

INTRODUCTION

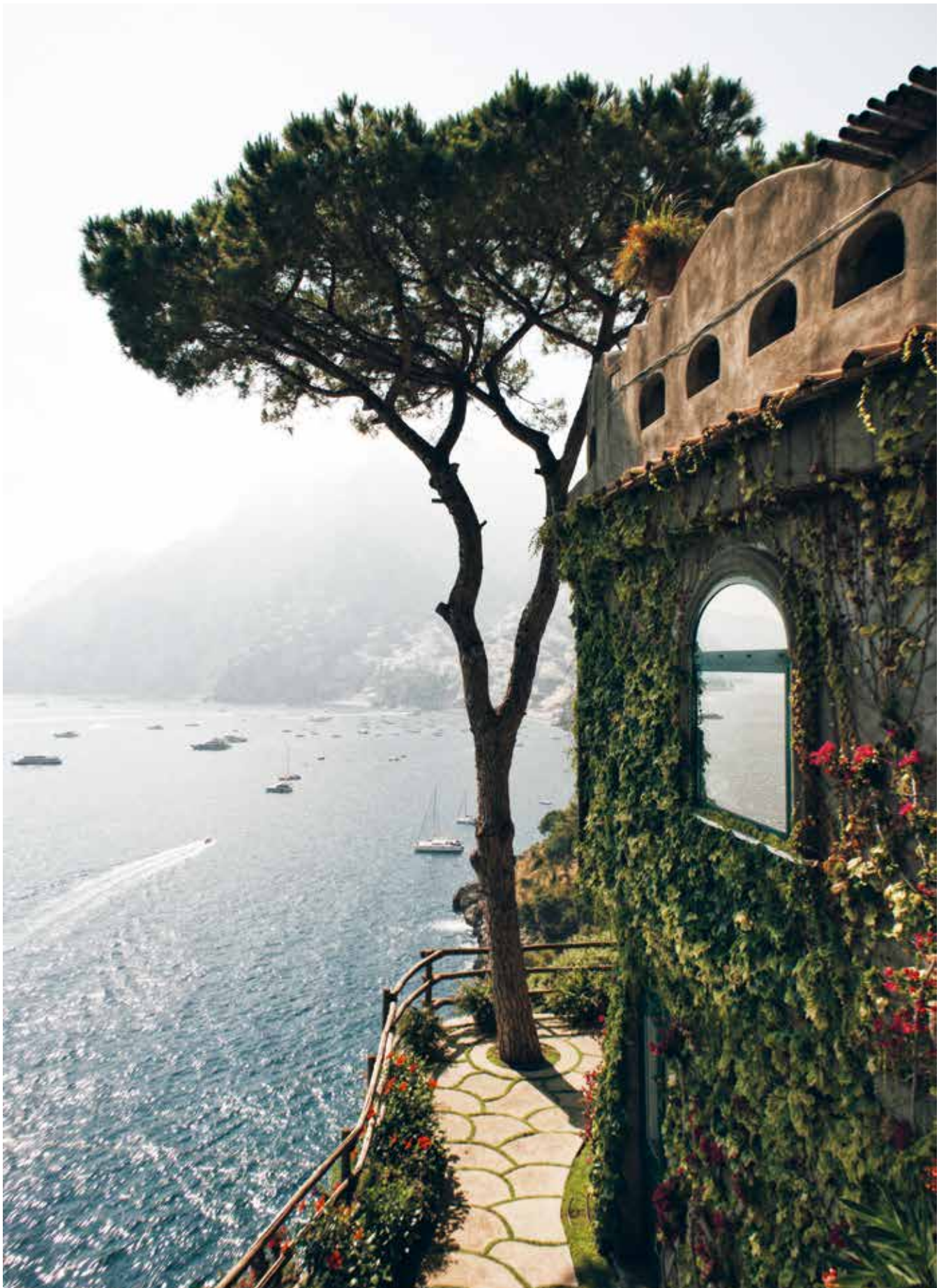
“Luxury refers to a state of great comfort, elegance and expense, or something that is highly desirable but not absolutely necessary. It goes beyond basic human needs and represents indulgence, superior quality and exclusivity,” says the Cambridge Dictionary. This, I have learned over the years, is total bullshit.

When I started my career in journalism over a decade ago, I had a very different idea of what luxury travel was. Back then it was just about flashy hotels, remote locations whose names I could barely pronounce and endless bottles of champagne being popped on the beach. Beautiful places and beautiful people became synonymous with my job, and it was my quest to portray this lifestyle in the most aspirational way possible. Nowadays, luxury is a grossly overused word. You see it everywhere. On fliers, ads, billboards and in magazines. But what does a word that has become so inane even mean?

My favourite haunts all represent everything I love – and more – in a good hotel: impeccable service, soulful touches, a sense of place and a monumental vision unmatched the world over. But is that enough? Over the years I have always looked to the Italians, the great purveyors of European luxury, and asked what it means to them. Vito Cinque of Hotel Il San Pietro di Positano defines luxury as “being able to be yourself in any situation”. Valentia de Santis, owner of Grand Hotel Tremezzo and Hotel Passalacqua, believes that “luxury isn’t what you see – it’s what lets you disappear”. And for Marie-Louise Scio, owner and CEO of Pellicano Hotels, luxury is something that “looks inwards. Luxury is about how you feel and the emotions you get. It’s everything that is internal as opposed to external.”

Many moons ago, I described luxury as a pre-sliced bagel. To me, it was something so simple you scarcely noticed it. I suppose I saw it as some kind of potent supernatural force buried in the mundane – a kind of continuous stream of consciousness – barely visible, but always lurking in the shadows. It’s a way of living that remains incomprehensible to most, and the result is all around us today: soulless, empty corporate spaces that preach clinical living, big spending and all things sexy and aspirational.

The jewel of the Amalfi Coast: Hotel Il San Pietro di Positano
Following pages from left to right: The iconic indoor pool and
terrace of La Posta Vecchia Hotel



SANDFONTEIN

Deafening Silence under the Stars



It was a cool, breezy June morning in Cape Town. I was a little bleary-eyed after an 11-hour flight from London, and the only thing on my mind was a strong cup of coffee and a bag of chocolate chuckles. Alas, like everything in life, it was all 'rush, rush, rush' to board my next flight, and instead of an airport java house, I was greeted by the sight of a private charter that stood lonely on the airport's private runway. 'Next Stop: The Middle of Nowhere' was emblazoned on its side. I dismissed it as clever marketing, but fast-forward one hour and 30 minutes, flying over desolate hills and small dunes, and that's exactly where I found myself. For once, I was pleasantly surprised, as well as humbled by my scepticism.





Opposite: Interstellar wonder: The Northern Lights shine over
Isbreen The Glacier **Following pages:** Igloo perspective: The
view of Jøkelfjord from Isbreen The Glacier

Despite some sketchy locals, it's all part of the Isbreen experience, and beyond its spellbinding tundra is one of the few retreats in Europe that can genuinely say its existence is cut off from the rest of the world. Here, you can hear a pin drop with an echo that can set off a hillside avalanche. And that's all part of its charm. On my first evening I was sitting in the hot tub going through emails. It was minus 26 degrees outside and then out of the blue, I heard Christine screaming at the top of her lungs: "Northern Lights!" I cut the power, looked up, and to my horror the sky shot up a luminous green.

As I clambered out of the tub, a claw-like veil of white slithered down from the heavens above me in a come-hither motion that sent chills down my spine. I am no believer in heaven. But for a split second it seemed as though the universe was opening a hidden door into another world. Seeing the lights billow and surge on loop for the first time was like stepping onto a cosmic rollercoaster. It was spellbindingly quixotic,

making me feel like I was being squeezed into a gargantuan wormhole, trapped in a hypnotic state of interstellar wonder. Running down to the main lodge, I met Christine and she said with a smile on her face, "Now you can tell everyone you've really seen the Northern Lights." For the next four days the sky lit up every night, and I was transfixed.

Their vividness was no coincidence. I later learned that Isbreen sits directly under the aurora belt at a latitude of exactly 70 degrees north of the equator, offering the highest and most vivid auroral displays on earth. So high in fact that seeing them in the winter months is near always guaranteed. This is one of the few times in my life where I embraced the constant sleep deprivation. The displays would go on long into the night – sometimes until 5am – and when dawn broke, I bizarrely never felt tired. That was the magic of the place. It offered a reset that was so vivid I felt anew.



My destination was the Genghis Khan Retreat, one of the world's most exclusive tented camps, open for just 11 weeks of the year. From the airport, it was a monstrous six-hour drive courtesy of one-lane roads and a smouldering convoy of heavy traffic. Eventually, the everyday mod cons morphed into the desolate landscapes of the Orkhon Valley, a dramatic plain of verdant nothingness. After 40 minutes of driving through this vast expanse, the retreat slowly came into view, huddled among the foothills of the Khangai Mountains, a part of Outer Mongolia's historic heartland. It was here, in this valley, where four great empires emerged – the Mongol, Uyghur, Göktürk Khaganates and Xiongnu empires – and shaped the global political and cultural discourse of what we now see as modern Asia. Dwarfed by towering peaks and sweeping, undulating hills, a semi-circle of 20 white-domed, ornately painted gers shimmered in the blistering heat.

Primordial, ancient and sacred, the camp is the world's ultimate glamping retreat, both otherworldly and extravagant. Inside and out, every layer and

every surface is cocooned in Mongolian cashmere alongside tables hand-painted with decorative motifs by a local Orkhon woman. The valley's most soul-stirring quality is that, ultimately, it is a land full of stories. Christopher Giercke, the camp's owner, was once a child actor in mid-20th-century East Berlin. Many years later, he became a film producer working alongside the likes of Francis Ford Coppola, and while scouting filming locations in Mongolia in 1993, he fell in love – not only with the vast expanse of the Mongolian steppe but also with a young woman named Enkhtsetseg 'Enkhe' Sanjaardorj. The couple married, had three children and, in between spending their summers here, set up what would later be dubbed one of the world's most revered camping retreats.

The stories continue. I visited this part of the world during Naadam, Mongolia's great annual celebration of traditional sports, rooted in centuries of nomadic military training. It's a time when communities from across the steppe gather to partake in the nation's three most traditional sports: wrestling,

Cultural festivities: Male wrestlers compete during the Orkhon Valley Naadam festival **Opposite:** Ger chic: The inside of a hand-painted ger at the retreat







ANDEAN EXPLORER

A Voyage into Peruvian Myth and Folklore



Peru is another world. Divine and naturally complex, it's a country of intricacies as bold and flirtatious as its technicolour highland weavings. The story of this antediluvian wilderness begins with its most popular myth and legend: the Tale of Manco Cápac and Mama Ocllo. The fable traces the story of human origin and passionately recalls how the sun morphed all of its great powers to create all of civilisation. Both star and man emerged from the great mountainous depths of Lake Titicaca, and as if by some ancient rite and spell, were immediately transfixed under the command of the almighty sun god. According to Inca lore, it was at this moment, beneath a trident of power, that Peru as we now know it was born.



EASTERN AND ORIENTAL EXPRESS

A Backstage Pass into the World of Malaysia



It was an overwhelmingly humid spring day at Singapore Woodlands Station. Panting and ranting, I stood in line waiting to board one of the world's great trains: the Eastern and Oriental Express. Its green carriages glistened in the sunlight as it emerged from the misty and musty confines of passport control. Eventually, I was let loose, and like a cowboy at a rodeo, went wild with excitement. I was one of 58 passengers from around the world, with fellow travellers from California, the UK, China and Singapore. Escorted by an army of stewards to a singalong, it was finally time to hit the jungle rails – and hit them I did with a gratuitous amount of champagne in my flute.





A movie icon: An Eastern Yellow-billed Hornbill resting in Samburu National Reserve **Opposite:** The heart of it all: The lounge at Sasaab lodge



It was also around this lodge that I encountered my biggest fear. For 37 years I've successfully managed to evade snakes. On every safari, in tropical rainforests and jungles, the first thing I tell a guide is: "I don't want to see one of those horrible slithery things." But luck and fate obviously had other plans for me in the Samburu. Running down some steps to retrieve my Fujifilm camera from my room, I noticed a small yellow tail sticking out of an irrigation pipe. I dismissed it as belonging to a stowaway lizard of some kind, and I even quickly Googled 'lizards with yellow tails' in an attempt to settle and reassure my racing mind. Calm and collected, I eventually escaped from my tent and began climbing the stairs. About three steps up I froze – there it was. The snake, bobbing its head up and down dramatically, watching my every move. It was a red spitting cobra, and while young,

its bite, I later learned, could be deadly. I backed away slowly, and after a few seconds, so did the snake, slithering back into the safety of the long grasses. While I was terrified, seeing how it reacted made me realise the poor thing was a lot more scared of me than I was of it. While lost for words and in need of a very strong drink after my close encounter, it was a bizarrely positive experience that made me realise much of my snake phobia was the figment of my own wild imagination.

Fascinated by it all, I eventually retreated to my tent to find a family of vervet monkeys running riot over my terrace. And with that, my adventure in the Samburu came to a memorable, albeit hilariously heart-stopping end.





