

The top 10 hotel discoveries of the year from around the world

SUSAN KUROSAWA

RAINFOREST HIDEOUT
THE DATAI, LANGKAWI, MALAYSIA

This family-friendly beachfront estate on the northwest coast of Langkawi Island was relaunched this year after an 18-month overhaul. The late West Australian architect Kerry Hall, who conceived the property in 1993, would surely be pleased that it's not a total transformation but a clever uplift of facilities in collaboration with his original interior design colleague, Didier Lefort. The footprint, on tall poles and lofty foundations, is soft and light, even buoyant, as if The Datai is merely tethered on its steep, cascading site, with minimal imposition on the terrain. New to the 121-room inventory mix are eight Rainforest Pool Villas with 10m infinity-edge swimming pools overlooking tree canopies and a slender river. Expect to encounter macaque and dusky leaf monkeys, great hornbills and flotillas of butterflies with names as irresistible as painted jeebel and golden birdwing.

Don't miss: An early-morning nature walk along the beach with naturalist Nicole Lim or one of her equally knowledgeable colleagues.
Also consider: Gaya Island Resort, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia.
•thedatai.com

ISLAND DREAMER
LUX NORTH ARI ATOLL, THE MALDIVES

Opened in February, this sister property to LUX South Ari Atoll features 67 villas, either overwater or by the beach, all with substantial pools and terraces as white cubes with rooftop styles and nautical flourishes that look a little bit Miami and a whole lot tropical moderne. Island hosts attend every category of accommodation; there's a super-cool beach club with DJs and multiple restaurants. Buggies can be ordered at any hour but the resort is not spaced-out, so strolling, ideally barefoot and fancy-free, and with a coconut or mango ice-cream cone in hand, is the way to go. The experience here is dressed-down and non-starchy, even playful. There's an old-style red phone box for free calls anywhere in the world; just connect, yell that you're never coming home, and hang up.
Don't miss: Order a floating breakfast to be served on trays in your private pool.
Also consider: Soneva Jani, The Maldives.
•luxresorts.com

THE REBIRTH
RAFFLES SINGAPORE

That name Raffles is a byword for colonial grandeur and this most fabled of Asian hotels reopened in August, grander than ever, after an 18-month restoration. The neoclassical pile was built in 1887, the first in Singapore with electricity and ceiling fans, and has undergone matronly nips and tucks over the past 132 years but none as thorough and sparkling as the latest incarnation. The 115 guestrooms are now equipped with the latest technology and up-to-date ensembles, the Writers' Bar has been reinstated and top mixologists are in command, and celebrity chefs of the ilk of Anne-Sophie Pic and Alain Ducasse have opened signature restaurants within the hotel and its branching arcades. But some things never change. So here's cheers to the legendary Long Bar, home of the cherry-pink Singapore sling, where gunny sacks of peanuts still preside, their shells ready to be tossed on the floor in a most non-Singaporean manner.
Don't miss: A full colonial afternoon tea in the heritage lobby; be sure to book well ahead.
Also consider: Eastern & Oriental



Reborn and rediscovered



Clockwise from main: LUX North Ari Atoll in The Maldives; Me-Gal restaurant in Wildlife Retreat at Taronga in Sydney; Cambodia's Shinta Mani Wild; The Warehouse Hotel, Singapore; The Landing in New Zealand; Datoi Langkawi Resort Malaysia



Hotel, Penang, Malaysia.
•raffles.com

ARTFUL LODGINGS
THE LANDING, BAY OF ISLANDS, NEW ZEALAND

This glamorous estate of more than 400ha on Wairoa Bay is home to a vineyard and four residences, from two to six bedrooms, offered as separate or combined bookings. "Magical!" declared Barack Obama, who promised staff he would return with Michelle. Choose between The Boathouse, The Vineyard Villa, Gabriel Residence and the sprawling Cooper Residence, named for California-based owner Peter Cooper, who grew up in the Bay of Islands, spied the waterfront land on the southwest tip of the Puerua Peninsula from a helicopter two decades ago, and the rest, as they say, is history in these parts. It could all be a rich

man's plaything, but the site is one of the earliest for Maori and European exchange. There is abiding respect for the land and tribal heritage, and on display in the Cooper Residence is the largest collection of Maori art and artefacts to be catalogued outside a museum.
Don't miss: A Bay of Islands cruise with skipper Brett Michalick on the estate's plush cabin cruiser, Iti Rangitiki.
Also consider: The Residences at Kauri Cliffs, Bay of Islands.
•thelandingnz.com

SMALL WONDER
MOSS HOTEL, HOBART

The sage, leaf-green, lichen, slate and rust tones of the decor at this petite property clearly evoke the colours of the Tasmanian wilderness. Moss Hotel is folded into a Georgian-era former warehouse, with original timber beams and



convict-cut sandstone; there are just 39 guestrooms in the opening phase with another 21 due to open as an annex in a heritage building further along waterfront Salamanca Place. Collaborations with local design studios, artisans and providers also imbue the hotel with a clear sense of place, from Derek Henderson's assembly of photographs and richly toned island timbers to big bowls of Huon Valley apples in public areas, and Tasmanian-sourced produce and wine in guestroom larders and mini-bars.
Don't miss: There's no onsite restaurant but many options are within cooee; best neighbourhood bar is Institut Polaire on Murray Street.
Also consider: Henry Jones Art Hotel, Hobart.
•mosshotel.com

MANOR FROM HEAVEN
HECKFIELD PLACE, HAMPSHIRE

Here we have the English country-house dream writ large. On a 162ha estate — complete with parkettes and "pleasure gardens", and a productive organic farm — near the town of Hook, Heckfield Place consists of a Grade II-listed, red-brick Georgian mansion with later extensions in a wooded park. Its renaissance has been more than six years in the making over from a rather drab events centre, but with a history that rolls back to the mid-18th century. The main house is almost as grand as Highclere Castle (aka Downton Abbey) but without the ticketed day-trippers and upstairs-downstairs divide. Old trees such as copper beeches and Douglas firs stand tall, and stonework-pretty walled gardens are dotted with glasshouses and pot-



ting sheds and perhaps the possibility of Beatrix Potter bunnies. It's all a delight, including fine food overseen by culinary director Skye Gynnell and six types of accommodation, from snug chambers to massive suites.
Don't miss: Even if not staying, book a lunch at the conservatory-style Marle brasserie; in summer, try to bag a terrace table.
Also consider: Coworth Park, Ascot.
•heckfieldplace.com

HIPSTER HQ
THE WAREHOUSE HOTEL, SINGAPORE

A combo of cement finishes, bare bricks and steel girders has become the interior template for many cool new hotels but the semi-industrial style of The Warehouse echoes the original architecture and purpose of this 1895-

built storage-house building, relaunched in 2017 as a 37-room hotel. Even cogs, wheels and pulleys have been repurposed as design features. Pick of the digs are River View Lofts on the second (top) floor, with double-height ceilings in the sleeping zone, and windows overlooking Robertson Quay. All the accommodation essentials are folded into compact spaces but the details are well-considered and Po, the 52-seat lobby-level diner, serves terrific food of "elevated hawker staples" and classics like Popo (grandma) used to make.
Don't miss: Ask the front desk for a copy of Secrets of the Trade, a little black book of insider retail, gallery and restaurant recommendations.
Also consider: Hotel Indigo Singapore Katong.
•designhotels.com

NEXT TO NATURE
WILDLIFE RETREAT AT TARONGA, SYDNEY

On the east edge of the NSW capital's famous Taronga Zoo, this spanking new lodge is hunkered in bushland, with its eco-smart credentials clearly on display. Cox Architecture has delivered an environmentally sensitive design of reconstituted timber panels and perforated metal blades and interiors are replete with creature comforts. There are 62 guestrooms and open-plan suites in five lodges linked by stairs, elevators and energy-efficient external passageways. Four accommodation styles offer either bushland, harbour or treetop views, plus the unusual option of close-up outlooks to the residents of the retreat's exclusive Sanctuary animal habitat. Me-Gal restaurant includes botanical motifs in its decor, prevailing Australian flavours and spectacular panoramas.
Don't miss: Ranger-escorted early-morning walks, exclusive to guests before the zoo opens for the day, down to the Wollemi Aviary where regent honeyeaters and bright parrots swoop and swirl.
Also consider: ZooFari Lodge, Taronga Western Plains Zoo, Dubbo NSW.
•taronga.org.au/sydney-zoo/wildlife-retreat

URBAN PLANNER
ALILA BANGSAR, KUALA LUMPUR

Occupying levels 35 to 42 of the mixed-use Establishment building, this 143-room retreat in the Malaysian capital's newly cool Bangsar neighbourhood is packed with leisure facilities. The double-height lobby opens to courtyards and an atrium pool open to the sky has been slotted into the structural matrix. Shanghai-based design studio Neri & Hu describes the top layers as "a lantern open to the surrounding city" and the accommodation ensues as "floating boxes", referring to the windowless design and cube-like form. All categories have floor-to-ceiling windows and a decor of charcoal, dove and white, with light teak timbers and strong black uprights and horizontal supports that create a grid into which custom-made furniture fits neatly. At Entier restaurant, Japanese-born chef Masashi Hirouchi, a Joel Robuchon protege, serves "complete meat", from tongue to tail, but seafood options are available, and the adjacent Pacific Standard cocktail lounge, which is all a bit mid-century Los Angeles noir, features retro cocktails enlivened by fancy salts and infused vinegars, just made to be sipped along to soul music soundtracks.
Also try: Hotel Stripes Kuala Lumpur Autograph Collection.
•alilahotels.com
•entierfrenchdining.com

JUNGLE HANGOUT
SHINTA MANI WILD — BENSLEY COLLECTION, CAMBODIA

Fifteen explorer tents constitute this luxury outpost on a nature reserve at the confluence of several national parks. Conceptualised and designed by Bangkok-based architect Bill Bensley, this is camping but not as you know it. Ensuite tents on stilts, erected without any removal of trees, are filled with ephemera and collectibles, from explorer trunks to framed photographs of Cambodian royalty. There's a slipper tub on each deck, veiled with greenery and overlooking a surging river, and arrival by zipline at this fabulous folly, whoosh over a waterfall and right into The Landing Zone Bar, is optional, but highly recommended, as is an outing with armed Wildlife Alliance rangers patrolling for poachers and removing snares. Heaven for butterfly watchers, too.
Don't miss: Chat with manager Sangjay Choegyal about the camp's conservation protocols to stop mining and logging and protect wildlife.
Also consider: Capella Ubud, Bali.
•bensleycollection.com
•shintamaniwild.com

Instantly at home in a strange, exotic city where the world's civilisations meet



JOURNEYS

PICO IYER

A rush of hot air had assaulted me the instant I stepped out of the plane, on my first night ever in Singapore. The tarmac was still black from a recent downpour. I'd never seen an airport so sleek or spotless as Changi, so perfectly a home for visitors from everywhere. But what hit me no less was the presence of tropical darkness inches away from the air-conditioning. As I stepped out into the humid night — bougainvillea all around the perfectly manicured

highway — I knew only one name to give the taxi driver as we sped to I Beach Road. I was 27 at the time, a writer on world affairs for Time magazine. Just one night before getting on to the plane I'd dosed a long article on Iran for my bosses, while also completing a cover story on English writer Cyril Connolly for an alternative weekly. Clearly, I was halfway out the door already. And just five months earlier, I'd made my first trip to Southeast Asia — Thailand and Burma — and fallen under the spell of its spiced ambiguities. It was 1984 and the first Macintosh computer had appeared on a few desks, with the first TED conference not many months away. But I was being pulled in the opposite direction, towards the night

and everything I couldn't put a name to. On my way to Singapore I stopped in Bali. My first full evening there, a woman I later recognised to be a witch led me out into the unlit lanes, eyes blazing. Everywhere was the smell of clove cigarettes, the dissonant jangle of gamelan orchestras between the trees. The urchins selling scarfs along the road had angel faces, but from the monkey forest down the street came a ceaseless demonic chatter. I needed to ground myself somewhere that felt solid and changeless, even familiar, and when we pulled up at the three-storey palazzo I'd been hearing about since boyhood, something in me quickened at the sight of the famous fan-shaped traveller's palms at its entrance.



Raffles Hotel in Singapore

But I also felt as if I were entering several pasts at once, and that somehow they all came together

to make the outlines of a future. Here were aspects of my earliest days, among the brisk bedrooms

and impeccable lawns of Oxford, mixed with spaces that reminded me of my 15th-century boarding-school near London, where the white busts that surrounded us as we delivered speeches in Latin had names that chimed with the Draycotts and Balmorals and Connaughts remembered in 380 Singapore street names. But here, too, was the world of my parents, growing up in a British India that would not have seemed far at all from the Singapore of the day. I could see my father getting off the train at Victoria Terminus and walking across what looked like a padang — white-flannel cricketers everywhere — as he proceeded to the library near the bell tower at Elphinstone College in Bombay. I could see my mother, meeting with Gandhi as she and

her family worked to win their country's independence. I could picture both of them moving from that people took to be the public voice of the American Empire. This could be home, I thought, as I looked around. Here was India and Southeast Asia and England and New York all at once. Here was something that brought my past, my present and the future I dreamed of (in Japan) together. I lugged my heavy suitcase to the modest check-in desk, under a huge mural, and found myself looking at the other powerful element in the equation — China — as front desk staff painstakingly inscribed entries in large, handwritten registers.

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This is an edited extract from *This Could Be Home: Raffles Hotel and the City of Tomorrow* by Pico Iyer (Epigram Books, Singapore); shop.epigrambooks.sg.