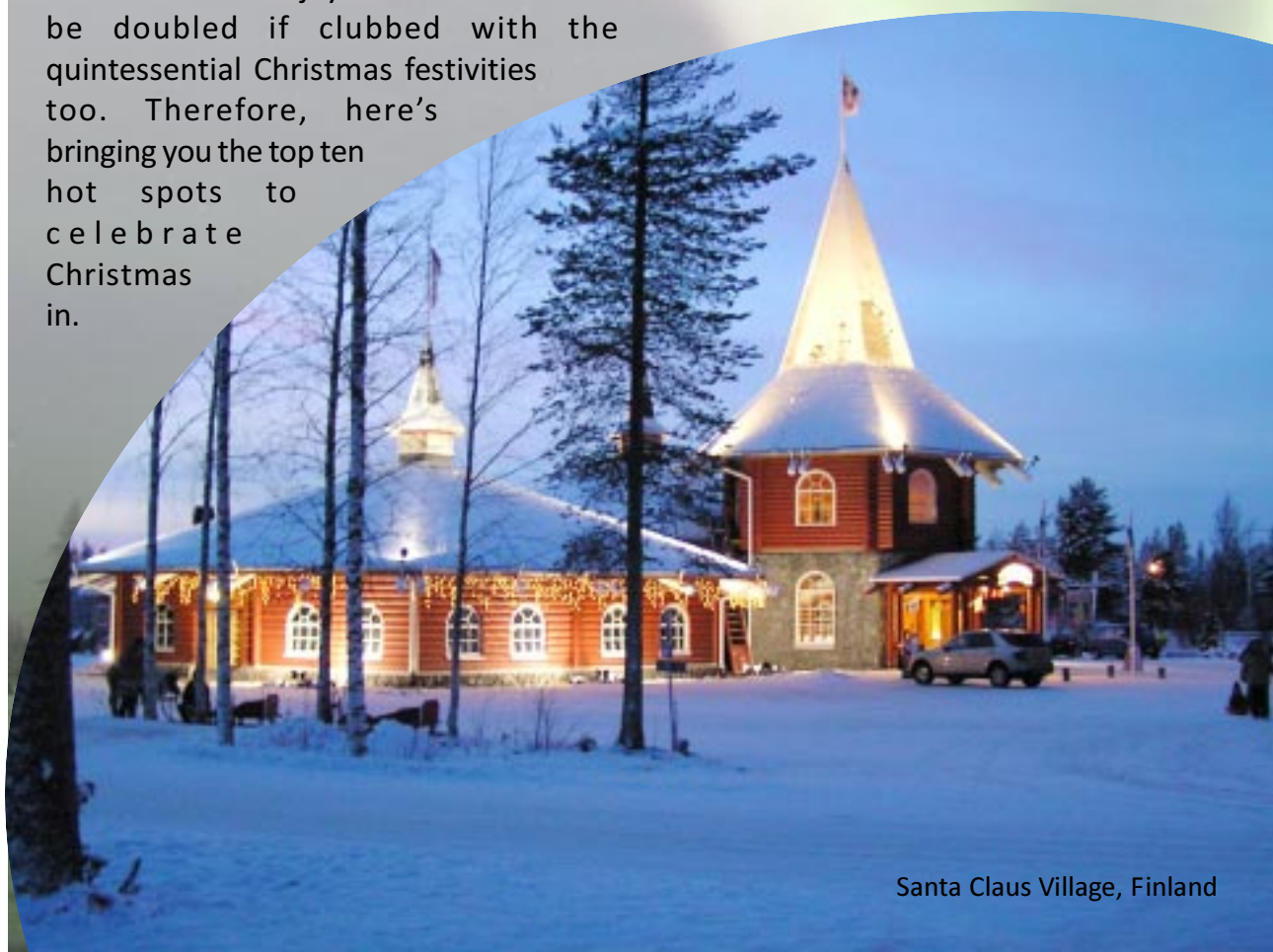
**– Plan ahead for
a memorable
Christmas
vacation in one
of the Ten Best
Christmas
Destinations
of the World...**



Christmas is just around the corner and this is the right time to pick a destination for the upcoming holidays. Christmas is celebrated all around the globe and is one of the most “looked-forward-to” events of the year. This is the beginning of the holiday season till the New Year Eve and a majority of the vacation deprived work force waits for this time of the year to take a break to enjoy with family and friends. The enjoyment of vacation can be doubled if clubbed with the quintessential Christmas festivities too. Therefore, here’s bringing you the top ten hot spots to celebrate Christmas in.

Santa Claus Village and Santa Park, Finland

Napapiiri, Europe’s Christmas capital, located on the extreme north of Finland, at the foot of the Arctic Circle, is the hotspot of all of Santa Clause’s actions, the “true base of operations”. Every year it draws thousands of visitors from all over Europe to observe the décor at its two Santa-themed attractions—the Santa Claus Village and Santa Park. The two attractions offer fun-filled encounters



Santa Claus Village, Finland



New York Rockefeller Center

with real reindeers, opportunity to buy some Santa's merchandise, tours of Santa's workshop, visits with the jolly adorable big man dressed in red suite and so on. The deep snow covered decorated Christmas trees; enchanting carols, nativity sceneries, and the amazing brilliance of Aurora Borealis (especially in Rovaniemi a.k.a. the World Capital of

Christmas) are the perfect ingredients of a dream Christmas vacation, especially when it is in the homeland of Santa.

New York, USA

Your Christmas destination list is utterly incomplete if the name of one of the iconic cities of the world, New York, is not included.



Aurora Borealis in Rovaniemi, Finland

This is because the world's tallest Christmas tree, illuminated beautifully by eight kilometres of light is displayed brilliantly at the centre of the Rockefeller Centre. An exciting ice-skating around the Rock's outdoor rink; a joyous ride in the carriage through Central Park, as well as skiing at the same venue; Macy's ever-changing window displays; Sixth Avenue spectacular decorations make it the ideal Christmas destination. Moreover, the city's cosy, family-like ambience acts as the icing on the cake.



Christmas Lights in Christmas Market Cologne Germany

Cologne, Germany

If you believe in the phrase 'shop till you drop', the Christmas markets of Cologne, Germany would definitely be the places to be in. Beat the bite of the chill with the hot and spicy shot of Gluhwein in the good spirit of celebrating the birth of the blessed one. Afterwards, join in

the queue of festiveness in any of the city's eight fabulous Christmas markets where surprising varieties of holiday gifts and



Christmas market Cologne Germany

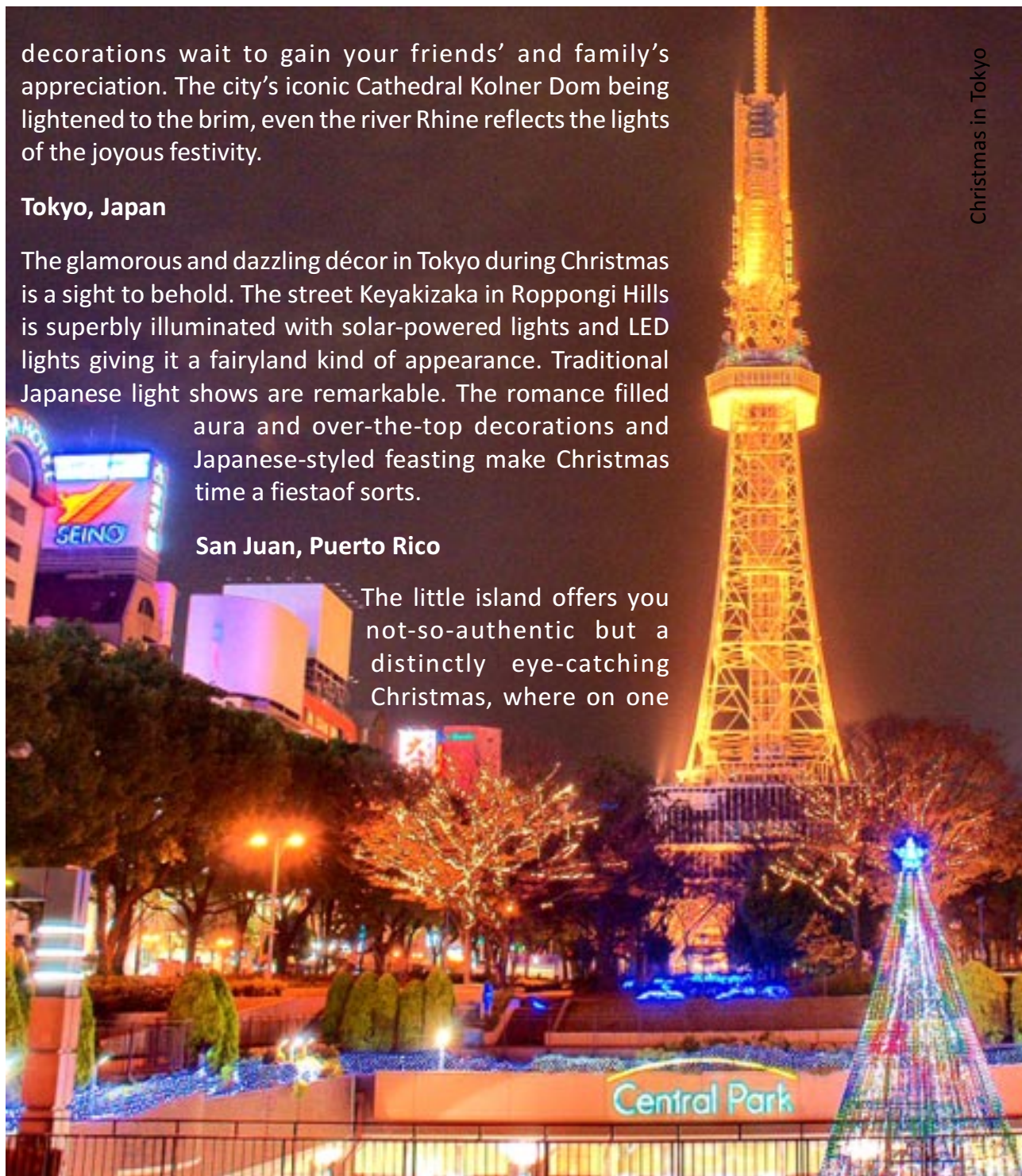
decorations wait to gain your friends' and family's appreciation. The city's iconic Cathedral Kolner Dom being lightened to the brim, even the river Rhine reflects the lights of the joyous festivity.

Tokyo, Japan

The glamorous and dazzling décor in Tokyo during Christmas is a sight to behold. The street Keyakizaka in Roppongi Hills is superbly illuminated with solar-powered lights and LED lights giving it a fairyland kind of appearance. Traditional Japanese light shows are remarkable. The romance filled aura and over-the-top decorations and Japanese-styled feasting make Christmas time a fiesta of sorts.

San Juan, Puerto Rico

The little island offers you not-so-authentic but a distinctly eye-catching Christmas, where on one



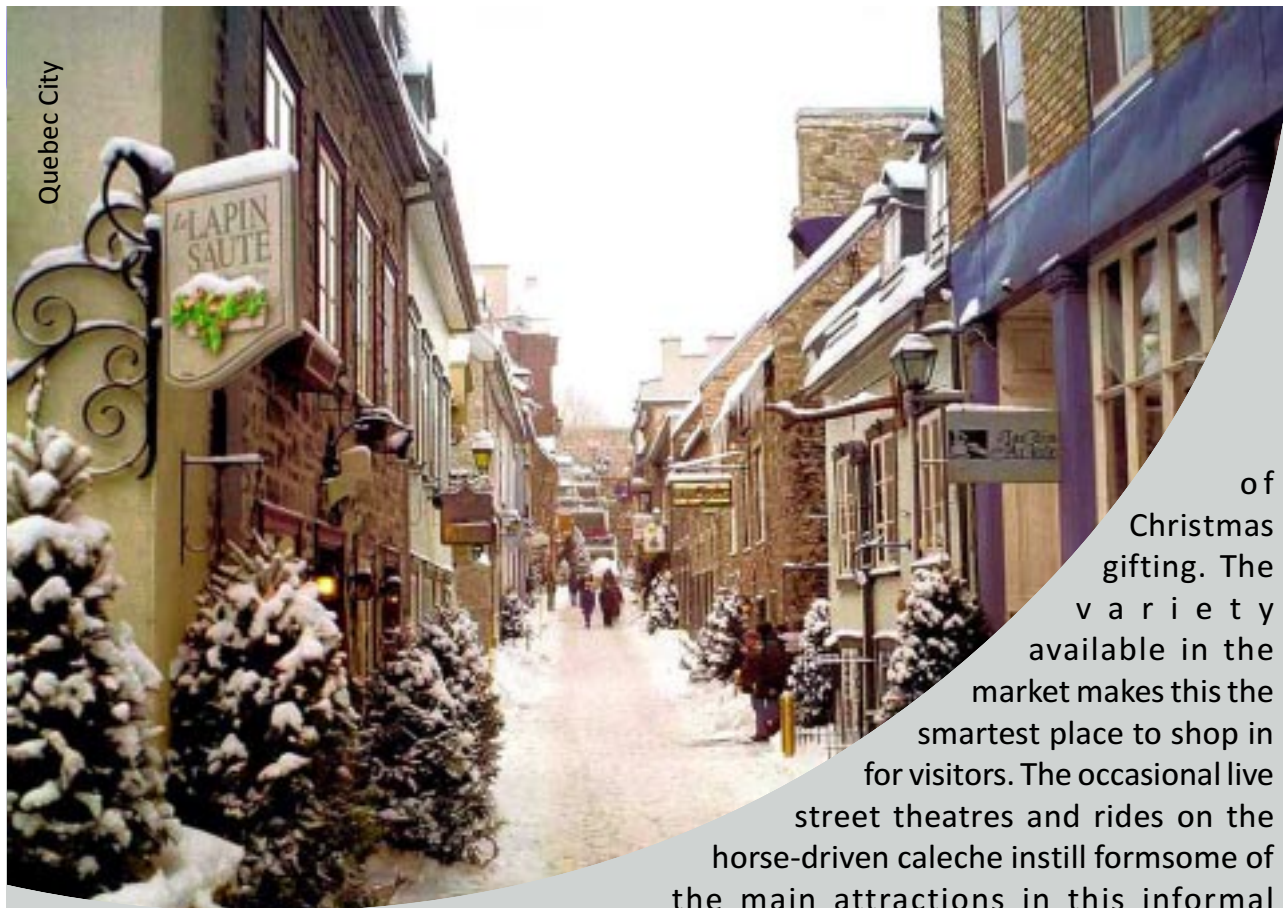


hand you ogle at the dazzling, multi-coloured decorative arches and lights hung down from tall palm trees and on the other, you join the crowd tapping your feet to the beats of salsa. The festivities though start early, reach its peak on the big day, and rolls down till Three Kings Day on January 6. The churches conduct Christmas carols, while ebullient carollers visit neighbour's door to make merriment. City Hall on the Plaza de Armas and the fairy-lit mall, Paseo de la Princesa will definitely amaze you with its awe-struck features. Do not forget to enjoy the local delicacies here.

Boston, USA

The exotic blend of old-world ambience and New-England cosiness wrapped in heart-filling wonderful sightsof Christmas decorations, a Christmas vacation cannot be better than this. Saunter around the historic length of the city, and noticethe 18th century New England Christmas around Beacon Hill's every cobblestoned street corner. More than 2,800 gas lamps stranded-to-glow on the snow dusted streets to light up the town. Coloured light-wrapped trees decorated along the shopping zones create sparkling canopies. The impressive snow-

Quebec City



covered Christmas tree in front of the Faneuil Hall becomes the centre piece of all Boston decor and festivities.

Quebec City, Canada

The streets of Quebec City may well be confused, as the setting of a fairy tale theatre or a fantasy land during Christmas. Christmas here is characterised by patches of snow on the building walls and narrow streets lined with enchanted lights apart from the regular Christmas decor. The Marche de Noel (Christmas Market) fulfils all the necessities

of Christmas gifting. The variety available in the market makes this the smartest place to shop in for visitors. The occasional live street theatres and rides on the horse-driven caleche instill formsome of the main attractions in this informal Christmas retreat.

Vienna, Austria

Bent more on aristocracy, Vienna is the lavish destination to celebrate Christmas the big way. Your eyes hover over the enchanting



Vienna, Austria Christmas Market Display

Christmas tree decorations in front of the Schonbrunn Palace as classical concerts in the luxurious City Hall building join in to sing Christmas carols. Wooden shops in one of the Europe's best Christmas markets is sure to thrill you in the sea of other cheerful faces. In the shopping spree, as you drown yourself buying more Christmas goodies, be sure to enjoy a spicy mulled wine to savour in the chilling weather conditions.

Nuremberg, Germany

The dazzle of the yesteryears is the inescapable Christmas flavour that pulls visitors every year among the relics of the middle ages in Nuremberg. Spellbinding world of toys in the spectacular Toy Museum is a heavenly retreat for



any child as well it is for adults. When it comes to quality time spending with the family, the German Railway Museum is the place to be. Recreations like the Nuremberg Christ Child are also there to pep up the holiday mood where a young woman between 16 to 19 years is elected

from online voting to inaugurate the grand Christmas market in the city. The Christmas market houses over 180 wooden stalls. Indulge in some Christmas delicacies like sticky buns, fritters and



other season's delicacies to complete the celebration.

Bethlehem, West Bank, Israel

How about doing the best thing on Christmas? The provenance of Christianity dwells in the sacred land of Jerusalem, the birth place of Jesus. The heart of Christian pilgrimage, Bethlehem, even today has a spell-binding effect on the minds of the pilgrims with its mystical anciently civilized appearance. The enthusiasm and spark at

Manger Square and in the Old City is just enough to light up a forest of Christmas trees! The spectacular colours and lightings at St. Cathedral's Church and the striking of the clock at midnight are some of the mesmerizing experiences.

Get ready for the holiday season, pack your bags and head to be a part of the celebrations in any of your favourite destinations. Whatever is the name

of the venue, a fun-loving heart, filled with excitement and cheerfulness can spread a tint of brightness and colour into the "black and white", dull backdrop of winter. This season of festivity is a pleasurable time not only for the little ones but also for the grown-ups. Christmas is no more confined to only Christianity. It has become a universal occasion to celebrate the holiday season too! Happy holidays!



South Africa

**The Country of
Kaleidoscopic Landscapes**

**Country
Getawa**



South Africa is a psychedelic mix of recreational activities, cultures, landscapes and wildlife. It is located on the southern tip of the African continent. Bordering its coastline are the Atlantic Ocean to its west and the Indian Ocean to the east and the south. Known as the 'Rainbow Nation', South Africa shares its northern border with Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe; north eastern border has Mozambique and Swaziland. Landlocked Lesotho is its eastern central plain. Characteristically lying below the Tropic of Capricorn, the country enjoys

everything including desert, savannah, mountains and wildlife making it the most exotic destination on the planet. This has also been proved by the steady influx of tourists reflecting the popularity of this country as an exotic holiday destination.

South Africa not only has a beautiful scenery, sunny climate and large acres of golf courses, it also has world class MICE infrastructure to attract business travellers. Many cities, including Cape Town and Johannesburg have ideal venues to host international congresses and conventions.



Climate

Though generally warm, the climate in South Africa is as varied as its terrain. One thing to note is that the country is in the southern hemisphere, so the seasons are in contrast to those of the northern hemisphere. The climate here is rather dry with an annual rainfall of around 464 mm. A major part of the country gets summer rainfall, except in the southwest around Cape Town.

Best Time to Visit

Depending on the part of the country and one's specific interests there are some guidelines for the best time to visit the country:

Northern South Africa:

Winter (June-September) -


At this time maximum temperatures are mild with 20 - 23 degree Celsius. There is very little rain and snow. It is the best time for wildlife and game viewing.

Southern South Africa: Summer (November - March) - Maximum temperatures can reach 30 degree or more. However the cool breeze from the Atlantic lowers the heat. Rainfall is less. May to August is considered the worst time to visit the Cape as it is generally cold,

wet and windy at this time.

Depending on your focused holiday activity, the best times are:

For safari: June to September – dry season

A close-up photograph of a leopard's fur, showing the characteristic rosette pattern of dark brown spots on a lighter tan background. The fur is slightly out of focus, with some areas sharper than others, creating a sense of depth. The lighting is warm, highlighting the texture of the fur.

Cape Town visit: November to March – summer

Rafting: December to February – rainy season

Flowers viewing: August to September – spring

Whale watching: June to December

The school vacation times in South Africa falls during mid-December to January making it the peak domestic tourist season. Make advance bookings to avoid disappointments.

Back Pack Essentials:

Light summer clothes, a warm jacket, rain coat, good walking shoes, neutral clothing for safaris, cool long sleeved shirts and cool long pants for evenings. Sunglasses, hats and sunscreens are the other must haves.

Attractions

Beaches - For the beach lovers, South Africa is an absolute paradise. The West Coast has lovely, isolated beaches. The country has a 3000-km-long coastline. Some of the best places include Langebaan and Elands Bay. Cape Town has beautiful beaches too. Arniston and Stilbaai are popular destinations here. Port Elizabeth and East London are popular beach destinations on the East Coast.

Cape Town - One of the must-see places of the world, Cape Town has it all – one of the new seven wonders of the world the Table Mountain, Cape Winelands, beautiful coastal scenery and great shopping. The Table Mountain is the central part of the Table Mountain National Park. The park is also famous



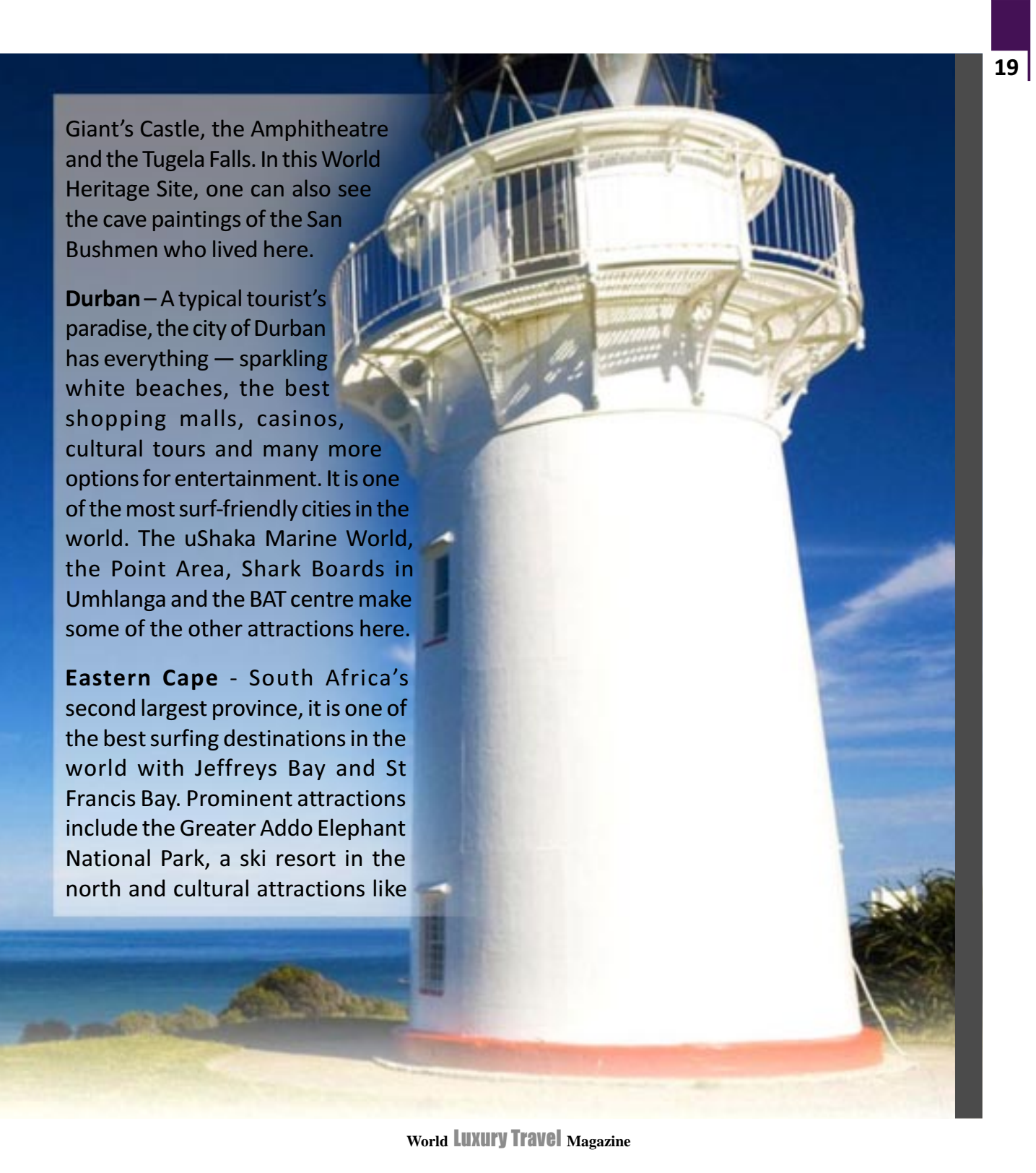
for Boulders Beach and its penguins and Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. It is characterised by its unique and breathtakingly diverse flora and fauna. It also offers hundreds of walks on its mountain slopes. Cape Town is also home to the Cape Floral Region, a world heritage site.

Drakensberg - This mountain range situated along the southeast coast of South Africa is a favoured place of adventure sports lovers. It offers varied activities such as mountain



biking, hiking, bird watching, river swimming and trout fishing. The uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park encompass this mountain range. Wildlife species like the eland, Mountain Reedbuck and stunning variety of birds can be seen here. Some of the major attractions here include the Cathedral Peak,





Giant's Castle, the Amphitheatre and the Tugela Falls. In this World Heritage Site, one can also see the cave paintings of the San Bushmen who lived here.

Durban – A typical tourist's paradise, the city of Durban has everything — sparkling white beaches, the best shopping malls, casinos, cultural tours and many more options for entertainment. It is one of the most surf-friendly cities in the world. The uShaka Marine World, the Point Area, Shark Boards in Umhlanga and the BAT centre make some of the other attractions here.

Eastern Cape - South Africa's second largest province, it is one of the best surfing destinations in the world with Jeffreys Bay and St Francis Bay. Prominent attractions include the Greater Addo Elephant National Park, a ski resort in the north and cultural attractions like

the towns of Graaff-Reinet and Grahamstown. Port Elizabeth, Port Alfred and East London have excellent golf courses too.

Garden Route - The Garden Route is a scenic route that begins at Mossel Bay, in Western Cape and runs along a road parallel to the coast of the Indian Ocean. It ends at the mouth of Storms River, which crosses through one of the world's longest arch bridges, 400 feet long. Beautiful scenery of lakes, mountains, hills, dense native forests, descending rivers and long beaches of white sand make it a must travel route while visiting the country. The 200-km stretch of route running along the Western Cape coastline also offers opportunities for diving, surfing, hiking and paragliding. It is a golfer's haven with innumerable golf courses all along. Some of the attractions here include the Knysna elephants, the fossil fish and the post office tree.

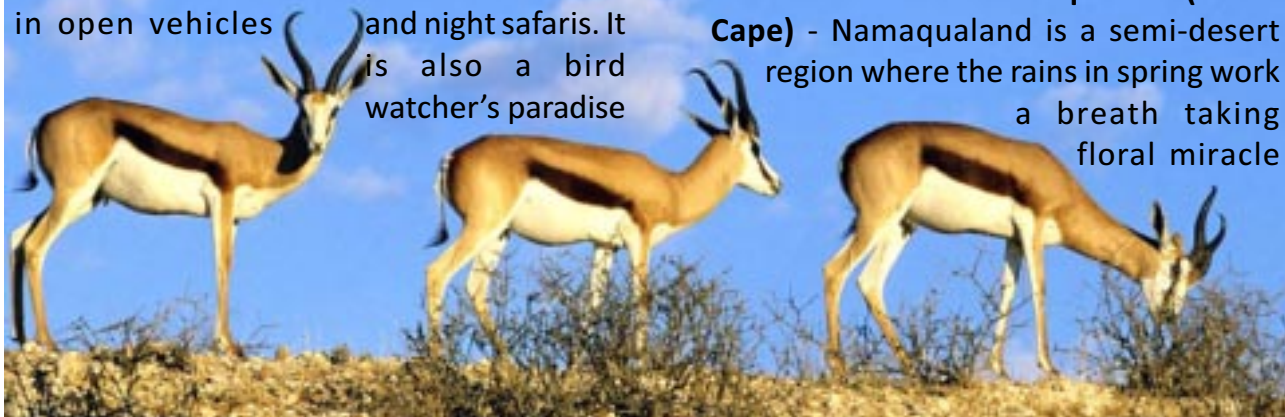


Kruger National Park

- One of the world's most famous game reserves, it is spread across almost a million hectares. A treasure trove of the world's most diverse flora and fauna, the majority of the park is situated in the Lowveld. The Park offers walking safaris, mountain bike trails, self-drive or guided tour. It has very good accommodation facilities. There are many private reserves where visitors are allowed to travel on foot, in open vehicles and night safaris. It is also a bird watcher's paradise

having 507 species of birds.

The Kalahari and the Namaqualand (North Cape) - Namaqualand is a semi-desert region where the rains in spring work a breath taking floral miracle



which draws tourists from all around the globe to view this lovely phenomenon. When it rains in spring, the arid, stony land soaks up the water and the whole landscape is magically transformed as millions of flowers start blooming and carpet the land in a stunning array of colours. The Namaqua National Park has been set up to protect this wonderful phenomenon of Nature. Some of the popular tourist spots here are Garies,

Springbok and Kamieskroon.

The Kalahari Desert forms a part of the vast sand basin which stretches from the Orange River to Angola, in the west to Namibia and Zimbabwe to the west. The landscape is made up of a vast sweep of red sand dunes, wide open spaces and blue skies. Some of the major attractions of this area are the Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, The Witsand Nature Reserve and the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.



Winelands - The winelands include Stellenbosch, Paarl and Franschhoek. The scenery is beautiful with vast sunny stretches of greenery, mountains and quaint houses. There are several regions with their own wine tasting tours.



culture by spending time at various cultural villages, viewing traditional dances and rural rituals and visits to historic townships. One can feel the spirit of the anti-Apartheid Struggle

Cultural Villages and Townships - South Africa has a rich and diverse cultural heritage. Tourists can get an insight into the country's

at Soweto, where one can also visit Nelson Mandela's house at Vilazaki Street. Other popular cultural destinations are the Basotho Cultural Village, Robben Island, KwaZulu-Natal and many other sites, museums and galleries.



Cuisine

The way South Africa is called the 'Rainbow Nation', its cuisine can be termed as 'rainbow cuisine' for its sheer variety of flavours and culinary traditions. Many may not know that the South African food hardly has its equal. The country's cuisine is characterised by the local traditional cuisine along with its European influences, sweet and sour delicacies of the Malays and of course by the rich spicy Indian curries. Meat is the dominant part of the diet here. Fresh seafood and great wines from the local vineyards also enrich the local cuisine.

Barbecues (Braais) are common. Some of the local delicacies are Boerworst (a spicy kind of sausage), Bobotie (curried mince stew), Bredie (mixed meat-vegetable casserole) and Biltong (dried meat-beef or venison).

Getting there

Air: Johannesburg International Airport is the major international air hub of the country. Cape Town International Airport receives direct flights from Europe. South African Airways is the national airline, with excellent networks. It operates international and regional flights with its subsidiaries — South African Airlink and South African Express.



Getting around

Several domestic airlines operate flights to various cities and towns. **Air** travel is fast and convenient and most cities are within a couple of hours reach. The Mpumalanga Kruger International Airport near Nelspruit and Kruger National Park and Durban International Airport handles several regional flights. Cities are well linked **by roads** and highways. Several car hire firms operate across the country. Taxis are also available. Car hijacking and theft is a common problem, so it is best to keep doors locked and avoid hitchhikers. Tourists must carry cash as credit cards are not accepted in most of the fuel stations. Avoid public transport and local buses. **Trains** are slow and mostly overnight. Luxury trains (running between Johannesburg and Cape Town twice a week) are more comfortable. Avoid Metrorail trains. Ironically, South Africa has the most luxurious train in the world – the Rovos Train. We recommend.

Fast Facts

Official Language: It has 11 official languages including Afrikaans and English

Currency: Rand (R)

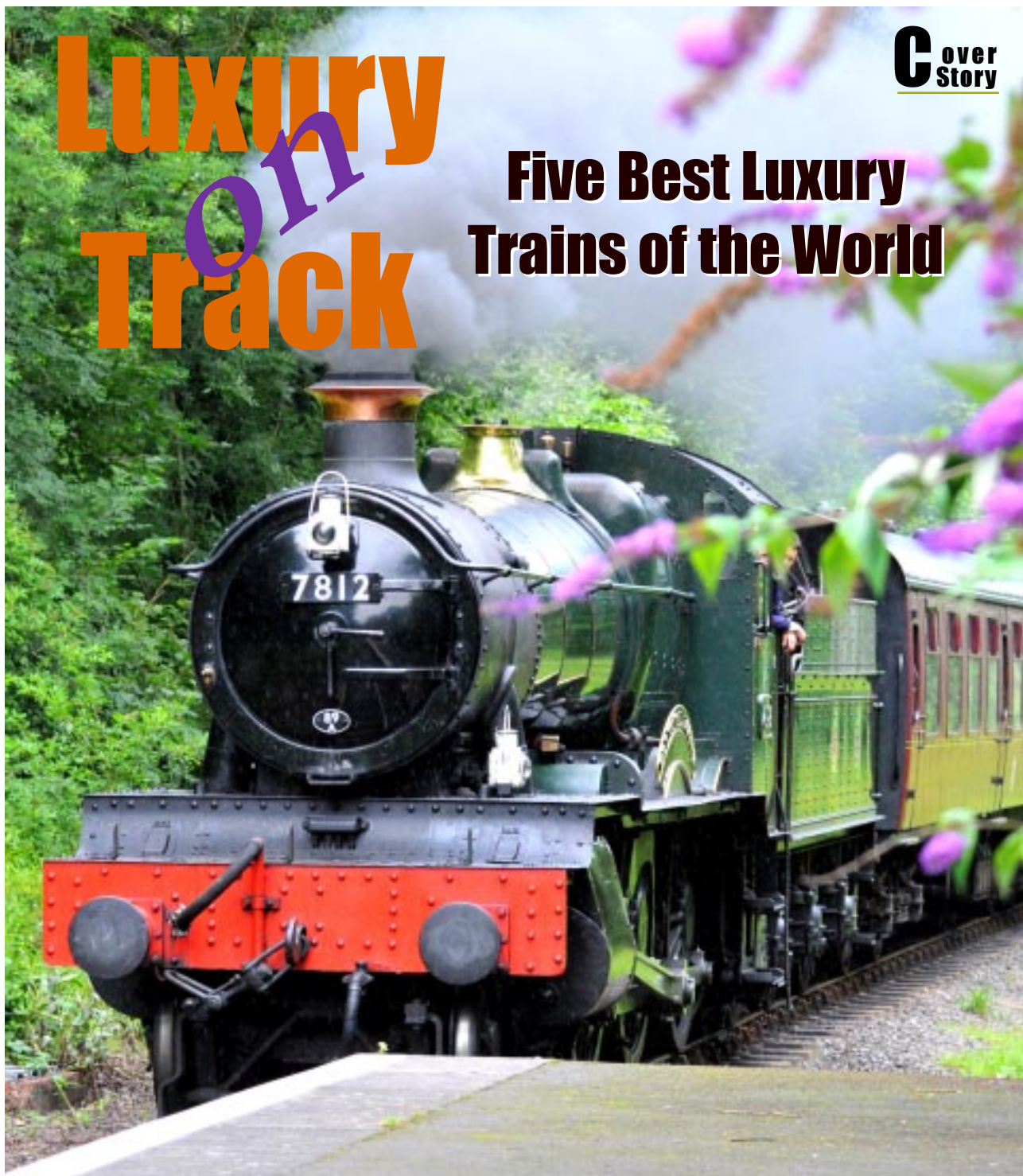
Religions: Christianity (79.8 per cent), Islam (1.5 per cent), Hinduism (1.2 per cent), Judaism (0.2 per cent), others (0.6 per cent), no religion (15 per cent), undetermined (1.4 per cent)

Emergency nos: 10111(Police and Fire), 10177(Medical) and 112 from mobiles

Nature at its best!
Blooming flowers, vast open spaces, amazing beaches, breath-taking mountains, incredible display of Mother Nature - all these make a visit to South Africa a memorable one. Just like us, everyone would have thousands of reasons to visit this country again and again.

Luxury On Track

Five Best Luxury Trains of the World





Travelling by train may not sound as fascinating at first. But wait till you read about these luxurious trains that run through some of the most exotic and picturesque terrains while you sit at the lap of comfort and luxury and almost forget that you are in a train! Travelling by such luxury trains should be in every luxe traveller's bucket list, because, your travel experiences will remain incomplete without one. So prepare for a journey of a lifetime as we present to you the five best luxury trains of the world.

Rovos Rails, Africa

Africa's pride! Royalty finds a new name in the newly furnished suites of the Rovos Rail. As the 72-passenger train sweeps its path through the enriching sceneries of wild Africa, the grandeur dining and heart-warming hospitality in all of its 15 Pullman compartments, 22 deluxe cabins, 4 king-size royal suites await to surprise you with its signature luxury experience. Travelling itself becomes your destination when it leaves a long lasting impression in your mind with its excellent wood panelling finish and ethnic Edwardian interiors. Private lounges furnished with cosy couches and the Victorian baths in the suites add extra stars to this imperial

ecstasy. There's more! Your classy experience now includes the Pyramids of Egypt to make your journey a more enthralling one. The train with archaic interiors, the Rovos Rail has all the high end amenities at its disposal to connect you to the contemporary world.

Journeys offered:

- Rovos Rail: Cape Town to Dar es Salaam
- Cape to Cairo by Luxury Train, Jet and Ship 2014
- Rovos Rail: The African College
- Rovos Rail Namibia



Eastern and Oriental Express, Asia

The Eastern and Oriental Express goes through Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and on into Laos taking you on a journey of 1,262 miles. This train is one of Orient Express's successful ventures. The sister train to Europe's Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, this luxury train offers you excellent on-board services ever possible in a luxury train journey. The train comprises of two gorgeous Presidential Suites, 28 State compartments, 30 double Pullmans, panelled with cherry wood and elm



burr and embellished with decorative parquetry and elaborate inlays. In this train all sleeping beds fold into comfortable seats during daytime. Dining on board is a delightful experience. The train's French chef along with its excellent service has received several prestigious acclamations for blending Western and Eastern signature cuisines. The observation car, at the very end of the train, has been divided into one-third exterior observatory area and the interior part is kept to enjoy cocktails amidst a colonial 'veranda' ambience. The bar car and other accessories will definitely woo your senses.

Journeys offered:

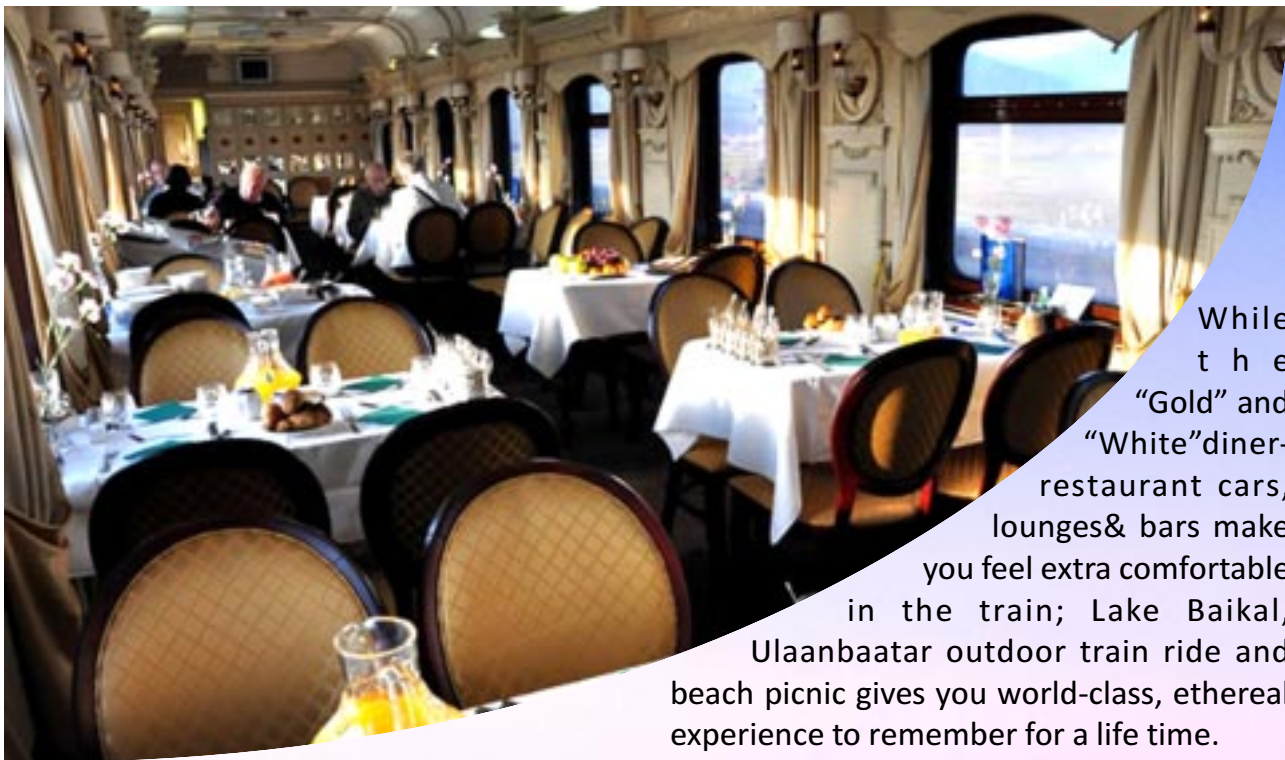
- Bangkok-Singapore (and return)
- Bangkok-Chiang Mai-Bangkok
- Extended Tour: Epic Thailand

- Bangkok – Vientiane – Bangkok Extended Tour: Tales of Laos
- Singapore – Bangkok Extended Tour: Fables of the Hills
- Bangkok – Singapore Extended Tour: Legends of the Peninsula

Golden Eagle Trans-Siberian Express, Europe

The journey from Russia to Vladivostok takes you through eight time zones and over 6,000 miles (9,656 km). The Trans-Siberian express runs on the world's longest railway line connecting two continents- Asia and Europe. The accommodations are classified in different forms





While the “Gold” and “White” diner-restaurant cars, lounges & bars make you feel extra comfortable in the train; Lake Baikal, Ulaanbaatar outdoor train ride and beach picnic gives you world-class, ethereal experience to remember for a life time.

like the newly inaugurated King-sized Imperial Suites, Gold Class compartments and Silver Class coaches. The finely conceptualized Imperial suite is the most lavish and spacious one, where the luxurious amenities also include an all-time butler service and In-cabin dining facilities. The Gold Class does not lag too behind when it comes to grandeur. With five compartments per car, it features everything to give you comfort and pleasure during the journey. The Silver Class car having six compartments each is also exquisitely furnished keeping in mind the Guest's common interest for luxury.

Journeys offered:

- Trans-Siberian Express: Russia by Private Train
- Silk Road by Private Train: Beijing to Moscow
- Trans-Mongolian Express: Naadam Festival
- Trans-Siberian: Winter Wonderland
- Trans-Mongolian Express: Beijing to Moscow
- Baikal Express: Lake Baikal to Moscow
- Caspian Odyssey: Almaty to Yerevan by Luxury Train

Blue Train, Africa

The royal blue colour of the train depicts royal appearance as well as imperial class and quality. Famed as “A window to the soul of Africa”, this elegant and superbly styled locomotive runs once a week between Pretoria and Cape Town. The accommodations are in two sets, one which has a maximum of 74, the other 58. The first set has nine deluxe coaches and the second one has eight. Each deluxe coach having 4 deluxe suites each and both sets have two luxury carriages with three compartments. Apart from gracious and professional service, the other services include, a butler on call in

each coach; facility to call the train manager if/whenever the guests need some assistance or seek information pertaining to the journey and telephone facility at a nominal charge if the guest wants to make a call outside. On board services include delicious snacks and beverages served in the suites on request, limited laundry and valet service, safe deposit boxes, luggage van for additional luggage, continental cuisine and classic lounges and so on. A camera mounted on each train gives guests a driver's-eye-view of the sceneries ahead.

Journeys offered:

- The Blue Train: Pretoria-Cape Town in Luxury
- The Blue Train, Luxury Train and Safaris
- The Blue Train: Luxury Overnight



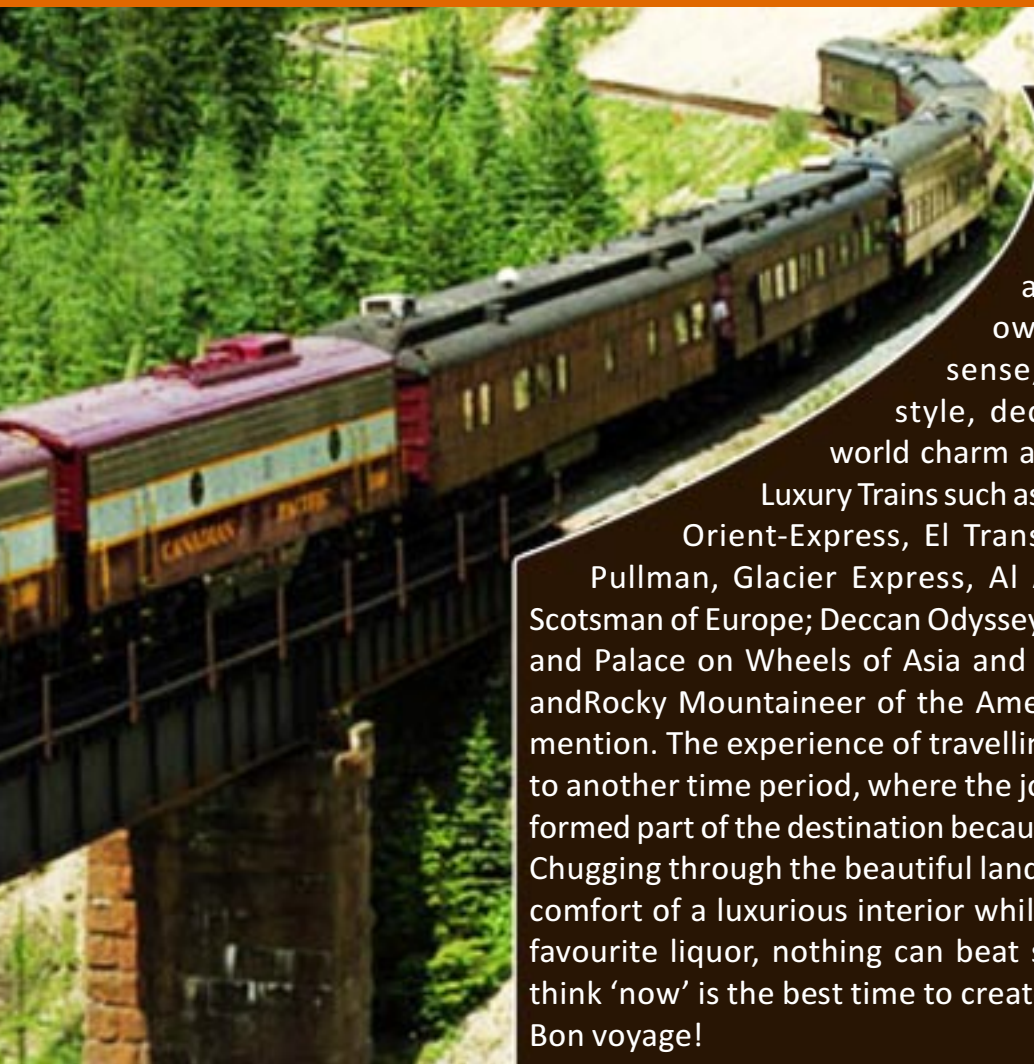
Royal Canadian Pacific, North America

Luxury knows no bounds in this 30-sweater elegant passenger train, where serene beauty of nature can be enjoyed on the observation platforms. The fame of this train is related to many of history's eminent names, such as King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, Sir Winston Churchill, Princess Elizabeth and Duke of Edinburgh, John and Jacqueline Kennedy who enjoyed the ride in one of the cars. There are five cabins with double beds and five with single accommodation. The multi-cuisine meals are freshly prepared in the dining cars, beautifully presented and graciously served to make your experience an unforgettable one. The lounge cars like "Mount Stephen", "Royal Wentworth", "Van Horne" offer complete and intimate journey wrapped up in luxury and comfort.

Journeys offered:

- Royal Canadian Rockies Experience
- Royal Canadian Pacific Express





Other than the above recognized names, few more need special appreciations here owing to their luxury sense, varied and classy style, decorative inlays, old world charm and signature dishes.

Luxury Trains such as the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, El Transcantabrico, British Pullman, Glacier Express, Al Andalus and Royal Scotsman of Europe; Deccan Odyssey, Maharaja's Express and Palace on Wheels of Asia and the Hiram Bingham and Rocky Mountaineer of the Americas are worth the mention. The experience of travelling by train takes you to another time period, where the journey by train itself formed part of the destination because of the experience. Chugging through the beautiful landscapes sitting in the comfort of a luxurious interior while sipping your most favourite liquor, nothing can beat such memories. We think 'now' is the best time to create one such memory. Bon voyage!

Feature

Ashram

Retreat for your mind, body and soul

Take a break from the mundane routine and visit one of these ashrams to pause, think and rediscover yourself.



Sometimes, a stage comes in life when nothing feels right. We become aimless, and the monotony of a routine life chokes our mind. These are the times when you wish you could go someplace else where you could just be at peace with yourself. Fortunately, there are places you can go to in order to get away from it all and take a break, at least for some days, to reflect and listen to your inner voice. Here you may even find unexpected guidance through the process of living itself. Here's presenting you a few of such retreats for the mind body and soul.

Ananda Ashram, Monroe, New York

Situated at the foothills of Catskill Mountain, New York, who could have thought that such a reclusive spiritual destination



by a serene lake could only be an hour journey from the busiest city of the world? Standing on 85 acres of woods, orchards and green fields is the calming retreat of the Ananda Ashram. Guest accommodations include six bedded dormitories and semi-private rooms all amounting to total 45 guests at a time in the Ashram. Following the ideals of its founder Shri Brahmananda Saraswati, residents and guests of the Ashram participate in hatha yoga and meditation sessions three times every day to re-connect with their inner selves. Filled with lively activities all-around the year, Ananda Ashram is also a diverse cultural centre. Residents are encouraged to indulge themselves

in learning meaningful Sanskrit “slokas” about life and Indian classical dance. Performances are held here annually in the yearly Thanksgiving Weekend Retreat arranged by Manhattan’s Jivamukti Yoga Center. Exquisite vegan food is the speciality and the only type of food available here. Bathrooms are shared. The calm and composite getaway also includes its own swimming pool, publication centre, program hall, natural healing centre and a gift shop. The spiritual journey is never allowed to stagnate with regular inclusions of recreational activities like seasonal camping sessions, workshops and cultural performances around every weekend.

Ashram website: www.anandaashram.org





Shekinashram, Glastonbury, Somerset, United Kingdom

The Shekinashram perfectly fits the bill of a peaceful retreat. The ashram is perfectly set up for those who wish to take some time out of the usual routine, to rest, rejuvenate and just to “be” with themselves for a while. Single and double room occupancy, served meal, self-cooked meal and recreation – everything is available to meet your requirements during the stay.

In the disciplines of Bhakti and Karma Yoga (selfless service) residents gain inner peace

and learn the ways of peaceful living. Shekinashram is an amalgamation of East and West where the values of Radha Krishna are taught. Slowdown in the rapid paths of life and find yourself in an enchanting and refreshing atmosphere during the morning “aaratis”. Regular “kirtan” and “satsang sabhas” rejuvenate your senses and create a compassionate nature towards the living around you. Workshops on healing your elements, connecting with the natural spirits restore your faith in the supreme power. Shekinashram can also serve to be a ‘women only’ retreat with its specialised workshops

addressing problems regarding their specific mental and physical states.

You may choose from the many other activities possible during the stay depending on your idea of getting in touch with yourself. The activities range from doing nothing to participating in the weekly programmes only, browsing through the insightful books in the library, morning meditation, ayurvedic therapy, learning vegan food preparation, to strolling in the garden or walking over the sacred Chalice Hill to reach the Tor and the fields beyond.

Ashram website: www.shekinashram.org

Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, Tamilnadu, India

“Now” is the best time to take a break and look within and Sri Aurobindo Ashram can be the right place to do so through “karma yoga”(selfless service). The Ashram is located in the eastern part of Pondicherry (Puducherry) in the southern part of India. Connected via Chennai, the Southernmost metropolitan of the country, spiritual seekers from the country and abroad come here to find themselves in this internationally acclaimed spiritual destination. The ashram residents live and work in the large number of buildings spread throughout the area. The brilliant radiance of life bursting out through the daily

activities and blooming smiles awaken the inner souls every day here. The ashram provides its members and residents the minimum that is required for a decent and



healthy life. Food, clothing, shelter as well as medical care are the responsibilities of the respective departments of the ashram. Guests and residents can browse through the libraries



and facilities for different cultural pursuits. The Ashram is administered by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust.

Based on the foundations of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, it teaches the principle of becoming "the one among the many" that frees one's mind from the constraints of daily struggles and competition for existence. Spiritual sessions, music lessons, and a simple routine through fulfilling basic daily chores are the key to a resident's training in patience and calmness.

The Ashram has also been the centre point of the township of Auroville, an international town with the goal to unite thinking of human minds irrespective of their origin, religion, cast and sect. Supported by UNESCO, Auroville is technologically sound too making it the "town of the future reflecting its past". The Auroville Festival is the celebration of human unity.

Ashram website:

www.sriaurobindoashram.org

General guidelines to follow while in an ashram

- It is best if you get acquainted with vegetarian food because the ashram authorities do not serve/cook/accept non-vegetarian food inside their compounds.
- Fancy and revealing clothes are not

allowed. It is best to use light coloured, comfortable and covered clothes in these environments.

- If you wish to stay in the Ashram overnight, do enquire about the closing time, as the ashram doors are closed at a pre-fixed time and the authorities are not flexible with timings.
- Apart from guide dogs, pets are not generally allowed in the premises.

A few renowned ashrams worldwide:

- ◆ Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers, Woodbourne, New York, USA
- ◆ Osho International Meditation Resort, Oregon, USA
- ◆ Shantimandir (by Swami Muktananda), Buenos Aires, Argentina, S. America
- ◆ Mata Anandamayee's (Amma) Ashram, Cheltenham, Australia
- ◆ Tolstoy Farm, Linden, South Africa

A few renowned ashrams in India:

- ◆ Umeshwar Dham, Sapta Sarovar, Ananda Van, Haridwar
- ◆ Art of Living Ashram (founded by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar), Udipalya Village, Panchagiri Hills (near Bangalore, Karnataka)
- ◆ Isha Foundation Ashram, near the base of

Velliangiri Mountains,
Tamilnadu

- ◆ Osho Ashram, Pune,
Maharashtra
- ◆ Amritapuri Ashram, Kollam,
Kerala

An ashram is an ideal place to refresh your mind and relax through different spiritual activities including meditation, yoga, educational programmes and charitable

activities. The healing process in an ashram is completely different and worth giving it a try. The best part about these ashrams is that everyone's welcomed here with an open mind. So when you are about to give up, check in at one of the many amazing ashrams around you and let the tranquil and divine ambience in the ashram remind you that - it's always darkest before the dawn.

Mexico City

A year-round destination



Mexico City is the capital of Mexico and is one of the must visit destinations in North America. A visit to this city automatically means exotic fun time, delectable food, dance, music, sun and sand and an even exciting night life. Mexico City is also one of the most important political, cultural, educational and financial centres in North America.

Settling on an altitude of more than 2,000 metres, the greater Mexico City metropolitan area is the largest city in North America. The Spanish conquerors reinvent the Latino city which was first discovered by the Aztecs. Hence, the mixture of these two cultures is distinctly visible in the city's every landmark and museums.

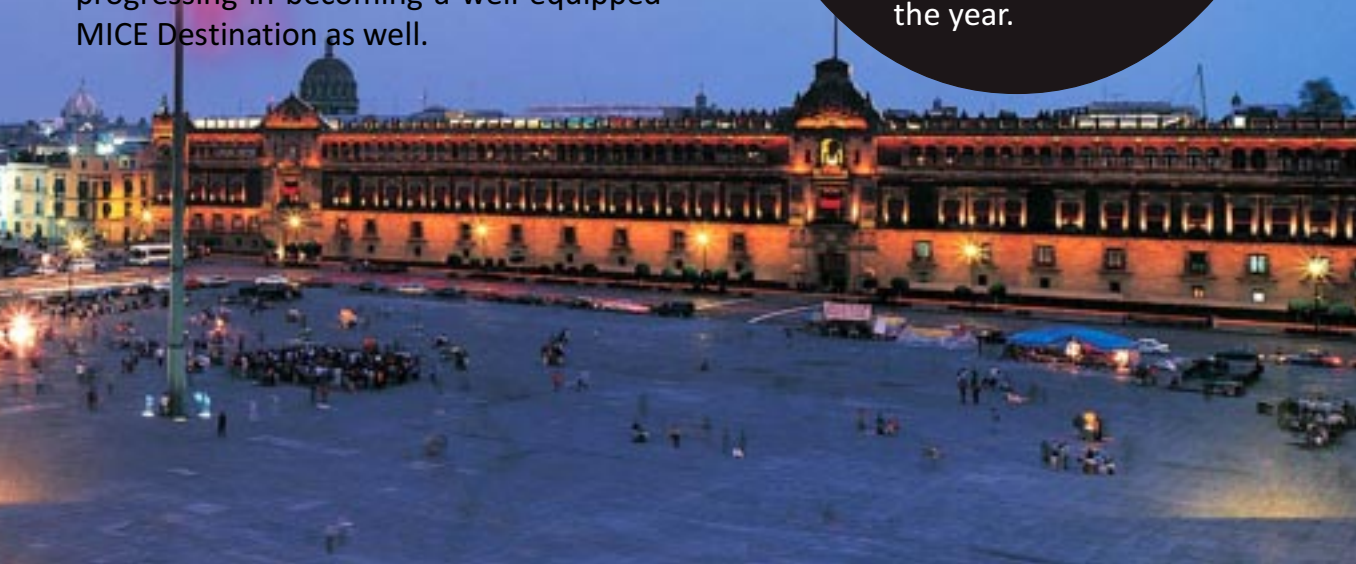
Mexico City is also a global hub for business tourism. Mexico City has been steadily progressing in becoming a well-equipped MICE Destination as well.

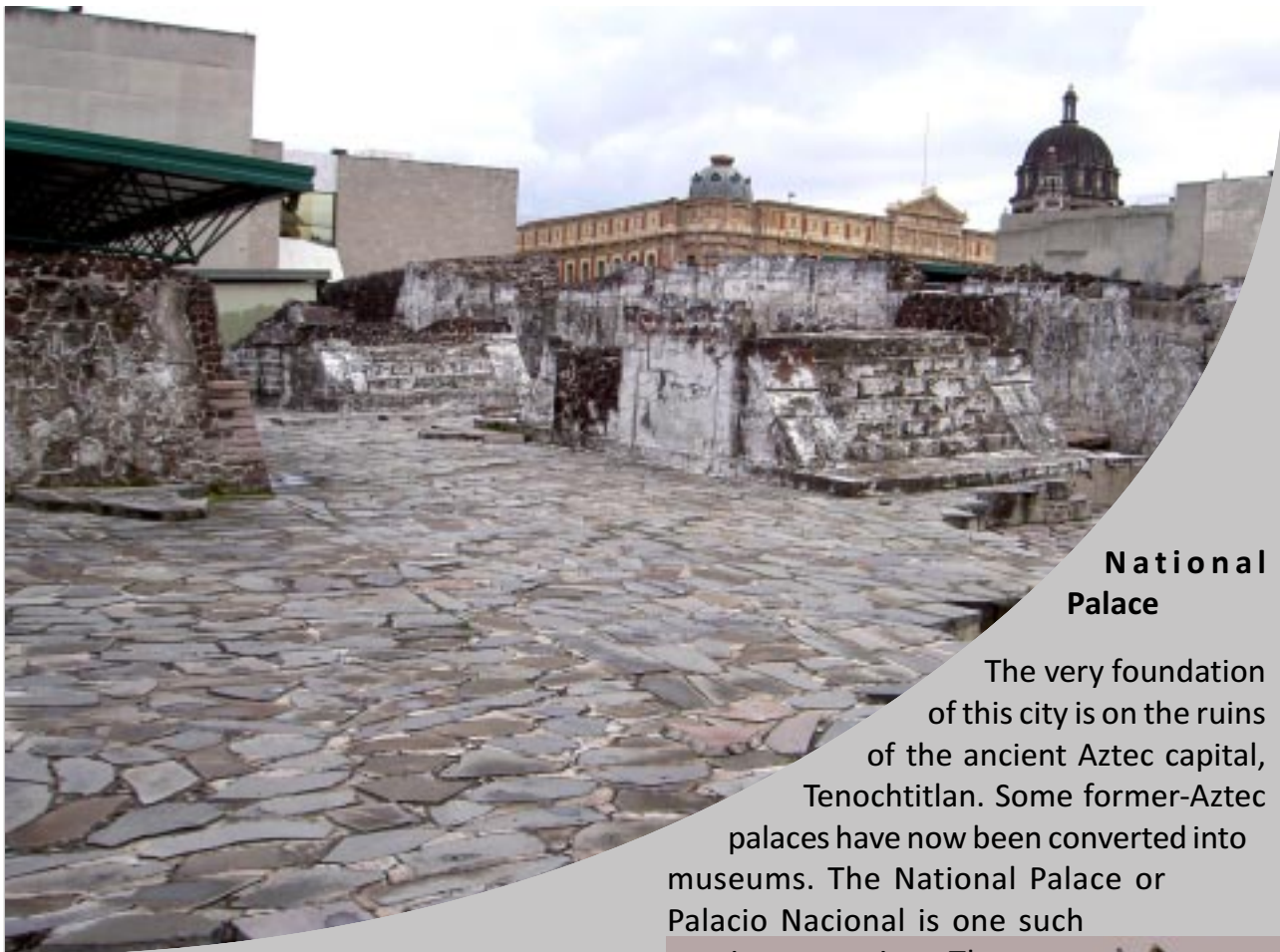
Best time to visit

— Mexico is known to be a year-round destination.

However, the time of the del Centro Historico festival celebration in March draws plenty of tourists from across the world. Christmas and Easter times are also regarded as peak tourist season. You are advised to make your bookings well in advance.

Climate — The climate in Mexico City is moderate. It has pleasant summers and mild winters with an annual average temperature of 64 degree F (18 degree Celsius). Seasonal temperature variations are small. May is the warmest month and January is the coldest. While July is the wettest month, February gives the driest time of the year.





National Palace

The very foundation of this city is on the ruins of the ancient Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan. Some former-Aztec palaces have now been converted into museums. The National Palace or Palacio Nacional is one such tourist attraction. The Palace is located on Mexico City's

Attractions:

Temple Mayor

Located in the Zocalo next to the Catedral Metropolitana, Temple Mayor or Templo Mayor is an archaeological site of the city. The remains of this ancient temple were found in 1978. The ancient Aztec dynasty has a deep rooted historic significance on Mexico City.



main square El Zócal. The colourful murals adorning the stairwell also depict Mexico's history. Every year on September 15, which the Independence Day of the country, the President rings a bell from the central balcony of the National Palace at midnight to cheer for the occasion.

Metropolitan Cathedral

The Temple of the Aztecs has been converted to the Metropolitan Cathedral. Apart from being a tourist destination, it also has religious significance. This is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is the seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Mexico. The cathedral now is dedicated to the Assumption of Mary and it was built around the old church between the years 1573 to 1813.

Angel of Independence

The Angel de la Independencia also known as the el Angel is situated on a roundabout over Paseo de la Reforma. It is in downtown



Mexico City. It is a famous landmark and a popular place for gathering and celebrations.





Zocalo

Zocalo square or the Plaza de la Constitution is located in the Centro Historico district and is mostly used for rallies, protests, ceremonies, celebrations and other events. Hence, it is a crowded place. It has the Federal Treasury and National archives towards its east.

There are other tourist attraction you may consider visiting including the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, Alameda Central, Arena Mexico, La Feria de Chapultepec, Basilica de Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe and more. If parks are the sort of things you dig, then you may also like to visit the Almaeda Park - the oldest park in the city and the Chapultepec Park which covers an area of 2000 acres.

While in Mexico City, you may also indulge in some retail therapy by visiting the Santa Fe and Polanco for some fashion shopping. But, if arts and crafts or souvenirs are what you

are seeking, the Coyoacan and San Angel would be your best bet.

Night Life:

Mexico City's night life has a character of its own. There are enormous selections of venues to spend the night having fun, including clubs, bars, restaurants, cafes and so on. You can choose from the ultramodern lounges in Santa Fe to the centuries-old dance halls in Centro.



Getting There

The easiest way to reach Mexico is by air. Many international airlines fly into Mexico City International Airport, one of the busiest airports in Latin America. There are scheduled daily flights to and from North America, Central America, the Caribbean, South America, Europe and Asia.

Mexico used to have a good train service linking all major cities though it has



deteriorated in the recent years. Bus services are widely available. More than 24,000 passenger buses arrive every week, bringing passengers from throughout the country.

Getting Around

Mexico City has a strong public transport network, consisting of the metro underground/subway railway system, buses, minibuses and taxis. You are advised to hire cabs from hotels. If you are travelling in Mexico City during December and January, please be aware of the high smog levels and venture outside accordingly.

Mexico City is well-known for its cultural warmth and genuine hospitality. Around 10 per cent of its GDP comes from tourism. Mexican people are friendly and they welcome tourists with open arms and a smiling face. Hotels boast of modern, state-of-the-art facilities and competitive rates. Do not forget to try the sumptuous Mexican cuisine - a sheer pleasure to enjoy.



December Festivals

Happenings





Chichibu Yomatsuri Float Festival

Where: Chichibu, Japan

When: December 2 – 3, 2012

The Chichibu Yomatsuri Float Festival is a major float festival in Japan. Six huge floats (in honour of the town's six deities) are lavishly decorated with paintings, flowers and lanterns and engage the strength of many young men who pull them from the

Chichibu shrine through the streets. The floats are also platforms for traditional Kabuki performances by children. Dazzling fireworks, the highlight parade, traditional plays, music and dancing, performances by street artistes and tantalising street food make it an exciting event to remember.

Trivia: The massive floats are more than 10 metres high and weigh 10 tonnes or more!

National Samba Day

Where: Rio de Janeiro

When: December 2, 2012

Samba, the iconic dance and music of Brazil is woven into the very lifestyle and culture of the Brazilians. It is fitting that there should be a whole day devoted to Samba, the hypnotic, rhythmic dance and music of Brazil. On the festival day, its samba all the way in Rio. People dance samba and listen to samba music all over the city- in the streets, bars and theatres. There is even a 'Samba Train', which goes across the city

with people hopping on to it on its journey from Central Station to Oswaldo Cruz (where playing samba first started). The atmosphere on the train is charged with enthusiasm and overflowing of music and rhythm. On this day, samba events are organised not just in Rio but all over the country as Brazilians pay tribute to this beloved national art and to its legendary artists.

Trivia: Samba has been declared as one of the 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage' of the world by UNESCO!





Hanukkah

Where: Israel

When: December 8 – 16, 2012

This Jewish 8-day festival is celebrated in honour of the reclamation of the Holy Temple (Jerusalem) by the Jews. They drove out the Syrian conquerors and as part of a cleansing ritual, lit the lamp at the temple

with oil. The oil was enough just for a day. However the lamp continued to burn for eight days! It is this 2300 year old miracle of faith that is celebrated till today.

It begins on the 25th day of Kislev month in the Jewish calendar. A traditional 9 armed menorah (candelabrum) is lit, beginning with one candle a day to all on the last night.

The festival is a time for family get-togethers and feasting, singing prayer songs and eating traditional fried foods like latkes and sufganiyot.

Trivia: Playing with dreidels (square spinning tops) and giving Hanukkah gelt (coins) are integral to the celebrations!

Whirling Dervishes Festival

Where: Konya, Turkey

When: December 10 – 17, 2012

The festival is dedicated to Mevlana Rumi, the 13th century Sufi saint, who spread the message of universal love and brotherhood. Every year at his tomb, on his death anniversary, dervishes twirl in a soulful trance-like dance, to the accompaniment of music. The dancers are dressed in white cloaks, wide skirts and a conical hat. Watching the rhythmic, circling dancers with their ethereal expressions and movements is a magical and uplifting experience.

Trivia: Non-Muslims can also attend the festival. Women need to cover their heads with scarves and sit separately from the men while watching the ceremony!

Fiesta De Santo Tomas

Where: Chichicastenango, Guatemala

When: December 13 – 21 annually

Chichicastenango explodes in a riot of brilliant masked costumes, stunning fireworks display, dazzling floats and parades, folk dances and a street fair in December. The celebration is in honour of Saint Thomas, the town's patron saint. The culmination of the festivities is on December 21 every year, which is Saint Thomas' Day. The highlight of the celebration is the dance of the Palo Volador or flying pole. In this daredevil stunt, pole dancers tie their ankles or hands to a 100 feet long pole and spin downwards at top speed while the rope unravels.

Trivia: The festival combines elements of Christian and Mayan traditions!





Oaxaca Radish Festival

Where: Oaxaca, Mexico

When: December 23

The Radish Night (Noche de rábanos) held in the Plaza Zocalo from evening till late night, is a unique display of carved radishes. This radish art display ranges from animals to nativity scenes to sculptures of Jesus. The radishes are specially cultivated and the creator of the best exhibit wins around 940 USD. Dried flowers and corn husks are also used in the sculptures. Local delicacies sold at the

festival and fireworks are also part of the attractions.

Essentially a Christmas event, this year will be the 114th one. It is believed that the Spanish introduced radishes to Mexico; they suggested that the local farmers carve the vegetable attractively to induce the wary locals to start buying them. Thus began the practice and in 1897 the Mayor of Oaxaca introduced a cash prize and formalized the event.

Trivia: These radishes can grow up to 50 cm and weigh up to three kilos!



Christmas

Where: Worldwide

When: December 25,
Every year

Perhaps one of the most universally loved festivals Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, who gave his life to save mankind. Christmas conjures up visions



of rich plum cakes, puddings, carol-singing, decorating Christmas trees, Santa Claus, shopping for presents, family bonding and feasting; but it is also something more – a celebration of love, peace and good will and a time for giving.

Some great Christmas traditions around the world are: Christmas

traditions in England, Germany's historic markets and fairs; the magic of Prague's Old Town Christmas; Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, New York; partying in Puerto Rico; Bondi Beach, Australia; fairy-tale Zurich; dazzling Paris and magical Finland - home of Santa.

Trivia: Midnight mass in the Vatican is deeply moving and a reminder of the true spirit of Christmas.

Junkanoo Cultural Festival

Where: Nassau, Bahamas

When: December 26

The origins of the Junkanoo festival go back to the 16th and 17th

centuries when slaves were allowed to leave the plantations for Christmas celebrations with their families. Their celebrations included wearing traditional costumes, folk music and dancing. The tradition of music and dancing continues till today along with a spectacular parade in which the colourful and innovative costumes are a sight to behold. The costumes could be made from anything ranging from paper, wood, leaves or even sea sponges!

Various participant groups dress





up according to themes with competition ranging high for winning the contest and prize money.

Trivia: The winning costumes are preserved in the Junkanoo Museum in Nassau!

Margazhi Music Season or Chennai Music Festival

Where: Chennai, India

When: December – January

What began as an anniversary celebration of the Madras Music Academy in 1927 is a full-blown cultural event now, considered one of the largest of its kind in the world today. Spanning over six weeks, there are more than 1200 vocal, instrumental dance and drama performances, held in various halls all over the city. Organised by various 'sabhas', the backbone of these performances is Carnatic music or South Indian classical music, which is traditionally an offering of



devotion to the gods.

The 'kutcheris' or music concerts attract over 7000 tourists as well as Indian expatriates. They provide a platform for not only famous masters but also budding talent. Various traditional instruments like the Mridangam (drum), Veena (stringed instrument), Nagaswaram (pipe) and Ghatam (mud pot) are all part of the performances.

Trivia: Do not miss the lip-smacking local food and coffee served at canteens during the musical season!

New Year's Eve

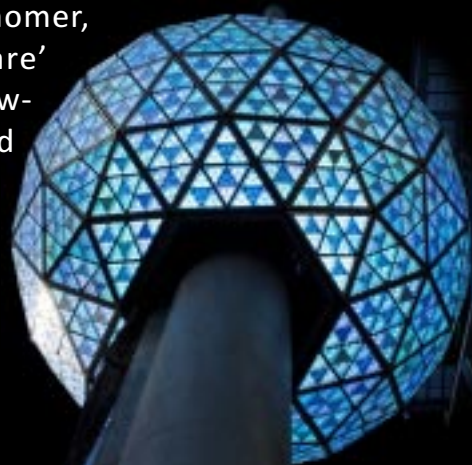
Where: Times Square, New York

When: December 31 every year

A million excited spectators assemble yearly at the Times Square in New York to watch the famous ball drop from the flagpole on top of the Times Square. The New Year is ushered in with joyous revelry, music, an avalanche of confetti, dazzling lights and fireworks.

The first celebrations started in 1904 to mark the opening of the new office of the New York Times in Times Square. The first New Year Ball was dropped in 1907. The Ball is covered with 2,668 dazzling Waterford Crystal triangles, has a diameter of 12 feet, weighs 11,875 pounds and is illuminated by 672 LED modules capable of creating millions of colours and patterns.

Trivia: The name Times Square is something of a misnomer, the 'square' being bow-tie shaped in reality!





Woodford Folk Festival

Where: Woodford, Australia

When: December 27 – January 1, 2013

This annual music festival is one of the largest aborigine folk festivals in Australia and attracts over 130,000 visitors. Beginning as the Maleny Folk Festival it has evolved into a cultural feast featuring over 400 performances and over 2000 participants. The amazing array includes dances, plays, concerts, workshops, film festival and culminates in a grand display of fireworks on New Year's Eve. There is camping site for accommodating around 15,000 visitors. Around 2700 volunteers contribute their efforts to make this event a seamless one. Street artists, markets, great food and a warm and friendly atmosphere make this a

wonderful event to attend.


Trivia: The 500-acre festival site is a cultural parkland with 90,000 rainforest trees and a variety of plants lovingly cultivated to make it a habitat for wildlife and butterflies!

Hogmanay Festival

Where: Edinburgh, Scotland

When: December 31

Ring in the New Year Scottish style, to the accompaniment of 'Auld Lang Syne', at the stroke of midnight! Hogmanay (New Year's Eve celebration) is a very important and joyous affair for the Scots with around a 100,000 people merry-making, kissing, drinking, singing and dancing and taking part in processions. The burning of a Viking ship and swinging fireballs (traditionally made of



paper, sticks, pine cones, paraffin etc. bound together with steel wire), are some of the highlights of the festival. This boisterous street party, one of the largest in the world, traces its roots to pagan sun and fire rituals by the Vikings in celebration of the winter solstice. Even today, the fire is symbolic of ushering in a bright, hopeful and New Year with light.

Trivia: The popular custom of 'first footing' entails visiting a neighbour at midnight with a small traditional gift for good luck (traditionally a tall-dark haired male is said to bring good luck).



World Luxury Tourism