

MURIELLE'S TRAVEL PICKS FOR 2009

Dear Friends,

I just got back from Cannes, France, where I attended The International Luxury Travel Mart. Three days of one big conversation between 1489 exhibitors and 1265 travel agents. Every city, region, country, island you can think of was represented. A tour around the world in 3 days, I was in heaven...The cultural exchange was awesome and the energy flowing.

Of all the fascinating trips I was able to discover, my picks are:

- **Patagonia** to experience its silence, glaciers, fjords and see majestic Mt Fitzroy; to cruise with Cruceros Australis through the Strait of Magellan, exploring Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego and Cape Horn. **Easter Island** to walk in the footsteps of ancient people who have disappeared from the world.
- **St Petersburg** to join Smithsonian Journeys on their exceptional tour next March or November "The glories of the Hermitage". Study Leader Tatyana Pasynkova, a senior curator, will accompany both departures, sharing her in-depth knowledge and passion for the museum's collections. She will be joined by other expert curators and guides for an insightful, educational and relaxed stay in St. Petersburg. This privileged-access tour is a unique chance to experience the life of a Hermitage insider, providing rare access to areas typically restricted to the public. Participants will spend Monday morning, when the Hermitage is closed to the public, at leisure exploring the museum free from the press of the crowds, followed by lunch in the staff café. "The Glories of the Hermitage" also takes participants on a special tour of the state-of-the-art storage facility off-site. Membership to the International Friends' Club of the Hermitage is also provided as a benefit of the program.
- **French Polynesia**; try a new experience and embark on a small ship for a spectacular itinerary. From mountain-lined blue lagoons and coral reefs of the Society Islands, to the pancake-flat, coral atolls of the Tuamotus, to the rugged, towering cliffs of the Marquesas...no two stops are the same on this ever-changing discovery.
- **The Sultanate of Oman and Qatar**, fabled land of the *1,001 nights*, where ancient traditions of the desert still exist; spectacular terrain, history, culture, cattle auction; visit Doha, the capital city of Qatar with its intriguing blend of Oriental, Arabic and contemporary architecture.
- **Madagascar**, to discover thousands of rare plants, ancient baobab trees, untouched beaches. To watch playful ring-tailed lemurs dance from branch to branch, hear the eerie cry of the Indri lemur in the forest and explore the limestone pinnacles known as *tsingy* in the Ankarana Reserve.

- **Laos**, to discover Luang Prabang, perhaps the best-preserved traditional city in Southeast Asia; to cruise on the upper Mekong along fantastic river landscapes, passing by World Heritage Sites and aboriginal villages. On this part of the Mekong quiet and calm parts of the river alternate with most dramatic and exciting shore sceneries; tropical lush green mountains, impressive rock formations and secluded villages along the river banks.
- **Great Empires of West Africa**; The other side of Africa; be one of the few travelers to experience the extraordinary Akwasidee Festival in Ghana; travel deep into Mali's highlands to visit the star-worshipping Dogon people and witness a traditional Dogon Mask Dance; explore the voodoo market in Benin with a guide well versed in local traditions; visit four UNESCO World Heritage Sites – Tireli, Cape Coast Castle, Accra and Timbuktu; journey across the Saharan sand dunes by camel to meet the nomadic Tuareg people; discover the African version of Venice in Ganvie.
- **Lisbon**, to visit the Calouste Gulbenkian museum, one of the world's finest private art collections, amassed over a period of 40 years by oil magnate Calouste Gulbenkian, who was one of the 20th century's wealthiest men; to discover the university town of Evora, a World Heritage site for its well-preserved Roman and Moorish heritage and to enjoy relaxing stays in *pousadas*.
- **Sikkim and Bhutan**, the Land of the peaceful dragon, the land of monarchs, fire dances, monasteries, unsurpassed in its scenic majesty and vibrant culture; go where few have gone before as you ascend high into the Himalayas for a glimpse of the last Shangri-La.

If you have a special interest for any city, region, island or country in the world, let me know and I will be happy to share the wonderful contacts I just made.

By traveling this year, you will provide jobs for many workers all over the world.
YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Fondly,

Murielle Blanchard

*"We live in a wonderful world that is full of beauty, charm and adventure. There is no end to the adventures we can have if only we seek them with our eyes open." --
Jawaharal Nehru*