

THE INSIDERS ALBA, ITALY

SIMON TANCRED  
HIDDEN ITALY WALKING TOURS

**STAY:** Hotel Palazzo Finati is a historic townhouse in Alba, located in Piedmont, Cuneo. It has nine individually decorated guestrooms, complete with frescoed ceilings, parquet floors, Persian carpets and antique furniture. Host Paola Fava offers a generous breakfast of local produce in the vaulted dining room; palazzofinati.it.

Villa La Meridiana-Casinca Reine is an elegant 18th-century art nouveau country house overlooking the medieval towers of Alba and the Tanaro River and surrounded by gardens and family vineyards. The villa has four double guestrooms and four self-contained apartments. Join in the grape harvest or a search for truffles in the nearby forests. villalameridianaalba.it.



**TREAT:** The art nouveau Pasticceria Cignetti has cafe tables in the shade of Alba's cathedral and is justly famous for its hazelnut nougat and Barolo and Moscato chocolates (Alba is home of Ferrero chocolates and Nutella); Via Vittorio Emanuele, 5.

**EAT:** Piazza Duomo and La Piola is a single address for two diverse culinary experiences. The bustling La Piola osteria specialises in traditional Albesse cuisine such as angel hair pasta with roasting juices and rabbit stew with roasted bell peppers. Upstairs is one of the most celebrated restaurants in Italy, the three Michelin-starred Ristorante Piazza Duomo where chef Enrico Crippa presents innovative cuisine rooted in local history with a touch of the Orient; lapiola-alba.it. Osteria dell'Arco is one of the champions of the Slow Food movement; it's a charming family-run osteria, tucked away in the arcades of Alba's busiest piazza and serves classic dishes with a modern twist, such as vitello tonnato, cod salad, risotto with porcini mushrooms and fried Cherasco snails; Piazza Savona, 5.

**DRINK:** Caffè Calissano was founded in the late 1800s and carries the name of one of Alba's most prestigious wine producers. Recently restored, its rooms glisten with gold-leaf stucco, antique mirrors and zinc counters and it offers a range of wine-based aperitivi, white wines and spumante; Piazza Risorgimento, 3.

**SHOP:** Known as the "king of truffles", Giacomo Morra was one of the great promoters of Alba's produce in the 50s and 60s. Tartufi Morra is a shop that perpetuates his name and legacy; there's fresh and preserved truffles plus pasta and cheese; tartufimorra.com.

**EXPLORE:** The University for Truffle Dogs was founded in Roddi, a hilltop village 6km south of Alba, in 1880 by (the present "rector") Giovanni Monichiero's great grandfather. There's a museum and products on sale and, by appointment, Monichiero escorts visitors on truffle hunts; universitadedecanidatartufo.it.

Alba is considered the capital of the hilly area of Langhe, and is famous for its white truffle, peach and wine production. Simon Tancred's Hidden Italy Walking Tours company runs escorted and self-guided tours throughout the country. More: hiddenitaly.com.au.



SILVERSEA Cruises is including shore excursions and two hours of Wi-Fi access daily (unlimited in top suites) for bookings on its 52 Mediterranean cruises this year; silversea.com.



RATHER than elephant-back tours, Isan Explorer in northeast Thailand has guided walking excursions with unchained jumbo; isanexplorer.com.



BOOKING.com has released a Booking Now app that offers customers a personalised reservations service and no fee for rooms at more than 580,000 properties worldwide.



THE Very Hungry Nomads site has collated a lively local and international selection of cooking classes, authentic food experiences and gourmet tours; veryhungrynomads.com.

HOME AND AWAY



THE utterly lovely AYANA resort at Bali's Jimbaran Bay, 20 minutes from Denpasar airport, has relaunched 24 Ocean View Pool Villas. The top-tier hideaways are among 78 villas within the cliff-top retreat's extensive landscaped grounds; the refurbished look includes a 15 per cent increase in interior living area as part of the overall 298sq m footprint, which features a private plunge pool. There are new soft furnishings, fixtures and lighting, and the marble bathrooms have been extended by 50 per cent with an additional indoor-outdoor shower with garden-facing glass wall. Aside from a de rigueur martini at the resort's madly popular Rock Bar, guests should head to the AYANA Thermes Marins Spa's Aquatonic Seawater Therapy Pool. Beneath a thatched pavilion roof, progress through 12 hydro-massage stations of varying temperatures and pressure jet streams, geysers and micro-bubbles and emerge happily pummelled, needled and de-stressed. Villa privileges include (otherwise unobtainable) sunset reservations at Rock Bar, spa extras, sunrise yoga sessions, 24-hour butler service and dedicated check-in lobby and services. More: ayanaresort.com.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

T & I LOVES



WITH Christmas barely gone, Valentine's Day is on the rosy horizon. Already in a romantic frame of mind, sister hotels Crown Towers and Crown Metropal in Melbourne have moved beyond the expected bouquets and creamy chocolates with newly released spa packages and gift ideas. The Crown Gifts luxury store (level one, Crown Metropal) is featuring a set of freshly launched his-and-hers spicy-scented Roi and floral and feminine Reine candles (pictured; \$70 each). ISIKA Day Spa at Crown Metropal has a Be My Valentine indulgence for two, covering a 60-minute couples massage, 30 minutes use of Jacuzzi and steam room, valet parking, sparkling wine and a \$50 Crown Gifts shopping card (\$320 for two). There's a similar deal at the Crown Spa at Crown Towers; both packages are available from February 1 to March 15 or make a purchase of \$250 or more at Crown Gifts and receive that complimentary king-and-queen candle duo. More: crownhotels.com.au.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

ACCESSORY

MOELOCO FLIP FLOPS, \$35

THESE Australian-designed rubber flip flops come in four options, each with an inspirational message on the sole (Dream Crazy, I Am Peace, I'm Happy or Live Love), which makes an imprint on sand as you walk. Moeloco provides one pair of school shoes to an impoverished child in India for each pair of flip flops sold. More: moeloco.com.

SHARON FOWLER



IN THE HOME

MEGAN HESS COCKTAIL TRAY, \$245

MELBOURNE-based fashion illustrator Megan Hess has just released a collection of serving trays in lacquered wood, each with a suede-covered base, accent stitching and cut-out handles. The High Tea tray (pictured) features her vintage-inspired characters indulging in tea and treats at a Parisian-style restaurant. More: meganhess.com.



SHARON FOWLER

ON THE ROAD

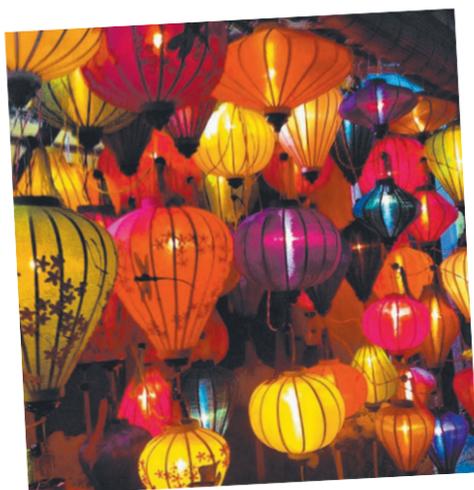
AESOP RESOLUTE HYDRATING BODY BALM, 120ML, \$37

NEW from Aesop, and in this Australian brand's signature stores and selected stockists from February 24, this emollient balm is blended with an oriental mix of essential oils, including crushed coriander seeds, black peppercorns and patchouli. The balm absorbs readily and has the right kind of spicy scent to appeal to chaps. It also contains shea butter, sweet almond and wheat germ oils and Vitamin E-rich carrot root extract, and is available in a 500ml dispenser (\$103). More: aesop.com.



SUSAN KUROSAWA

Light and bright in Vietnam's heritage town of Hoi An



SNAP DECISIONS

SUSAN KUROSAWA

LET there be lanterns. The historic little trading town of Hoi An in the central coast region of Vietnam (inland from Da Nang) is UNESCO World Heritage listed and famous for its tailors and silken textiles.

Despite the throngs of tourists, many being pedalled along in convoys of cyclos, it feels a bit like a movie set. It wouldn't seem entirely ridiculous if a martial arts master were to catapult from a tiled rooftop or a shapely maiden in traditional ao dai costume twirl her oil-paper parasol and sing for the cameras.

The ground levels of Chinese-style shop-houses lining Nguyen Thai Hoc and Bach Dang Streets, plus numerous side lanes such as Le Loi, are full of shops festooned with silk and brocade lanterns in bulbous or slender shapes, bouncing about doorways and hung from posts and rafters, all are ribbed and can be folded down for easy passage home.

My first visit is by day and the selection appears overwhelming but next night, the choice seems easier as colour is the key; the lanterns glow brightly, from mulberry and scarlet to jazzy orange and gold, some

with patterns of blossoms and butterflies, dragons and stalks of bamboo.

The town is lit up like a fairyland as locals and visitors alike promenade over the Cam Nam Bridge and beside the Thu Bon River

The six lanterns I buy (and which later become gorgeous hangings for garden parties) come with little notes that they are "certified by the Intellectual Property Department", which should make any shopper feel righteous.

Dinner that evening is a treat at a riverside table at the colonnaded and colonial-inspired Brother's Café on Phan Boi Chau Street, after which, like most tourists, I stroll more lantern-lit alleys to pause and lower a candle in a scalloped paper "boat" from Cam Nam Bridge via a long hook into the river.

It costs the equivalent of less than a \$1 from the candle hawkers and, like me, surely everyone wishes they could return, and soon, to charming Hoi An.

Follow on Instagram: susankurosawa