

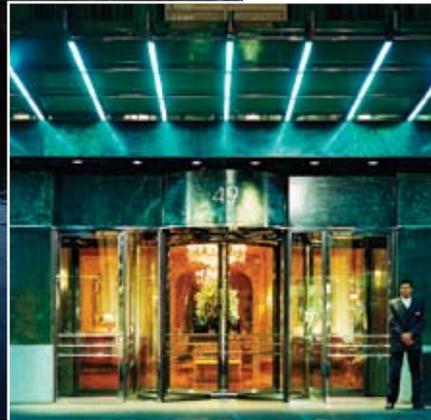
1.

BERLIN

When Klaus Wowereit, the openly gay mayor of Berlin, described his hometown as “poor, but sexy,” he was only exaggerating slightly. Recently, the eminently affordable German capital has attracted an influx of international artists, musicians and other creative types, and the city’s art scene is thriving, both in established venues like the **NEUES MUSEUM**, set to complete its massive reconstruction project in 2009, and independent galleries, such as **ARNDT & PARTNER**, which has opened a new space near the **MUSEUM FÜR GEGENWART**. But the beautiful things are not only in galleries—style-savvy shoppers flock to the quirky accessories boutique **HECKING** and the elegant new **FOURSTORE**. Long days of taking in avant-garde culture require good, old-fashioned beds, and the elegant **REGENT HOTEL** is a great place to catch up on beauty sleep. Or try the **LEONARDO ROYAL HOTEL BERLIN**, slated to open in August once the \$69-million conversion of the former East German Stasi office is complete. A luxury hotel in a former state police building? Now that’s sexy.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: THE BERLIN CATHEDRAL; THE WARES AT HECKING; THE REGENT HOTEL’S ELEGANT ENTRANCE



WE’LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS...

But what about Berlin? Six hot travel spots about to have their moment in the sun. By BENJAMIN LESZCZ



THE MEKONG RIVER AND CITY VIEW

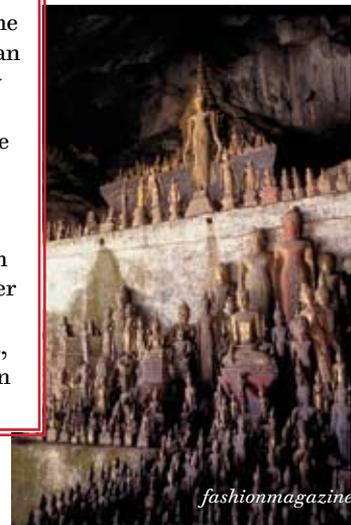
2.

LUANG PRABANG

While Western backpackers flock to neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam, Luang Prabang, the former capital of Laos, remains pristine. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its unique blend of Lau and European colonial urban and traditional architecture, Luang Prabang sits along the **MEKONG RIVER**, and the **PAK OU CAVES** and **KUANG SI FALLS** are both an easy day trip away. A burgeoning silk industry means that divinely soft shawls and pillows can be had for pocket change. And the upscale properties are arriving: **LA RÉSIDENCE PHOU VAU**, set in a French Colonial-style mansion, has been offering Western-style luxury since a 2002 renovation, and the **VILLA MALY**, which opened this fall—its central building is a former 1920s-era private royal residence. Each of its 33 rooms, spread out in five low-rise buildings, offers a view of the property’s stunning garden and pool. Paradise? Found.



ABOVE: LA RÉSIDENCE PHOU VAU. BELOW: STANDING BUDDHAS AT PAK OU CAVES

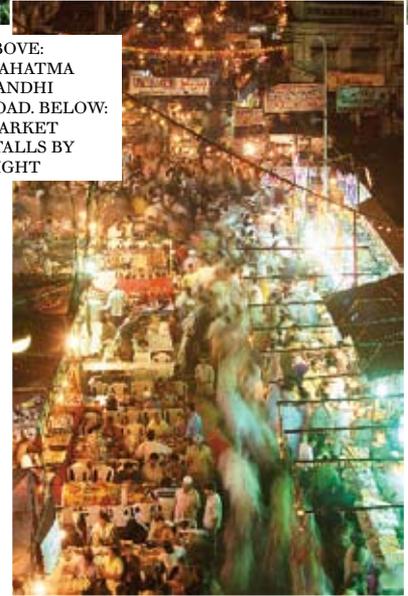


3. **MUMBAI**

Last August, when *Vogue India* featured impoverished street people modelling Birkin bags and Burberry umbrellas, Mumbai (where the magazine is published) was buzzing with controversy. Questions of political correctness aside, the debate affirmed that fashion had become a part of the daily conversation in the fast-rising city formerly known as Bombay. This is also evidenced by the emergence of top-tier boutiques, including East-West fusion specialist **DESIGN TEMPLE** and **BOMBAY ELECTRIC**, which stocks Indian artisans' cutting-edge designs. Galleries like **BODHI ART** and **CHEMOULD PRESCOTT ROAD CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY** are home to India's burgeoning contemporary art scene. Add ridiculously fresh seafood into the mix (**TRISHNA** restaurant stands out) as well as luxury properties like the much-hyped **FOUR SEASONS MUMBAI**, which opened last May, and the city emerges as the star of India, and the East's next world-class city.



ABOVE: MAHATMA GANDHI ROAD. BELOW: MARKET STALLS BY NIGHT



4. **MALDIVES**

ABOVE: VIEW FROM SHANGRI-LA'S VILLINGILI RESORT & SPA. LEFT: A SUITE AT THE RESORT

The 1,192 islands comprising the Republic of Maldives are lowlands, with none reaching over eight feet above sea level. Thanks to climate change, long-term prospects for this equatorial island nation, south of India, are questionable. But don't tell that to the developers of the new **SHANGRI-LA'S VILLINGILI RESORT & SPA**, which, as of press time, is set to open in late 2008, or the **THE REGENT MALDIVES**, due to open this summer, where each of the 50 private villas will have a private plunge pool. The closest thing to litter on these gleaming white beaches—made of coral, so they never get foot-burningly hot—are coconuts and palm fronds. The water is a better-than-Photoshop glassy blue-green and the coral reefs are a diving mecca, home to unicorn fish, spotted eagle rays and whale sharks. The surfing is unreal; the best breaks, of course, are accessed by helicopter. The less adventurous can pass the day sunning on a dhoni, an indigenous sailing boat handcrafted with coconut palm timber. It would be wise to visit soon, though—before dhonis become the luxury properties.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MAHATMA GANDHI ROAD BY ROBERT HARDING TRAVEL/PHOTOLIBRARY; MARKET STALLS BY DIGITAL VISION/PHOTOLIBRARY

RIGHT: THE VIEW FROM GALATA TOWER. BELOW: RING FROM SEVAN BICAKCI AND A BAKERY IN KADIKOY MARKET



5. ISTANBUL

In 1850, when French novelist Gustave Flaubert visited Istanbul, he declared that the Turkish metropolis was destined to become a world capital. Now, the world's third-largest city is booming, with high-end hotels and boutiques popping up alongside centuries-old mosques and markets. Though a **W** arrived last summer, the buzz now is about the **PARK HYATT ISTANBUL MAÇKA PALAS**, which just opened in the trendy shopping district of **NIŞANTAŞI**—some rooms even offer in-room Turkish baths with heated stone seats. The hotel is home to **ARMANI** and **GUCCI** stores, but for more locally inspired shopping, jewellery boutiques **SEVAN BICAKCI** and **CEM LOKMANHEKIM** offer glimmering, one-of-a-kind pieces, while **GÖNÜL PAKSOY** designs wildly original dresses combining new and antique fabrics. **AUTOBAN** is best known as an architecture, interior- and product-design studio, but its boutique is a must-see for elegant furniture. Afterwards, head to **MÜZEDECHANGA**, the glass, cube-shaped restaurant that Autoban designed. Nibbling grilled octopus in caper-berry sauce on its patio, overlooking the Bosphorus strait, it feels as if Flaubert was on to something.

THE CASTLE OF SAINT GEORGE OVERLOOKING THE ALFAMA QUARTER



6. LISBON

Long dismissed as Western Europe's poorest capital, Lisbon is a rising creative hub. The city's diverse architecture is only getting better, with the classic modern buildings of Álvaro Siza; a Norman Foster project (in the planning stage) in the up-and-coming design district of **SANTOS**; and an ambitious proposal by The Pritzker Architecture Prize-winner Jean Nouvel called **ALCÂNTARA-MAR**, that would include restaurants, shops and apartments. **MUDE**, a highly anticipated fashion-and-design museum, is set to open this year. Until then, the city's got the **BERARDO COLLECTION MUSEUM**, which opened last year with a collection that includes Dalí and Warhol. Independent art is booming too, with galleries like **CRISTINA GUERRA CONTEMPORARY ART** and **LUÍS SERPA** showing the work of young Portuguese artists. Dozens of hotels are set to open here in the next few years, including a conversion of Portugal's highest tower, the Torre Vasco da Gama, into the five-star Sana Torre Vasco da Gama Royal Hotel. For now, the art-deco style **APARTHOTEL VIP EDEN**, boasting a rooftop pool and a prime **RESTAURADORES SQUARE** location, will have to suffice. Portugal is one of the last affordable Euro destinations—run there before it turns into Italy. □

PHOTOGRAPHY: ISTANBUL CITYSCAPE BY MEL STUART/GETTY; BAKERY BY MARK EDWARD SMITH/PHOTOLIBRARY; LISBON BY ANDREW WARD/LIFE FILE/PHOTOLIBRARY