

CHECKLIST

Your weekly update on the best deals, new visa procedures and must-visit places

Shangri-La's Silver Jubilee Packages

SHANGRI-LA Hotel Bangkok is celebrating its silver jubilee with two packages — 'The 2500' and 'Silver Salute' — plus 25 per cent discounts for the first 25 guests born on August 3, 1986, and a 2,500 Baht spa offer. 'The 2500' package, priced at US\$2,500 for two nights, includes overnight stay at the presidential suite, in-room breakfast, 150-minute spa treatment and a gourmet Italian dinner served en suite (all for two), BMW 7-Series airport transfers and free WiFi access. The 'Silver Salute' starts from 5,500 Baht per night with a choice of either a head and shoulder massage or an F&B credit of 1,500 Baht. Visit www.shangri-la.com/bangkok for more.

THE 568-room Amari Atrium Bangkok has rolled out two two-night packages, both priced at ₹7,382.53 per person. The 'Flaming Deal' package, valid till September 30, includes hotel stay with breakfast and seasonal fruit platter, a complimentary 'Flaming Skewers' meal at Mingles restaurant, and guaranteed late checkout till 6 p.m. on departure day. The 'Super Saver', valid till October 31, comes with a food and beverage credit of 500 Baht. Freebies include a complimentary shuttle bus service to the Airport Rail Link (Markesan Station) every 90 minutes. Go to www.amari.com for details.

Promo Deal for Singapore F1



TRAVELCITY INDIA is promoting a ₹68,850 deal for two (ex-Mumbai; September 22-27) for the Singtel Singapore Grand Prix, the only night-time Formula 1 race in the world. The deal, which includes return airfare on Qantas and six-night hotel accommodation, gives you time to freshen up for the action, which takes place on a 5.067km loop at Marina Bay on September 23-25. You will stay at the three-star Value Hotel Thomson Singapore, located near the Botanic Gardens and Battle Box at the hillside of Fort Canning Park, and a ten-minute walk from Orchard Road.

DELHI-BASED travel agency Swan Tours has three weekend offers that it's promoting in a big way. The first is a limited two-night offer (₹6,999 for a couple) at Radisson Agra. Another, more tempting, offer is from Trident Agra, Jaipur and Udaipur. Make a reservation at any one of these hotels and get a room complimentary for children below 12. But the best deal is from Taj Goa hotels. Buy a three-night couple package (starting from ₹24,750) and get a fourth night for free. The package includes all meals. For details, contact Swan Tours (011-23415601) or visit at www.swantour.com.

Two Nights at Judge's Court



JUDGE'S COURT, a country manor built in 1918 in the middle of a 12-acre orchard at the heritage village of Pragpur in the Kangra Valley, has a summer deal going till September 30. You can spend two nights and three days at this WelcomHeritage property for ₹9,999 (the double occupancy deal includes American breakfast and specified taxes). You can book additional beds for ₹1,200 each per night (with American breakfast). Located at an elevation of 2,000 feet, the country's first classified 'heritage country manor' is within driving distance from Kangra Fort, Dharamsala and McLeodganj. For details, log on to www.welcomheritagehotels.com

The Leela Palace Udaipur's summer promotion is on till September 30, so you can still take a break in the lake city at discounted rates — Rs 18,500 per night for the Lake View rooms and Rs 20,500 per night for the Heritage View rooms (both rates are inclusive of taxes and are for two adults on double occupancy). If you check in for two nights, you get a third complimentary. The freebies include two-way airport transfer and daily breakfast. A second room for children below 12 years will be complimentary subject to availability.

If you have information to share, send it to sourish.bhattacharya@mailtoday.in

STRADDLING CENTURIES IN OLD GHENT



By Kalpana Sunder

IT'S A PLEASANT summer evening. The haunting bells toll across the centuries-old buildings and the sinuous river. Students sit on the banks of the river — some drink beer and wolf down *frites* (fries); others from the local art school capture the enchanting skyline on paper. There's a party atmosphere on the medieval streets as the lights come on. The town crier leads groups of tourists on pub crawls down narrow alleys that once housed brothels and unruly drinking houses. Graslei and Kornlei, the two streets on the banks of the River Leie, have medieval houses that once belonged to guilds of the corn measurers, the fishmongers and the bricklayers, and have now been converted to swish bars and restaurants.

The people of Ghent have always been head-strong and known for their quirky non-conformism; guilds have opposed guilds, artisans have opposed nobility, and the people have opposed the king. In 1540, Emperor Charles punished the locals by making them walk barefoot, wearing only a shirt and a noose around their necks so that they would kneel and beg for forgiveness. Today, *stroppendragers*, or noose wearers, is the name of a popular beer!

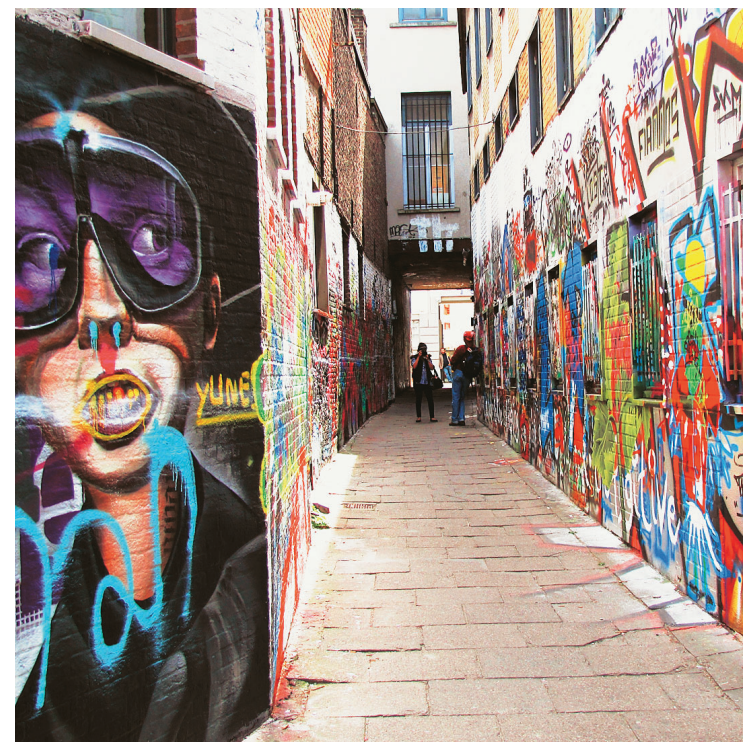
There's nothing better that represents the spirit of Ghent than the street set aside for graffiti. It's a riot of colour and images. Cartoons, characters from comic strips, even an Indonesian shadow dance, all are represented here. Ghent, Belgium's unsung city, is spirited and hip. Long ago, it used to be a medieval powerhouse, the largest city in Europe after

Paris. It is famous now for the Ghent Festival, held over ten days in July with an explosion of puppetry, theatre and music, attracting more than 1.6 million visitors.

Our hotel, Monasterium Poortackre, used to be a monastery dating back to the 13th century. Today, it's an atmospheric but austere hotel with a chapel-turned-dining room and Gregorian chants renting the air. We get our first impression of this town via an indulgent boat trip

on the Leie, with the water lapping the medieval guild houses, weeping willows and graceful swans. From St Michael's Bridge we see the town's three architectural icons: St Bavo's, St Nicholas and the Belfry. In Belgium, they say that Bruges is poetry in bricks and Ghent is poetry in stone.

An extensive beautification drive is on in the town. We see evidence of it everywhere: cranes and construction equipment, new signs and the energy-saving lighting in public buildings. The Groentenmarkt has the



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Soon, the event is flagged off and the laidback city coasts along in its tryst with speed. Being witness to this fascinating jamboree — and even getting a few hair-raising and heart-stopping laps of my own — is truly an unmatched experience. But that is only a glam brooch pinned on the fine regal gown of the city that has much more character than you will be able to notice at first sight.

Pau enjoys a special place in French history. One of the famous kings of France — Henry IV, who ruled the country from 1589 to 1610 — was born here. Chateau de Pau, the castle that nurtures the story of the king's birth and his life, towers over the city with its well-balanced architecture. The castle also offers one of the most beautiful sights in Pau — that of the Pyrenees



Jurancon's extensive vineyards produce a delicious white wine.



The St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent is famous for the illusionist painting, 'The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb', which was completed by the Van Eyck brothers in 1432.

old, cavernous meat hall, with a roof like the hull of a boat. It is today a classy restaurant with warehouse-style dining and cured ham hanging from hooks in the ceiling.

Close by is the legendary store, Tierenteyn Verlent, which has been making mustard down the ages, from the era of Napoleon, based on a recipe that probably came from Dijon. Powerful and tangy, the mustard brings out tears streaming from my eyes. Outside, we see a cart selling peculiar snout-shaped dark purple sweets called *neuzekes* or noses. The seller informs us that these are made from Arabic gum and raspberry, and we are quite taken in by their unique taste. A photogenic waffle seller completes the picture.

MY BRUSH with Flemish art takes place at St Bavo's. The church has an intricate rococo pulpit in marble and illusionist paintings made to look like marble. The blockbuster here is the 'The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb' completed by the Van Eyck Brothers in 1432.

Painted on panels that open out like a book, it has so many details with a jewel-like brilliance and history replete with Christian symbolism, that it's overwhelming! Adam and Eve, angels,

philosophers, martyr and saints in a flower-strewn landscape — this stunning altarpiece has them all. The painting has outlived the iconoclasts, Napoleon, who stole it, and the Nazis.

We have dinner at Belga Queen, a 13th-century granary on the waterfront, now converted into a steel-and-glass, modern-meets-ancient, high-dining experience. White asparagus, sole, mussels and Beef Tartar are specialties that feature on the menu. We visit the crowded and boisterous Dulle Griet, a bar with more than 250 kinds of beers. Some of the beers here are so special — like the Kwak, which comes with boules glasses and its own wooden stands — that the pub takes your shoes as collateral. Nearby is the medieval cannon after which this pub is named. It has never been fired, though it is often used as a bed by drunks!

In the heart of the city is the medieval Gravensteen Castle. Today, you can get a marvellous view from its ramparts and visit the sinister torture rooms. Our 'view from the top' moment is from the ancient belfry, which has a gleaming guardian dragon on top. It was once the scene of executions. Today, an elevator whisks you to the top for a panoramic view of church steeples and red roofs. It's this constant interplay of the medieval and the modern that makes Ghent grow on you.



The *neuzekes*, or noses, the fruity sweetmeats sold on the streets of Ghent in Belgium.

Speed junkies and wine-soaked memories

framed in the arc of its entrance. Between the turrets of the castle and the mountain peaks, you are in fairyland. The silently flowing mountain river, Gave de Pau, completes the magical picture.

The Pyrenees are an omnipresent feature of the town. The people of Pau love the views of the mountains that mark the natural boundary between France and Spain and many of them flock to the Boulevard de Pyrenees to spend a leisurely evening dining and winning at one of the many al fresco restaurants offering fantastic views of the mountains. I am lucky to be in the Parc Beaumont hotel, the rooms of which provide stunning views of the more prominent peaks of the mountain range.

An important chapter in Pau's history is in English. The salubrious town just an hour's drive away from the Atlantic Coast caught the fancy of wealthy English family in the early 19th century. It became their favourite holiday spot and their summer houses still stand in this town. They gave Pau the continental Europe's first golf course in 1856 — it's still functional. Pau's importance in modern times grew with the discovery of natural gas nearby Lacq. No wonder, it's seminal to the country's aerospace industry, with quite a few big players in related fields having their official establishments here. Total, for instance. Quite a few Indians work here and study at its business school.

The town has many tourist attractions, but it's the proximity to the sea, the ski slopes and the Jurancon vineyards that lend

character to a sojourn to Pau. I am neither a sommelier, nor even a lay wine connoisseur, but what gets me excited about Jurancon, apart from its neatly chequered landscape that nurtures delicate grapes, is the sweet white wine its chateaux produce.

My bus draws up at one of the chateaux located atop a hill. The picture-postcard vista that's just revealed itself to me takes me by surprise — it's a world apart from Bordeaux, which produce cult wines in a mundane landscape.

The gleam of a ray of the sun playing on the twirling tendrils of vine grabs my imagination. This is what the excellent wines are made of, this is what lovely memories are made of, canned in my mind forever, with an eternal sweet after-taste.

