

by Suzanne Wright

## Java, Indonesia

There's not much I want to do except sleep at 4:30 a.m., but still I rose to catch the sunrise from the top of the temple. Not just any temple, but Borobudur, the largest Buddhist monument in the world in Central Java.

One of the great archeological finds of the modern era and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the apex of Borobudur features three round terrace platforms with 73 perforated stupas (bell-shaped chambers) encasing 72 Buddhas. Borobudur was believed to have been built around A.D. 800, and, for more than 800 years, it was covered by vegetation. It was "discovered" in 1814 and used for 160 years before a volcanic eruption caused the temple to be once again abandoned.

My guide, Darto, and I climbed up the steep stairs and waited for the heavens to dawn. Pink fingers spread through the charcoal sky as we circled a *stupa* clockwise seven times for enlightenment. By this time, we were joined by a few school children. Here, Buddhism and Islam easily exist in harmony.

The elephant ride through the local village and back to Amanjiwo was a highlight of my visit. The deeply tanned, rail-thin farmers have a ragged nobility—and some even have cell phones. We lumbered past fields of chilies, tobacco, avocados, tomatoes and chicken farms, across a river where women are in the river washing clothes, while kids are bathing, playing and splashing. The locals shouted "hello," "good morning" and "how are you?" from tidy homes. On the roofs, rice was drying in bamboo baskets.

Amanjiwo's architecture echoes that of majestic Borobudur. The intimate resort has 36 suites and the kind of hushed refinement that invites a replenishing stillness. That afternoon, I took a cooking class with Chef Bambang, who explains that Indonesian cuisine combines salty, sweet, bitter and pungent flavors. Here, we made three dishes: chicken satay, grilled fish wrapped in banana leaves and *nasi goreng*, the national fried rice dish. Even though we were using exactly the same ingredients in the exact same order and the same equipment, the chef's was far better than mine, which was a little scorched.

As a reward for my efforts, I had a *mandi lulur*, two hours of pampering that Javanese princesses enjoy on the eve of their wedding night. After sipping *jamu*, a health-boosting tea of tamarind, palm sugar and turmeric, I was gently exfoliated, followed by a bath filled with floating, fragrant white and red rose petals. Tari gave me a restorative massage with tender strokes that, when combined with the gamelan music, induces an almost trance-like state.

Afterwards, padding along the cool curved corridor to my room, sconces threw shadows as night fell. I lounged under the canopy on my terrace. As a farewell gesture, my room was draped with intoxicating garlands of tuberose, the platform bed scattered with bright pink rose petals. My sleep that night was perfumed. In my



Jordan- the Dead Sea.



Hydropools at the Dead Sea.

dreams, I was again scaling Borobudur. Such is the power and pull of Java—asleep or awake.

For reservations at Amanjiwo, log onto [www.amanresorts.com](http://www.amanresorts.com).

## VENEZUELA

While Atlanta has the Perimeter and 400, Caracas has the Spider, Octopus and Centipede,

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highways that crisscross the sprawling city. Many of its neighborhood homes that predate the oil boom of the 1970s have the red roof tiles of colonial Spanish homes; newer high-rises, offices and malls are nondescript concrete structures (not unlike Atlanta).

Situated at the base of majestic El Avila Mountain, just a 15-minute cab ride from the center of town, Hotel Avila is far removed from the city hum. With lush tropical landscaping, a lively pool and 113 rooms, it's an appealing base camp for a long weekend.

Smack in the center of Caracas is another green paradise, Parque del Este. Also in the heart of town is leafy Plaza Bolívar, with the prominent El Liberador monument to Simon Bolívar, one of Latin America's most important historical figures. The Museo de Arte Colonial's comely gardens nearly upstage the collection. Artifacts are housed in a beautiful colonial mansion known as *Quinta*. When it was constructed in 1797, it was well outside of town, but today it is a peaceful oasis.

Another nature-lover's site, the Caracas Botanical Garden, contains more than 2,000 native and nonindigenous species, more than 100 types of palms and greenhouses for bromeliads, ferns, orchids and shade plants. There are also more than 100,000 trees in the arboretum.

Many of the city's best restaurants are found in the Tony Altamira, La Castellana, Los Palos Grandes and Las Mercedes neighborhoods. Hoja Santa, a Nuevo Latino restaurant, has delicious *ceviche*, and tapas including *arepa*, a round, flat corn meal cake filled with different meats and vegetables. Hearty chicken soup and pot roast, along with Venezuelan food like *cachapas*, corn pancakes topped with shredded cheese, is the draw at Misia Jacinta, while Catalan and Spanish dishes dominate at Racó. And if you want grilled meats, head

to El Tinajero de los Helechos.

After dark, the sounds of salsa and meringue fill the warm night air. Simply cock your ear and follow the beat to one of the many discothèques. Or better yet, ask a local to direct you to his or her favorite. I ended up dancing until early morning with a friendly group, and, the following morning, I took my ablutions in El Avila's waterfall and hiked off the evening's excesses.

To make reservations at Hotel Avila, visit [www.hotelavila.com](http://www.hotelavila.com).

# living it up in style

## SWEDEN

Eight hours after leaving Newark, I landed in Stockholm, Sweden, and boarded the Arlanda Express Train. Nobel Prize winners, business titans and movie stars stay at The Grand Hotel, but sadly, I did not. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the copious smorgasbord in the *Grand Veranda*, which overlooks the Baltic Sea. The buffet included 10 herring dishes, cold cuts including reindeer, five types of gravlax, salads, cheese and meatballs, all washed down with 1874 aquavit, a bracing schnapps flavored with fennel, aniseed, caraway and sherry.

Stockholm is one third water, one third greenbelt and one third city. Fourteen islands are connected by 57 bridges, and there are 75 museums. Impeccably clean, a blend of modern and historic, the city is compact and walkable—a good thing, because cabs are pricey (as is everything else). In fact, socialist Sweden enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the world.

The Absolut Icebar in the Nordic Sea Hotel is a kitschy and popular must-do. For about \$15 (which includes your first drink), you can don an insulated silver cape and gloves and enter the frigid, tiny room that holds 35 people. There, you can drink from a glass made of solid ice while braving the cold—the room is maintained at -5 degrees Celsius (that's 23 degrees Fahrenheit). It's a novelty to sip elderflower juice with cinnamon—for about 10 minutes, anyway.

You can also stroll the cobbled streets of Old Town, Gamal Stan, or wander past the Royal Palace with blue-clad uniformed officers. Visit City Hall where the Nobel Prizes are awarded, or tour Junibacken, where Pippi Longstocking's story comes to life. The top attraction, however, has to be the Vasa Museum, the most visited museum in Scandinavia.

The Vasa was the grandest man-of-war ever built, and the museum is dedicated to its spectacular failure. On August 10, 1628, less than an hour into her maiden voyage, she sank. The Vasa was salvaged in 1961 after 333 years on the sea's floor. Today, it is the biggest and best-preserved ship in world—and utterly awe-inspiring.

A one-hour flight from Stockholm brings you to Luleå, the gateway to Lapland. It's an undeniable kick to cross the Arctic Circle and snap a picture for posterity. But a bigger thrill is seeing a reindeer on the side of the road (who is, alas, camera-shy). Luleå is just north of the 65th parallel; in winter, days are short, while in summer, the days are sunny and long.

The only brackish water archipelago (with more than 700 islands) in the world is in Luleå. With a short cruise to Sandön, you can enjoy a salmon lunch at Klubbviken and relax on sandy beaches. But my favorite stop was the Ájtte Swedish Mountain and Sáami Museum, dedicated to the culture of the indigenous people of Lapland (a region which stretches over Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia). The gorgeous exhibitions include stunning taxidermy of regional animals, handicrafts, weaponry and stunning silver and textiles.

That evening, like with most Swedes, the extraordinary light emboldened me—a night owl—to stay up even later. The air was sweet and clear; it was nearly two a.m. and soundless, save for the occasional footsteps



Outdoor showers in Java.



Overwater Bungalow in Bora Bora.

on the pavement below my hotel window. At last, the final dusky pink rays gave way to a steel blue night sky.

For information on Stockholm, visit [www.stockholm.se](http://www.stockholm.se); for Lapland, [www.swedishlapland.com](http://www.swedishlapland.com); for Sigtuna, [www.sal.sigtuna.se/turism/en](http://www.sal.sigtuna.se/turism/en); for Luleå, <http://www.lulea.se>.

## TAHITI

I never thought I would visit Tahiti alone, but time and a heart-stopping destination wait for no man—literally, no man. This is why I found myself among the young honeymooners being whisked by boat from the Bora Bora Airport to Bora Bora Lagoon Resorts.

Jaws literally drop as we approach the Robinson Crusoe-like thatched bungalows perched over the opalescent waters of the lagoon. Smooth as glass, Bora Bora's famed lagoon is actually three times larger than the land mass; Captain Cook dubbed it the "pearl of the Pacific."



The Red Sea Grill, Jordan.

Having long read of overwater bungalows in glossy travel magazines, it was surreal to actually be bunking in one. I loved the sound of water lapping under the balcony in my bungalow, and I loved slipping on a snorkel and fins and gliding into the warm, shallow water from the platform.

I split my time between the beach and the resort's infinity pool. At the Maru Spa, I had the Honeymoon Bliss treatment, two and a half hours of sumptuous pampering that starts with a soothing cup of vanilla-scented tea, moves to a brown sugar scrub and a monoi oil massage and finishes with a coconut milk and flower bath in a candle-lit tub. Solo or not, this is heaven.

While couples nuzzle at the weekly poolside seafood buffet, I tucked into sushi, lobster stir-fried to order, raw oysters and a Polynesian show (if my bikini is a bit tight, who cares?) During the day, I dined al fresco on *poisson cru*, a local ceviche-like specialty of raw fish in coconut milk. On my final night, in the formal dining room, I indulged in French-influenced fare as



**Bora Bora Lagoon Resort & Spa.**

risotto with foie gras and prawns. When the full moon rose at 9:30 p.m., it illuminated the lagoon and brought Mount Otemanui into dramatic relief. The dark waters shimmered as I fell asleep, and a lullaby of waves echoed in my ears.

The next day, I joined Bora Bora Cruises for four days of “nomadic yachting” on the *Ti'a Moana*. Owned by a chic Tahitian woman, the three-year old luxury vessel was built in Australia, furnished in Sweden and staffed in Monaco with solicitous personnel from all over the world. It is the epitome of sophistication, with elegant artwork, gleaming woods, mother-of-pearl tiles and blue-green glass accents and well-appointed rooms. It plied the gentle waters of the leeward Society Islands, including Bora Bora, Taha'a, Raiatea and Huahine.

Excursions include shark feeding, kayaking, a nature hike and snorkeling. Onboard, there is yoga and tai chi, massages and fishing off the back of the yacht. A wild-haired local tattoo artist joins us one evening, creating elaborate designs on tanned limbs with water-soluble ink. The cuisine is flawless, with multiple courses at lunch and dinner.

But my favorite activities took place on the *motus*, or private islands, when elaborate meals were staged in the lagoon—yes, *in* the lagoon: a sumptuous breakfast with made-to-order omelets, to be precise. At a beach barbecue, a roasted pig was pulled from the earth, cooked under a cover of banana leaves; tables were set up under coconut trees and sunshine glints off the polished silverware. Traditional batik blankets held in place with coconuts were placed on the palm-fringed beach for sunbathing; a staffer mixed and applied a treatment of coconut milk, jasmine flowers and lime to the women's hair, the heat intensifying the restorative effect.

Leaning over the rails on my final night, I saw the sea stretching out in all directions, unbroken save for a far-off isle velvety in green. I toasted Tahiti as the sunset melts in mango and guava tones, trusting I could bring this glorious vision to mind when back home, far, far from French Polynesia.

For more information on Tahiti, visit [www.tahiti-tourisme.com](http://www.tahiti-tourisme.com). For more information on Air Tahiti Nui's Business Class flight from Los Angeles to Papeete, visit [www.](http://www.)



**Botswana Eagle Island Camp, Sunset Dinner.**

[airtahitinui.com](http://airtahitinui.com). For reservations at Bora Bora Lagoon Resort, call 800-860-4095 or visit [www.boraboralagoon.com](http://www.boraboralagoon.com). For information on Bora Bora Cruises, visit [www.boraboracruises.com](http://www.boraboracruises.com).

## botswana

It took three planes (including a six-seat chartered Cessna) to arrive at Eagle Island, the first of three Orient Express luxury lodges I visited. A tractor pulled my duffel bag, me and the other guests three minutes to the camp from the tiny airstrip. First I heard and then I saw the welcome singing and clapping of the employees, who offered us cool drinks. We were seated on the open-air patio for orientation; hippos cavorted in the distant marsh. I immediately started shooting one of the 20 rolls of film I'd brought.

Our daily schedule: up at 5:30 a.m., coffee and fresh fruit served in the open-air dining room; by 6:30 a.m. we piled into Land Rovers for a three-hour game drive to witness the early morning activities of the Big Five (elephant, lion, rhinoceros, leopard, buffalo); by 11:00 a.m. we were back at base for a gourmet spread of made-to-order omelets, pastries, cheeses and meats. We napped or sunned by the pool until tea at 3 p.m., and the evening game drive departed at 4:30 p.m. Back by 7:30 p.m., we had cocktails and then dinner at 8:30 p.m. After dinner we stargazed at the constellations of the Southern hemisphere before retiring to find a bedtime story on our pillow, a different bush fable each night.

One of the world's great ecosystems, the Okavango Delta spreads 6,000 miles over Botswana. The Okavango River originates in Angola, and when it floods, its waters spill back inland, forming a rich area of wetlands and waterways. It was nicknamed the “Switzerland of Africa,” because of its peaceful history and flourishing economy. In addition to tourism, the country's wealth stems from diamond mining and beef exports. The size of Texas, 17 percent of Botswana is dedicated to national parks. Unlike the more gridlocked Kenya, where tourist sighting is Jeep-heavy, we rarely encounter another vehicle.

We set off on a mokoro (wooden dug-out canoe) expedition, navigating through water lily laden

waterways, hearing the cries of an African fish eagle. Our afternoon game drive brought us thrilling close to graceful giraffes and zebras, loping baboons, tsessebe and proud kudu.

A 40-minute plane ride deposited me at Savute Elephant Camp, in the far northeastern corner of the country. It sits in the arid desert of the Kalahari where Chobe National Park is home to huge herds of elephant, giraffe, impalas, kudu and buffalo. Monkeys ambled across the camp paths and the elephants were just beyond the pool, down at the watering hole, their giant ears flapping like a personal cooling system.

On one game drive the landscape changed from gray-green grasses to dramatic acacia trees with eerie black branches and huge nests. Here, we saw wildebeest, ostrich, zebra and antelope. Our guide, Joe, tracked a pride of female lions by their dried paw prints in the dirt. Half an hour later, we found them and snapped picture after picture of these magnificent creatures. At sunset, our Land Rover pulled over for “Sundowners” in the bush, the grapefruit pink sun setting over the landscape like a *Discovery Channel* episode.

My last stop was Khwai River Lodge. On our game drives, the smell of sagebrush filled our nostrils and we saw baboons, serval and hippos under an expansive robin's egg blue sky. Although we stalked leopards, they and the rhinos eluded us on this trip. Evening cooled the heat of the day and we toasted our time under a star-filled sky to the beat of a bush lullaby of frogs croaking, punctuated by the occasional bellow of a distant hippo, which sounds like hollow wooden chimes.

The thrill of seeing so many animals in such a pristine setting was unmatched except by the broad smiles of the beautiful, gentle Botswana people.

For more information, visit [www.botswana-tourism.gov.bw](http://www.botswana-tourism.gov.bw).

**Suzanne Wright is a travel writer living in Atlanta. She is a regular contributor to the Piedmont Review.**