

Cave Swimming with Bats in Mexico, Road Tripping in Thailand, and More

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“We peer down what looks like a bottomless pit festooned with giant tropical tendrils. Across the shoulder-wide opening, a young man flashes a grin, lets loose a triumphant howl, and jumps in. Two seconds later we hear a deep splash with a resonant echo.

“This is one way to experience ‘Cenote de Siete Bocas,’” writes *IL* contributor Chip Hunter. The exhilarating jumping/diving/screaming spot is part of a vast network of subterranean rivers and caves, 10 miles west of Puerto Morelos, Mexico. The park, popular with locals, is set deep in the surrounding jungle. It offers inviting thatch-roofed palapas and shady elevated platforms. It also provides sanctuary from the midday heat and sometimes exhausting bustle of the Riviera Maya’s busier hotspots.

“You can also descend steep, sturdy, handcrafted stairs into the shadowy world of underground caves. It takes a moment to adapt to the dim light. Stalactites hang from the ceiling. The water is cool and clear, with bright yellow ropes to lead swimmers from chamber to chamber. Abruptly, a small, black form darts by, then another and another. Cave bats flit from perch to perch, individually and in gangs. Others remain in fuzzy clumps securely attached to the rocky ceiling. Happily, as they fly, they steer well clear of swimmers, as they’re busy chasing insects, instead.

“Exploring the cenote takes a few minutes, or all day. Price of admission is 300 pesos (approximately \$15) but can be negotiated. There is no lifeguard, but life vests (*chalecos*) and occasional glimpses of monkeys are included.”

Road Tripping on Thailand's Coast

“Taking the coastal road south from our home in Hua Hin on the Gulf of Thailand is one road trip we love taking visitors on,” writes *IL* Thailand Correspondent Michael Cullen. “It’s a 40-mile round trip, and we make our way through coastal villages like Kao Tao, with its hillside golf course presenting ocean views from nearly every hole. Then Pak Nam Pran, where 5-star resorts sit beside authentic Thai lodgings— all enjoying exquisite outlooks along the seaside esplanade.

“Onward to Dolphin Bay, home to a pod of rare pink humpback dolphins. This long, wide, palm-lined beach is perfect for a leisurely stroll or swim before taking lunch at one of the beach-side restaurants. Khao Sam Roi Yod National Park is our final stop for the day...the name means ‘300 peaks.’

“The road weaves through the coastal plains, where the black limestone mountains rise majestically. At 270 square miles, the park has lots to offer. Sprawling tropical wetlands are home to migratory birds coming to escape the far northern and southern hemisphere winters. Coastal mangrove swamps feature a multitude of wildlife, including families of crab-eating macaque monkeys... and for the adventurous who venture into the dense forests, sightings of barking deer.”

Leonardo da Vinci's Vineyard

Visitors to Milan have long been drawn to Leonardo da Vinci's 15th-century masterpiece, *The Last Supper*,” writes Tricia A. Mitchell. “Tickets to see the painting are difficult to come by, though, and travelers often lament that the time allotted for viewing is too short.

“An alternative—or companion activity, if you're one of those lucky enough to get tickets to view *The Last Supper*—is a visit to Leonardo's vineyard (Vigna di Leonardo). The site is in Milan's historic center, just across the street from Santa Maria delle Grazie, the church housing *The Last Supper*.



Art, wine, and dolce vita combine in the heart of Milan, Italy. © MAXIM SERGEEKOV/DREAMSTIME.COM

“Scientists have determined the grape type Da Vinci grew.”

“The Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza (who commissioned *The Last Supper*), gave da Vinci the vineyard in 1498. Da Vinci’s beloved vines existed for several centuries, but eventually succumbed to fire and World War II air raids.

“Recently, thanks to DNA analysis of the original vineyard plot, scientists were able to determine the type of white grape da Vinci grew— malvasia di candia aromatica. They later replanted malvasia vines in the vineyard’s original location, which is overlooked by a Renaissance-era palazzo, the Casa degli Atellani. While the vines are still too young, the owners hope to eventually produce wine from them.

“Tickets to the vineyard are \$12. This fee includes a tour of the Casa degli Atellani’s fresco-filled interior as well as its grounds. You can also stay in one of the palace’s self-catering apartments. The palatial surrounds include a café, where you can enjoy a cappuccino with the view. There’s also an informal restaurant with a seasonal menu that changes each week.” See:

Vignadileonardo.com.

Foodie Taipei

One of the highlights of Taipei, Taiwan, is an evening foray to the many night markets around the city. The largest one is the Shilin Night Market, where more than 1,000 stalls line the streets or are set up in an indoor court.

Hawkers sell everything from oyster omelettes and fried noodles to snake soup and stinky tofu (it's horrifically pungent, but the locals seem to love it). Try some "frog eggs" to drink (they're actually tapioca pearls) and have some red candied cherry tomatoes for dessert. Practically every dish costs \$2.50 or less. Be sure to visit the Cixian Temple at the edge of the market while you're there. Take the MRT to Jiantan Station and follow the signs and the hungry crowds to the market.

Big Waves of Nazaré

Thanks to storm activity and unique undersea geography, the surf off the small town of Nazaré, on Portugal's Silver Coast, reaches record-breaking levels. With the right North Atlantic storm conditions in winter, you can expect to see walls of water up to 100 feet high.

The action draws fearless professional surfers from around the world in wintertime. In these conditions, a wipeout can be deadly. Non-surfers are also welcome in Nazaré. It's one of Portugal's most popular seaside resorts, about a 90-minute drive north of Lisbon. You can watch the big waves safely on a lighthouse point overlooking the Praia do Norte (North Beach). Or you can enjoy a promenade along the town's main beach, which has much calmer waters and is where the area's still-active small boat fishing fleet is based. "Catch of the day" is popular at local restaurants. Be sure to try the local specialty, Caldeirada à Nazarena, a hearty seafood stew.