When the Moon Hits Your Eye Like a Big Pizza Pie

by Nancy Bestor

If you’re looking for an off-the-beaten-path Italian tourist destination, Venice likely won’t come to mind. As many as 60,000 tourists visit its narrow canals and alleyways every day in the summer, rubbing sweaty elbows in St. Mark’s Square and on the Rialto Bridge. Many of them, however, stay just for the day, leaving in the early evening for nearby Mestre and cheaper accommodations. Too bad for them, as nighttime is when Venice puts its best foot forward. The palaces lining the Grand Canal are lit by gorgeous chandeliers. And as you float by late in the evening, you can look into their large windows and imagine the fine dances and masquerade balls of yesteryear. Perhaps part of Venice’s nighttime charm is that it’s a little harder to see the decay of buildings that have sat in water for hundreds of years, and the trash that floats in some of the smaller canals. But while it’s true that Venice can be hot, dirty, and crowded, Venice is also fabulous.

Bob, Sarah and I visited Venice for four days at the height of the tourist season in July and loved every minute of it. We stayed a short walk from the Rialto Bridge, at the lovely Pensione Guerrato (recommended in Rick Steves Italy guidebook). Owned by brothers-in-law Roberto and Piero, the hotel is a former convent with splendid antiques and furniture throughout. We stayed in two different rooms while there, one quite large with a stunning chandelier (room 10). Our rate of 150 euros a night was a bargain for Venice and included a very good breakfast of warm croissants, rolls, cheeses, yogurt, cereal, coffee and juice, as well as air conditioning, which is very

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Booking a Hotel in Europe

by Robert H. Bestor, Jr.

A survey of our travel newsletter readers once asked which elements of a European vacation were of greatest concern; sightseeing, destinations, restaurants, ground transport, entertainment, language issues, or lodging. By a wide margin, responders were most interested in where they slept. In a way, that makes sense. We spend more time in hotels than gawking at statues, eating, or getting from place to place, and a couple of bad hotel experiences can ruin a trip. The way to avoid them is to know what you are getting into. Hotel brochures and websites can be misleading. Ideally, of course, one would like to personally inspect a hotel before committing to stay. That’s possible when traveling in the countryside without reservations, but often it is not, so for the most part we must rely

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Our Top Travel Products for 2013 and Beyond

by Ember Hood

When the holidays approach, I’m always on the lookout for great gifts. Often though, when it gets down to crunch time, I realize I have lots more people on my list than I have good ideas. We don’t want that to happen to you. So we’ve compiled a list of our favorite and most practical Travel Essentials gift ideas for this holiday season. Whether you’re looking for something big or something to tuck in a stocking, we’ve got you covered!

Smartwool Next to Skin
Next to Skin (NTS) base layer wear from SmartWool is guaranteed to keep you warm and toasty this winter. Made from super-soft, itch-free 100% Merino Wool from New Zealand, these tops offer the best in comfort, warmth and breathability. NTS is very travel friendly as well. Wool wicks moisture naturally for quick drying and, unlike synthetics, is odor resistant. Home care is easy too. Go ahead and

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important during the Venetian summer. And the location, just above the outdoor fish and produce market, could not have been better.

On our first morning, we wandered through the market, watching everyday Venetians go about their everyday business. We saw a chef in his white coat with his grocery list, smelling herbs and buying produce, all the while chatting with his trusted vendors. We watched fishermen trim fillets for customers and grocers check individual pieces of fruit for ripeness before selling them. The casual attentiveness provided to each customer was a delight to see.

We bought vaporetto (boat taxi) passes for 72 hours, which saved both money and time. Our passes were 35 euros each, as opposed to seven euros per individual ride, and Sarah got the young person’s pass for 22 euros. The young persons’ pass is for those up to age 30. I was not even asked if I qualified (RUDE), and Sarah, at age 15, had to show her passport to prove she was eligible. Tourists ride gondolas (80 euros for 40 minutes, and even more in the evening hours), but locals who don’t walk ride the vaporetto, which is the boat equivalent of the city bus. And while Venice is very walkable, it was great to be able to hop on a boat whenever we were tired or in a bit of a hurry.

Rick Steves says that 80% of Venice is not touristy, but 80% of tourists never notice. Taking his advice, Bob and I were up early most mornings, walking the canals and back streets, where we’d hardly see another person, let alone other tourists. Even the famous Rialto Bridge was mostly deserted. We’d have no planned destination, other than returning to our hotel to wake Sarah around 9. After breakfast we’d walk or ride a vaporetto to a popular site, such as the stunning Doge Palace and famous Bridge of Sighs or St. Mark’s Basilica. When finished with our morning of sightseeing, we would eat lunch, drop Sarah back at the hotel and continue our personal walking tour of the neighborhood back streets of Venice.

Bob and I had both visited Venice in our cheap travel college days, sleeping on the train to get in to the city and then spending less than a day checking off the major sites. In retrospect, we realized that like many other tourists, we hadn’t seen much of the place. But on this trip, we visited fabulous churches, with frescoes and architecture as beautiful as St. Mark’s, but empty of other people. We peeked into yards and buildings with beautiful front doors and ornate door knockers. We walked over deserted canals and bridges with all manner of boats tied up to the sides. We had coffee with Italian men sitting outside a non-descript café in a deserted alley. We bought yummy pastries from an old Italian couple at a tiny local bakery. And we walked, and walked and walked.

Bob always hits up hoteliers for restaurant recommendations. After he gets his first answer he always asks, “Do you eat there? Where is it that YOU like to eat?” Sometimes, we still get the standard tourist recommendation, but more often than not, we’ll be directed to a great local spot. Piero from Pensione Guarrato sent us to his favorite restaurant, the outstanding Trattoria Da Bepi.

We got to Bepi about 9pm, and most of the outdoor seating was filled with locals. Our waiter quickly set up the only spare table for us, and there we sat, eating a lovely dinner and drinking great house wine on a side street in Venice! We shared a caprese salad, followed by seafood spaghetti for Bob, spaghetti with lobster for me, and spaghetti with garlic, olive oil and hot pepper for Sarah. Our bill, with wine, bottled water and soda, housemade biscotti and warm chocolate cake, came to 80 euros. It was very good food and excellent service in a wonderful atmosphere. Did I mention it was in Venice?

On another evening, we ate at a restaurant right off the canal, and at high tide watched water spill onto the pavement every time a boat sped past. Although the flooding waters delighted the children nearby, Venice is slowly sinking, by as much as an inch per year, and the water lapping onto the piazza near our table was proof.

Before we left for Italy, good friends loaned us several books by Donna Leon, featuring Commissario Guido Brunetti, a Venetian detective. Ms. Leon, an American who has lived in Venice for more than 25 years, knows her adopted city well and her crime novels are an absolute must read for anyone visiting the city.

Venice might not be the cleanest city I’ve ever visited, in fact, it doesn’t come close. But it is stunning nonetheless. And late one afternoon, as we watched a couple arrive by boat at the justice of the peace in wedding attire, I realized it is the most romantic city I’ve ever visited.

—Nancy Bestor is the co-owner of Travel Essentials. She is a romantic at heart, something her husband should remember.
Booking a Hotel in Europe

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on sources other than our own eyeballs.

Price being a vital consideration in choosing hotels, it is not comforting to know that the rate for a specific hotel room can vary widely, depending on how and where it is booked. An example is a four-star Zürich hotel whose rack rate is $483 but which can sometimes be booked for $79 via Priceline. Though that’s an extreme example, these days many hotels allow their published rates to be heavily discounted by online travel agencies. To disguise this practice, hotels are moving away from a published rate structure toward a case-by-case quoting system which allows demand to drive prices. Like purchasing an airline ticket, the price of a room quoted on a hotel’s website can vary from day-to-day, even hour-to-hour. So how does one go about getting a good hotel at a good price?

Roll the Dice

For hotels in major European cities, consider the “opaque” online sellers, Priceline.com and Hotwire.com. The big chains such as Marriott, Hilton and Intercontinental abhor empty rooms and are thus often willing to drastically reduce rates so long as their rooms are sold via the opaque sellers’ hush-hush marketing model. Though you won’t know which hotel you’ll get until you’ve made a non-refundable booking, you can specify location and quality level. It is a relatively safe assumption—though not 100%—that a four-star hotel in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Rome, etc. will not be a dump. Before making a Priceline bid, get a sense of what a room quoted on a hotel’s website can vary from day-to-day, even hour-to-hour.

Michelin Red Guides

These wonderfully useful books are valuable for identifying good, moderately priced hotels—especially in the countryside. Pay particular attention to the blue “Bib Hotel” icon of the Michelin Man’s head on a pillow. This is the way Michelin identifies the cream of the crop of inexpensive hotels. Other establishments with special qualities of charm, comfort, service and welcome are noted in red and can be relied upon for their quality without respect to category—from small, family-run inns to five-star luxury.

Rick Steves Guidebooks

Steves does an excellent job of offering the best values of accommodation by class. This approach pares down significantly from the offerings of the Red Guides. And from camping and hostels to pensions and high-end hotels throughout Europe, Steves choices almost always offer both value and local charm. We’ve never been disappointed when staying at a Rick Steves recommended hotel.

Tourist Offices

For those who relish the flexibility of traveling without reservations, small-town tourist offices are a reliable source of same-day hotel bookings. Visit the tourist office as soon as you arrive in town and its personnel can make recommendations based on your needs and price category. Often they can make a booking or arrange for you to inspect two or three hotels before making a final decision.

Online Hotel-Only Booking Engines

Based on reliability, rates, hotel inventory, and ease of booking, we recommend Holland-based Booking.com (owned by Priceline) in this category. Their inventory of hotels in the smaller towns and villages of Europe is far more extensive than that of the big online travel agencies such as Orbitz, Travelocity, and Expedia. For example, a search on Orbitz for a three-night early November stay in Beaune, in the heart of France’s Burgundy region, turned up 26 hotels, but with rooms available in only six of them. Booking.com, on other hand, listed 50 properties, 15 with rooms to rent. In Europe’s capitals, their inventory is huge, offering 1,361 hotels in Paris, 1,595 in Rome, 856 in Berlin, and tens of thousands of other hotels spread over virtually every European city. Booking.com’s online presentation provides each hotel with multiple photos, comprehensive information on services and location, as well as user ratings. Venere.com is another reliable hotel-only online booker, though their inventory in smaller European towns does not equal Booking.com’s.

Finally, consider the recommendations of trusted friends, and perhaps websites such as TripAdvisor. Be somewhat wary of web forums, however, as your idea of a good hotel may be at wide variance from the polyglot demographic of a website that includes all nationalities and pocketbooks. When it’s time to book, price-check multiple sources: Priceline, Hotwire, the major online travel sellers such as Orbitz and Travelocity and, of course, the hotels themselves. In addition to the aforementioned online resources, don’t make a final decision until you have looked carefully at the website of every hotel you are considering. The photos, the text, even the website’s graphics will reveal much of the hotel’s style, attention to detail and its facilities. Reserve with a credit card—never cash—and be keenly aware of each hotel’s cancellation policy.

—Robert H. Bestor Jr., father of Travel Essentials co-owner Bob Bestor, is the publisher of Gemütlichkeit. The Travel Letter for Germany, Austria & Switzerland. His website, www.gemut.com, is affiliated with Booking.com and its huge inventory of European hotels can be searched and booked at www.gemut.com/browse-destinations.html.

“Instead of insight, maybe all a man gets is strength to wander for a while. Maybe the only gift is a chance to inquire, to know nothing for certain.” —WILLIAM LEAST HEAT MOON
Our Top Travel Products for 2013...

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throw it in the washing machine (use cold water!) and the dryer. It will not shrink. You’ll also find that SmartWool is extremely breathable. That means you’ll be warm outdoors but you won’t overheat when you step inside for lunch or a cup of tea. We offer both the Crew ($99.95) and the Quarter Zip ($105) in Men’s and Women’s sizes, as well as a variety of colors. You won’t get caught out in the cold if you put a little SmartWool between yourself and the elements!

Ignite iPad Case
If you’re looking for a sleek and sturdy iPad case this holiday season, we recommend the Ignite Tablet Case ($59) from Briggs & Riley. Its custom hard shell casing fits and protects both the iPad 2 and iPad 3, and offers openings for your iPad’s camera, microphone, speakers, headphone jack, dock connector, sleep/wake button and volume control—so, you never have to take the iPad out of its case. The Ignite Tablet Case’s book-like opening boasts a magnetic closure that “sleeps” and “wakes” your iPad, and the micro-suede interior lining is specially designed to protect your screen from scratches. Best-of-all, the case easily converts to a stand for horizontal viewing and usage, making it great for everyone from the casual user to the technophile.

40 Blinks Sleep Mask
The Bucky 40 Blinks Eye Mask ($12.95) is our best selling eye-shade, and it’s easy to see why. Lightweight and sleek, its concave shape keeps pressure off your eyelids, while blocking out all unwanted light. A variety of colors and patterns makes them fun for any sleeper, and the adjustable strap allows the 40 Blinks Eye Mask to stay in place comfortably on any size head. Whether you need an afternoon nap, or some sleep on a long flight, or want to block out city lights or an early sunrise, the Bucky 40 Blinks has your eyes covered—comfortably.

Lightweight Eagle Creek Luggage
Our brand new wheeled bags and backpacks from Eagle Creek are the lightest they’ve ever produced. From carry-ons and totes all the way up to 36” Wheeled Duffels, Eagle Creek has added another round of winners to their long tradition of producing the lightest and most durable travel gear available. The Flip-Switch converts easily from a wheeled bag to a backpack and is available in two sizes (22” and 28”, $275 and $310 respectively). It also uniquely features an ingenious, removable waist belt and shoulder straps so you can leave that extra bulk behind when it’s not needed. The Load Warrior and Gear Warrior bags offer five sizes of lightweight, rugged wheeled duffels, ranging from a carry-on friendly 22” Load Warrior ($230) to a massive 36” Gear Warrior ($310).

Photon Keychain Flashlight
The Photon Keychain Microlight ($14.95) is a bright yet compact light that fits easily on your keychain or in your pocket. It’s only a quarter of an inch thick and less than two inches long. The powerful LED light comes in almost every color, including a red that helps with night vision. Great for travel, camping or finding your car in a poorly-lit parking lot, we think everyone should carry one so they’re not caught in the dark!

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― Russell Baker
Our Top Travel Products for 2013...

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ExOfficio Quick-Drying Underwear
If you like traveling light, ExOfficio Quick-Dry Underwear ($18 to $26) just might be the perfect travel companion, as might the model in the photo below.

Because they dry quickly, you can easily wash them out in a hotel sink, hang them up, and they’ll be dry in just a few hours. You’ll also find Exo’s Undies to be comfortable and odor-resistant with their moisture-wicking properties and anti-bacterial finish. They come in a variety of men’s and women’s styles, with everything from briefs to boxers for the fellas, and from bikinis to full-cut briefs for the ladies. When you’re traveling with ExOfficio Quick Dry Underwear, you’ll only need one or two pairs, no matter how long you’re away from home!

Global Puzzle
The Global Puzzle ($19.99) makes geography fun for the whole family. Everyone from the young’uns all the way up to the grandparents are sure to have a great time both learning and brushing up on their geography skills. To make things a bit easier, many of the 600 pieces are shaped like states, provinces and countries so if you already know your way around the world you’ll have an advantage! And the endless blue of the oceans is filled with geographic facts like capitals, populations and land areas. With the Global Puzzle you can sit down and actually learn something (gasp!) while you have a great time.

RFID Waist Stash
Your data might be a little less secure these days. All US Passports issued since 2006 and a growing number of credit cards now use RFID chips to store your personal data. That’s the bad news. The good news is that RFID-Blocking security pouches that offer simple yet powerful protection against electronic identity theft and credit card fraud are now available.

Like traditional money belts, our RFID-Blocking Waist Stash and Neck Stash (each $19.95) protect against pickpockets. But they also stop more technologically advanced thieves from “skimming” your sensitive data electronically. They’re comfortable and lightweight, featuring pockets perfect for tucking cash, cards and paperwork out of sight and fully protected, so you can relax on your next trip.

No Matter What Duffels
The Eagle Creek No Matter What Duffel ($65 to $95) is ready for you when you need extra packing space. Each of the four sizes packs into a handy carry-pouch when not in use, making it easy to store at home or to take along on your next trip for a few more cubic inches. Each No Matter What Duffel features a comfortable, adjustable padded shoulder strap and rugged handles on the top and ends of the bag for when you need to grab and go. While the exterior compression straps tighten down and stabilize your load, an external zip pocket provides quick and easy access to small items. Whether you need a lightweight bag that won’t take up space in your closet, or you want the reassurance of taking along extra packing space for your return trip, Eagle Creek’s No Matter What Duffel delivers.

Hawaii Guidebook
The Hawaii Revealed book series ($18.95) provides four honest guides to the Hawaiian Islands, written and regularly updated by true locals. There is not a better guidebook series anywhere. Author & publisher Andrew Doughty lives what he writes. He and his staff hike the trails, visit the restaurants, and sample all the snorkeling boats and helicopter tours to find both the best experiences and the best values. Lucky dogs! They also find places that lots of locals don’t even know about. Everything is reviewed and each guide is frank, humorous and pulls no punches.

Hawaii Revealed Guides tell you where to go and what to avoid. If you’re off to Hawaii, the Hawaii Revealed books really are unbeatable for the best island experience.

“Anticipation, I suppose, sometimes exceeds realization.” — AMELIA
After the Flood: Hiking Italy’s Cinque Terre

by Nancy Bestor

Our train arrived in the Cinque Terre town of Vernazza late on a summer afternoon in 2012, eight months after a devastating flood hit this small seaside village. As we walked down the town’s lone street, searching for our hotel, we noticed lots of carpenters and painters working hard to get this popular tourist destination back to its pre-flood condition. Only a few businesses had reopened on this narrow way—a grocery store, a bakery, a bar, a couple of souvenir shops, and a few restaurants. The power was out until 6 p.m. the day we arrived, again due to the reconstruction.

Stopping in our hotel’s bar to check in, I worried that Vernazza had too few amenities, and perhaps one of the other four Cinque Terre towns would be better suited to welcome tourists. But as the barmaid grabbed our key and led us up tiny alleys and winding flights of stairs to our room, I realized the rebuilding of Vernazza was perhaps the best of reasons to stay in this enchanting town. The peace and quiet each evening, as day-trippers left to eat dinner and sleep elsewhere, made our stay here even more charming. For a few days we felt a part of this small village, and knew our tourist dollars were more needed and appreciated here than anywhere else.

We booked a four-night stay on the ruggedly beautiful Italian Riviera, and our plans included eating & drinking (of course), swimming in the sea, and hiking the network of trails that connect the five Cinque Terre towns. Located near the center of the Cinque Terre National Park trail system, Vernazza is perfectly positioned for a home base. While some hikers walk from the furthest town north (Monterosso) to the furthest town south (Riomaggiore) in a single day—11 miles—we planned to hike as far as we felt like each day and then train back to Vernazza. Parts of the primary coastline trails were still closed due to the flood, forcing us to take longer and more strenuous hiking routes. Although at times there was some grumbling in the ranks, Bob and I could not have been happier to walk through farmland and vineyards with sea views in the distance. At times, it seemed like there were hundreds of people on the trail with us, particularly on the shorter distances. On other days however, we had the trail to ourselves, and it was fabulous.

We ended our long days of hiking with delicious gelato, followed by a swim in the sea, jumping off rocks into stunning swimming holes. We picnicked for most of our lunches, buying fresh fruit, calzones, paninis, and pizza slices, and then ate long, relaxing and delicious Italian dinners back in Vernazza. A favorite spot, tucked in an alley off Vernazza’s main street, was Ristorante Incadase da Piva. Seafood Risotto is the specialty of the house and it was fabulous, as was the grilled Dorado. That night we were the last diners to finish, and as we lingered at our outdoor table in a little alley the owner came out with his guitar and, joined by a couple of friends, began singing and playing music, just like Rick Steves promised (maybe Rick called ahead). It was a perfect Italian evening.

Another memorable Vernazza restaurant is Trattoria de Sandro, right on the town’s main street. We ate here twice, thanks in large part to the local Ligurian cuisine. We ate amazing seafood pastas, anchovy and potato dishes, and fresh swordfish. The young Italian waiter Eduoardo was a delight as well, flirting with me (well really he was flirting with my daughters, but I can pretend can’t I?), and joshing with Bob.

Our hotel, Gianni Franzi, was very close to Vernazza’s main square that sits right next to the harbor. Our rooms were small, but modern and clean. While the girls stayed on the second floor and Bob and I on the third, we spent most of our hotel time on their stunning cliffside terrace overlooking the sea. Each morning Bob and I would wind our way down the alleys and stairs into the local (and only) bar for a coffee. We enjoyed our cappuccinos standing at the bar Italian style. We then stopped in the bakery just a few steps away for pastries, bread and juice, and took them back to our hotel’s terrace above the sea, where our girls joined us for breakfast with a view.

We bought family hiking passes that also included train travel within the Cinque Terra area for three days. Although the listed price was a nominal 19 euros each for three days, we seemed to pay some kind of discounted family price, apparently known only to the man selling us our tickets. There are guard stations at trail entrances, and in theory, someone is there checking to make sure all hikers have valid passes. During our stay we saw just one such station staffed. All five towns were fun to explore. Each has its own personality, with streets and alleys tucked off the beaten path, and small grocery and prepared food shops with delicious offerings. Time seems to stop in this little section of the Italian Riviera. News of the world, the internet, phone access—are all limited, and no one seems to care. There’s good food, good wine, and beautiful views. What more does one need?
Driving around the Big Island of Hawaii from western Kona to Volcano National Park is a study in opposites. One quickly goes from beautiful beaches, sand and ocean to barren lava deserts. But a visit to the Big Island would not be complete without seeing the park that is home to two active volcanos. Leaving our swimsuits behind, Bob and I brought our rain jackets and long sleeve shirts on a day’s visit to hike in the park.

Boasting one of the world’s most active volcanoes—Kilauea—Volcano National Park is very easy to navigate. In fact, our favorite guidebook, Hawaii the Big Island Revealed, calls it the drive-in volcano. When conditions are right, visitors can hike or walk directly to where lava is flowing. While the volcano was not erupting when we visited, and the current lava flow was in an unreachable area, that didn’t mean there was nothing to see. We started at the steam vents along the Crater Rim Drive, where rain that seeps into the ground is heated deep beneath Kilauea, before coming back out in steam form. From there we headed to the Kilauea Iki (little Kilauea) crater, and the Kilauea Iki trail, a four-mile hike that ambles from amazingly lush rain forest to the barren, lava paved crater, that last erupted in 1959. The crater floor, which appears smooth and flat from above, is actually warped, buckled and crushed lava when you get up close, and still has active steam vents in many spots. The hike on the Kilauea Iki Crater is not to be missed, and our guidebook says if you have time for just one hike on the Big Island, this is the one to take. It is surreal environment. At times it felt like Bob and I were on the moon or a movie set, and I fully expected the Terminator to come walking around a huge pile of buckled lava at any moment.

If you have time, Volcano National Park has many more great sites to check out, including a Lava Tube and a 19-mile drive down to the sea on Chain of Craters Road. We brought lunch into the park, as there was no food service available other than vending machines when we were there. We bought our picnic fixings in the cute, tiny town of Volcano. Many tourists visiting the park choose to stay a night nearby, as the trip from Kona is two hours. We were on a mission to drive much of the island however, so after our hike and lunch we headed back to the car to continue towards Hilo on our lap of the Big Island.

On the very eastern tip of the Big Island, Kapoho (just south of Hilo in the Puna district) is a little visited area that is great for both snorkeling and exploring. With a natural lava swimming pool, interconnected lava tide pools, a volcanically heated spring and a man-made ocean-fed pool, a person can spend several hours here, driving from site to site and enjoying these natural wonders. We had just a couple of hours until sunset however, so we enjoyed snorkeling in the lava tide pools then continued on our way to Hilo.

It’s a long drive around the island to Hilo, and if we hadn’t already been more than halfway there after visiting Volcano National Park, I would have considered it a wasted trip. In my opinion, the town of Hilo doesn’t have a whole lot to offer. It looks more like a typical American city than any other place I’ve been on any of the Hawaiian Islands, complete with strip malls and big box stores. We stopped for some adequate sushi and then continued on our way, back over the desolate and now eerily dark and deserted Saddle Road.

We carried on to Hawi, on the northern tip of the Big Island, to eat dinner at Bamboo, a restaurant recommended by several Travel Essentials customers. It was an excellent choice. Originally a hotel, then for more than 60 years a dry goods and grocery store, it is worth a stop just to check out the historic building. Fortunately the food is equally unique and delicious. Bamboo is known for their Lilikoi Margarita which of course we enjoyed, along with two delicious dishes, a Hawaiian barbecued pork sandwich and a Thai fish Salad. I’m only sorry this restaurant was over an hour away from our home base in Kona, because I definitely would have eaten here again. Across the street from Bamboo is a recommended ice cream store with locally made Tropical Dreams Ice Cream, but more importantly a cool vintage clothing store named Chi Chi La Fongs. I really wish I could name my children all over again.

Notes:
We rented a superb condo for six nights from Aloha Condos (www.alohacondos.com). It was right on the ocean, with every amenity we could ask for. The total cost, including taxes, cleaning and air conditioning fees, was $1600 for six nights. It was more than we’ve ever spent on lodging in Hawaii, but we are worth it. I also highly recommend a locals’ restaurant in Kailua-Kona, Rapanui. This affordable and delish Thai restaurant labels itself “island food for island people.” Hidden off the main drag in the downtown area, Rapanui serves unique food with great flavors. The owner and chef is from New Zealand, and it’s Thai/Asian/American food like I’ve never tasted before. We loved our Paw Paw chicken, beef and pork satay. And Bob was even brave enough to sample the wasabi peanut butter balls for dessert. He loved them.

For more on our visit to the Big Island, including my review of our snorkeling tour with Sea Quest, check out our November online e-newsletter.
Know Your Rights as a Traveler & Other Travel Tidbits

The European Court of Justice just ruled that people flying in the European Union are entitled to money (as much as $775 USD) if their flight is more than three hours late. Airlines are exempt from this ruling if the delays are due to “extraordinary circumstances,” which the court did not explain. Our advice if you’re flying and have a delayed or cancelled flight, whether in Europe or in the U.S. is to keep asking for compensation. We’ve said it before, and we’ll say it again, you won’t get anything unless you ask. And sometimes ask again and again and again.

If you’re wondering which country has the worst airline in the world, wonder no longer—it’s North Korea. Air Koryo, the state-owned airline, is the only airline in the world rated with just one star by Skytrax, the world’s largest airline review site. Air Koryo began offering on-line bookings for the first time this summer, but users reported that the website is very slow with some searches not actually offering any flights to choose. The one star rating is reserved for airlines that offer very poor quality performance. Twenty-nine working airlines are currently listed by Skytrax with just two stars, including Air Zimbabwe, Bulgaria Air, and RyanAir. Read more at www.airlinequality.com.

And speaking of RyanAir, chief executive Michael O’Leary has come up with some zingers lately. One of our favorites follows: “Anyone who thinks RyanAir flights are some sort of bastion of sanctity where you can contemplate your navel is wrong. We already bombard you with as many in-flight announcements and trolleys as we can. Anyone who looks like they’re sleeping, we wake them up to sell them things.” And this one: “People say the customer is always right, but you know what—they’re not. Sometimes they are wrong and they need to be told so.”

If you’re not locking your luggage, you might not want to read this paragraph. More than 400 TSA employees have been fired in the past 10 years for stealing things out of travelers’ bags. Miami International Airport has fired the most, followed by JFK and Los Angeles International. Of course a luggage lock can be snapped, but if your bag is locked and the next bag on the conveyor belt isn’t, it’s more likely that someone is going to go for the unlocked bag. Your best protection against theft from your luggage, however, is to keep your valuables with you, or better yet, leave them at home! Carry your computers, your iPads, and your iPhones on the plane with you. Wear your costume jewelry, or your fake Rolex watch, and leave the diamonds and gold locked safely at home.

Have you always wanted to fly, but can’t find any pixie dust? Well Neiman Marcus has just the ticket. In its on-line catalog the retailer is now selling an individual jet-pack, which will propel a person 32 miles per hour into the air. For the low price of $99,000, you can take to the skies, and leave the TSA behind.

A new study by Kayak.com says the best time to buy a plane ticket is 21 days before you want to fly. The report said that domestic airlines drop to their lowest level 21 days before departure. This excludes holiday travel, which we all know is at its lowest way before most people have any idea where they may be going. Our advice? Buy your plane ticket when you can afford to buy it, and stop looking at the fare after your purchase is made.