

AUTUMN'S SACRED MYSTERIES

BY LAURA ELLIOTT

THERE IS A SACREDNESS ABOUT OUR WALK IN THE WILD. THIS IS WHERE EACH STEP IS AN INVITATION AND OUR CHOICES A KIND OF PRAYER - ESPECIALLY AT THE CROSSROADS. THESE ELEMENTAL JOURNEYS TAKE YOU DEEP INTO NATURE'S ELEMENTS - FIRE, WATER, EARTH AND AIR - ULTIMATELY BRINGING YOU CLOSER TO NATURE AND YOURSELF. ENCOUNTERING LEGENDS AND MYSTERIES, YOU HAVE A RINGSIDE SEAT TO THE MARVELS OF NATURE. BE IT WILDEBEEST MIGRATIONS OR BREATHTAKING SCORCHED LANDSCAPES, THE BEST PART ABOUT COMING EYE-TO-EYE WITH NATURE IS THE EXPANSION OF OUR IDEAS ABOUT ALL THAT IS POSSIBLE.



Previous page, small lagoons in foreground, a colorful sunset on salar de Chile This page, the blue lagoon-geothermal spa, one of the most visited attractions in Iceland

FIRE

Iceland - “The Land of the Gods” in Reykjavik

When the fires of Hekla began to burn in 1104, people around the world were terrified. Fear created stories about the powers of dark princes and the flames of eternal fires throwing souls into the underworld. Others spoke of immortal gods waging war on ancient battlefields.

Welcome to the ancient and the sacred in Iceland where you will journey into a landscape that brings you closer to the exotic within. It’s fitting that this story begins with a swim in the Blue Lagoon - one of the 25 natural wonders of the world - and experience naturally heated geothermal, unnaturally blue mineral water kept at the constant perfect temperature between 34 and 39 degrees Celsius. Enjoy in-water massages rumoured to leave skin younger, with life-long lasting health benefits.

Rejuvenated, you’re prepared for the thrill that is the tour inside the Thrihnukagigur volcano. That’s right, inside. Open until mid-October you’ll discover a whole new world an easy 45- to 50-minute hike inside. Watching its fire and fury brings a catharsis, of sorts. A natural letting off of steam that might speak to what you may need to purge. Other impressive sights nearby include the Gullfoss waterfall, and diving or snorkelling the Silfa fissure - one of the world’s top dive spots, a crack between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates.

After a trip by super jeep into “The Land of the Gods” in the island’s interior, the domain of Vikings, elves and Norse Gods, enjoy a luxurious stay at slick, chic **101 Hotel** in Reykjavik. With a casually elegant style including log burning fires and a high-end spa, the property is within walking distance of the city’s famed Golden Circle. Enjoy the hotel’s glass ceiling restaurant for Icelandic international cuisine or take a stroll to experience the city’s small-town feel at any one of several local restaurants. *101hotel.is*

Chile - the driest place on Earth, Atacama Desert

With regions that haven’t seen rain in over 300 years and mountains capped with salt instead of snow, you quickly realise you’re in one of the driest places on earth, where the arches of Valle de la Luna bring you one of the world’s most unique sunrises. Although the Atacama Desert is an all-year destination, you will find the temperatures in November the most pleasing. The vast region stretches 965 kilometres south of the Peruvian border. Be sure to bring your walking shoes because this is a place that needs to be trekked to be believed.

According to NASA, you’ve just landed in the driest place on Earth, where some weather stations in this desert have never received rain, with soil samples that are similar to soil samples from Mars. Mummies that have been found here predate the Egyptians by thousands of years. Cycling salt flats, gushing over the Tatío geysers, or admiring explosive colours around the high Andean lagoons of Miscanti and Miñiques, these are mind-boggling encounters far drawn from daily realities.

When trekking turns to pampering, enjoy luxuriating at **Alto Atacama Desert Lodge & Spa** in San Pedro de Atacama. Chile’s best architects, designers

and landscapers unleashed this ethereal creation upon one of the world’s most enchanting settings in the orange rock mountains, and it blends in perfectly. Water from glacial snow turns San Pedro de Atacama into an oasis and infuses the Puri Spa with an unequalled revitalising experience among the breathtaking beauty of a scorched landscape where you can enjoy unique treatments like a quinoa facial. Astounding Chilean wines are the perfect counterpoint to the desert’s enchantment, as are the culinary Mediterranean-inspired masterpieces enjoyed in intimate indoor and outdoor settings. The pool area and Puri Spa offer inspired relaxation in several levels of pools with graduating temperatures, from cold-plunge to body temperature. www.altoatacama.com

WATER

Madagascar - Encounters at Nosy Hara Archipelago

One of Autumn’s most enjoyable ecotourism destinations is Madagascar – all thanks to its gorgeous weather and many interesting ways to encounter nature, be it snorkelling the coral reefs or spotting a baby lemurs hitching rides on their mamma’s backs. Malagasy for “mountainous island” the archipelago gets its name from the signature stone formations of Nosy Hara, a region of twelve uninhabited islands encircled by coral reefs. Here among the azure sea you will find salt life at its best—exotic, eclectic and never in a hurry. In fact, you’ll often hear “mora, mora” a Malagasy phrase that speaks to how everything needs its proper time. There is no regular boat traffic into the Nosy Hara, so a sail there is a slice of heaven, and requires some planning in advance. This remote locale provides unrivalled encounters with sea life including 279 species of coral fish, 108 species of coral, a variety of sponges, molluscs, marine turtles, whales, dolphins, birds, and 18 different reptiles including the smallest chameleon in the world - a rare, unique tropical paradise. **Constance Tsarabanjina**, your sanctuary away from home, is infused with a warm Malagasy spirit and offers luxurious eco villas dotting exotic beaches, its own brand of barefoot chic. An intimate retreat, the resort cheerfully anticipates your every desire with staff dedicated to authentic experiences and a commitment to help you discover yours.

The private beach of the restaurant sets the stage for rustic elegance and an abundance of seafood. The laid-back atmosphere mirrors the simplicity of the natural world, reflected in the simple, fresh local ingredients that create flavourful cuisine. You’ve never had afternoon tea quite like this before, or dinner at the beach for that matter. www.constancehotels.com/en/hotels-resorts/madagascar/tsarabanjina

Holland - Romantic sail to the past

There is a lightness about Amsterdam, infused with a precise yet playful spirit unique in all the world. There isn’t a more breathtaking ride in Autumn then on her legendary, often painted canals.



This page, nosy iranja
madagascar, a
piece of heaven



This page, traditional old buildings in Amsterdam

Sail away from the crowds in search of your own space on the water. A much-needed break from terra firma, a calm settles once you enter the realm of canals which come alive in gorgeous, distinctive hues that only arise during the change of seasons, transforming the waterways.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the 165 canals are an efficient and tranquil way to sail through the city’s legendary history as a local and experience the freedom of sailing wherever the day leads. The sights of Amsterdam will take your breath away as you sail past world-famous museums and remnants of medieval walls, constructed to protect her from one-time invaders.

An exceptional retreat with a nod to the past in the heart of this majestic Autumn getaway, **Waldorf Astoria Amsterdam** is a collection of six canal palaces on the Herengracht in Amsterdam, dating from the sixteenth century. A window into Dutch graciousness at its finest, the property combines legendary service and timeless elegance to deliver an unforgettable experience. A short walk from branded boutiques, museums and theatres, this architectural marvel hosts breathtaking views of the canal or courtyard gardens from guest rooms, suites and lofts. Leave the day behind with luxurious treatments at Guerlain Spa which includes a private indoor pool and fitness area. At the end of the day, you will enjoy indulging in world-class dining at the Librije’s Zusje Amsterdam, a two-star Michelin restaurant. waldorfastoria3.hilton.com/en/hotels/netherlands/waldorf-astoria-amsterdam-AMSWAWA/

EARTH

Borneo - Nature’s playground takes centre stage

Borneo is a love letter to nature and her beautiful variety with the orangutan, the clouded leopard, pygmy elephant and proboscis monkey just to name a few of many species you might encounter here. A visit to Semenggok Orangutan Sanctuary finds an Orangutan enjoying a plump, wild durian. A wildlife safari along the Kinabatangan River invites you to journey deep into the heart of Borneo and enjoy your stay at the renowned **Borneo Rainforest Lodge**.

A luxurious rainforest chalet awaits with amenities to match. Enjoy a unique experience nestled in the jungle where nature takes centre stage and captivates day and night. The sounds of the topics inspire as the rhythm of the jungle tunes in to the rhythm of your heart. Autumn is an excellent time to visit as the rains have not yet arrived and the temperatures have ceased to sizzle. The minimalist design of the new, premium villas boasts green conservation, with particular sensitivity to a minimal footprint. Each has a luxuriously large outdoor bathtub atop a spacious deck with panoramic views of the river and tranquil forest landscapes.

The Tree Top Canopy Walkway at 26 metres high, is one of the most stunning in Sabah spanning over 300 metres with various viewing platforms. You will feel like you are floating upon the platforms when you contemplate the 130-million-

year-old virgin jungle high in the canopy. The lodge offers the adventurous many options to explore the jungle including an animal spotting drive, extended night drive, and extended night walk.

After a day of discovery while trekking and bird watching you will enjoy visiting the lodge’s spa for treatments that are creatively labelled two-hour Danum Valley Trekking Treatment and Bird Watching Shoulder & Back Therapy. www.borneonaturetours.com

Sonoma - Moon Valley’s extremes

Life in Moon Valley is legendary, but it’s the little-known stories here that keep her front and centre on wine’s world stage and the simple pleasures of watching a full moon traverse the local mountains to keep you coming back for more. Sonoma is rustic beauty and casual elegance. Hollywood has nothing on drama compared to the humble grape. By enduring extreme stressors like thin soil and a lack of water, the fruit becomes flavourful and complex. Moon Valley brings award-winning extremes.

Wine lovers will enjoy romantic, historical wine tours through Benziger’s biodynamic vineyards where there are plenty of intimate wine tastings. History comes alive at Buena Vista Winery, the oldest winery in California founded by Count Agoston Haraszthy after fleeing political persecution in search of Purple Gold during California’s Gold Rush. Petroni Vineyard was the first and only winemaker to bring the Sangiovese Brunello di Montalcino clone to Sonoma from Italy, and the first to introduce food and wine pairings in the valley. Brainchild of Chef Max Porterkhamsky, delicacies - exquisitely served in voluminous wine caves - are inspired by his nomadic wanderings, a love of the stories behind local ingredients, and playful extremes like grilled peaches paired with fresh mozzarella in a micro-citrus balsamic reduction with home-grown estate olive oil.

Continue your flare for the luxurious and dramatic with a stay at the **Glass House**, the quintessential Sonoma Valley home, which appears to float above the tree line as if by magic providing storybook sunset views from every room. Elegant, modern, and minimal with touches of Asian artwork and accessories, guests enjoy the ultimate retreat among the property’s outdoor spaces. A private chef entertains guests by the pool and spa or serves up an intimate candlelit meal inspired by your latest passion, be it Cabernet Sauvignon or Sauvignon Blanc - a celebration of nature’s bounty and the joy that comes from endurance. www.beautiful-places.com/villas/glass_house

SKY

Kenya - Airborne over Maasai Mara National Reserve

The romantic scale and breadth of wildlife here is the stuff of legend with epic backdrops found in dreams and movies. While wildlife spotting is year-round here, the vistas are the most spectacular during the wildebeest migration, billed as ‘the greatest wildlife show on earth’ which ends in October, coinciding with the end of the dry season. One of the most beautiful ways to see the migration is in a hot





This page, Hot air Balloon over Mara river, Kenya **Opposite,** Ritz Carlton Bachelor Gulch Wildflower Hall, Shimla pool with valley view





This page, landscape view of Sonoma valley vineyards at sunset

air balloon. From the commanding perspective of the clouds, you will understand nature and your place in it in new ways as your spirit soars to new heights.

You will get to experience all of this from a luxury tent that harkens to the refined elegance of a bygone era. **Angama Mara**, inspired by the Swahili word for “suspended in mid-air” is a fitting base camp for your hot air balloon safari. The hotel has your coffee and tea ready in the wee hours of the morning, a fitting time to prepare to soar.

You’ve needed a new dawn. While watching the balloon inflate you welcome the here and now. And just like, that you drift upwards, floating on the breeze of a gentle wind with what seems like all of Africa below. You sail along the Mara River over the open plains and the drama unfolds of tracking lions and wildebeests, a feast for the eyes and feeling so incredibly free the experience doesn’t seem real. Something to celebrate at the champagne breakfast.

When it’s time to retire you will feel like royalty in your tented suite with 11-metre wide floor-to-ceiling glass fronts providing breathtaking views of the wilderness. Parquet floors and splashes of Masi red highlight the elegant modern interiors punctuated with artisan textiles and artwork. www.angama.com

India - Enchantment in the Himalayas

Soaring at 2438 metres, **Wildflower Hall** in the outskirts of Shimla provides a crowning view of nature in all her glory. Autumn in the Himalaya brings supernatural colours to the canvas of your life. Trekking in this wonderland will feel as if you have entered an enchanted world among 23 acres of the protected cedar forest.

In a land full of adventure, thrill seekers will enjoy mountain biking some of the world’s sweetest runs. An abundance of wellness experiences at the hotel will capture your heart including a renewal of vows ceremony featuring opulent spa rituals for the bride and groom, traditional henna hand painting, salon services, and the bride’s arrival by horse-drawn carriage to the flower-filled ceremony at the Shiva temple. Other unique experiences include sunset at Naila Fort, and Rajput Romance of Rajvilas, a lavish rejuvenation for couples using Ayurvedic therapies to stimulate the body’s energy centres. Yoga sessions and Aarti Puja Ceremonies are complimentary and unforgettable.

Luxury at Wildflower Hall is found in the gracious staff and their anticipation of your every need. But you won’t need much when you stay in the two-bedroom Lord Kitchener Suite. 135 square metres of pure, elegant enjoyment begins with forever views of the Himalayas and ends your day around the open fireplace in the exquisite warmth of paisley sofas, rich wooden mantels and a canopied four-poster bed with Spanish-tiled bathrooms

Complimentary wine tastings usher in a luxurious dining experience within an intimate, elegant glass conservatory that serves up majestic views of the Himalayas. Featuring pan-Indian, Asian and Continental specialities, guests are bound to find an indulgence they love. Come early for a cocktail at Cavalry Bar filled with antique war memorabilia or late for a relaxing nightcap under the stars. www.oberoihotels.com/hotels-in-shimla-wfh