



Pictured, les Chalets de Philippe, which are located high above the Chamonix Valley in France. Your view?...the fabulous Mont Blanc!

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A Change is as Good as a Rest

Destinations to Exhilarate the Senses

A Winter Escape is something that technically takes us away from an intolerable boss, sullen weather or the agonizing dilemma of day-after-day, hour-after-hour, minute-after-minute, second-after... OK you get the idea...boredom. Dramatic? Yes, but in normal-person words, a change is as good as a rest.

For some it means bravely launching one's self down a mountainous drop.... wind scorching the cheeks, as cut after perfect cut is made on freshly dumped snow. For others, escaping winter means surprising your brand new Ping Rapture driver with an all-expense paid vacation to a lush tropical tee box. Others yet, envision snapping themselves to a zip line and plung-

ing across an impossibly green canopy of rainforest, a football field below. Others yet, yearn for a cultural epiphany, far removed from their own world, where the knowledge of centuries past collides with the present.

My gist is this...there are more outdoors than indoors in the world and we'd best get out of our chairs to absorb it! Opulence, this issue, looks at the skiing meccas of Europe and Vail, Colorado, the magic of golf in South Africa, the Eco-amazement of Costa Rica and the mystery of Vietnam. There is more to life than the inside of an all-inclusive, so... what are you waiting for? - RON TAYLOR



Skiing Mont Blanc, France

Mont Blanc and the Chamonix Valley in France is home to 13 ski resorts and nestled on Europe's highest peak. It is also the self-proclaimed "world capital of skiing". To say that the scenery is stunning would be an understatement of dynamic proportions. They call it "Alpine" skiing for a reason and this jewel in the middle of the Alps lives up to all billing. Point of entry here is Geneva, Switzerland and the recommendation here is to rent a car and drive. Besides wondering at the sights passing by on all sides, it is also a very efficient way to go. I might also recommend that to avoid the crunch of long lineups, that off-season (meaning April-May or September-October) be the preferred time to go. Lift line traffic grid is not for the squeamish in Europe!

The Chamonix Valley itself is massive and for the most part, you can ski all day long from hamlet to hamlet. Skiing first took place here thousands of years ago, so the title of skiing's birthplace is certainly not an exaggeration.

Three of the better known villages are Argentiere, Chamonix and Les Houches. Argentiere is home to a ski area known as Les Grands Montets, and if you are one who likes a little air and some radical drops, spread over a punishing variety of runs, then this is the place for you (and the hundreds of snowboarders who regularly flock here). A terrific place to stay in this area is the Chalets Phillippe, a fairy tale of a masterpiece that has taken 20 years to refine. Between the fine antiques and the HD TV, it offers a myriad of corporeal joys to balance off the funny sunburn around your ski goggles.

Chamonix itself is the hub of the valley and as such, has the most amenities. Shops, bars, restaurants, casinos and a ton of après ski temptations make Chamonix a skier's ecstasy. Not to be forgotten is the actual skiing, where the Mont Blanc ski pass entitles one to over 700 kilometers of pisted skiing. Yup... massive. A hot accommodation here is Chalet Concept One, which has one

of the most contemporary and unique designs in all of Europe!

At the base of Mont Blanc lies the enchanting village of Les Houches. Comprised of a number of hamlets, with oratories, chapels, old bread ovens and farms, "les Houchards" also have their skiing chops with magnificent runs emanating from the exit doors of your gondola. Kandahar is ranked only below Hahnenkamm in Kitzbühel among downhill ski racers. One terrific place to stay here is the Chalet Annapurna. Four hundred meters over three floors, complete with sauna, outdoor hot tub and indoor swimming pool, it is magnificent!

Superb Mont Blanc accommodation of all stripes can be found at

www.skiinluxury.com

and this captivating valley gives all of us jaded Canadian winterians something to fully appreciate. Toss in the style of old world Europe and we have ourselves a feast of the senses.



Golfing in South Africa

The target for this segment is South Africa...and in particular the world's the passion known as golf. Now most of the planet is obsessed with soccer as a sport, but once one passes a certain vintage where pounding across a pitch becomes less than appealing, the game of golf readily assumes a welcoming position. As accommodating a host that golf is to our physical and mental needs, it remains coy as it will be one that is never fully understood.

As is our way here in Canada, when the wind howls and the mercury dips, sunnier climes scream out for the exercising of your putter. South Africa is a multi-faceted winter getaway. Itself a place of contrasts, South Africa's emergence from a very dark place not so long ago, has brought a breath of fresh air to its inhabitants. Combining its own unique physical attributes, including its people, its wildlife and its varied cultural mixes, it has rapidly become a destination point for curious northern hemispherians to explore. Golf

is amazing there, as is the scenery, the wineries and countless other treasures. The Garden Route along the Indian Ocean is itself, worthy of your entire vacation. From the snow white beaches and towering mountains to the indigenous forests and inland lakes, this ride is a favourite among all visitors. Golf is just another great way to inspire.

There are many fantastic courses to choose from and a great one to start with is the Royal Cape Golf Club. Having hosted the SA Open 11 times and with the narrow fairways leading to closing holes only a pro could master, it challenges your mettle. Pearl Valley is a striking piece of real estate with personal touches provided by the incomparable Jack Nicklaus. Surrounded by mountains and vineyards and constantly monitored by the Berg River (not to mention Jack's quirky trait of throwing bunkers in everywhere) and you have a full fledged duel on your hands. Mossel Bay is an undulating seaside course where every tee box presents a

view of the Indian Ocean. Naturally we're in for a bit of wind on this one. Bushman Sands, a Gary Player designed course, is a throwback to Scottish links courses and crisscrosses two rivers. It is also proximal to the Shamwari Game Reserve, an outstanding award winning 20,000 hectare, five eco-system marvel. A night here, complete with game safari completes the picture. Finally we'll also mention the Fancourt Hotel and Golf Estate, the ultimate South African golf destination. In fact it is ranked as number one in the country. With four plush courses delicately placed near the famous South African Garden Route, plus a 5-star hotel complex, there is a luxuriant feel to it and after spending a few days, it is understood to be a real privilege to play here.

South Africa all by itself is a once in a lifetime place to visit and from the standpoint of one who likes to both golf and explore interesting places, the diversity found here truly fulfills those needs. The moment you touch down, you will realize that this certainly isn't an ordinary place!



Vietnam

The image of Vietnam for those growing up in the 60's evokes memories of war and suffering, particularly with the lingering stories of veterans who were there, slopping through soggy jungle... danger around every corner.

Like the emergence of tiny saplings after a forest fire, though, Vietnam, led by its youth, is doggedly reaching skyward. They said it couldn't be done. They didn't know the Vietnamese.

What's not to love? Vietnam is essentially a 3,500 kilometer long tropical beach. To the south, one finds the saucy Saigon, or more correctly, Ho Chi Minh City. A steamy Asian metropolis, teeming with all the trappings and guile of many of its Asian sister cities, it is one big bustle of 5 million people. Cars, bicycles and may-hem scurry in all directions with markets busy as ant hills. Bright lights fill the night. Proximal to the Mekong Delta and hot as all get-out, the south is more street savvy, with strong western influences.

Contrast this with Hanoi, a 4 million

strong city that is the more reserved sibling of this family. As center of government, it has always been one to play with a poker face and never truly lets its slip show. It is also a place that is filled with amazing artistic creativity and acts as the gateway to a magnificent north. One of the great old hotels in Asia is located here, close to the historic "Old Quarter", the Hotel Sofitel Metropole.

Central Vietnam is home to cities, towns and villages that are sure to captivate. Danang is the epicenter of China Beach, while nearby lie two extremely appealing places. To the immediate north is Hue, a vibrant city filled with life and lots of night markets, while to the south is the unbearably charming town of Hoi An. Small businesses, eating establishments and of course, deserted beaches await.

Another popular destination is Nha Trang, which is kind of the Miami Beach of Vietnam. During the Vietnam War generals from both sides reportedly escaped to this spot to grab their R & R... sometimes unknowingly at the same time!

Moving to the north, there is nothing quite like taking a rowboat ride, then 12 km hike to the Buddhist Perfume (Huong) Pagoda. Passing through a complex of mountains, rivers and streams, villages and pagodas this is a postcard moment. Given the country's French influence, don't be surprised to see baguette stands and Catholic churches along the way.

Further to the north we ice the cake with a cruise on Halong Bay. Probably the most photographed part of Vietnam, it features limestone monolithic spires shooting out of the water in all directions. Small boats scurry about catching fish and the landscape is as surreal as it gets!

Vietnam has quickly embraced the idea of welcoming visitors and in my personal opinion, it is a rich and rewarding experience. Fascinating history, combined with an Asian-French cultural slant, makes this escape truly unique and one where the traditional is indeed rear ended by the modern. You'll want to take the number on this one.



Costa Rica

A lot of places purport to be eco-friendly destinations, but few actually step up to the plate and live it. Costa Rica is one such place! Located in Central America, north of Panama and south of Nicaragua, this lush tropical sanctuary has become THE destination of choice for road weary travelers who are looking for something a bit different. Comprising coastal beaches from both the Caribbean as well as the Pacific Ocean, it teems with sun drenched locales to roost in for a few days or maybe forever. Add to this an astounding assortment of parks and protected areas, exotic birds, mammals (and a few things we aren't quite sure of), sprinkle in ominous looking volcanoes, meandering waterways and mountainous roads you couldn't drive a tank over and we have ourselves a real kettle of rich stew to enjoy.

Because of the country's stability, midst rambunctious neighbours, and we have an enchanting place that many North Americans are only now starting to discover.

San Jose is the linchpin of it all and as entry point to the country, also acts as

its cultural center and springboard to all that other "great stuff". Urban, yes, but it is also located in the Central Valley area of Costa Rica, which also happens to be home to a lot of those phenomenal volcanoes. Some are more active than others, meaning watch but don't engage!

From a newbie visitor standpoint, Costa Rica has two main attractions. One is the rich habitat, that has been so carefully preserved, while the other is a beach life that involves both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Talk about the best of both worlds! On the Pacific side, in the North Guanacaste area, one recommended stay is at the Punta Islita, a 45 unit luxury boutique hotel which was the recipient of the 2006 "Investor in People" award, given to businesses who contribute tangible benefits to local communities. It is gorgeous and well worth time spent. The South Pacific and Puntarenas areas are also beach oriented and resorts of all shapes and sizes have sprung up. Of particular interest in the Puntarenas are the scads of inlets and islands, each with its own ecological wonders.

The Caribbean side is a little less devel-

oped, though the beaches are still pristine marvels. The real attraction here is the jungle interior and the access to it. The Tortuguero district is home to a many-fingered waterway system and these rivers are about the only way to get to the middle. Roads are pretty much someone's bad dream, however the boat rides themselves are full of interest, as long as you consider encounters with crocodiles, howler monkeys and a rainbow of birds interesting! A recommended site is the Pachiera Lodge, not fancy, but comfortable and the in-hut massages are unique, particularly with the monkeys chirping away outside. Once inside the belly of the jungle, there aren't many 5-stars!

Between nesting turtles, massive butterflies and intriguing sloths...between crossing 120 metre high foot bridges over raging rivers, losing your screaming voice to a scintillating zip line ride and walking through rain forest thick and green enough to mesmerize any city slicker, Costa Rica is a world unto its own and one may never find a more thrilling escape from the mundane.

...and with that, we say... start packing!