

# PASSPORT *at the* READY

From the souks of Marrakech to the caves of Cappadocia, we share our must-visit destinations for the coming year

Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna



## **CAPPADOCIA, TURKEY**

Next time you hop on a speedy flight to Turkey, why not skip Istanbul and head for this beautiful and mysterious place instead? Located in Nevsehir Province, Cappadocia is one of the most historically significant regions in central Anatolia. Once an important trade route for everyone from the Byzantines to the Persians, Romans and Ottomans, it was a place where people of all walks of life convened—but its many assets meant the region was under frequent threat of attack

from raiders, sending its inhabitants deep into the hills so they could live safely and peacefully in concealment.

Renowned for its other-worldly moonscape, the unusual rock formations found across its rolling valleys were created thanks to a combination of lava from the nearby volcanic mountains, and thousands of years of erosion from wind and rain.

Take the time to explore this subterranean world of underground cities that have been carved into its stunning

rock formations; in fact, there are roughly 3,000 rock churches dotted throughout Cappadocia, not to mention hundreds of underground homes that many villagers still live in today—some of which can even run to more than 50 metres deep. Hikers will love the chance to trek across the Ihlara Valley gorge, while shopaholics will happily peruse the hand-woven carpets and red pottery, both of which have won great acclaim in the area.

If you fancy experiencing living life inside a cave but aren't quite ready to give

## 2 WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND

With the recent release of *The Hobbit*, the prequel to Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movie adaptation series, there's never been a better time to visit "Middle Earth." Make like the film's production team and first head to Wellington, the country's capital, which is a destination in itself with plenty of things to see, do and eat. Known as the country's "Capital of Cool," the city is loved for its great arts, culture and entertainment scene, and with countless art galleries, cafes, restaurants, boutiques, theatres, museums and dance halls, its reputation is well-deserved.

Te Papa Tongarewa Museum, the National Museum of New Zealand, is a must-visit, with interactive displays and six floors encompassing everything from an earthquake simulator to a living native bush exhibit—and it's free to enter! And it's near here where we'd settle in, at the Booklovers B&B—a cute bed and breakfast just a 10 minute walk from the museum that offers free wireless internet, is kid-friendly, and as its name suggests, is a book-lover's paradise. Run by author Jane Tolerton, books are piled throughout the house just begging to be curled up with and delved into while you munch on one of their tasty homemade cookies.

After learning all about the country's history and art scene—and maybe even picking up a Maori souvenir or two—you'll probably have worked up an appetite, and for the full behind-the-scenes experience

of the movie we suggest grabbing a bite at Fidel's Cafe. Reportedly one of the *Lord of the Rings* cast's favourite places to eat while they were in the city, the restaurant is set in the heart of Cuba Street, Wellington's quirky bohemian centre where creativity runs rampant. Any of the restaurants around Cuba Street should be a safe bet, with plenty of gourmandises to choose from, but if you're looking for something a little flashier we'd suggest heading over to Courtenay Place. Known as the city's entertainment and nightlife hub, Courtenay Place is also home to plenty of award-winning restaurants that help earn the city its name as the culinary capital of New Zealand.

**"The country's 'Capital of Cool', this city is loved for its great arts, culture and entertainment"**

It won't be easy leaving the captivating vibe of Wellington, but when you're ready to move on, "Hobbiton" is a six-hour drive away, in Matamata. While it may seem long, the beautiful scenery will help the journey whiz by, and the destination will be worth it. While Matamata is quite a sleepy town, you can tour the actual movie set by booking through Hobbiton Tours, enjoy a meal in the Shires Rest Cafe, and the kids can even feed and pet a lamb on the farm it is set on. →



up your modern comforts just yet, we've got the perfect place for you: The Museum Hotel. Marrying together the perfect blend of luxury and history, the rooms boast exposed rock walls, locally-made rugs, and cave-formed nooks and crannies... as well as LCD TVs, jacuzzis, an award-winning restaurant and an infinity pool. The hotel's 30 rooms are all unique, and throughout the premises you'll find priceless antique tapestries, art objects and other decor hand-picked from the owner's private collections, lending the hotel its name.



### 3 BOLOGNA, ITALY

One of Italy's greatest hidden gems, this charming city in the country's Emilia-Romagna area is a foodie heaven. The largest city in Northern Italy, Bologna is not only home to the famous Bolognese sauce, it's also known for its Parma ham (also known as *prosciutto crudo di Parma*), Mortadella spiced meat, Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, Balsamic vinegar of Modena, tortellini pasta, and lasagna—not to mention delicate Ravenna asparagus, amaretti macaroons, piadina flatbreads and capelletacci (pasta stuffed with chocolate-flavoured chestnuts).

When you're not sampling the endless foods on offer, there's also plenty of culture to be enjoyed. Boasting the oldest university in the world, Bologna is a cosmopolitan, buzzing centre for art, music, and culture. Stop in at Piazza Maggiore and marvel at the Neptune statue before heading over to The Two Towers—a symbol of the city—to climb up their medieval staircases, then check out the artwork in the Pinacoteca Nazionale museum before ambling through one of the city's many arcades. When you've had your fill (or need to give your waistline a break) and you're ready for a big-city buzz, Florence is just a train ride away...

In a city with this much history, we'd recommend booking yourself in to the I Portici Hotel di Bologna. Blending modern design into the surroundings of a 19th-century palazzo, the hotel is just a hop and a skip away from the main Piazza—and the train station.



### 4 IBIZA, SPAIN

Known to many as the party island, there's more to Ibiza than beaches and bars—there's plenty to see on the island for the more refined traveller, too. If you're interested in learning about the history of Ibiza, head to the Museu de Arqueologia. Attached to the Necropolis De Puig D'es Molins, an ancient Carthage burial site that is said to contain more than 4,000 graves, here you'll have the chance to see Ibiza as it was thousands of years ago. Continue soaking in history by heading to Ibiza's old town, Dalt Vila. Built in the 16th century, this UNESCO World Heritage Site is a tranquil step back in time with its cobblestoned streets and well-preserved buildings. Head to the top of the Santa Maria Cathedral for breathtaking views of the city and sea below, then roam around the Portal de ses Taules gateway. After you've finished taking in the sights, the boutiques selling local artwork, jewellery and other crafts are well worth a visit, while Dalt Vila is also home to many gourmet restaurants just perfect for a romantic meal.

Meanwhile, water babies will love the island's cobalt blue seas and white sand beaches. Las Salinas Beach, *Ses Salines*, is bordered by fragrant pine woods, and are named after the salt plains on the south of the island. While we recommend a visit to the plains themselves to view the "white gold" salt and breathe in their crisp, iodine-rich air, if you're in the mood to kick back and soak up some sun, the beach is the place to be. Here, you can sip on a cocktail while listening to excellent tunes, and watching the wealthy and beautiful parade by. Celebrity sightings are common, and the crystal clear waters and gorgeous scenery ensure it lives up to the hype. If you're not into sun-worshipping,

a wonderful world exists below the waves just waiting to be explored, with the rich marine life making it an excellent place for diving and snorkeling among the caves, wrecks and warm waters. Next, the Es Canar Hippy Market being the perfect place to pick up some souvenirs and gifts for friends and family back home.

**“Celebrity sightings are common, and the crystal clear waters ensure it lives up to the hype”**

While some say Ibiza can be intimidating for those with children thanks to its reputation as the adult playground of the Balearic Islands, it can actually be quite kid-friendly, with a few hotels offering plenty to keep little ones occupied. Les Terrasses, one of these rare gems, is a stunning French boutique hotel that blends together the elegance and boho chic of the island, and it boasts plenty of ways to keep you and your entire family entertained. With two pools, a tennis court and a newly-opened spa tree house, you'll never be short of something to do. The owner, Francois, is incredibly friendly, greeting guests like old friends as you dine in the courtyard. The hotel has gained a reputation around the island as *the* place to dine on Tuesday nights for both tourists and residents alike thanks to their famous Cous-Cous theme nights serving up various grills and the most delicious homemade chutney we've ever tried. Each suite comes with a private balcony, and family rooms are available. If you're looking for the perfect spot to unwind, this is undoubtedly the place to be.

## 5 SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

With 42 restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area & Wine Country awarded Michelin stars for 2013, this relaxed Californian hotspot is *the* go-to destination for foodies, sophisticates and wine-lovers on the US West Coast. Known as the financial and cultural centre of northern California, the city's unique personality means it is home to as many dreamers and artists as it is tech whizzes and fashionistas. As well as taking a walk or riding a bike across the iconic Golden Gate Bridge, the city has various must-visit sights and areas: Head up Coit Tower for a fantastic view, wander over to Fisherman's Wharf for a juicy lobster roll, take the kids to the Walt Disney Family Museum, take your other half to the opera, pop over to Twin Peaks for an unbeatable view, or get stuck into one of the city's many museums and galleries. Alcatraz Island and its famous prison is just a short ferry ride away, while the wine counties of Sonoma and Napa Valley are just another quick drive out of town, and well worth a visit.

When it's time to feed your appetite and not just your curiosity, San Francisco's

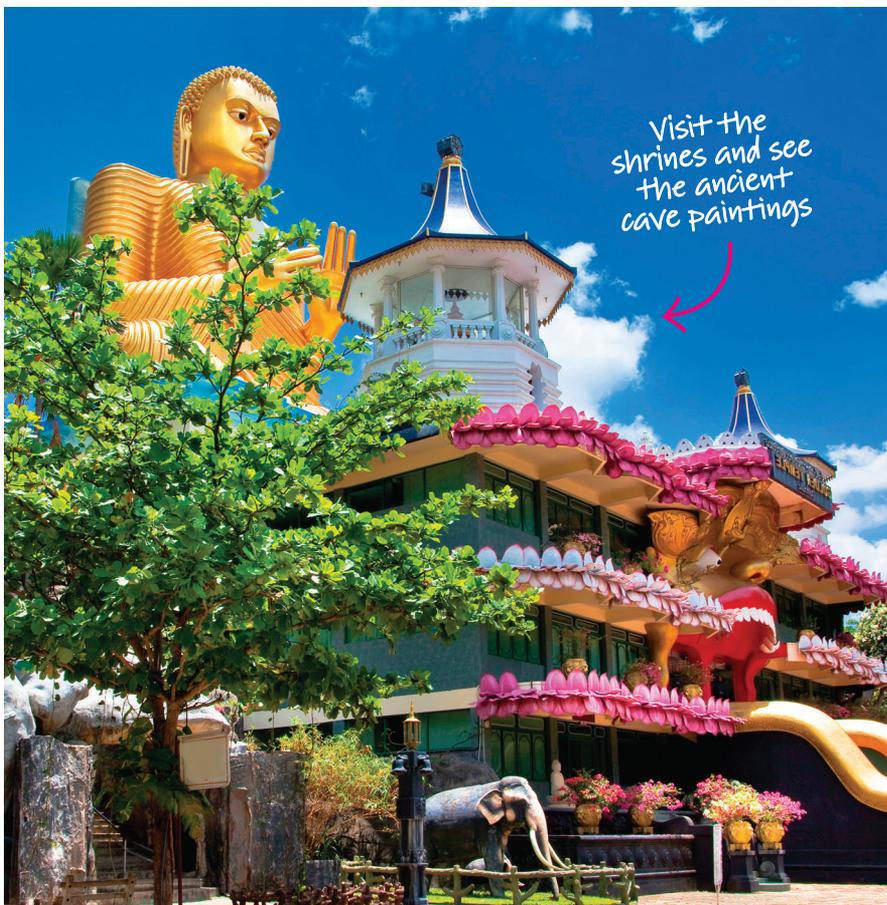


### “Take the kids to the Walt Disney Family Museum, or visit the opera for date night”

many award-winning restaurants are endlessly tempting, but our two personal favourites have a more casual vibe: Known for its long lines that stretch down the block, Burma Superstar is a moreish haven with refreshingly different dishes that are entirely worth the wait, while The House restaurant's fresh Asian American fare is

so flavourful you'll find yourself wanting to order seconds even if you're full.

In keeping with the city's quirky theme, our favourite hotel to stay in when in the city by the Bay is the Hotel Palomar. Part of the Kimpton Group, the hotel gives guests the chance to “adopt” a goldfish with a celebrity name for the duration of their stay (our favourite is Dolly Parton). The rooms are spacious, light and airy, and the beds are seriously comfortable, and the hotel's laid-back, warm and friendly atmosphere ensures that guests are made to feel so comfortable they're always ready to book a return stay on their next visit.



## 6 DAMBULLA, SRI LANKA

It's not every day that you get to stay in a hotel that's built into a cliffside or look over a lake from a spa steam room, but at the Heritance Kandarama you get to do exactly that. Located in the heart of Sri Lanka, the hotel is set in a peaceful nook of the Matale region on the outskirts of Dambulla. The hotel was designed by renowned Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa, to coincide harmoniously with its natural surroundings—and it truly does. Just on the short walk to Kandarama Lake, you can see anything from monitor lizards slithering into the bushes, to tiny frogs atop the leaves and colourful butterflies.

Across the lake, the ancient fortress of Sigirya Rock is just one of Sri Lanka's eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites, dating back to prehistoric times. The Dambulla Cave Temple, another World Heritage Site, is just a 10-minute drive away and is a fascinating complex of five unique shrine rooms tucked into caves towering an impressive 160 metres over its surrounds.

With Sri Lanka's main airport in Colombo just a 4-hour flight from the UAE, it's the perfect excuse to visit before the rest of the world heads over to discover this gem in the Indian Ocean. →

## 7 REYKJAVIK, ICELAND

Once a land of Vikings, Iceland is still a land of mystery to many.

Thanks to its reputation as one of the most expensive countries in the world, for years its lovely, desolate landscapes and lagoons were nothing but a pipe dream to many who couldn't afford to visit. But the weakened krona, following the economic crash of 2008, has enticed many to take advantage of the opportunity to visit the country at more affordable rates. Seize the opportunity to visit now so you'll still have the chance to enjoy it before prices return to their boom time rates.

The largest city in the country (and its capital), Reykjavik, is Iceland's cultural heart and despite the country's name's cold connotations, the centre of its old town is actually a riot of warm, vibrant colours. Here, you can shop, eat, drink and experience Icelandic culture at its best, sampling hearty meat stews and freshly-caught seafood, or if you're brave enough you can even try its more unique delicacies such as *hákarl* (fermented shark), *slátur* (blood pudding and liver sausage) and *þorramatur* (a variety of traditional, whey-pickled meats and fish products).

A visit to Iceland wouldn't be complete without a trip to the Blue Lagoon, and this natural geothermal spa isn't just good for your skin, it's also absolutely breathtaking. The Northern Lights are another of Iceland's captivating natural wonders, and as the aurora borealis reaches the peak of its cycle this year in a "Solar Maximum,"



## “The Blue Lagoon’s natural geothermal spa isn’t just good for you, it’s stunning”

there's never been a better time to catch this spectacular display.

As for where to stay, design buffs will delight in the 101 Hotel. Offering

everything from standard rooms to apartment suites, the accommodation is spacious (and comes with free WiFi), and is resplendent in its clean, minimalist décor. Meanwhile, the restaurant's clear glass roof ensures a truly unique view that appeals to the trendiest crowd in town. The hotel also encompasses its own gallery displaying cutting-edge contemporary art, giving you a sight to see without even having to leave the premises.



## 8 KYOTO, JAPAN

As Japan slowly begins to recover from the devastating earthquake that rocked its Eastern coast in 2011, tourism has begun to pick up again and we'd heartily recommend a visit to Kyoto.

With ancient temples and shrines, cute boutiques, tempting restaurants and tranquil gardens—not to mention real-life geishas—Kyoto was once Japan's imperial capital. Upon arrival you might find it surprisingly urban, but you only have to set foot into the heart of the old town to feel as though you've stepped back in time, with incredible historical sites to see.

One of our favourites is the Fushimi-Inari Taisha Shrine. This shrine—which was the setting for the iconic closing scene of the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*—is filled with thousands of stunning vermilion gates that represent dreams and hopes. Meanwhile, the Kiyomizu-Dera temple is a

must-see for the stunning views alone, while the underground Tainai-Meguri temple next door is truly one of a kind.

Find all sorts of unique Japanese foods at the Nishiki Food Market (a smorgasbord of the weird and wonderful), or if you're craving something a little more familiar, head to Ozawa tempura restaurant where you'll find almost anything wrapped in its delicious, light and fluffy tempura batter.

When you're rested and headed back to your hotel, be sure to try an onsen. These traditional Japanese steam baths are good for the body, mind and soul, and at Ryokan Motonago—our hotel of choice—there's an in-house onsen you can book for private use. Ryokan Motonago combines tradition with the height of luxury, and the floor-set Japanese-style beds are exceedingly comfortable. We suggest trying their Japanese in-room breakfast at least once. Love it or hate it, you won't forget it!

Photography: Shutterstock, Getty Images.

## 9 MARRAKECH, MOROCCO

A bastion of the Morocco of yore, Marrakech is known to many as “The Pink City” thanks to the dusty ochre hue of its walls. While many of the streets and buildings in the Medina—the “old town”—may seem rather run-down at a first glance, it’s precisely this old-world charm that gives them their appeal. Small winding paths mean much of it is closed to cars, leaving people to travel on foot, or by donkey or motorcycle. And while there are some modern tourist traps to be found here and there, the famed Marrakesh souks are still a shopper’s paradise, selling everything from silk slippers, colourful spices and delicate teacups to lanterns, handmade leather satchels and silver and beaded jewellery. It’s easy to be seduced by the atmosphere and forget to haggle, but haggle you must, since most store-keepers are willing to part with their wares at half of the original asking price.

As with any winding paths rife with distractions, it’s easy to get lost in the Medina but don’t panic—it’s all part of the Marrakech experience and all paths seem to inevitably lead to Jemaa el Fna square. By day, this square is filled with snake charmers, juice stalls, and horse-drawn carriages, but at night it turns into an open-air fiesta, its food stalls serving up everything from tagine, pastilla and cous-cous to honeyed sweets and snail soup.

When you’re ready to head out of the Medina, Marrakech has no shortage of sights to see. Fashion-lovers will delight in visiting the exotic Majorelle Gardens—once owned by Yves Saint Laurent—while history buffs should have the El Badi

Palace ruins, Bahia Palace and Saadian Tombs firmly on their list. Meanwhile, the ultimate destination for the luxury lover is the legendary Mamounia Hotel.

After the bustle of the city, having a tranquil place to relax is essential and there’s no place better to rest your weary head than Riad Farnatchi. This family-

### “The famed souks of Marrakech are a shopper’s paradise”

run hotel in the heart of the Medina simply oozes charm. Despite being just steps away from the souk, Riad Farnatchi is tucked away into a quiet alleyway, and behind its unassuming wooden doors you’ll find an elegant swimming pool, two beautiful courtyards, and a rooftop with a spectacular view. Their resident masseur Ahmad is one of the best in town, and his magic hands can work away months of tension within minutes; combine that with a scrub and steam in the in-house hammam for a truly blissful afternoon. Come dinnertime, a meal in the lavish dining room is an experience you won’t soon forget: their tagines are cooked to perfection and are, without a doubt, the best we’ve ever had. When you retreat to your room with a full belly, the warm and friendly staff can light a fire for you to curl up next to as you snuggle into the djellaba robe every guest is given as a gift to keep. Each suite is unique, and comes with a fireplace, terrace, and modern amenities like Molton Brown toiletries and Bose sound systems. It’s a true home away from home—and one you’ll never want to leave.



## 10 SALZBURG, AUSTRIA

When Julie Andrews sang about the hills being alive with *The Sound of Music*, she wasn’t kidding—the unspoiled lands surrounding Salzburg are truly full of life, and fans of the movie will delight in the dedicated movie tour of the city. Even if you’re weren’t keen on the film, the tour takes you to many of the city’s best sights such as The Mirabell Gardens and the grand Leopoldskron and Hellbrunn Palaces. Meanwhile, Nonnberg Abbey—where Maria was a novice nun—is also the oldest convent in the German-speaking part of Europe.

If you’d like to take the city in at a slower pace, we recommend wandering around the Getreidegasse, a winding road that’s one of the oldest in Salzburg. Browse its many shops selling everything from local artisan’s products to high-end designer labels and foodie items, then when you’re finished, head to the Mozart Cafe for a bite—the city is the hometown of famed classical musician Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, after all.

At night, rest up in the Hotel Sacher Salzburg. The hotel brand responsible for creating the country’s most celebrated dessert, the Sacher Torte—no easy feat given the incredible quality of food found throughout Austria—this luxurious and recently-renovated hotel boasts sumptuous rooms, traditional decor and classical touches that have even attracted royals and dignitaries as guests. ■

