

# WHERE NOW

We surveyed *Virtuoso* travel advisors around the world to find out what's big for 2015. From safaris and city escapes to honeymoons, family adventures, Europe's best value, and more, here are the spots they recommend now. BY AARON GULLEY

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## Europe for Less

### *The Continent's Next Frontier*

The word is out: Croatia's Dalmatian Coast is as beautiful as the Cinque Terre; Istrian wines rival Roja's; the walled city of Dubrovnik is much more than an offbeat Carcassonne – and it's all less expensive than Western Europe. But here's a secret: The neighboring Balkan states offer great value and variety too.

**CROATIA** "Besides Zagreb, Dubrovnik and the Adriatic coast is one of the country's biggest draws, as the **beaches and historical towns rival anything in the Mediterranean**," says travel advisor Nena Batoz-Kuzmanovic of Toronto, who has lived throughout the region. "Opatija hosts an international jazz festival in July that's not to be missed and has a great seaside promenade stretching more than seven miles."

**BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA** Sarajevo is one of Europe's most underrated cities for travelers. "It's very diverse," Batz-Kuzmanovic says. "You'll find an Orthodox and Catholic church, a mosque, and a synagogue within walking distance of each other. **Baščaršja, the city's old bazaar**, is probably the most visited part, with its cobblestoned streets and small shops featuring traditional craftswork."

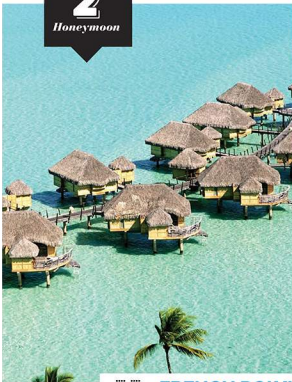
**SERBIA** Countless peoples, including the Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans, have reigned over this mountainous land, leaving a tapestry of cultures and architectural artifacts for travelers to discover. Now Sad, Serbia's second-largest city, isn't as frenetic as the capital, Belgrade, and its sweet little Old Town is fun to explore. "The Petrovaradin Fortress has great views of town," says Toronto-based advisor Borka Grabovac, a Sarajevo native. "Not far away, **Fruska Gora's valleys produce the country's best wines and berries**, a national liqueur similar to vermouth."

➤ **GO** Sample the Balkans on **Travcoa's** ten-day trip, which includes Osijek and Dubrovnik, Croatia, and cherry-picks highlights in Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Departures: May 16, August 22, and September 26; from \$6,995*

**MONTENEGRO** With a coastline that rivals Croatia's, it's only a matter of time before Montenegro catches up with its northern neighbor. Coastal Kotor, set on

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Honeymoon



## FRENCH POLYNESIA OR MALDIVES

*A Bounty of Overwater Bungalows*

For a honeymoon, milestone anniversary, or just because you deserve it: ultimate beach escape, the Maldives and French Polynesia top Virtuoso advisors' lists. Here's how the heavenly heavyweights match up.

### FRENCH POLYNESIA

**BEST FOR** Quicker access than the Maldives – from Los Angeles, it takes less time to reach Tahitian resorts than to reach Paris. Beyond great snorkeling, French Polynesia also has more activity options than the Maldives.

**WHAT TO KNOW** "French Polynesia is generally more built up than the Maldives, so carefully consider your hotel," says travel advisor Ellen Rubinfield of Seattle, Washington. "Do you want an unobstructed view? Do you prefer to face the sunrise or sunset? **Don't be afraid to ask your advisor questions.**"

**STAY** Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa, with 12 beach villas and 45 overwater suites, presides on a lush private islet in the Society Islands, which are renowned for vanilla production. Doubles from

\$875, including breakfast daily and a \$90 spa credit.

### MALDIVES

**BEST FOR** True seclusion – and larger bungalows. "The Maldives offers more opportunity for seclusion and privacy, since many of the hotels are located on their own private islands," Rubinfield explains.

**WHAT TO KNOW** It's more than 24 hours to the Maldives from almost anywhere in the U.S. **For comfort and service, Emirates is the best option,** says Rubinfield, who recommends travelers fly through

Dubai rather than connecting through Japan or Southeast Asia, which may be a touch quicker from the West Coast, but often requires more stops or multiple airlines.

**STAY** Splash down at 45-villa Cheval Blanc Randheli, 40 minutes north of the capital of Malé by seaplane. This French resort on private Noonu Atoll puts a modern architectural spin on traditional thatched bungalows and has a house reef teeming with fish. Doubles from \$2,700, including in-villa breakfast daily and a \$150 resort credit.

Elevated living at Cheval Blanc Randheli and (left) Le Taha'a.



IMAGE COURTESY OF CHEVAL BLANC RANDHELI; PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES HARRIS

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Culture



## MILAN

*Expo 2015*

With 64 editions in 164 years, the World's Fair – now dubbed Expo – is going strong, and yes, it's still exciting and relevant. In fact, the upcoming edition, **Expo Milano 2015** (May 1 through October 31) might prove the tastiest yet. Some 144 countries will present ideas and technology on the theme of "Feeding the Planet. Energy for Life." Expo has a history of debuting delicacies – Belgian waffles in 1958, for instance – but in case discovering the next gelato isn't tempting enough, Cirque du Soleil will launch *Alltaval*, created exclusively for Expo and performed May 6 through August 23 in its open-air theater.

**GO** Explore the Expo on Monograms' three-day Milan



Park Hyatt Milan's ice-cream lollipops.

tour, which includes transportation, entry to the event, and a local host to show you around Expo. **Departures:** Any day May 2 through October 28, from \$783.

**STAY** The 106-room Park Hyatt Milan has created Expo experiences that zip three days all the fair with dining at a trio of Michelin-starred restaurants, including the hotel's own modern-Italian kitchen, *Vini*. Through October 31, doubles from \$3,740, including three nights' accommodations, breakfast and dinner daily, and a \$100 hotel credit.

**URBAN ESCAPE** After exploring the pavilions, there are

more ways to

dodge crowds

than by ducking

into boutiques.

"The shopping is

incredible, but the

city also has many

gorgeous parks,"

says Virtuoso

travel advisor

Melissa Rosen-

blum, who splits

her time between

Atlanta, Georgia,

and Breckenridge,

Colorado. "Indro

Montanelli Public

Gardens is the

perfect place to

escape Milan's

noise and commotion."



Morning at Milan Cathedral, Italy's largest.

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Safari



## SOUTH AFRICA

*Save the Rhinos*

Poachers are rapidly and silently culling South Africa's rhino population. "There were 1,020 rhinos killed in the country last year," notes Virtuoso advisor and former safari guide Ryan Hilton of Sarasota, Florida. "That's all the more reason to go now. **It's terms of conservation, every visitor counts.** You're making it tougher for the poachers just by being present in the bush."

**GO** Wildlife lovers on Micato Safaris' 12-day trip get front-seat viewing of rhinos, as well as 40 or 50 other species, at Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve, which borders Kruger National Park. But it's the elephant-back safaris at private Shambala Game Reserve that will make the biggest impression. **Departures:** Multiple dates January 8 through 2015, from \$12,650.

**PACK THIS** "You'll need a 300 mm lens or longer to capture beautiful wildlife portraits of the big cats in their own environment," Hilton says. "You can often rent good glass at camera shops for a lot less than it would cost to buy it."

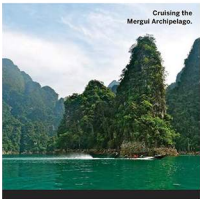
## EBOLA CONCERNS? Some Context

With the Ebola virus dominating news cycles last year, some travelers may be anxious about visiting Africa. But only six countries – all in West Africa – out of 55 on the continent were affected by the 2014 outbreak, and there were zero cases in any of the safari nations. In fact, London, Paris, and Madrid are closer to the outbreak than Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa.

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## The Emerging Destination

Cruising the Mergui Archipelago.



## MYANMAR

Make for Mergui

When Myanmar opened its doors to the outside world a few years ago, travelers poured in. A tourist circuit developed quickly – Yangon with its golden pagoda, Bagan's thousand-year-old temples, and floating-village life on Inle Lake – but, in a nation almost as big as Texas, that leaves room for exploration. “Myanmar is changing fast, and everyone wants to go before it loses its charm,” explains travel advisor Tracy Fiala of Calgary. “But the truth is, **you have to get off the beaten path** a little bit for an authentic experience.”

➤ **GO** Spend three days cruising through one of the country's least known treasures, the Mergui Archipelago, on **Natural Habitat Adventures'** 13-day journey through Myanmar and Thailand. Mergui's **800 mostly uninhabited islands** lie scattered along the western coast and provide an endless array of empty beaches, lush rain forest, and pristine reefs rich with manta rays, sea turtles, and whale sharks. After Mergui, the 62-foot catamaran sails Thai waters to Khao Sok National Park's limestone towers, home to langurs, macaques, and fish eagles. Departures: February 2 and 23 and November 30; from \$8,895.



Picasso returns to Paris after a five-year hiatus.

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## City Escape

## PARIS

The City Lights Up

“Paris is the place to go in 2015,” says Virtuoso advisor Victoire Spoerry of her hometown, which is experiencing a slew of hotel and restaurant rebirths. “This year, both The Ritz and the Hôtel de Crillon will reopen after major renovations. And the new Peninsula Paris is absolutely fabulous. Its top-floor restaurant, **L'Oiseau Blanc**, has some of the best views in town, with tables

overlooking the Eiffel Tower and Montmartre. Take note, though: **There's a three-month waiting list unless you stay at the hotel.**

The other big food news on the tip of locals' tongues is renowned chef Christian Le Sueur's move from Pavillon Ledoyen to the Four Seasons Hotel George V. “People think he may get a third Michelin star in just four months,” Spoerry says, “which would be a first in history.” Of course, you can't eat and sleep away your entire time in the City of Light. Good thing the **Musée Picasso Paris** just reopened after a five-year renovation, and the city's newest landmark, the striking **Fondation Louis Vuitton**, opened in October.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/DAVID J. RAY; ART: PABLO PICASSO; COURTESY OF THE MUSEE D'ART MODERNE, PARIS

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## Supernatural Nature

## THE GALÁPAGOS

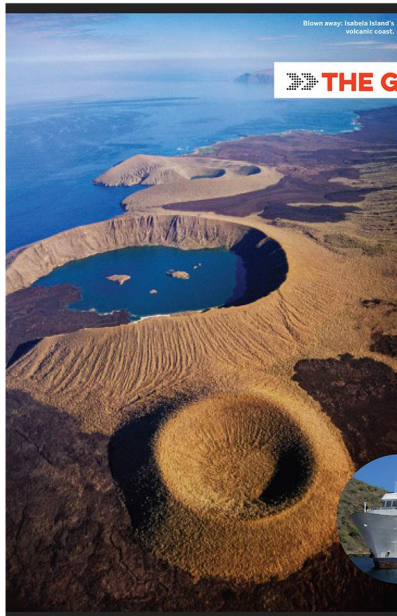
In High Def

With visitor numbers climbing and land-based development afoot, the pressure is on to see Ecuador's Galápagos Islands before they change.

➤ **GO** Tauck's innovative Earth Journeys partnership with the producers of BBC Earth gives guests on the 40-passenger *Isabela II* access to gear and expertise from the nature documentary company for enriched encounters with penguins, iguanas, and other wildlife. Underwater and thermal-imaging cameras, night-vision goggles, and **infrared camera traps** provide new perspectives on animal behaviors, and exclusive films created for the nine-day cruise anchor naturalists' lectures. Departures: Multiple dates January 5 through August 31; from \$5,740.

**MAINLAND RISING** A handful of properties have freshened up mainland Ecuador. “**Casa Gangotena** has been restored to the best property in Quito,” says New York-based advisor Ginny Caragol. “And **Mashpi Lodge**, in the Mashpi Rainforest Biodiversity Reserve, a three-hour drive from Quito, is a magical place and a great add-on to the Galápagos.”

The Isabela II.



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Family Travel



## COSTA RICA

Guanacaste: Hang Ten with the Cool Kids

Even Costa Rica, one of the planet's best-known eco-travel destinations, has its hideaways. In the northwest corner of the country, not far from the Nicaragua border, a small spit of land called the **Papagayo Peninsula** is emerging as the country's high-end family destination.

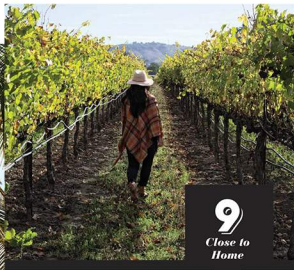
**STAY** Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica at Peninsula Papagayo put the region on the tourism map, with 154 rooms on 45 lush acres, an 18-hole Arnold Palmer-designed golf course, and water

sports ranging from sea kayaking and sailing to snorkeling, diving, and a surf school. **Villas of Distinction** has two properties on the peninsula: Five-bedroom Casa Praia, with an enviable oceanfront setting, was one of the first homes built here, while eight-bedroom Villa Manzu is prime for large family gatherings, with two pools, a spa, and a private theater. Four Seasons doubles from \$450; villas from \$3,500.

**HEAD FOR THE HILLS** "It's more than just Papagayo," says Virtuoso

advisor Marisa Stephens of Dallas. **"The entire state of Guanacaste is relatively untapped."** In the mountains east of the coast, Rincón de la Vieja Volcano National Park has a number of volcano hikes, and several resorts offer thermal baths. The best part? It's all within an hour or two of Liberia's international airport, with direct flights to the U.S.

From top: Surf's up in Guanacaste, Villa Manzu, and Casa Praia's pool.



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Close to Home



## NAPA VALLEY

Raise a Glass – and Your Health

"Northern California is **perfect for travelers who want to go to Tulum or Provence but don't have the time or budget**," explains Virtuoso's Janet McLaughlin, who grew up in the Bay Area and now lives in Cincinnati. Ready for discovery this year: Recently opened tasting rooms from **Tank Garage Winery and The Grade and Romeo Cellars** in Calistoga, and in Napa, **Atlas Social**, which opens on First Street this month with a raw bar, specialties that include a soy-ginger-glazed quail, and, of course, great wines by the glass.

**GO** Sample Napa with **Cox & Kings'** five-day trip through Northern California. Sit down with a master sommelier just hours after departing San Francisco, take a walking tour of an artisan cheese farm, and head to Tomales Bay for a private tasting and tour of Hog Island Oyster Co. The private trip includes exclusive **cellar and barrel tastings** and optional

reservations at two of the area's most acclaimed venues, The Restaurant at Meadowood and The French Laundry. Departures: Any day through December 15; from \$6,725.

## BEYOND THE CORKSCREW

"The region isn't just for wine enthusiasts," McLaughlin says. "There's excellent shopping – for instance, the quirky home goods at Napa's Liken Market – and beautiful hiking and biking trails for stretching your legs." Two recommendations: Robert Louis Stevenson State Park's 11-mile **Palisades Trail hike**, which trends mostly downhill through coniferous forest, grasslands, and chaparral to Calistoga; for cyclists, the course for Santa Rosa's Granfondo charity ride offers 100 miles – and plenty of options to cut it short – on quiet country roads. The full route, which rolls through wheat fields down to the Pacific coast, is as good all year as it is on the day of the event (October 3).

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Adventure Travel



Approaching Mount Cook on New Zealand's South Island, and (above) a quiet walk in Napa.



## NEW ZEALAND

Roll with It

With the exception of perhaps Costa Rica, no country in the world has built its reputation on adventure travel more than New Zealand. "The country is truly a breath of fresh air," says Virtuoso advisor Annette Sordom of Sherman Oaks, California. "It's one of the few places you can still slow down, touch the earth, and experience silence. We all need that more than ever today."

This year, New Zealand is

doubling down and investing millions to complete a **national network of cycle trails** that will include more than 1,500 miles of new bike-specific paths and singletrails. **Butterfield & Roberson** and **Absolute Travel** both customize cycle-specific adventures in New Zealand, varying from a sampler of some of the 23 new rides on the North and South islands to tours of wine and food regions such as Marlborough. **V**