

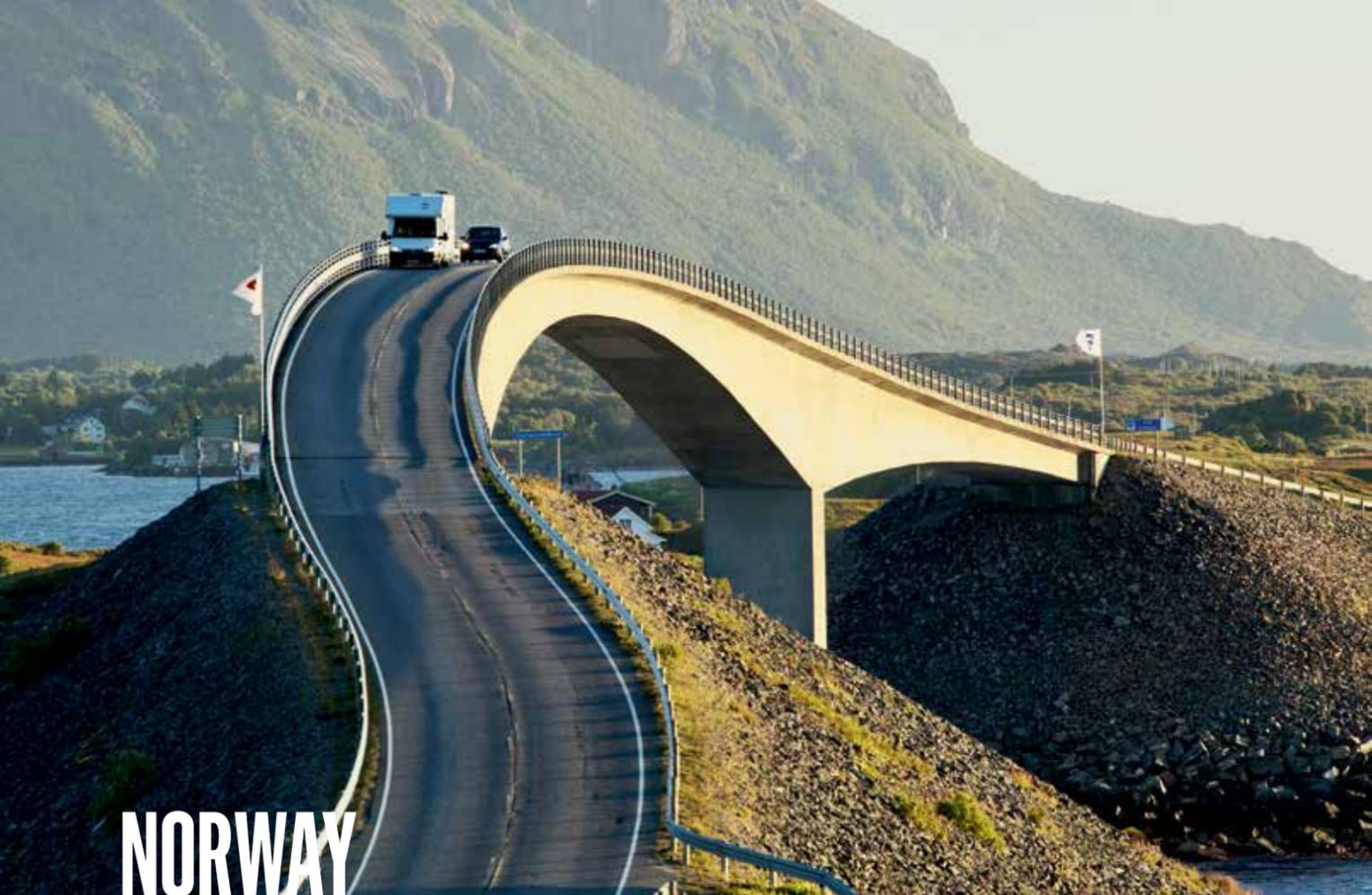
HIDDEN SECRETS *of* EUROPE

From incredible gorges and canyons, to pure blue coasts, mysterious castles and bridges, unusual natural formations, great wine trails, and trains with stellar views, we unearth experiences in Europe you won't find on an ordinary tourist map.

BY RUCHIRA BOSE

Sunsets may be magical in Prague but they are prettier when you drive two hours from the capital to the beautiful wine region of Moravia.





NORWAY

The name conjures images of icy fjords, Viking longboats, and trolls. But these icons of Norway tell only part of the story. While the landscape is still largely dominated by a long, snowy winter, Norway's northern climate is moderated greatly by a wealthy society placing a heavy premium on convenience, beauty, and accessibility for all. Yesteryear's marauding Vikings are today's well-mannered hydroelectric engineers, so the nation has the intellectual know-how to make theirs not merely a highly desirable nation in which to live but a great year-round destination for travellers. From art, culture, and history to the world's best hiking, biking, and skiing, Norway has much to offer.

HARDANGER

Visiting Hardanger is the only way to understand why artists have drawn inspiration from the surrounding landscapes with thundering waterfalls or colourful fruit trees in full bloom.

The landscape of Hardanger is like a picture postcard or a painting in an art gallery—everywhere you look, there is yet another stunning view. Fruits have been grown here since the 14th century, and for hundreds of years artists and travellers have come here to get close to nature. Hardanger is surrounded by five large waterfalls that frame the scenery like a painted

masterpiece. Each waterfall has its own distinct character, and their majestic power exert an almost hypnotic attraction that can only be fully understood when you experience them in person.

SNOW WALLS OF SOGNEFJELLET

For those who love long drives, this is a special treat. The road over Sognefjellet was an important transport artery linking the coast and inland

HOW TO SAY
A THOUSAND THANKS!
Norway

Tusen takk!

TRAINS WITH THE BEST VIEWS OF NORWAY

There's a more spectacular way to see the Northern Lights and other Nordic delights... from Norway's gorgeous trains.

DOVRE RAILWAY

Takes you through a fairy tale kingdom with views from different altitudes—as the train goes over mountains and valleys.

FLAM RAILWAY

This is a way to experience all of Norway in just one hour. The line runs from the high mountain station of Myrdal down to Flam

beside the Aurlandsfjord.

The scenery changes constantly – steep mountainsides to snowcapped peaks, rivers, waterfalls and lush fjord landscape.

THE RAUMABANEN RAILWAY

You pass Dombas, Romsdalsfjord and Europe's tallest vertical rock face: the

Trollveggen wall which is 1,000 metres high.

THE NORDLAND NIGHT TRAIN RIDE ON

Voted the most beautiful train ride in the world. At Saltfjellet you cross the arctic circle. In winter you can enjoy the Northern Lights from this train. In summer, you can marvel at the brilliant Midnight Sun.

DAVID ROBERTSON/ALAMY

FROM TOP: Grünerløkka, a trendy neighbourhood with vintage shops and cafes in Oslo; The Stegastein Viewing Platform makes you feel like you're suspended in air, above the fjord and village. OPPOSITE: The spiralling Atlantic Road, Norway.



areas. Trading led to the transport of salt and fish eastwards while butter, pitch, and leather were transported west. Travelling across the mountain in the old days was not without its perils—vagabonds robbed travellers and merchants. But now, this route offers an incredible sight in early spring when the road is open again, and is flanked by almost 10-metre high banks of snow. That's not the only gorgeous view you see on the road. From the verdant meadows and the lush cultural landscape of Bøverdalen, you can catch a glimpse of towering mountains in the far distance, as the road slowly ascends through the valley. It makes its way up to the summit at 1,434 metres, making the road northern Europe's highest mountain pass. Continuing down towards the Sognefjord the mountain region appears untamed. Where the Hurrungane massif towers up to the heavens the mountains suddenly open up and the landscape changes once again. Towards Gaupne, the final point on this stretch, the road descends to skirt the beautiful Sognefjord whose clear waters change colour from green to blue in tune with the light and the weather. What should you do when you arrive? Relax and let your impressions sink in. Some people turn and drive the same way back, and are surprised to see how different everything is. Although everything is the same, it's as if you see the surroundings anew.

FISHING BRIDGES AT MYRBAERHOLMEN

“The Atlantic road is physically out in the sea. I'm driving on the coastal road from **Vevang** towards **Averøya**. Stone, islets, islands and eight bridges spread over an equal number of kilometres. It's just one of the dramatic roads in Norway. The swells come rolling in from the big sea, the waves are broken and thrown up in the air. It's a dramatic picture,



VANTAGE POINT

The Stegastein Viewing Platform at Aurlandsfjellet

Arriving from Flåm, this should definitely be on your bucket list. The Stegastein viewing platform hangs at 30 metres out from the mountain walls and 650 metres up from the fjord, and gives you the feeling that you are floating above the fjord and villages.

even on a day with sunshine. When Mother Nature really shows off her strength, the waves beat over the bridges and the asphalt is torn off the road, while the cod swim along the barriers.” This is how the Norwegian photographer **Baard Loeken** describes the Atlantic Road in his book *Hjemlandet* (The Homeland).

Historically, the conditions on the islets have been the very best for salting and drying of cod, and for this reason a lot of people chose to live on these windswept islands. A hundred years ago, the politicians planned to build a railway here, but the plans were abandoned in the 1930s. The idea to build a road instead was born. Construction work started in the 1980s. Twelve storms later, in 1989, the road was officially opened.

At **Myrbaerholmen Bridge**, there are two fishing bridges, which mean sports fishermen can haul in cod without being a hindrance to traffic. Come here for one of the most authentic Nordic experiences.



CZECH REPUBLIC

KARLOVY VARY

This is a historic Czech spa destination since the 14th century. The healing springs are like gold threads running through a rare tapestry of public fountains.

It is hard to resist Karlovy Vary's carefree spirit and the sense of stately calm on the promenade that runs between the splendid façade of grand houses and richly decorated colonnades. Knowing that Peter the Great, Marie Theresa, Bach, Goethe, Casanova and Beethove have taken the waters here just adds to the experience. The most renowned spas are located here and in neighbouring Mariánské Lázně and Franiskovy Lázně. Karlovy Vary itself has 12 hot healing springs, with their most famous one that gushes up 15 metres in the air. Ascending a spa trail through woods to a height above the town and seeing it laid out deep beneath you is equally enchanting.

You'll also love discovering its hidden corners, romantic views, elegant spa buildings with their original architecture, and the charm of concerts on the promenade, or the quiet parks lined with benches. What's more, there are kilometres of marked hiking and biking trails around each spa location. And several golf courses, too.

HOW TO SAY
WOULD YOU LIKE TO DANCE?
Czech

Smím prosit?

KARLOVY VARY

CELEBRITIES UP CLOSE! The International Film Festival in Karlovy Vary is a highly prestigious one, and come every July, you'll see the best and most cutting edge film makers and stars strolling around town, and walking the red carpet.

NEARBY: BECOV CASTLE: On the banks of the Tepla River, in the midst of the romantic Slavkovsky Forest, you'll find the picturesque little town of Bečov nad Teplou. There, in a chateau of the same name, lies a gem that experts consider the second greatest treasure in the Czech Republic, right after the crown jewels—the St Maurus reliquary. The reliquary comes with an unusual history and an exciting detective story. It's worth the detour and you won't regret it.

MARIÁNSKÉ LAZNE

In August, you can enjoy classical music concerts at the international festival honouring the genius Polish composer and pianist Chopin. You'll find out more about his life and his relationship to this region at his monument at the Chopin House.

BEER IN PLZEN

Plzen's location between Prague and the country's western border provided for rapid economic growth of the region. But Plzen is also associated with rich cultural events including a fantastic puppet festival and the great Pilsner Fest. The city's own Plzensky Prazdroj (Pilsner Urquell) is without exaggeration a world-renowned beer with a secret recipe. Here you can experience the story of beer right from the Middle Ages to how it's brewed today.

Underneath the Brewery Museum lies a whole maze of city streets—in some places up to three levels deep. While there isn't so much to see down there, they've done a great job adding miscellaneous bits and pieces of history throughout the walk. And the best part? They've got a free app (for both iOS and Android) that allows you to follow along while your guide addresses the group in Czech! It's well narrated and offers a great glimpse into the city's history, both above and below the streets.

Not far from Plzen is Zatec, where there's actually a beer temple that rises from its famous green-gold fields of hops.

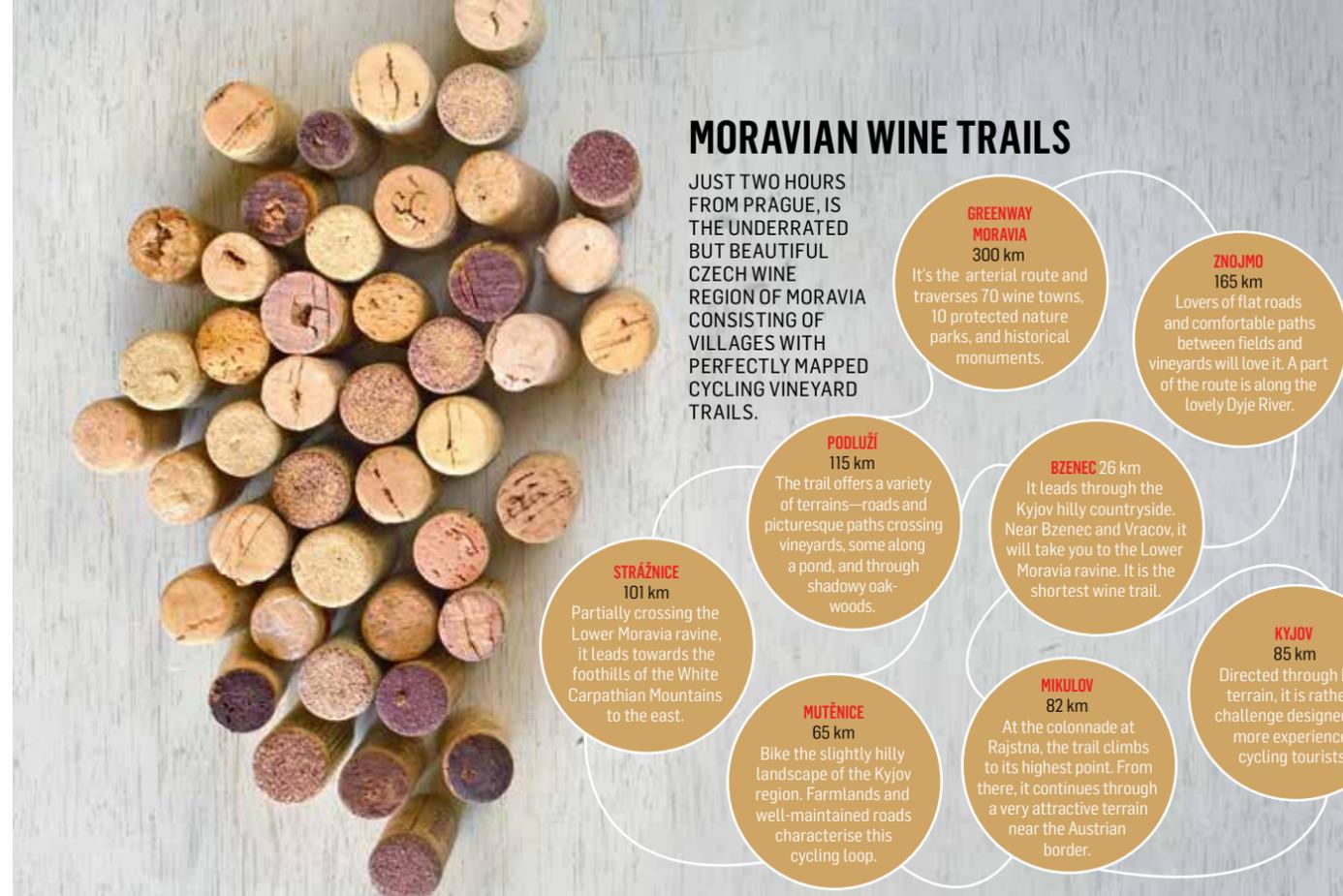
Be sure to book ahead as tours fill up fast and if you want to take pictures, you'll need to get a photography pass, available where you buy tickets (cost: 100 Czech Crowns).

KUTNÁ HORA

Kutná Hora, a silver town, deserves its second title 'the country's treasure chest.' Its silver mining wealth helped the Czech kingdom to flourish.

Its mysteries include cathedrals, monasteries, noblemen's houses, clandestine corners, vaulted cellars and gems of Gothic and Baroque architecture, urban planning and sculpture. In the Middle Ages, silver was mined there, coins were minted, trade blossomed and it was even the seat of Czech kings.

Standing beneath the arches of the Church of St Barbara, one of the most beautiful Gothic



MORAVIAN WINE TRAILS

JUST TWO HOURS FROM PRAGUE, IS THE UNDERRATED BUT BEAUTIFUL CZECH WINE REGION OF MORAVIA CONSISTING OF VILLAGES WITH PERFECTLY MAPPED CYCLING VINEYARD TRAILS.

GREENWAY MORAVIA

300 km
It's the arterial route and traverses 70 wine towns, 10 protected nature parks, and historical monuments.

ZNOJMO

165 km
Lovers of flat roads and comfortable paths between fields and vineyards will love it. A part of the route is along the lovely Dyje River.

PODLUŽÍ

115 km
The trail offers a variety of terrains—roads and picturesque paths crossing vineyards, some along a pond, and through shadowy oak-woods.

BZENEC

26 km
It leads through the Kyjov hilly countryside. Near Bzenec and Vracov, it will take you to the Lower Moravia ravine. It is the shortest wine trail.

STRÁŽNICE

101 km
Partially crossing the Lower Moravia ravine, it leads towards the foothills of the White Carpathian Mountains to the east.

MUTĚNICE

65 km
Bike the slightly hilly landscape of the Kyjov region. Farmlands and well-maintained roads characterise this cycling loop.

MIKULOV

82 km
At the colonnade at Rajstna, the trail climbs to its highest point. From there, it continues through a very attractive terrain near the Austrian border.

KYJOV

85 km
Directed through hilly terrain, it is rather a challenge designed for more experienced cycling tourists.

VISIT THE MAGICAL WORLD OF FINE GLASSWORKS WHEN YOU DROP BY THE MOSER GLASSWORKS CENTRE IN KARLOVY VARY.



BECHEROVKA

Made up of around 20 herbs and spices, Bechervodka has a tingly and bitter flavour profile that can be summed up as 'essence of forest.' The recipe has been a secret since its first concoction in the early 19th century, and supposedly, only a handful of people on the planet know exactly what goes into it.

LEFT: Traditional roasted ham is a popular dish in the Czech Republic. OPPOSITE: Mariánské Lázně, in the Karlovy Vary Region.

cathedrals in Europe, is an awe-inspiring experience. You can also stroll through the courtyard and chambers of the Italian Court, once the palace of King Wenceslas IV, or descend with bated breath into the ossuary of a Cistercian monastery, taking in with a mixture of awe and unease its altars, coats of arms, chandeliers, pyramids, and obelisks made from the bones of plague victims. Another attraction is the unique Gothic Stone House, where you can become a medieval craftsman or cook for a while.

On the museum tour you will pass—equipped only with a lamp, helmet and miner's tunic—through the 250-metre tunnel of a medieval mine.

BOHEMIAN SWITZERLAND

When you're here, you'll recognise the landscape immediately. Large parts of *The Chronicles of Narnia* have been shot here. Hans Christian Andersen wrote part of the fairy tale *The Snow Queen* here. Floating walkways, tunnels, gorges, footbridges, canyons, all contribute to this region's amazing panorama.



FROM ABOVE: Pretzel stall on Florianska Street in Krakow; underground passage in Wieliczka Salt Mine; a cobbled street amidst buildings; the Main Market Square, Zamosc. OPPOSITE: Cafe in the Cloth Hall in Rynek Główny.



POLAND

TEN THINGS TO DO IN POLAND THAT AREN'T ON A TOURIST GUIDE

SEE A CONCERT IN SZCZECIN

The new philharmonic building in Szczecin is absolutely stunning and is the place to watch a musical performance. With a glass exterior, this modern building is a contrast to its more traditional surroundings. Inside, the Szczecin Philharmonic building is a wide, open, white, minimalist space complemented by skylights letting in beautiful natural light.

STAND AT TWILIGHT AT THE MAIN SQUARE IN ZAMOSC Zamosc is a renaissance city in the south east part of the country. It is named after Jan Zamoyski, one of the wealthiest and the most enlightened magnate of 16th century Poland. He realised the importance of a defensible place near the Ukrainian border, and commissioned the Italian architect Bernardo Morando to work with him on a project. The result was the remarkable city with the merchant houses, colonnaded arcades and the Main Market Square, one of the best city squares in Europe.

SPEND A NIGHT IN A SALT MINE SPA

The Royal Salt Mines in Wieliczka is one of the first places in the world to be included in the UNESCO World Heritage list. It's got these weird sculptures carved in salt, chapels that were made for the salt miners, and spa treatments and therapies in saline chambers—you can even spend a night in one. You can take a boat ride in the underground lake here. They have a really unusual music, dance and performance festival in the summer called the World Art Underground. The mine also hosts weddings, movie shoots, etc.

CLOCKWISE: WITOLD SKRYPczAK/GETTYIMAGES; ENDESS TRAVEL/ALAMY; ERIK WITSOE / EYEEM/GETTYIMAGES; JON HICKS/GETTYIMAGES



IN CAPE ROZEWIE ON THE BALTIC COAST, YOU CAN COLLECT AMBER THAT GETS WASHED ASHORE BY THE SEA.

WITNESS THE CLASSIC GOLDEN POLISH AUTUMN

The Tatras in Poland are home to the rare and protected Edelweiss—summer fields of golden wheat and barley divided by rows of poppy. In autumn, they have something called The Golden Polish Autumn—the colours of the trees, the scent of falling leaves, and sunlight create a rare picture.

STAND AMIDST HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF BUTTERFLIES

The butterflies in Pieniny are a spectacular sight. Hundreds of thousands of them can be seen here during spring-summer, swirling in clouds of colours, patterns, and geometry.

FIND YOUR OWN PIECE OF AMBER

In Cape Rozewie on the Baltic coast, you can collect amber that gets washed ashore by the sea. In fact every year, Poland hosts the World Championships in collecting amber here. You can also see seals at the estuary of Vistula here. Something your kids will remember forever.

NEANDERTHAL MOMENT The Cave in Sudetes has the world's largest collection of cave

HOW TO SAY PLEASED TO MEET YOU! **Poland**

Bardzo mi miło!

animal remains. And its colourful stalagmites and stalactites are impressive! The Mastodon Chamber here is so large that it can fit a football stadium or a 10-story building.

WATCH THE MILKY WAY UNDER THE WORLD'S CLEAREST SKY

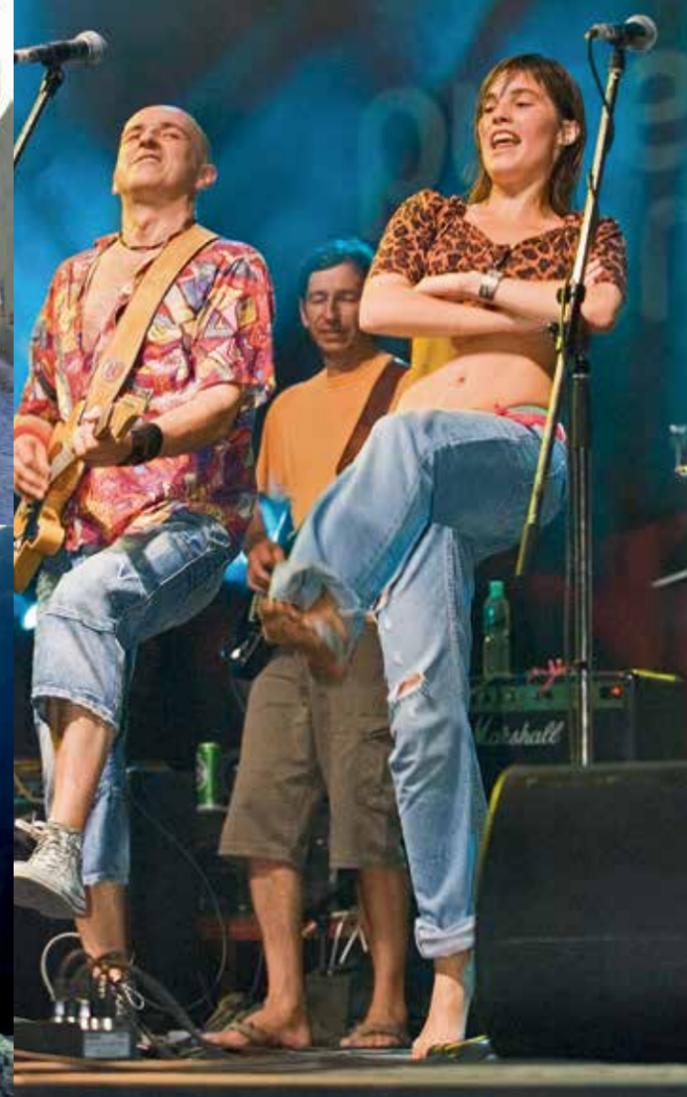
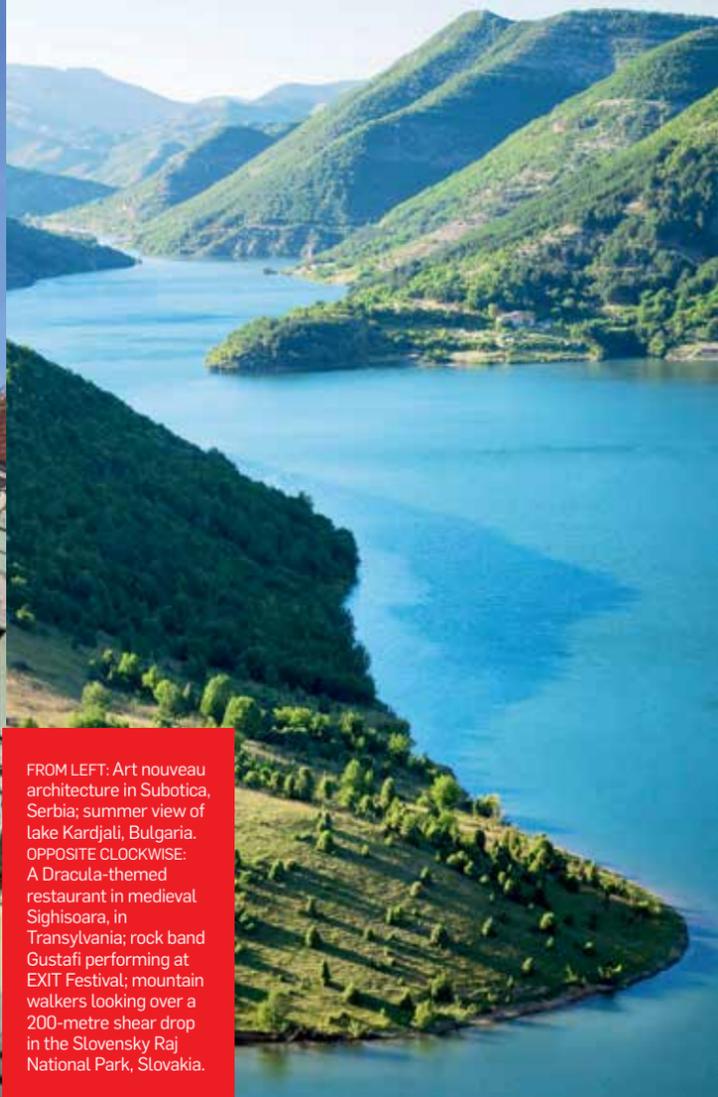
Astronomers have been flocking to Jizera mountains for years. It's one of the most spectacular places to see the night sky.

ETIQUETTE

- For the Czech, the proper greeting is a kiss on the cheek, so avoid a handshake if you're going on a date; it might come across as too business-like for someone pursuing a romantic interest.
- Norwegians often engage in a private drinking party before and after a pub crawl, called 'forspiel' or 'nachspiel', to avoid going bankrupt.
- At a bar in Poland, you're expected to order yourself shots in pairs, so that each leg gets equally drunk and the walk back home is easier.
- If you want to wish someone good luck in Romania, say 'Mult noroc!' (lots of luck), or 'Baftă!' (good luck). Do not say 'Noroc bun!' (the word-for-word translation from English), because it means 'good riddance.'
- When invited to a Bulgarian home, it is polite to bring a small gift, something from your own country will be appreciated.

STORK INVADERS

Żytkowo actually becomes a village of storks from April to August. There are approximately 120 white storks living here. All of them in the small village, four times exceeding the number of people!



FROM LEFT: Art nouveau architecture in Subotica, Serbia; summer view of lake Kardjali, Bulgaria. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE: A Dracula-themed restaurant in medieval Sighisoara, in Transylvania; rock band Gustafi performing at EXIT Festival; mountain walkers looking over a 200-metre shear drop in the Slovensky Raj National Park, Slovakia.

BULGARIA

IN SOFIA, TAKE A DRIVE SOUTH TO THE famous Rila Monastery. This surprisingly colourful building was established in the 10th century, but experienced multiple raids during the Ottoman occupation and suffered a fire in the 19th century. Still, the monastery was always rebuilt and restored, proving resilient through both time and war. Nestled in the Rila Mountains, this UNESCO World Heritage site should not be missed while travelling through Bulgaria.

THE PETRIFIED WEDDING In a small town called Kardjali, three hours from Sofia, you'll be amazed to find beautiful natural formations. The metal oxides in the rock give them shades of pink, red and brown. Scientists believe one of these—the Petrified Wedding started forming 40 billion years ago, due to underwater volcanic activity. Later, when the sea receded, the rocks became exposed to rain, wind and sun, which weathered them to their current shapes. Local legend has it that this is a wedding procession, petrified by nature when the groom's father had 'sinful' thoughts about the bride.

SAVAMALA

Belgrade's Savamala district was previously abandoned, but today its once-dilapidated warehouses are being transformed into forward-thinking cultural centres, art galleries, bars, and clubs. It's a great example of neighbourhood revitalisation and adaptive reuse of buildings.

THE MIKSER FESTIVAL

A cool music, performance and art festival that attracts international talent. Check for dates for Savamala's annual four-day long Mikser Festival.

ROMANIA

DRACULA AND SIGHISOARA'S CLOCK FIGURES This is a well-preserved medieval city founded by the Transylvanian Saxons. A UNESCO World Heritage site, famous for its citadel, clock tower and town square, what many miss are the figures on its rotating mechanism—carved from linden wood and representing the seven days of the week.

Also, on your way out of Sighisoara, considering it is the birthplace of Vlad Tepes (better known as Dracula), stop at the many roadside castle ruins and take in the eerie landscape... Don't feed the dogs!

VILLACROSE AND MACCA PASSAGES

These two pedestrian alleys in Bucharest are roofed with tinted glass and wrought iron. They are lined with shops, cafes, and restaurants in a 'U' shape. The sun gives a natural light to the alley when it hits the tinted rooftop.

SERBIA

SUBOTICA'S ART NOUVEAU TREASURES Subotica is like a treasure box overflowing with Art Nouveau gems. Most of the buildings were constructed in the early 20th century, when Serbia and neighbouring Hungary were part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Designers incorporated whimsical details, colourful flourishes, and folk art into Subotica's City Hall, Synagogue, private homes, and banks, evoking thoughts of Gaudí, fictional Dr Seuss lands, and fanciful wedding cakes.

PARTY WITH A PURPOSE: EXIT FESTIVAL Held over three days in mid-July, this music festival was started by a group of students fighting for peace and democracy in Serbia and the Balkans. Today, the event stays true to its activist roots with social advocacy and politics as much a part of EXIT as the music is.

The outdoor venue is one of the coolest of its kind as the event takes place on the Petrovaradin Fortress grounds in the Serbian city of Novi Sad. Considered one of Europe's best multi-day music festivals, shows are held on seven different stages—the main stage is located at the heart of the old fortress and is surrounded by six themed stages for different genres.

WHAT TO DO

If you are invited to a Slovak home, take off your shoes at the door. They are just being polite when they're telling you not to.

If you're out for a drink with locals in Serbia, know that the bill is usually paid in rounds or split very roughly among everybody at the end.

HOW TO SAY LONG TIME NO SEE Slovakia

Dugo se nismo videli

SLOVAKIA

THE HIGH TATRAS If you like epic, snow-capped mountains, beautiful forests, miles of incredible hikes filled with an array of rock formations, and crystal clear mountain water, then the High Tatras are the perfect dose of nature for you. Located right in the middle of the High Tatras is a small ski town called Nový Smokovec, which can be reached by either car or bus. Once you arrive, explore the small historic town and take in the various shops and eateries. When it's time to sleep, venture on over to the Villa Dr Szontagh, named after the founding family of Nový Smokovec. To reach the mountain hiking trails, you can buy a ticket for the tram and ride it up to the start of the paths. There are five to choose from, and they range in duration from 20 minutes all the way up to three hours. Each one ends at a 'chata,' a resting house where you can simply recharge, or if there are rooms, stay for the night. It's just what the doctor ordered. 📍

FROM LEFT: TIBOR BOGNAR/ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK

CLOCKWISE: MONICA WELLS/ALAMY; ODYSSEY IMAGES/ALAMY; PAUL GLENDELL/ALAMY