



Ron Taylor has traveled to over 30 countries, owns his own communications company, Taylor Creative (TaylorCreative.ca) and contributes regularly to **Opulence Magazine**.

Luxury Travel Escapes

Experience six diverse and distinct areas of the world

A true escape is one where the pressures of life disappear in the back windshield over the horizon, while upcoming roadways are clear, sunny and smooth. Our feature involves Luxury Travel Retreats and we have chosen six very diverse experiences from six distinctive areas of the world.

Located within a grouping of 1,200 islands south of India and Sri Lanka, the Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru, Maldives is a spectacular tropical paradise that summons thoughts of tranquil, sun bleached beaches and tropical huts.

The Buraj Al Arab in Dubai is the world's only 7-star hotel and takes lavishness to a degree unknown to us mortals. We assume there is valet service for those with helicopters.

For spa enthusiasts, picture a place where the Great

Barrier Reef meets a tropical rain forest and we have the incomparable Daintree Eco-Lodge and Spa in Australia. Rejuvenation is mandatory.

The Kicking Horse Mountain Resort and specifically, the Cache Estates is a mountain escape where myriad activity choices makes one's head spin and western wilderness is provided in dazzling episodes.

Golf ecstasy is certainly found at the Kapalua Resort on Maui, particularly with three spectacular golf tracks to choose from, not to mention ocean vistas and the greenery that can only be Hawaii.

Finally, Ntwala Island Lodge in central Africa is a retreat of outrageous elegance located right on the confluence of two monumental rivers. The mystique of this continent is undeniable and is brought right to your doorstep. - RON TAYLOR



Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru, Maldives

Hugging the equator, on the other side of the world lie a grouping of islands just south of Sri Lanka, known as the Maldives. Accessible via air from a number of places, Male, the main city, is the center point of 1,200 islands that stretch for 800 kms north to south and 120 kms east to west. Of those islands, 202 are inhabited, while 87 are exclusive resort islands.

Now, the first thing that one may ask is given the geography is whether this was a place that the tsunami laid waste to last year and the answer is a resounding NO! They missed all of that.

The Maldives are very similar in nature to many of the stunning islands of the south Pacific. In fact, it is not uncommon to be able to walk around some of these islands in less than half an hour, definitely a Robinson Crusoe escape.

One spot that Mr. Crusoe would have traded all his coconuts for at the time is the Banyan Tree Maldives, Vabbinfaru.

The word Vabbinfaru in Maldivian means “round island circled by a round coral reef”. Forty-eight thatched roofed villas comprise this island-paradise that is cooled by the breezes of the Indian Ocean.

The villas themselves are something to behold and more than satisfy our idyllic view of that little beach hut on the ocean. Little beach huts, these are not.

Each has its own ocean view terrace, four poster beds, recessed sitting rooms and indigenous art. Huge bathrooms are the norm and some come equipped with outdoor showers.

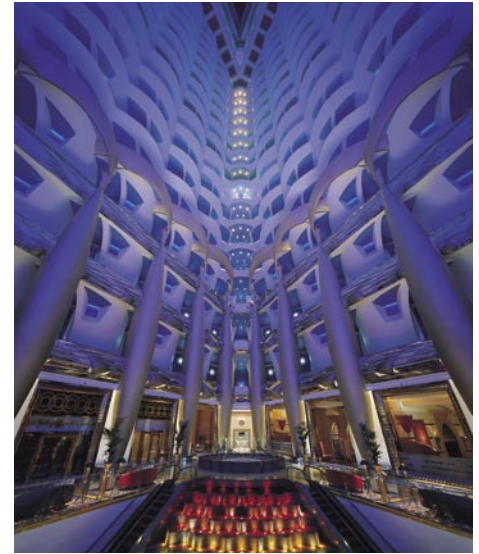
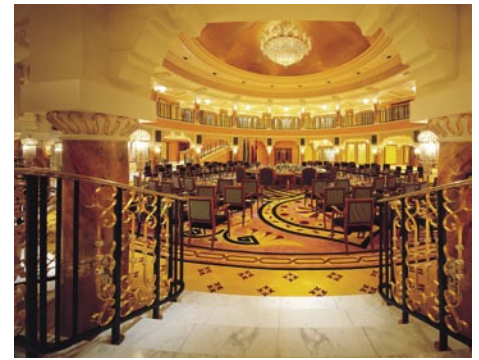
Banyan Tree Maldives is unique, because it has its own privately funded marine biology lab. In fact, this past June, 91 baby sea turtles were hatched and made their way into the world, with islanders hoping that some will survive the harsh sea to return and lay eggs in the future. Snorkeling off the reef is stupidly incredible and there are nightly feedings of rays and fish right off the pier.

Food-wise this culture is extraordinary, with a mix of east African, south Asian and Indian. Seafood naturally, is king. Whether it's a beachside restaurant setting or doing your own terrace barbecue, there is a special place reserved for soothing the belly at the Banyan Tree.

After a glorious day island hopping, fishing, toasting your skin or sea plane touring, here's yet another capper...

Five spacious outdoor spa pavilions, each with side-by-side couple massage beds and open-air showers exist, with two featuring exotic copper bathtubs hand-crafted in Sri Lanka and the private Rain Mist Rooms - specially equipped with rain-shower and steam-mist facilities. As one might guess, stress is not translated into the local language, Dhivehi.

If one were to pick a spot on the earth that is about as far away as one could imagine, then Maldives would be high up on that list... both in body and spirit.



Buraj Al Arab Hotel, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

In the staggering heat of the Gulf of Arabia lies a small coastal country which offers a respite from the culture shock that is prevalent here to some western travellers.

Though there are many North Americans and Europeans who have worked in this part of the globe, it still remains a culture steeped in the traditional ways of long gone ancestors, whose teachings are engrained in peoples' souls.

Dubai, United Arab Emirates is likely a place to which many of us have never been, particularly in a world that preaches restraint in its travel advice. Nonetheless, the United Arab Emirates is what one might call an opulent western oasis in the middle of a sea of sand and conservatism.

The city itself is a gleaming architectural marvel that shoots up out of the landscape. Commerce thrives here and many of the western trappings that one would never find in other Arab countries can be located here.

The words on your Windows Thesaurus

that are used to describe opulent include: wealthy, lavish, luxurious, rich, magnificent, affluent and sumptuous. Well... that pretty much describes Dubai and in particular the Buraj Al Arab Hotel.

The only 7-Star hotel in the world, the Buraj is a marvel of man's capacity to build. Sail-shaped to honour Arabian seamen of the past, this wonder stands over 320 metres tall, making it the tallest hotel in the world. It juts out onto the water on its own man made island and its sail façade represents an astounding technical challenge, featuring a double-skinned Teflon-coated woven glass fiber screen - the first time such technology has been used vertically in such form and extent in any building, worldwide.

The outside is incredible. The inside is dazzling. Featuring an atrium that shoots up 180 metres, one starts to get the old bug-eyes right off the bat. As one might expect, this atrium is the tallest in the world. Don't let the 10 storey waterfall distract you either, as there is certainly much more to see here. Gold...is... every-

where.

The hotel is a 28 story microcosm of Arab extravagance that has its own heliport, presumably for those who don't like traffic. There are 202 duplex suites ranging from the "small" ones at 170 sq. metres (1800 sq. feet) to the monster 25th floor Royal Suites which go at a completely ornate 780 sq. metres (8400 sq. feet).

Roof top restaurants, suspended unbearably above the sea give way to others below the water line, offering succulent ocean cuisine while watching the curious sea creatures swim by looking for their buddies. The culinary genius of the staff is something special, as is the incredible attention by all hotel staff to detail. If you want it...they will get it.

In a city that has its own indoor downhill ski facility (itself a technological miracle), it's little wonder that the offerings of this hotel are as substantial as what they are. It's like blowing all the circuits in your travel brain.



Daintree Eco-Lodge and Spa, Northern Queensland, Australia

The land of OZ is well named, indeed. The one that Dorothy found herself in was occupied by engaging people who tripped over themselves to ensure the comfort of their visitors (especially ones who squashed bad witches with their flying farmhouses). The tropical north of Queensland is part of our modern Oz and carries with it the title of world's eco-capital. Why? This part of Australia is a very unique one where the rainforest meets the Great Barrier Reef and the result is a kaleidoscope of natural sights, sounds and sensations. Picture tropical rainforests, sparkling rivers, secluded white beaches and breathtaking undersea magic and we might add, one of the ten best spas in the world, the Daintree Eco-Lodge and Spa.

Located about 90 minutes north and west of the city of Cairns, Daintree offers a natural setting that quite simply is unmatched on the planet. Even the drive itself from Cairns is quite astounding and is rated near the top of Australia's scenic rides. The lodge is located on the

Daintree River, a bit to the west of the Cook Highway. The area is in the Greater Daintree Forest, which houses more varieties of trees than in all of North America or Europe, not to mention half the bird population of Australia. Yes, there are crocodiles, and no, you won't have to sidestep them at the spa!

The spa is fed by natural spring water from its own pristine waterfall and is rated as the purest of waters. Being as there is no one else around there and no other development, the guarantee of pure air is also rock solid!

One of the beauties about this place is that there are only 15 villas on the property and that means a true escape in every sense of the word. Despite the seclusion offered by the region, all the comforts of home are here. At the end of a hard day "spa-ing" you can even relax in your own Jacuzzi on the balcony. Life is certainly rough.

The spa itself includes a swimming pool,

art gallery, licensed restaurant and wellness centre, so one needn't be bored. As if...

Now many spa aficionados will be wondering about the spa services and Daintree covers the gamut. Holistic therapies and naturopathic treatments from point of toe to tip of head are at your disposal and picture for a moment, the sensation of a full body massage and skin soothing to the sounds of actual rainforest birds and bees. In short it is an experience that really can't be described with any accuracy here by ink on paper.

As Daintree is so eco-friendly, there is also a component to the program that caters to its surroundings. Guided Aboriginal rainforest cultural walks are a must-do and according to the people who were there long before the white man, "the rainforest is a kitchen, medicine chest, tool shed and a church".

An elixir for the soul, such is the magic of northern Queensland and the Daintree.



Cache Estates, The Kicking Horse Mountain Resort, Golden, B.C.

If Mountain Adventure is where you are at, then look no further than one of the newest Canadian destinations, right in the heart of the Rockies. The Kicking Horse is the new kid on the block and the one thing that strikes you is that there is just so much to do here! The Kicking Horse Pass, founded in 1858 is located an hour and a half west of Banff, Alberta. The resort village itself is about a 6 minute ride north of Golden, B.C., just off the Trans Canada Highway and is located in a corner of the Rockies that radiates outdoor fun. Six national parks surround this great area!

The Cache Estates, where your head hits pillow, are operated by Ultimate Resorts and Hotels and comprise three luxury homes at the base of the mountain gondola. Much rock and log embrace the designs, which have that distinctive Canadian Rocky Mountain feel to them and with over 4,000 square feet of 5 bedroom roominess, they offer the height of comfort and stylish mountain living. Neighbouring a meandering creek, de-

signer kitchens, high vaulted ceilings and cozy fireplaces also add to the flavour. If you were to pick the type of place that fits perfectly with its surroundings, then this would certainly be it!

For those unaccustomed to mountain life, expect a surreal burst of clean air that city-fied lungs may not know what to do with. Having acclimatized to this, the obvious next step is getting the heart to pump extra vigorously in some manner and there are lots of methods, depending upon your preferred season.

Summertime invites anyone who fancies the whitest of waters to experience the energetic and gorgeous Kicking Horse River. Screw on your helmet, slip on your life jacket and prepare yourself for an exhilarating ride! If this is a little more jumbling than what you bargained for, then jet boat safaris on the Columbia River, bountiful fishing, magnificent golf or endless hiking opportunities exist.

If winter fun is more up your alley, then the obvious choice is skiing or snowboarding on the nearby mountain with all 106 of its diverse runs. The Golden Eagle Express gondola is a mere 200 meters from your door. Beginner or seasoned veteran, this place is well worth it. For those who like their skiing a bit more radical, there is also snow-cat or heli-skiing in the world-famous Purcell mountain range. You can also add to this, ice climbing, dog sledding, snowmobiling or myriad other winter type things to earn one's exhausted state at the end of the day and that special ticket to the hot tub.

The Cache Estates offer a number of dining options and if you want to do the cooking, have at it. Otherwise, private chefs and catering are at your disposal. In fact, the people at Ultimate Resorts and Hotels can set up just about anything your little heart desires... activities and pampering included. That's the best part... a mountain getaway with all the comforts!



Kapalua Resort, Maui, Hawaii, USA

Mark Twain always declared golf as “a good walk, spoiled”, but in my case it also includes safaris off into dense jungle. A game that none of us will ever completely master, the swinging of sticks has become a life’s passion for many. The best part is that no matter the result, the golfer can always find a good excuse to play somewhere and if it’s possible to surround one’s self in heavily treed greenery by an ocean or lake, all the better.

Such is the case with the Kapalua Resort on Maui.

The name Kapalua means “arms embracing the sea” and this is in special reference to the arms of lava that comprise the bays around Kapalua.

The Kapalua Resort is in bird’s eye view of both the Emerald Mountains of West Maui and the neighbouring island of Molokai and is certainly cloud nine on the golf chart. Boasting three championship golf courses, Hawaii’s #1 golf resort is the home of the PGA’s Mercedes Championship, where the likes of Singh,

Appleby, Garcia, Furyk hunt birds and eagles. The views all around these perpetually green courses are scintillating, with the Pacific Ocean and mountainous backdrops all around.

The Plantation course is the one where the PGA pros play. Finesse and thought are integral elements of this one, as a number of downhill runs and cliffside greens yearn for your patience. You might also consider the ocean winds here that sometimes can revert you to a cap-chasing albatross.

The Bay course features rolling fairways and big, fat greens that gently welcome you home. Not as difficult as the plantation course, when it comes time to building your confidence back up after playing the pros’ course, this is your best bet.

The Village course is another kettle of fish altogether and is a short bucking bull that twists and turns, up and down until the ball finally drops on 18. Your driver may sleep peacefully on many of the holes here, but because of the funky terrain, it certainly keeps you amused!

The Kapalua Gold Villas themselves have pretty much everything a hardy traveller could want. Of course, the interiors are of the utmost design and sitting atop your balcony with the salty tropical air whistling through your hair and that post game Mai Tai squarely in your paw, surely paints a memorable picture. The places are loaded from top to bottom and include dedicated concierge and advance tee times. Not to be outdone, there are also luxury homes available for rent, each having a minimum of 4,000 square feet, with three to five bedrooms and swimming pool. Perfect for those family getaways!

Maui itself is a mystical place with mountains and blazing sun, pelting tropical rains, whales and historical significance. Golf is a great pastime that is brought to another plateau when at a place like Kapalua. Be wary not to stare at the startling scenery to long when trying to navigate that little white ball in to that little black hole.

Easier said than done.



Ntwala Island Lodge, Caprivi District, Namibia

Dark and mysterious, Africa is one of those mythical places that fuelled our kidlike imaginations as we scoured through our little picture books. The continent, in general, remains glorious but troubled, however there are pockets of inspiration and sheer beauty that just need to be seen and felt!

Accessed from Johannesburg, South Africa, the south central area of the continent is one that has shown a distinctive upswing and that area is precisely where our last segment takes us. Bordered on four sides by Botswana, Angola, Zimbabwe and Zambia lies an extremely interesting area of Namibia known as Caprivi.

This basin is one where two of the bigger African rivers, the Zambezi and Chobe, collide and Mama Nature has blueprinted a number of islands on the Mambova Rapids. Located on one of the tinier islands is a magnificent place known as Ntwala Island Lodge. Created (along with other properties in the area) by a group called Islands in Africa, the successful business plan for this little jewel involves working together with the World Wildlife Foundation and other conservation and economic agencies to form an area with

special focus on the local communities.

One of the great things about Ntwala, besides the fact that it comprises only four flawless cabanas, is that you are allocated your own boat and guide for your entire stay. In all cases, Ntwala employs local people and your cost includes payment towards the various funds that help develop the area and its people.

Ntwala itself is a masterpiece. The lodges are self contained stone, wood and glass creations, each of which includes their own outdoor plunge pool facing the Zambezi River. The only way to get around to various parts of the complex is through a network of floating walkways and the sights, smells and sounds of the African interior bring us all back to those kid years with the picture books.

Whether or not you eat in the privacy of your own lodge or with the other guests, the food and wines are flawless as well and quite impossible to comprehend, given the remoteness of the location and the fact that the river system is the only way of getting goods in and out.

From an activities perspective, we all

want to see the animals if we're in Africa and there is no shortage of them. River safaris bring us to see hippos, elephants, crocs, buffalo and even lions who come down to whet their whistle. There are also options to go birding or conduct your own walks and with a river that is chock full, fly fishing is a must.

Perhaps the most spectacular attraction of the area lies about 80 clicks down the river. Victoria Falls is one of the natural wonders of the world. Try to picture a great gush of water that plummets down a chasm that is almost 3 kms wide and you get the idea. Along with the many animals that greet tourists, these falls are probably the greatest natural spectacle on the African continent (with kind regards to Mount Kilimanjaro).

Compared to the many lavish choices one has on this planet to escape to, perhaps one of the greatest gifts that a place like this can deliver is hope for its people. The location is incredible, the effect on the area extremely positive and yet, it still gives us a taste of what living a real life is all about and when it gets right down to it, that may be the greatest escape of all!