







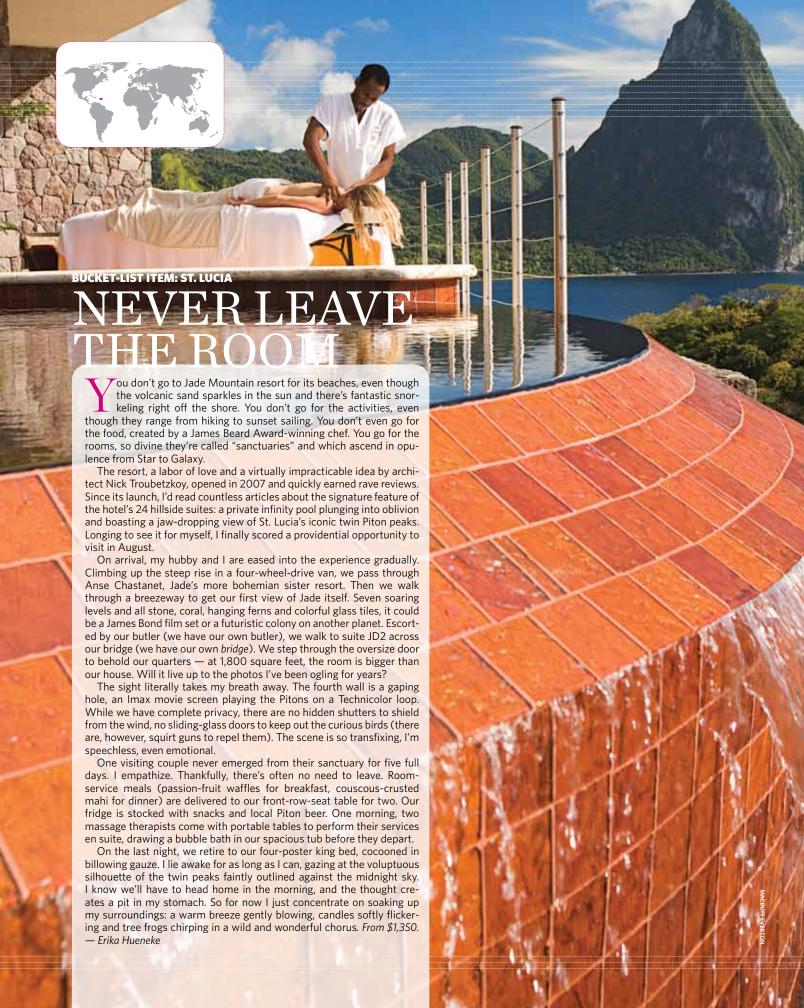
ion! Come quickly!" whispered Richard, the tracker on our morning walk through South Africa's Kruger National Park. My husband and I scuttled behind our guide, Johan Peter ("JP" for short), who was bearing a rifle. A few cautious steps later, we found a lioness resting in the shade, close enough for us to see the silhouette of her dark evelashes. I was more in awe than afraid, secure in the deep experience of our local guides. Mike and I looked at each other and mouthed, "Wow." We'd just seen the last of the Big Five animals — elephants, rhinos, Cape buffaloes, leopards and lions — and our life bucket list received one gigantic check mark.

The morning's adventure was just a small part of and Beyond's Five-Day Ngala Experience. The package immerses travelers in one of the best places in the world to see the Big Five through a luxurious safari crafted to guests' interests.

On sunrise and late-afternoon drives, we'd rumble along in a Land Cruiser down the sandy roads of and Beyond Ngala, a 35,000acre private game reserve within Kruger that's accessible only to and Beyond visitors. JP would identify many of the park's 500plus bird species and 147 mammals, including giraffes, zebras, warthogs and wildebeests. These peaceful excursions would be punctuated with thrilling encounters: a herd of elephants munching on mopane leaves a few feet away or a leopard lounging in an ancient leadwood tree. Once we followed the footprints of white rhinos on foot, then listened to their lips smacking as they grazed.

A flight with Mpumalanga Helicopter Co., included in the and-Beyond package, swooped us over the park to the Blyde River Canyon, the world's third deepest. We passed towering waterfalls, rock formations striated in oranges and reds, and a herd of wild horses.

That night, exhausted from the excitement, we went back to our cottage to discover our butler had set up a private, lantern-lit dinner on our veranda. We dined on springbok, boerewors sausage and steamed vegetables, followed by creme caramel. A live choir serenaded us with harmonic gospel songs in Shangaan, the local language. Afterward, we tucked into our preheated bed, surrounded by the romantic Out of Africa decor of our abode, a watering hole for elephants and buffaloes just outside. We hadn't just seen South Africa's wilderness; we were part of it. From \$500 per person. Jennica Peterson





GET STAR TREATMENT

hen I flip through tabloids and see celebs splashing around in their posh private-pool suites, I can't help but imagine what it would be like to slip into their fashionable Pradas for a few days. So when my husband and I settled on Mexico for our once-in-a-lifetime trip, we decided to try One&Only Palmilla in Cabo San Lucas on for size. The 172-room property is nestled in a coastal garden at the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula, and since I had actually read about it in magazines, I knew it had to be good.

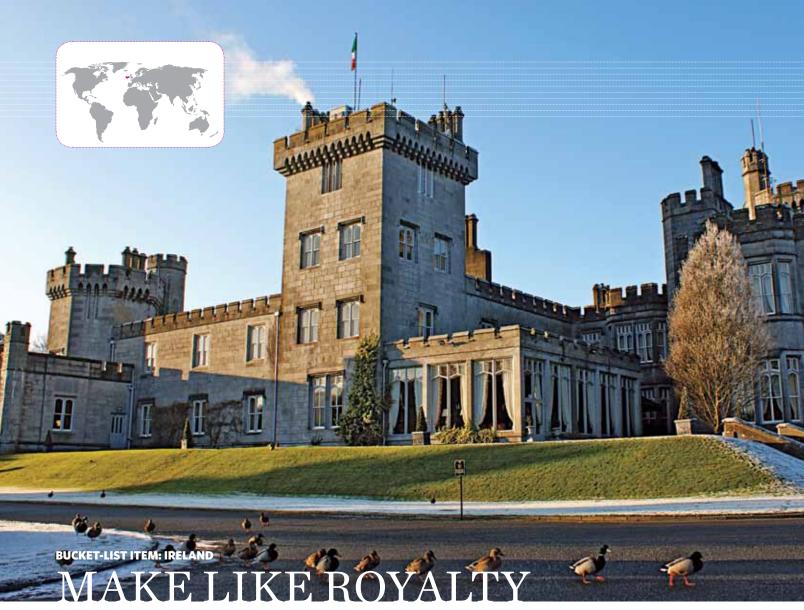
On check-in, we were greeted by our personal butler, who was holding a welcome carafe of tequila. Once we learned how to sip (not shoot!) our drinks, we explored our suite. The room looked more like a romantic movie set than a hotel room. (Maybe that's why Hollywood is so comfortable here?) Adorned with traditional Mexican tapestries and a private balcony overlooking the Sea of Cortez, it also featured a fancy stand-alone tub and a rain shower.

I'd expected an over-the-top room — that's a given in world-class hotels. What I wasn't ready for were the added touches that made us feel truly special. Case in point number one: the customized sewing kit containing pre-threaded needles that matched our wardrobes perfectly, created by our butler (I'm guessing) on the same day we checked in. Or the fact that every night at dusk, a team of employees (whom you'd never see) transformed the property's lush gardens into a candlelit fantasy world with more than 1,000 lanterns hanging from trees and tucked into hedges. Or the complimentary foot massages offered to us as we lazed poolside, drinks in hand.

Though our goal was to relax and unwind, we worked in a little adventure too. We took a snorkeling trip on the *One & Only*, a private yacht available for excursions to Lover's Beach — a great spot for couples who want to pack a lunch and spend the afternoon on a quiet sandy cove. When we weren't yachting, we lounged by the adults-only pool or rambled down to the beach, made even more special by the addition of its own floating beds.

We'd heard that Jennifer Aniston and Bethenny Frankel have been known to relax by that very same pool — and that George Clooney and Brangelina frequent the resort's three restaurants (our favorite was Market, a Jean Georges bistro). So we weren't altogether shocked when Avril Lavigne sauntered up to the swim-up bar with a few of her friends. Yes, it was cool to be rubbing elbows with a star. But even better was that we felt kind of like celebrities too. From \$740. — Lauren Eggert





t's actually happening: my Downton Abbey moment. I'm entering Dromoland Castle in County Clare, and greeting me is a gracious butler in a white apron, ready to cater to my every whim. Inside the centuries-old fortress, a giant painting of a former king — one who actually ruled the castle grounds — gazes at me, and I wonder instead if maybe this is my Game of Thrones moment. (And how maybe I watch entirely too much TV.) Either way, it's hard to believe I've finally made it to the Emerald Isle. Now it's time to pretend to be queen for a day or two.

As he leads me down the red-carpeted corridors, my butler explains how each of the castle's 99 rooms is individually decorated. I pretend to listen, but I'm secretly scanning the halls for hidden passages. I try to act dignified as he drops my bags in the grand Honeymoon Suite, but the minute he's gone, I squeal with glee at my surroundings: a drawing room with a couch, daybed, dining table, flat-screen TV and chandelier. The upstairs bedroom (yes, upstairs) is perched in a turret overlooking the ivy-covered castle below. (Cue the Tangled moment.) In the adjoining bathroom, a blissfully oversize tub — perfect for two — awaits. With that, I skip down my staircase to start exploring.

Built in the 1800s, the castle is just one part of this 410-acre property. I spot a couple cuddling on a horse-drawn carriage, golfers teeing off on the green and people trotting on horseback. I decide to set off the old-fashioned way: on foot. The damp Irish weather casts everything in emerald as I pass romantic little nooks: a lily pond, a grassy lawn ideal for a picnic, a garden gazebo and a stone hut that looks like it was built for a hobbit. (Lord of the Rings moment? Check!) My wandering also leads to a fitness facility surrounded by manicured gardens, a heated pool, a courtyard chess game with lifesize pieces (a la Alice in Wonderland) and a spa. Famished from my adventure, I dress for dinner.

The opulent Earl of Thomond restaurant makes me desperately wish I was wearing an evening gown and elbow-length gloves. The fancy dining room is accented with floor-to-ceiling windows draped in gold-and-green-tasseled curtains, tables with crisp linens, crystal chandeliers and a live harpist. I could certainly get used to five-course dinners and this level of royal treatment, although I would definitely have to learn which fork to use.

Post-dinner, I retire to the octagon-shape Cocktail Bar, a former baron's study with leather chairs, mahogany bookcases and a cozy fireplace. I settle in with a glass of whiskey as a stately woman croons Irish ballads, and to my surprise, other patrons join in, well-versed in all the old folk-song lyrics. In that moment, I realize just how truly enchanting Ireland is — and nothing on the big or small screen could have ever prepared me for the real-life magic I found. From \$569. – Rebecca Kinnear







I'm an avid scuba diver, and for years I'd heard people talk about diving along the walls off of Fiji. One diver described it as an underwater parade of hammerheads, turtles, mantas ... you name it. And most of the sites offer drift dives, in which you float along with the current, letting it take you where it will. It sounded so freeing, so full of life, that it quickly gained a prime spot on my dream list.

After a 45-minute flight from Nadi International Airport, I checked into The Wakaya Club & Spa, located on its own private island just northeast of Viti Levu. I'd come for the diving, but one glance showed me the topside life was equally special. I was taken to my *bure* (bungalow) and served fresh papaya on my own private front porch overlooking the sand. Gazing out at the lagoon, I couldn't wait to get underwater. The dive shop was just a few yards down the beach, so I wouldn't have to go far. Even better, I could leave my gear there all week and not have to worry about hauling it back to my room or even laying it out to dry. For a diver, that's just bliss.

The next morning, it was time for the long-awaited show. The interesting thing about the wall here is that it's only a five-minute

boat ride from the resort, and it starts at around 20 feet, so you don't lose out on your bottom time because of going too deep. Another plus: The shallow depths mean snorkeling counterparts can still join the fun and see much of what you see.

Within 10 minutes I was hovering over the wall, looking down 1,000-plus feet. I love the magic of the dark blue. Even though you can't see anything in the depths, you just feel that there is so much out there. But the wall itself is equally beautiful. As we went down it, we soon spotted colorful nudibranchs inching along coral, a shy frogfish (my first) hiding under a Gorgonian fan, and vibrant schools of fish dancing around in a perfectly choreographed performance. It was then that I turned around to see a 10-foot hammerhead sauntering toward me; we locked eyes for a brief but amazing moment before she disappeared. Experiencing hammerhead aftershock, I looked up to watch a graceful manta fly above me, her silhouette backlit by the sun, creating a memory that I won't soon forget. Twenty minutes in, and I was already feeling free and at peace in my own watery dream world. From \$1,900.

— Tara Bradley



BUCKET-LIST ITEM: ECUADOR

CRUISE THE GALAPAGOS

'm suddenly an unwitting voyeur. Sure, we'd come to the Galapagos to view exotic animals in the wild — I just didn't expect to see such an intimate act so soon and at such close range. We've just been whisked from the M/V Evolution to North Seymour Island, one of the archipelago's 13 main isles. Only two minutes pass on this morning's hike before our guide, Christina, calls attention to the particulars of the blue-footed-booby mating dance.

"See him raising his foot? He's trying to get her attention."

These lovebirds stand only a few feet in front of us, unbothered, even as we step closer.

For centuries, the wildlife here has evolved away from humans — aside from a handful of sailors and whalers, and Mr. Darwin and his lot. So the lizards, giant tortoises and birds don't fear people and have no reason to: The strict rules of the Galapagos National Park protect them from everything but having their boudoir moments posted on Facebook. Here, you rarely need binoculars, but you will wish for more memory cards. The animals stay mugging for every last shutter-crazy *National Geographic* hopeful in the group.

The dance is suspenseful. After the male has strutted his case, we all hold our breath, sizing up the female's interest. She makes him sweat a bit, then flirts back, kicking up her heels in heat.

With sufficient megabytes devoted, we hike on, completing a loop out to a beach where dozens of dinosaurlike marine iguanas solar-charge on the volcanic rocks. Back at the landing point, waiting dinghies collect us and cart us back to the 192-foot-long vessel — our floating hotel for the week, all arranged by International Expeditions. Greeting us is a spread of midmorning snacks: still-warm cookies, finger sandwiches and fresh guanábana juice. Nibbles in hand, our only task is to choose between the bow's sun chaises and Jacuzzi, or the top deck's shaded loungers. I opt for the latter, recounting this morning in my journal entries about Galapagos penguins jetting through the water, sea lions pulling our kayak across a bay via a bowline, 200 cownose rays swarming us on a snorkel trip, and land tortoises craning their necks to pluck fruit from cacti.

When the lunch bell sounds, we gather round the alfresco dining tables on the aft deck. A cold Pilsener, an Ecuadorian beer, is waiting for me. It's the perfect complement to today's locally themed buffet: pumpkin soup, beans and rice, and three kinds of ceviche — which the locals recommend with popcorn on top.

Bellies full, we're reminded how rigorous the schedule is: We're allotted a couple hours of relaxation as the boat motors to the next destination. There, we'll enjoy an afternoon boat tour where our sole task will be helping the guides scout for sea turtles, penguins and sea lions — and, who knows, these animals may be feeling frisky too. Ten-day trip from \$5,098 per person. — Brooke Morton



ere's what they don't tell you about riding elephants: Hold on tight. I learned this the hard way. I was sitting seven feet up in a wooden saddle for two, strapped to the back of an Asian elephant named Cho as he ambled down a dirt path in the rainforest near Krabi. The safety bar was broken, replaced with a piece of loosely tied rope ... which didn't bother me in the slightest as we started our trek. But when Cho started down a steep hill and I began to slide under the rope, I dropped my camera and grabbed for the saddle arms, laughing with exhilaration as I held on for dear life. Yes, the fact that the mahout, clad in flip-flops and shorts, was balancing gracefully on Cho's giant neck made me feel a tad abashed and over-dramatic. But hey, it was my first time on an elephant.

Once I regained my balance, I sat back and soaked up the rest of the ride — up and down a wooded trail, across a stream where Cho paused to drink, and through a section of rainforest. After the hourlong tour, we headed back to Phunaka, the elephant camp comprised of a wooden farmhouse and a separate barn and corral for the elephants. (I spied six pachyderms in all, including a baby not even a year old that showed off his skills at the harmonica.)

The elephants and their mahouts form a strong bond, working together for the course of their lives. I'd heard stories about camps where the beasts aren't treated well, but that obviously wasn't the case here; this pack was a family. The ride was sticky, bumpy, buggy and utterly magical; the chance to see the world from the towering perspective of these gentle giants left me in awe.

Afterward, I headed back to my resort: Phulay Bay, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve. (You may know it as the wedding site in The Hangover 2.) In keeping with my elephant perspective, everything was lavishly oversize, from the deep soaking tubs for two in my room (yes, tubs – my room had two, one in the bathroom and one outside in a stone garden) to the beds, seemingly made for giants (they're actually comprised of two California king mattresses linked together, covered with the softest linens imaginable).

Come sunset, I had another surprise: The resort invites a baby elephant, Koko, to visit once a week and interact with guests. So my day, which started with a long-anticipated elephant ride, ended with hand-feeding a banana to Koko's inquisitive trunk as I rubbed his ears. Simply unforgettable. From \$650. -SM