

FIRST-CLASS Travel

ART HOTELS | Rooms with a view

Where travelers can rest, relax and feast their eyes on fine artworks

Museums no longer have a monopoly on great art. An increasing number of super-luxury hotels offer their guests magnificent in-house art collections to peruse and even purchase.

The Peninsula Tokyo boasts a permanent collection of more than 1,000 pieces on display in public areas and guest rooms. The artworks were created by nearly 60 artists — 90 percent of them Japanese — and personally selected for display in the hotel by the renowned interior designer Yukio Hashimoto.

Says the hotel's general manager, Malcolm Thompson: "From its exterior, representing a traditional Japanese lantern, to the lobby's wooden lattices, echoing the *senbongoshi* of old Kyoto, it was only right to want to complement the Peninsula Tokyo's rich Japanese design with an extensive art collection of both traditional and modern Japanese pieces."

To fully appreciate the collection, the hotel offers a 45-minute "Art Walk" tour on iPod (in English and Japanese), available to guests on a complimentary basis from the concierge desk.

"We find that guests appreciate the fact that the Peninsula Tokyo reflects the country it is in," says Thompson. "At times, guests don't have the chance to visit local museums or art galleries, but they comment that the hotel's art collection and Art Walk provide the perfect glimpse into Japanese art and design."

For those guests who do have a bit of time to spare, public art in the Marunouchi neighborhood surrounding the Peninsula is included in another complimentary iPod tour, the leisurely 60-minute Eye Walk through Hibiya Park, the Imperial Gardens and nearby streets. For those with an interest in pop art, Tokyo's only artistic tribute to Godzilla is right across the street from the Peninsula: a bronze statue of the famous film creature.

Some hotels flaunt their art as part of guest packages. Throughout 2010, South Korea's Shilla Hotel is offering a Gallery at the Shilla package that includes a personal

guided tour of the hotel's 2,000-piece in-door art collection, access to the hotel's acclaimed 70-work Sculpture Garden (spread over its own park in the heart of Seoul) and tickets to the city's celebrated Leeum Museum of Art.

The Shilla collection includes prominent Korean as well as international artists, ranging from Salvador Dali and Picasso to the American pop artists Tom Wesselmann and Bill Thompson.

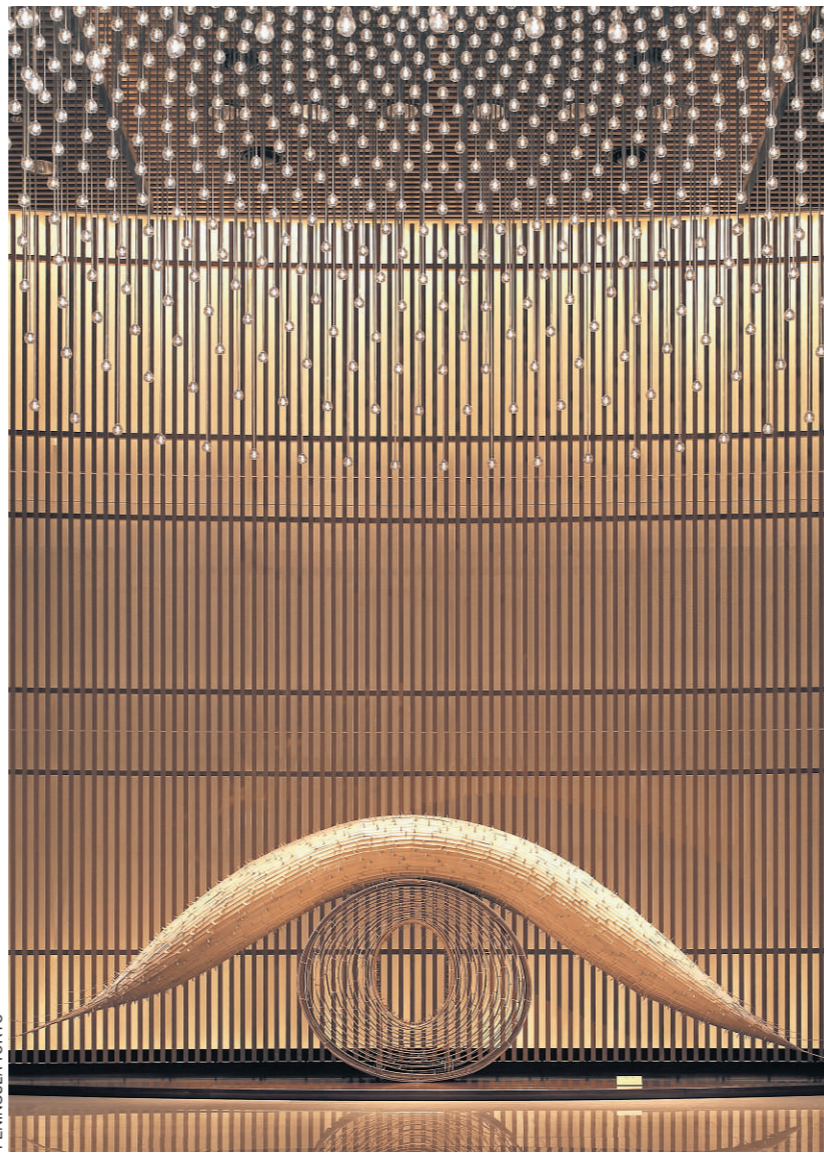
In the United States, the Bellagio is often credited with sparking the hotel art rush when the deluxe Las Vegas hotel opened its doors in 1998 with a fine-art gallery to complement its casino, swimming pools and other amenities.

A dozen years later, the Bellagio continues to lead the way. Its current offering (until January 2011) is "Figuratively Speaking: A Survey of the Human Form," comprising more than 40 paintings, photographs, sculptures and video installations by 29 artists whose traditional and contemporary perspectives on figurative art are said to have helped define the genre in the late 19th, 20th and early 21st centuries.

Featured works are borrowed from the permanent collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego as well as MGM Resorts International's own extensive collection.

Hugh M. Davies of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego says, "Spanning more than three decades of figurative expression, these selected works — by such notable artists as Roy Lichtenstein, Bill Viola, Keith Haring, Cindy Sherman, Tony Oursler and Barbara Kruger — use the figure in innovative ways, provoking the most varied of interpretations." He adds that many of these works are on display for the first time.

Some hotels are lucky enough to display the works of artists who actually stayed, socialized and sometimes created on the premises. New York's Gramercy Park Hotel — a longtime bohemian hangout — is currently exhibiting 20th-century masterpieces



Gracing the Peninsula Tokyo is a stylized dragon in bamboo by Kelsen Hama.

by Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Damien Hirst, Richard Prince, Keith Haring and Julian Schnabel.

In Minneapolis, Le Méridien Chambers is part hotel, part art gallery. It is home to a collection of more than 200 pieces of original, edgy and controversial contemporary works of art, many of them from the Young British Artist movement.

Drawn from the hotel owner Ralph Burnett's private collection, the pieces are scattered throughout the public areas and 60 guest rooms of this contemporary boutique hotel. The hotel also offers an

"Unlock Art" program, with complimentary access to local cultural institutions like the Walker Art Center through presentation of a room key card.

Across the border in Canada, the Fairmont Royal York hotel in Toronto recently offered a summer "Drama and Desire at The Art Gallery of Ontario" package with entrance tickets to an exhibition that included artwork from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay.

In South America, Casa Andina in the artsy Miraflores district of Lima, Peru offers guests a private perusal of a fine collection of Peruvian contemporary art and colonial-era antiques throughout its public areas, reflecting the hotel's history and local character.

The hotel restaurant boasts a large, tactile sculpture by the Limeño artist Alvaro Roca Rey: "Cóndor Metálico," a modern wood-and-metal interpretation of a condor. The entire back wall of this area is graced by a massive fresco called "Fauna Limeña," created expressly for the space by the Dutch artist Gam Klutier, a longtime resident of Peru.

Engravings of contemporary Peruvian artists adorn the restaurant's other walls. Meanwhile, antiques in the hotel's other public areas include furniture, religious statues, benches, tables and a 300-year-old ceramic *botija* (a large earthenware jug used to collect rainwater).

The Hotel Majestic has long been known as the art hotel of Barcelona. The collection displayed in every nook and cranny of the premises features works by significant artists such as Tàpies, Saura, Guinovart, Cobo, Casamada and Gerardo Rueda. Contemporary art is represented by a wide array of works by 1980s artists and engravings by Anish Kapoor, Richard Long and Richard Deacon.

CULINARY TOURISM | A taste of the territory

Chocolate lures the footloose gourmet

His dreadlocks tucked up beneath a colorful tam, Edmund Brown takes another vanload of visitors through the Grenada Chocolate Factory. The Caribbean has been producing cocoa beans for more than 300 years, described by Brown with no small amount of pride as "some of the most high-flavored in the world." But what Grenada didn't have until recently was the means of transforming those dark-brown beans into an end product.

Instead of shipping all of its prized organic cacao to overseas producers — and losing out on all that downstream profit — Grenada founded its own chocolate factory in 2001. First and foremost, it was a way for the island to tap into the world's sweetest obsession. But local chocolatiers were also hoping the factory would become a tourist attraction. With sales booming in the United States and the United Kingdom, and an ever-increasing number of tourists coming through the door, they've managed to score on both fronts.

Grenada isn't the only place to have jumped on the gourmet chocolate bandwagon. Much as in the boom in wine tourism a generation ago, these destinations have been parlaying their confectionary creations into a tourism bonanza that includes factory tours, private tastings and classes where visitors can obtain (sticky) hands-on experience making their own mouthwatering chocolates.

"Chocolate has a profound affect on people on many levels," says Pamela Hinckley of upscale Theo Chocolate in Seattle, Washington. "The aroma, flavor and sensual way it melts is just the beginning. Many of the sensations are similar to those we experience when we are falling in love."

With a long tradition of producing some of the world's most delicious pralines, nougats, truffles and chocolate seashells, Belgium has long been the Mecca of serious chocoholics. The country's chocolate industry was an unexpected consequence of King Leopold II's decision to colonize the cacao-rich Congo in 1885. It wasn't long before those beans made their way back to Brussels, where the 1912 invention of the Belgian praline sparked the world's first chocolate craze and established chocolate as one of the country's main industries.

Nowadays, Belgium boasts more than a dozen chocolate factories and an impressive 2,000 chocolate shops. Neuhaus, Leonidas, Suikerbuyc, Daskalidés and Godiva count among its iconic confectioners, all of

them known for their elegant designs and sumptuous packaging. Visitors with a sweet tooth can also indulge in five chocolate museums and the annual Choco-Laté Festival in Bruges.

In Italy, the hub of the boutique chocolate industry is the fertile Arno River region between Pisa and Florence, home to a cluster of confectionary villages collectively called Chocolate Valley. Artisan chocolate makers like Amedei, Catinari, Mannori and Vestri may not be household names around the globe, but they make some of the world's most delicious (and expensive) sweets.

Visitors must call ahead and make an appointment for a private visit of the renowned Amedei factory. Founded by the siblings Cecilia and Alessio Tessieri in 1990 and named after their grandmother, Amedei creates a wide variety of handmade chocolates, including the celebrated Porcellana, made from rare white Venezuelan cacao and often called the world's most expensive chocolate.

The Italian chocolate maestro Luca Mannori offers classes, clinics and chocolate tastings at the modern Espace Mannori in Prato. The workshop "not only aims at producing high-quality chocolate in all its forms and variants," says Mannori, "but also proposes a physical and virtual space available to all those who want to tread and live the cacao path to the fullest possible extent."

Meanwhile, in North America, organic chocolate is enjoying a boom, especially in the eco-friendly Pacific Northwest, where both Seattle and Vancouver have become hotbeds of gourmet chocolate production. Visitors to the Theo Chocolate factory in Seattle quickly learn that the company makes all of its products from fair-trade-certified cacao and participates in a local green power initiative.

Not to be outdone, the mass chocolate producer Hershey has also gone boutique and organic. One of the highlights of Hershey's Chocolate World theme park in the Pennsylvania countryside is a private tasting of new gourmet chocolates like Dagoba, made from Madagascar-grown beans.

"Think of this as Chocolate 101," says Erma Ohlendorf as she kicks off a tasting session. "We're going to look at chocolate, listen to it, smell it, let it melt and then finally taste it." Although, given the subject of their study, it would seem that most of those gathered for the session would rather go straight to eating the luscious dark bars.

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FALL FOLIAGE | On the road to nature

Autumn's glory: Color blazes in the northern climes

A classic blend of the great outdoors and the automobile, fall foliage road trips are a tradition in New England and Canada's Maritime provinces, offering spectacular chromatics, quaint villages and cool places to stay, eat and shop. But there are dozens of other destinations in the Northern Hemisphere that lend themselves equally well to leafy autumn adventures.

Japan might be best known for its cherry blossoms, but its fall colors can be just as striking, especially on the northern island of Hokkaido, with its mountainous landscapes and many wilderness areas.

Travelers can rent a car in Sapporo and head north along the Hokkaido Expressway to the Kamuiokotan Valley, where a spectacular suspension bridge is enveloped in a riot of reds, yellows and oranges. Highway 39

leads to the high-altitude Daisetsuzan National Park, where autumn arrives earlier than anywhere else in Japan. Along the same highway east to Asano National Park and Lake Kussharo, the fall foliage is framed by volcanoes, hot springs and possibly the Japanese version of the Loch Ness monster, a giant water creature called Kusshii.

Scandinavia is also rife with color come fall, including the northern forest and farmland that flanks the international route (E18) between Oslo and Stockholm. Some of the most picturesque places along the way are Glaskogen Nature Reserve, the north shore of Lake Vänem and the historic town of Karlstad, with its parks and museums. Off-road areas can be explored by canoe or western Sweden's iconic inspection trolleys: pedal-

powered carts that run along disused rural railroad lines. Two recent best-sellers, "Out Stealing Horses" and "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo," are set in or near this region.

In northern Spain, a trail of orange, red and gold meanders between Barcelona and Pamplona via the old medieval town of Ainsa. Among the fall-color hot spots along the route are trekker-friendly Ordesa and Aigües Tortes national parks and the gorgeous Valle de Arán in the high Pyrenees. Even farther off the beaten track is secluded Selva de Oza near Jaca, where megalithic monuments are scattered among the brightly colored beech trees.

Back at the other end of North America, the 135-mile (217 kilometer) Denali Highway in northern Alaska takes intrepid drivers through a tundra wilderness that's every bit as colorful as autumn maples or aspens. This gravel "road to nowhere" runs east to west across the middle of the state between Denali National Park and the village of Paxson on the Delta, designated a National Wild and Scenic River. The road reaches its highest point at Maclaren Summit, which offers a vast panorama of peaks, lakes and glaciers. Depending on the weather in any given year, fall colors can bloom in late August and continue into mid-November.

Maintained by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Denali Highway is also rich in wildlife, including moose, caribou, wolves and bear. Among the rustic places to sleep along the route are Paxson Lodge at the road's eastern terminus (on the Richardson Highway that runs up from Anchorage) and the secluded Denali Highway Cabins at the 42-mile marker.

J.R.Y.



Caribou as well as fall color can be found in Alaska's Denali National Park.