

Fifty things we love about travel right now



Getty Images

People take photographs at sunset at The Callanish Stones in Lewis, Scotland.

Related Links

[Be travel prepared and you'll save money](#) [10 things I have been wrong about in travel](#) [Are you addicted to travel?](#)

From retro caravans to saving the rhinos, here's what we love about travel right now.

SCOTLAND

On September 18, the people of Scotland will vote "yes" or "no" for independence from the United Kingdom. Electorally, it could still go either way, but the intensity of the debate is another indicator of how dynamic the country has become in recent years. Even to outsiders, it certainly feels different from any other part of the world.

Tourists have long known all about the snow-globe prettiness of Edinburgh and the mythic vistas of the Highlands, but much of the intricate coastline remains relatively undiscovered, and the culture is always revealing fresh reserves of energy, from Glasgow's art and music scenes to the eco-lodges now appearing in wet, wild and sun-dappled corners of the countryside.

visitscotland.com. SP

LUXURY HIKES IN AUSTRALIA

There was a time when bushwalking meant leaden backpacks and monotonous bags of trail mix, but that no longer need be the case.

Luxury hikes, on which walkers carry light packs, stay in comfortable lodges or standing camps and dine on good-quality local produce and wine, have become a fixture of the Tasmanian outdoors and are spreading across mainland Australia.

In 2011, the Arkaba Walk began gently introducing hikers to the Flinders Ranges, and this month Spicers commenced its Scenic Rim Trail, a four-day guided walk through Queensland's Scenic Rim, staying in safari-style tents and Spicers Peak Lodge. **AB**

IN-FLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEMS

Love goes out to the airlines blazing trails with bigger, better in-flight entertainment systems. Yes, we mean you, Lufthansa, Etihad, Garuda and Turkish Airlines. We love the fact that passengers won't miss the World Cup final thanks to a live sports broadcast channel.

Take a bow, Emirates. Your 777s are ahead of the game with wider screens and eight live channels of news, business and sport.

Paywall Wi-Fi is being rolled out in 30-odd fleets, but kudos to JetBlue, Norwegian, Air China and Hong Kong Airlines, which offer it free.

Finally, well done to the aviation authorities who realised that watching a movie during landing isn't a threat to safety, and respect to airlines now allowing us to watch until the aircraft touches down. **MA**

VINTAGE CARAVANS

Move over glamping: vintage vacations with retro caravans, from Winnebagos to silver-bullet Airstreams, are taking over.

Happy Days Retro Vacations in Britain has "sympathetically restored caravans" in Dorset, Rent an Airstream in California has Airstreams from the 1940s and 1950s, as well as modern Airstreams, to tow on your next holiday, and Vintage Vacations, on the Isle of Wight, offers cute vintage Vagabond, Spartan and Airstream caravans on a country field, along with bed and breakfast. **ROA**

ONLINE TRAVEL-PLANNING EVOLUTION

Flight-search websites have long been a part of travel planning, but new resources have emerged to cope with complex itineraries. One of the best is Rome2Rio (rome2rio.com), which smoothly plots journeys between any two locales, suggesting trains, planes and boats in multiple configurations.

It's as much a daydreaming aid as a practical planner. A similar site, RouteRank (routerank.com) presents alternative itineraries and acts as a booking portal. Flightfox (flightfox.com) simulates the role of a savvy travel agent by crowdsourcing your planning, paying a finder's fee to

whichever of its selected experts can find the cheapest price for a complicated itinerary. Sorted!
TR

SLEEPING IN PARKS

New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service has really hit its stride. It not only has a fancy new website but historic buildings in its care are being restored and made available as self-contained accommodation.

These include retro beach shacks in Byron Bay, lighthouse keepers' cottages on Montague Island, an 1890s National Estate homestead in Kosciuszko and shearers' quarters at Mungo.

While heritage accommodation in NSW is increasingly marketed towards cashed-up couples without children, these more-the-merrier alternatives can be equally charming, more relaxed and cover a broader range of prices.

Accommodation located within national parks is also perfect for travellers who love nature but not enough to sleep in its arms. nationalparks.nsw.gov.au. **EC**

URUGUAY

Not all Uruguayans are happy that their government's recent landmark legalisation of marijuana drew so much attention from around the world. Generally speaking, they don't like a fuss, and the sale of cannabis to foreigners remains illegal anyway.

More to the point, there are other, better reasons to visit, and the beaches are the biggest - they are some of the best in the world. To the south, Punta del Este draws wealthy party people from throughout Latin America, while the northern resort of Punta del Diablo has a more chic-rustic appeal, and the colony at Cabo Polonio remains almost entirely off the grid - just brightly painted shacks, a lighthouse and the stars. visit-uruguay.com. **SP**

LIKULIKU'S CHEF

Could Ihaka Peri at Likuliku in Fiji be the world's best resort chef? If this talented Kiwi worked in Sydney or Melbourne, you would have to book a table weeks in advance.

At Likuliku, his superb meals are just part of the package. There's a new lunch and dinner menu every day - love the truffle gnocchi with braised chicken, walnuts and oregano butter - but make a point of showing up for breakfast too, where choices include mud crab omelette and twice-baked cheese souffle. likulikulagoon.com. **UJ**

EUROPEAN PEACE WALK

You have trekked the Kokoda Trail, hiked the Inca Trail and walked the Camino de Santiago. Now, it's time to lace up those hiking boots again with the launch of the European Peace Walk, a 550-kilometre trans-national walkway established to commemorate the 100th anniversary of World War I.

The walk will be launched in Vienna on the morning of July 28, taking participants through the central European countries of Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and Italy. A cross-border initiative, the project has the noble aim of celebrating Europe's modern-day culture of peace and establishing its newest pilgrim route. peacewalk.eu. **CM**

SIDETOUR

Yet another happy addition to the share economy revolution, SideTour was founded in San Francisco and has already spread to eight other United States cities.

The platform offers experiences - workshops, demonstrations, talks and tours - that are personally curated and run by talented local people who have a skill, interest or obsession to share. They might be an hour or a day, a one-off or ongoing, but they are always at a fair price.

Tourist attractions aren't every traveller's cup of tea and SideTour offers alternatives, such as a tree-house building workshop in Dallas, body-painting to live jazz in New York, Mediterranean spice blending in Seattle, or whatever is happening when you are there. sidetour.com. **EC**

RAWLA NARLAI

Set against an elephantine hump of granite in the Aravalli Hills of India's Rajasthan state, Rawla Narlai is a gorgeous country retreat that belongs to the Maharaja of Jodhpur and is now a heritage hotel with outstanding charm and character.

Stucco walls in faded citrus and white surround three bougainvillea-wrapped courtyards, one with a big swimming pool. Best of all, the hotel offers a window over the village of Narlai, an exotic corner in one of the most colourful parts of India. Ask for one of the new rooms in the Tower Wing. rawlanarlai.com. **MG**

ACTIVE HOLIDAYS

You don't have to lie around a pool to relax. For a rapidly growing group of travellers, holiday leisure time is better spent on far more active pursuits, and travel companies are keen to cater to them.

From cycling trips through the mountains of south-east Asia to multi-day hikes through the Andes, from expeditions to Antarctica to ice-skating across frozen seas in Sweden, there has never been a better time for active, adventurous travellers to explore the world. The swimming pools can wait. **BG**

LONDON'S ROOFTOP BARS

The British capital may yet lose Scotland, but it is gaining rooftop bars thanks to a new-found fondness for power towers.

The 300-metre-high The Shard in Southwark is home to the new Gong bar. From 52 floors up, drinkers can look down their noses at the rest of Europe.

The bar, operated by the Shangri-La hotel group, has Oriental furnishings, imperial prices (17 quid for a cocktail) and peerless views.

The 12th floor of the Tower of London Hilton has recently opened the Sky Lounge, featuring two spectacular terraces with views across to Tower Bridge, the Thames and, indeed, The Shard. Less lofty but equally lovely is the Vista rooftop bar atop the Trafalgar Hotel.

You are not quite going eye to eye with Lord Nelson, but you are high enough to have an iconic slice of London at your feet. Other places for top-of-the-town tipples include Paramount (the Centre Point Tower in Tottenham Court Road) and Sushisamba, on the top of the Heron Tower in Bishopsgate. **MA**

EATWITH.COM

Ever feel as if there is a party you are missing while travelling? Eatwith ensures you don't miss out again.

Choose your destination and your host and invite yourself to a dinner party of homemade cuisine with locals in their home, from a casual barbecue to a fine feast. **ROA**

SHIPPING CONTAINER CHIC

They are warm, compact and eco-friendly, and now you can check into them while on the road: shipping containers, the new building blocks of unfussy, environmentally savvy hotels. They feature in Japan's Bayside Marina, England's The Travelodge, China's Xiang Xiang Xiang Pray House and Amsterdam's citizenM Centraal.

Perhaps the most exclusive and exciting is Belgium's wittily named Sleeping Around hotel, a village of just four rooms which pops up in a new city location each northern summer (it's about to be erected on Antwerp's Left Bank).

Chinese shipping containers rescued from Belgian dockyards have been transformed into luxury digs complete with box-spring beds, saunas and rain showers. It is novelty wrapped up in a tiny carbon footprint. sleepingaround.eu. **CM**

ITALY'S AGRITURISMO

As more tourists look to identify with the source of their food, the Agriturismo movement is booming in Italy, where a growing number of farmers welcome visitors who want to experience authentic rural life, from sampling meals made from produce grown on site to staying for a few days.

Accommodation can range from basic to luxurious.

At some farms, guests are encouraged to join in the daily farming activities. Leading Melbourne chef Guy Grossi nominated rustic Mondragon at Tarzo, 40 kilometres from Treviso in the Veneto region, as offering the perfect Agriturismo experience. Its weekend restaurant features dishes such as house-made porchetta, gnocchi with goose ragu, and dandelion crepes all for about €20 (NZ\$31) for lunch. agriturismo.it. **WD**

SAVING THE RHINOS

You love spotting them on safari. Now you can help save black rhinos from extinction by supporting the Africa travel experts fighting to save the species.

With more than 1000 rhinos poached in South Africa last year, safari operators are teaming up with conservation bodies and taking the drastic step of translocating them to the relative safety of Botswana, a country with low rhino densities and strict anti-poaching laws.

If successful, Wilderness Safaris' The Wilderness Botswana Rhino Project and &Beyond's Rhinos Without Borders might bring these magnificent beasts back from the brink of extinction. wilderness-safaris.com; andbeyond.com. **CM**

TOM BRADLEY INTERNATIONAL TERMINAL

You used to have to steel yourself for a trip to Los Angeles International Airport. You would prepare for the worst - the long queues, the dodgy old terminals and the lack of food and services. Now, like a shining beacon of travel convenience, there's the new Tom Bradley International Terminal.

Officially opened last year and serviced by the likes of Qantas, Fiji Airways and Emirates, it is everything the rest of LAX is not: a modern, spacious, relaxing terminal with high-end shops, an impressive choice of food and even art installations in the form of huge video screens in the main concourse. The queues may still occasionally be long but they feel so much more pleasant. **BG**

THE BOUTIQUE MINI BAR

From organic fare to local artisan products, emergency dresses and ties, sex toys and more, the mini bar has morphed into a boutique shop in more than just the average fridge. The mini bar at The NoMad Hotel in New York is found inside a steamer trunk and the mini bars at The Dylan in Amsterdam are silver leaf lined with mother-of-pearl handles.

But don't just judge a mini bar by its cover. The Standard at East Village has David Kirsch Vitamin Powder inside its mini bars, dogs have their own mini bar at pet-friendly Fairmont in San Francisco, including rope toys and pet candles, and the W Retreat in the Maldives offers a Heidi Klein bikini among the cold drinks. **ROA**

ONLINE CHECK-IN

Footie fans at this year's World Cup in Brazil will be among the first to try out Accor's new online check-in system, with the service available at nearly all of the group's hotels in most of the major match-hosting cities.

But travellers headed elsewhere won't have long to wait: the technology-driven Accor Welcome Project will see guests at 1000 of the group's hotels around the world and across its brands checking in remotely by the end of this year.

The planned result? Shorter queues, fewer formalities, more time for fun. accorhotels.com. **CM**

SRI LANKAN STYLE

The outbreak of seemingly permanent peace in Sri Lanka following years of savage civil war has encouraged renewed investment in not just in upmarket hotels and resorts but also the restoration of more of the island's plethora of historical colonial-era houses. Among them is the recently opened Hill Rise, an elegantly renovated classic tea planter's bungalow in the Sri Lanka high country.

The luxurious four-bedroom house is just below 2000 metres on a rise above a lake in Nuwara Eliya - Sri Lankan's picturesque "Little England" hill station. Hill Rise is part of the new Edwards Collection, launched by a wealthy Sri Lankan couple who have decorated the hotel with memorabilia from their involvement in horse racing, including a display of trophies, leather saddles and old photos of bygone race meetings at the local turf club down the road. You can, if you wish, visit their stabled thoroughbreds there.

Elsewhere, in the holy capital and second city of Kandy, the couple will soon begin restoration of The Mansion, another nostalgic, colonial era property. classicsafaricompany.com.au. **AD**

SOLO WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Sisters are doing it for themselves, and by themselves. In tandem with the rise of the single-person household, an ever-increasing number of women are choosing to travel solo, whether it's in the name of adventure, culture, self-improvement or idleness.

These days there are not too many tours that do not include a number of single women and they're often the most engaged, the last to bed and having the most fun. The travel industry is catching on. Some upscale cruise operators in particular are dispensing with the single supplement in order to fill cabins in low season, and a small but growing band of specialist travel operators now organise tours exclusively for women who choose to travel on their own, but not to be alone.

All the latter are choreographed by, for and about women and the best bring creativity and imagination to their task, with themes ranging from classical music tours to shopping, food tours, yoga intensives and hardcore adventure. Google "single women travel" and prepare for take-off. **MG**

THE MARCH OF FREE WI-FI

Despite rear-guard inaction by some hotel groups, there are more and more places around the world offering free Wi-Fi to all. Begun by companies like McDonalds, Starbucks and Apple Stores it now extends to many others, whole shopping centres, most airports and entire cities from Perth to Paris.

So you can turn off expensive overseas data roaming and still readily check emails, search a map, call home on Skype or post another selfie on Facebook. Listed among the top priorities for business travellers, some hotels offer free Wi-Fi to guests while many more provide it to members of their loyalty programs. **DMcG**

THE IRISH PUBS OF ULAANBAATAR

It's only natural to want a cold beer when you ride into Ulaanbaatar after a long, dusty tour of the Gobi Desert by jeep or horse or camel. It's a bit of a surprise, however, to find the local bar scene dominated by Irish pubs.

In Mongolia, it seems, the very word "Irish" has become a synonym for high-quality conviviality. True to its cross-cultural name, the famous Grand Khaan Irish Pub tends to host an eclectic mix of foreign and local drinkers, but the quieter and cosier Hennessy's Restbar felt a little more like home to this wandering Dubliner. **SP**

SLOVENIA

Often described as the sleeping beauty of Europe, Slovenia is one of the hottest European destinations in 2014 and its capital of Ljubljana is a beautiful old city that, unlike Budapest and Prague, is not yet over-run by tourists.

Sip crisp Slovenian white wines in one of the many bars and eateries that dot the banks of the River Ljubljanica - a pedestrian-only district frequented by the city's fashionable young things. Ice wine and sparkling wines are also popular. Enjoy traditional Slovenian specialities such as slovenski struklji - dumplings with asparagus, cottage cheese, chives and wild garlic, or sample rabbit and veal dishes at the rustic Spajza restaurant.

The funkier base from which to explore is Vander Urbani Resort in the heart of the old town. There's a rooftop terrace with a pool, a yoga studio and a bar/restaurant serving breakfast, lunch and dinner. slovenia.info. **WD**

TRANSIT STOPOVERS

Break your long-haul flight with a visit to Hong Kong Disneyland, coffee in Singapore's Kampong Glam, a Chinese shopover or a spot of Arabian dune bashing. Transit stopovers don't have to follow the old sluice-and-snooze formula.

The new stopover cities of Guangzhou and Dubai are going gung-ho with relaxed transit visas and budget hotel offers, while the old hands of Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong are offering easy transit visas and tours to show off their towns. Expect cheap hotels and hop-on, hop-off buses in Singapore, free rail cards and kick-boxing shows in Bangkok, or Emirates' and Qantas' Dubai hotel packages. Most offers are limited to travellers flying on the country's national airline. **BJ**

OSLO

Yes, it's cold, yes, it's pricey, but the Norwegian capital is a sleeper hit for its food, architecture and design. Fly in with thrifty Norwegian Air, ogle architect Renzo Piano's new Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art or squeal with your hands over your ears alongside Edvard Munch's The Scream.

If Michelin-starred Maaemo is out of your league, try organic Kolonihagen Grunerlokka for new Nordic tapas: think mini elkburgers and dainty seafood, or go budget on gritty Storgata, aka Kebab Street. Hipsters bunker down at The Thief Hotel, then go old-school to sip coffee and shop Nordic design at Fuglen.

Grab a window seat in the Grand Hotel's cafe to channel Ibsen and world peace (the Nobel Peace Prize laureate snoozes here each year). visitoslo.com. **BJ**

PARIS MACARONS

If you're a macaron, Paris is the world's fashion catwalk, but the traditional pastel-coloured versions from the classy Laduree stores are feeling the bite from flashy upstart Gerard Mulot.

With several shops throughout the city, including the Marais, Mulot has sold his soul to the sugar fairies, such is the lightness and delicacy of his fruity fillings, and quelles couleurs! Ooh-la-lah!

gerard-mulot.com **MG**

DREAMLINER

It can't take all the pain out of flying but Boeing's Dreamliner 787 does live up to the hype. Traveller has done a few legs now, including Qatar Airways (Edinburgh to Doha) in early June.

Virtually all the major airlines are now flying 787s on select routes. Jetstar took delivery of its first 787s in December last year.

People ask, What's so good about it? To start with, state-of-the-art technology sensors that adjust the plane during turbulence, limiting movement and motion sickness.

It is much quieter than other planes and uses 20 per cent less fuel. Larger cabin windows (about 30 per cent bigger than traditional aircraft) dim at the touch of a button and the LED lighting and vaulted ceilings make for a more pleasant, calming interior. Cabins have more oxygen with more moisture in the air, meaning you don't get that shrivelled, dehydrated feeling.

Many sinus sufferers have reported a far better flying experience on 787s, given the cabins are pressurised at an altitude of 6000 feet, compared with 8000 feet for similar aircraft.

Enough reasons? **FC**

CITY BIKES

Those Danes always go one better. More than 600 cities worldwide now offer public bike systems; this year Copenhagen is trialling electric-powered city bikes featuring built-in tablets with GPS and internet.

Meanwhile, intrepid cheapskate travellers are happily lumbering round on Velibs in Paris, Bicings in Barcelona, CityCycles in Brisbane and GZs in Guangzhou. They may not be speedy steeds, but once you've worked out the system they're convenient, cheap city-centre transport.

They're adventures in themselves, making you feel you're caring for your body and the environment, and saving money you can later blow on something unhealthy and indulgent. **RT**

MESH PROTECTION

Want to enhance the theft-proof capability of your check-in baggage, or secure it to a luggage rack when it's beyond your watchful gaze? Pacsafe eXomesh is a lockable, stainless steel wire spiderweb that wraps around the whole bag, available in different sizes from Paddy Pallin, The Luggage Professionals and Travelgear. **MG**

CHEAP ROAMING

Global roaming charges are a traveller's worst nightmare but more third-party operators are taking a chainsaw to the cost. If you're galloping around Europe, LeFrench Mobile (lefrenchmobile.com) charges calls within the EU at €0.19 a minute and also offers cheap text messaging and EU data roaming at just €0.07 per MB.

Want data only? Simply Roam (simplyroam.com) is a prepaid global data sim card that gives you internet access throughout Europe, or in more than 95 countries.

Plans start from €14.99 for 200 MB in Europe to the Globetrotter, €29.99 for 100 MB. **MG**

THE CANTON ROUTE

Guangzhou, in southern China, is the heartland of the Canton Route, a wallet-friendly rival to the traditional Kangaroo Route from Sydney to London via Hong Kong or Singapore. China Southern Airlines also now flies Guangzhou to Moscow, Frankfurt and New York (from August 6).

Aussies are already snapping up free 72-hour transit visas to scoff Cantonese nosh and explore the surrounding Guangdong Province. **BJ**

CANBERRA - CAPITAL OF COOL

It's reputed that some European nations once designated Canberra a hardship posting for its diplomats. But now Australia's bush capital is all bushy-tailed having transformed itself into a capital of cool.

Dull apartment hotels pitched at public servants on parsimonious per diems have been usurped by the likes of QT Canberra, Hotel Hotel and East pitched at the design and food devotees on weekend getaways while the strident New Acton development has redefined the city's architectural ethos.

Even The New York Times has gone a little Canberra crazy, recently recommending to its readers they spend 36 hours there at places such as Lonsdale Street Roasters and Mocan & Green Grout, a suggestion that not long ago would have been dismissed by some, nay many, as 36 hours too long. **AD**

DONGDAEMUN DESIGN PLAZA IN SEOUL

In 2010, Seoul became a UNESCO City of Design. In March 2014, that title was crowned with the opening of the Dongdaemun Design Plaza, on the site of a former baseball stadium. A vast,

curving building designed by Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid, its futuristic exterior resembles a silver spaceship from a design-savvy galaxy far, far away.

A product of the most advanced computer design, it sits in a beautifully landscaped park in the city's traditional fashion hub and is fascinating to walk around. Inside, there's plenty more to see. The interior is split into three zones - the Art Hall, Design Museum and Design Lab.

The first is for big events such as fashion shows; the museum hosts an exhibition of priceless Korean artwork and historical artefacts; and the Design Lab showcases the work of local designers, with their work for sale. The accompanying Design Market is a quality collection of shops and eateries.

All up, the DDM is a top place to experience the magic of great design. seouldesign.or.kr/eng/.
TR

APP ACCESS TO LOCAL BUSES

It's always been easy to figure out how to use public transport in a foreign city - as long as it ran on rails. Train and tram routes were easy to decipher, but local buses remained an impenetrable mystery.

As more and more cities around the world make their transport data available to Google Maps, however, that puzzle has largely been solved. Tap in a query about getting from A to B, and the app will tell you which buses to catch and where to transfer. It opens up a whole new way of getting around in the company of locals. **TR**

50 YEARS OF THE POPPY

Everyone's favourite Finnish design house's iconic poppy print - Unikko - celebrates its half century this year. The fun, light-hearted poppy design is one of the most stylish looks you can boast as you wave your loved ones adieu.

Whether it be a silk scarf, a billowing maxi dress, a cheeky kaftan - or one of Marimekko's many canvas backpacks, toiletries and cosmetic bags or cute clasp purses (perfect for keeping foreign coins separate) - there's no better time to splurge on a Marimekko item. unikko.marimekko.com.
FC

REPURPOSING

Travellers are increasingly keen to eat and sleep in repurposed buildings, but without being buffered from the structure's history. We want to slumber in what were once Slovenian military prison cells at Ljubljana's Hostel Celica, drink at Denver's former mortuary of Linger, munch brunch at school desks in the old New York City primary classroom that's now M. Wells Dinette, stay in a bank vault, cave, brothel, church, castle.

Trends swing back and forth with our changing sensibilities and right now, in response to the mind-numbing monotonies of the generic-homogenous-chain era, travellers crave authenticity. Repurposed buildings feed that need and, if the walls want to tell stories, we're interested. **EC**

BALLARAT, VICTORIA

This Australian city has swapped its dated country town cuisine for an impressive food scene. Some of the best new venues to eat and drink include smooth wine bar Mitchell Harris; cool laneway restaurant The Lane; Jackson's & Co with its stylish dining in a renovated 19th century pub; Rebellion Brewery, which makes its own gluten-free beer; and atmospheric pizzeria The Forge.

In the past year or so, many of Ballarat's attractions have also been renewed or transformed. The shiny new Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka (MADE) stands on the site of the Eureka Stockade rebellion of 1854. Outside the city, the once naff Kryal Castle has been given a thorough makeover, fine-tuning its mock-mediaeval theme with a large dose of fairytale. visitballarat.com.au. **TR**

CHILD-FREE ZONES

Love them as we do, there are some children that can inflict pain and suffering on airline passengers and a couple of discount carriers now offer child-free tranquillity zones.

Scoot (flyscoot.com) has a ScootinSilence cabin, a no-go area for children under 12, located behind business class, with the added bonus of 10 centimetres extra legroom per seat. Aboard Malaysia-based AirAsia X (airasia.com), seats in the Quiet Zone offer the same child-free factor, plus soft, ambient lighting and the promise of a swifter meal service.

Apart from the "hot seats" located at the front of the cabin, which come at a premium since they offer extra legroom, Quiet Zone seats are free of charge. **MG**

DOWNTOWN LA

Travellers used to shun Los Angeles' Downtown, but the city centre has been rediscovered by locals and is re-emerging as one of LA's most vibrant (and walkable!) districts. Use the ever-expanding subway and light rail network to go downtown, emerging at magnificent Union Station.

In nearby El Pueblo, the new America Tropical Interpretive Centre showcases a controversial 1932 mural by Mexican artist David Siqueiros. LA's own Broadway is lined by beautiful theatre and cinema facades, now being restored to their century-old glory.

The Grammy Museum is a wonderful tribute to the power of music, and it sits within the sprawling LA Live complex of entertainment venues. Food is following the upward trend, with new eateries such as Maccheroni Republic, Alma and Bestia joining classics like Water Grill and the ultra-cheap taco stands of Grand Central Market. Finish the day with a beer at the rooftop beer garden of the Standard Hotel. **TR**

HASHTAG HOTELS

Social media-savvy hotels are giving back to those who spread their word. 1888 in Sydney streams #1888hotel Instagrams on flat screens in their lobby and offers a free night for the best photo each month. Guests at Sol Wave House in Majorca get their own Twitter app at check-in

to communicate with staff via different hashtags and can chat with other guests too. Post #fillmyfridge and voila, your mini bar is replenished. **ROA**

POCKET SCANNER

Scanner Mini by Readdle turns your iPhone or iPad into a portable scanner. Shoot an image using the app and presto, it converts to a PDF - ideal for storing your passport photo page, itinerary, tickets and collecting must-do hints to enhance your travels. While the app is free, you'll need to upgrade to the \$6.99 Pro version to send your scans to Dropbox or attach to an email. readdle.com. **MG**

INLE PRINCESS RESORT

Exit the generals, and it's cue Myanmar opening up, travellers flooding in and overseas-owned hotels multiplying. That's it, right? Not quite. A luxury sustainable resort and hospitality project at Myanmar's renowned Inle Lake is so innovative, its remarkable founder has been plucked from obscurity and awarded the coveted Goldman Sachs & Fortune Global Women Leaders Award in the US.

Mi Suu Yin's Inle Princess Resort breaks with business convention and breaks new ground by insisting that development should not come at the cost of local culture; that environmental protection, collective activism, training the unemployed and profit go hand in hand. Yin's new Inle Heritage Vocational Training Centre is adjacent to her resort, built to exacting environmental standards and accommodates students who learn high-end hospitality and tourism skills. Travellers heading to Inle Lake can book a stay at one of six guest bungalows attached to the training centre or stay at the resort itself.

Longer term, Yin is developing a "Thahara" network of boutique places to stay in Myanmar, each designed and built to be sustainable, and each in the care of local owners who offer insight and introduction to travellers keen to experience local life. inleprincessresort.net. **LW**

UPFRONT CRUISING

Pre-paid drinks' packages take the sting out of big bar bills on a cruise. While cruise lines are set to discount fares to fill all those ships heading Down Under in the next 18 months, passengers can often rack up double the fare on alcohol, soft drinks and decent coffees. Royal Caribbean, Celebrity Cruises, Holland America Line and MSC Cruises have daily packages that are reportedly better value than buying an equal number of drinks at normal bar prices.

MSC has the best prices at about \$38 a day; others range from \$46 with different prices for standard and top-shelf drinks. The move follows the lead of luxury cruise lines such as Crystal, Regent Seven Seas, Seabourn, Sea Dream and Silversea, which have included drinks in their fares for several years. **CG**

TREKKING IN NEPAL

In 2015 Nepal celebrates a little-known anniversary, marking 50 years since the first commercial trek in the country.

In the half-century since Colonel James Roberts led a group into the Himalayas, trekking has boomed, declined during the Maoist insurgency and is now booming again. Everest Base Camp remains the big-ticket target, but the country is veined with trails, from remote Kanchenjunga - the world's third-highest mountain - in the east to the legendary lands of Peter Matthiessen's The Snow Leopard in the west. It's even possible now to trek the country's length on the new 1700-kilometre Great Himalaya Trail. **AB**

SKIING IN CHILE

The world-class slopes of Chile might be a blind spot for us but with nine direct flights a week with Qantas from Sydney to Santiago, its tourism body says the Andean slopes are worth a second look.

Flights from June to September are considered low season for both countries, planes are not full and fares average at about US\$2300 (NZ\$2621) a person return including taxes, according to Tourism Chile's Pablo Retamal. Resorts are within striking distance of the capital.

One of the best, Valle Nevado with more than 9000 hectares of skiable terrain, is just 46 kilometres from the city and costs between US\$80-\$90 a day for an adult lift pass. La Parva is 38 kilometres away with tickets from about \$60 a day.

Further afield, the Pucon resort at Villarica, more than 700 kilometres from the capital, skiers can descend the active volcano, complete with smoke coming from the crater. And for the sun-lovers there's no sacrificing summer in the southern hemisphere. chileanski.com/eng. **JR**

SUITCASE STYLE

With black fabric suitcases at saturation point, it's no surprise carousel conversation has been reduced to "Is that ours?" So we say "Huzzah!" for growing numbers of hard-shell polymer case fashioned into new and often outlandish creations.

Big ups for the R2D2 wheelie ("Robot Trolley" from salvadorbachiller.com) the washing machine (with clothes inside - from sooperdesign.com.au) and the woofer speaker (loveluggage.com.au).

And "plaudits with reservation" for the giant stickers of questionable taste from cheeky.com: applied to a corner of your case, they suggest it has been torn to reveal contents that include a kidnapped air hostess, great bundles of dollar bills and bags of cocaine. Ahem. **MA**

CHEAP MICHELIN EATS

Even Michelin-star-restaurant hunters can't resist a deal, and we love the rise of little cheapies creating expert food on a salaryman's budget.

The cheapest is said to be Hong Kong's celebrated Tim Ho Wan, hot property for its pork buns (three for under \$3), otherwise, check out the one-star Arbutus, the bellwether of London's so-called recession restaurants, with the plat de jour and wine for 10 quid, or New York's first gastropub, The Spotted Pig, a one-star constant since it opened a decade ago.

The Michelin Guide's Bib Gourmand listing spots restaurants that are dishing up non-starred all-stars serving two courses and wine for less than \$40, fertile hunting ground for eaters with dieting wallets. **BJ**

FIRST TRACKS APP

Skiers and boarders know that when it comes to powder, all social graces are off. First in gets first tracks.

The geo-tagged First Tracks Powder Alarm from Helly Hansen for smartphones will check the weather all night while you're sleeping. If there's fresh snow, your alarm will go off an hour earlier than you set to put you first in line. **ROA**

Contributors: Max Anderson, Andrew Bain, Elspeth Callender, Fiona Carruthers, Anthony Dennis, Winsor Dobbin, Michael Gebicki, Ben Groundwater, Belinda Jackson, Catherine Marshall, Rachael Oakes-Ash, Stephen Phelan, Tim Richards, Richard Tulloch, Jane Reddy, Lynne Whiley, David McGonigal, Caroline Gladstone, Ute Junker.

- FFX Aus