

The **MALDIVES** nobody will talk about P.46

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ON ASSIGNMENT
WITH US
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ISLANDS

Our Favorite

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escapes

(From Georgia to Australia!)

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DOZE
ON THIS
BEACH
P.29



Sleep on this beach.
Shower on a cliff.
Drink with kangaroos.
Fly into a forest.

These Are Our Favorite Escapes

On the Beach

HAYMAN ISLAND RESORT / AUSTRALIA / \$485+

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There could not be a more perfect place to meditate. I've been told I need to master this age-old panacea. But I have a problem keeping my body still and my thoughts silent. If meditation is ever going to work for me, it will have to be right here, on this swath of virgin sand outside my door, with sunlight tap-dancing on the blue, blue sea, and the hiss of waves dragging in and out like the breaths of a sleeping baby. So I sit on a towel, close my eyes and give it another go. Nope, this is not working. This time I blame it on the bird, this strange, knock-kneed, hunched, googly-eyed avian — the type of weird creature that only Australia produces. He stands beside me, 2 feet tall, gazing straight into my soul. He looks at me in the way, when I was 14, I wished all boys would look at me — like someone about to break into Barry Manilow's "Mandy." He is lovestruck, or so I fancy. He teeters on his pipe-cleaner legs, staring, distracting and destroying my date with meditation. Enlightenment is once again postponed.

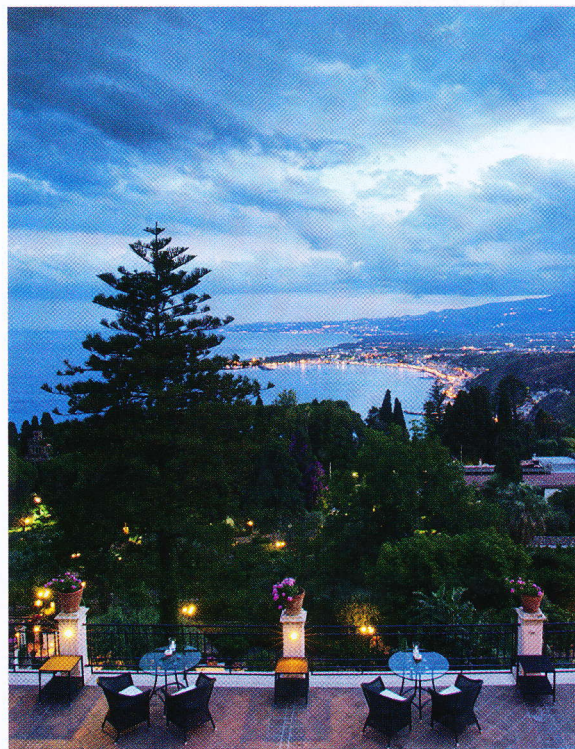
Curtis, because that is what I have named him, is a stone curlew, and Hayman Island is home to hordes of them. The waitress who later delivers an Asian-fusion

On the Rocks

THE CAVES / JAMAICA / \$550+

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We can hear the ocean swell gurgling like a washing machine below us. "Should we?" I ask Becky. I'm supposed to be the confident one. We're standing next to our cottage at the Caves in Negril, Jamaica, in darkness that could not be any darker. "You go first," she says. My confidence has not yet overtaken me. I know the water is deep enough for jumping because I'd peered down at it from our property before sunset. A night earlier, in a dining room set inside a cave, those same waves were like soft background music. They even lulled me to sleep in the cottage. But now they're taunting me. Neither of us can see past our feet, where we can identify only rocks and a bottomless hole. A jolt of bravery hits — and Becky makes the plunge. I see a streak of her white sarong before hearing a splash some 15 feet below. Next is the sound of her laughter, which echoes off the rocks and lands in my ears. I'm still standing, dry. "Confidence," I say to myself. "Confi ..." My feet leave the rocks. I'm falling! I can't see! Ka-splash! The warm water rushes over me while adrenaline rushes through me. It feels incredible. We swim out of the cove and climb up the steps to the top of the cliff. "Should we do it again?" Becky asks. "Mini bar," I say, confidently. — ZACH STOVALL



On the Cliffs

GRAND HOTEL TIMEO / SICILY / \$450+

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Sicily reeks of desire. Even the local dishes have names like *bacioni di Taormina* (Taormina kisses), *minne di Sant'Agata* (breasts of St. Agatha) and *trionfo di gola* (triumph of gluttony). I should be feeling the pull of Sicily's romantic magnetism from where I stand, gazing out my window at the Grand Hotel Timeo. But the place is perched precariously on the jagged cliffs overlooking Mount Etna, the smoldering volcano that threatens to erupt with fiery passion at any time. I'm afraid of heights. Near me sits a glass of Carricante, a wine that gets its exuberant minerality from Etna's volcanic soil. Also nearby is my mother. Yes, I'm here with my mother.

Romantic fantasies quashed, Mom and I board a cable car for the two-minute descent to Mazzaro Beach. As our car leaves the platform, I gasp. This is not the way I'd envisioned my breath being taken away. But then Mom gets my attention with a nudge. I turn my head with everyone else on the car and focus on the panoramic view of Etna over the glittering Ionian Sea. We're falling, falling into the lap of the island. If the cable breaks, it will have been worth it. Well, in theory. — ROBIN CHERRY