

THE CONCIERGE

GEO QUIZ

Which city on the Rhine River was the capital of West Germany before German reunification in 1990?

- Cologne
 Dusseldorf
 Bonn

Answer below. Source: National Geographic Bee

TIPSHEET

Sustainable leisure at eco-hotels

BY MARY FORGIONE

Getting close to nature doesn't mean roughing it. For those who want immersion in the outdoors without forsaking comfort, sustainable tourism association Bee + Hive recommends four eco-hotels:

Sweden

Seven modern treehouses in the country's Lapland region let visitors perch high above the forest floor. You can sleep in a giant bird's nest, a mirrored cube or even a flying saucer built in the trees. Inside, they're outfitted with modern furnishings and bathrooms. A nearby guest-house provides breakfast and an internet connection to the world — if you choose. From \$450 a night for two.

Info: treehotel.se

Canada

Fogo Island on the northeastern coast of Newfoundland prides itself as "still wild." You can count on seeing caribou, puffin and the occasional iceberg float by while staying in one of 29 rooms in the island's namesake luxury inn. All rooms face the North Atlantic and are set in what looks like two large boxes stacked on a rocky brow. Locally sourced food appears on menus, and furniture and quilts are made by locals. From \$1,496 a night for two, including meals and guided tour of the island.

Info: fogoislandinn.ca

Georgia

A visit to Little St. Simons Island offers 11,000 acres of wilderness and seven miles of beaches. Visitors can hike, bird-watch and explore salt marshes and other habitats. The island has been privately owned since the 18th century and is accessible only by boat. A 1917 lodge and cottages house just 32 guests. From \$500 a night, including meals, snacks and naturalist outings.

Info: littlestsimonsisland.com

Brazil

Pousada Trijuncão, one of Bee + Hive's newest members, opened in December. The luxury solar-powered lodge features seven suites in the country's savanna. Wildlife safaris (sometimes at night) take visitors in search of the rare maned wolf, giant armadillos and the world's smallest alligator. Rooms have outdoor baths. From \$675 a night, including meals and amenities.

Info: Pousada Trijuncão, pousadatrijuncao.com.br/en/home/

GEO QUIZ ANSWER:

Bonn



JIMIN LAI AFP/Getty Images

BOATS dot a road in Sri Lanka after the devastating tsunami of December 2004 that killed thousands.

DEPARTURE POINTS

The gift of another day

My sister and I narrowly escaped the 2004 tsunami. Now I try to live my life to the fullest around the world.

BY MARCIA HACKETT

I started shaking when I first heard about the tsunami that struck Indonesia in December. The reason? On Dec. 26, 2004, my sister Penny and I were washed ashore by the tsunami that started with a 9.1-magnitude earthquake off Indonesia's Sumatra and generated a wave that spread across the Indian Ocean.

We were vacationing with a group of teachers on the southern tip of Sri Lanka. On that beautiful Sunday morning, Penny and I were headed to the beach. There was not a cloud in the sky; gentle waves lapped the shore where a few early-bird tourists sunned themselves.

We hiked parallel to the shore on top of a 12-foot-tall breakwater made of large black boulders. They were slippery, and we had to look down to watch our footing.

Just after 10 a.m., a giant wave slammed down on us, carrying us about 10 feet in the air and depositing us into the brush along the beach. It knocked the wind out of both of us.

When she could catch her breath, Penny yelled, "Marcia, we've got to get out of here!" She had experienced rogue waves in the U.S. Virgin Islands and thought this was one.

Shaking and soaked, we stood up and trudged through the wet sand,

seaweed and debris, trying to go back the way we had come. The dry riverbed we had crossed that morning had become a raging torrent, carrying picnic tables, lawn chairs, umbrellas and all sorts of trash. We considered fording it, but two hotel staffers frantically waved us back knowing we would have drowned in an instant.

I was still wearing my sneakers and had my fanny pack, but Penny had on only her bikini and wasn't wearing shoes. Now we tried to fight our way through the jungle to get back to the hotel, but the brush was too dense and thorns scraped and scratched our legs and arms until they bled. We saw no path through it.

About 20 minutes later, the two men who had waved us back suddenly came crashing through the brush. They took us by the arm, and the four of us held hands as they led us along the raging river and put us in an open-bed truck that took us back to the hotel.

Still shaking with fright, Penny and I headed back to our cabin, hoping to clean up and grab breakfast. When we saw how much water was on the hotel grounds, we wondered why the gardeners had overwatered. Our little cabin had been flooded and furniture toppled. We still didn't understand the magnitude of what had happened.

Soon we heard the first news about the tsunami. The hotel manager called for an immediate evacuation. We quickly packed our things and headed for the several hotel vans that would take us inland.

We traveled all day, going north

through the center of the country. We were horrified by the devastation, but the scope still eluded us. The hotel driver took only our travel group in his van, seeking and finally finding a hotel with space for the 12 of us.

We stayed there for two days, glued to the tiny television in the lobby. Little of the commentary was in English so we didn't know the extent of the disaster until we arrived in Colombo and our next hotel. Things became clearer there. Penny and I both trembled from the shock.

We had come so close to a sudden death. Why had we been so fortunate to survive? At our original hotel we had been upgraded to a fancier one several miles south. We learned later that about 200 of the guests who had been staying where we would have been were swept away.

The unfathomable tragedy killed more than 225,000 people, and it changed everything, including my view on life. I am grateful for each day and try to live my life to the fullest, a perspective that was reinforced 18 months later when Penny, my kid sister, the only person who could truly understand what happened to us, died unexpectedly.

I miss Penny every day. But I go on because this second chance is a gift. What happened to me — to us — hasn't diminished my desire to see the world. In fact, come sit down beside me and let me tell you about my recent trip to Israel.

You may submit an essay of 700 or fewer words to travel@latimes.com using "Departure Points" in the subject line.

DEAL OF THE WEEK

Families get a break with Alaskan cruise

Lindblad Expeditions-National Geographic gives families a chance to save on an active cruise to Alaska.

The deal: See brown bears, humpback whales and more on the eight-day trip that starts in Juneau and ends in Sitka. Cabins start at \$5,990 per person, double occupancy. Fare for the first child or grandchild is \$2,995; the second child sails free. The discounts apply for kids as old as 22. The offer is good on select sailings between May and September.

Info: (800) 397-3348, lat.ms/AlaskaCoastalWilderness

— MARY FORGIONE



MICHAEL S. NOLAN

ACTIVITIES abound on and off the Lindblad Expeditions-National Geographic Alaska cruises, and discounted kids can be as old as 22.

TOURS & CRUISES

FRANCE

A walk through Dordogne

Lace up your hiking boots and hit the trail in central France, where you'll visit medieval villages, châteaux, forests, hills and gently flowing rivers on a weeklong walking tour. A new On Foot Holidays tour concentrates on the scenic middle Dordogne region, beginning at Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne and weaving south through the countryside. Along the way, travelers stay at waterside inns and visit Rocamadour, an ancient pilgrimage center where buildings cling to the cliffs overhanging the valley. Shorter versions of the route are also available.

Dates: Offered May through October, except mid-July to late August.

Price: From \$1,340 per person, double occupancy. Includes seven nights' bed and breakfast, all luggage transfers, route notes and information pack. Airfare and airport transfers are not included.

Info: On Foot Holidays, onfootholidays.co.uk/routes/dordogne
 — ROSEMARY MCCLURE

CUBA

Musical tour

Country singer Tim McGraw will lead a musical tour of Cuba in May. The three-time Grammy winner will team up with Cuban musicians for concerts in Havana. He will perform for participants at the Teatro Bellas Artes, and for the public at Teatro Mella with Los Van Van, Carlos Varela and others. The four-day cultural-exchange tour includes visits with local artists, dance parties, cigar and rum tastings and architectural tours.

Dates: May 23-27

Price: From \$2,999 per person, double occupancy. Includes accommodations at Meliá Habana Hotel, meals, concerts, sightseeing, ground transportation and guides.

Info: timmcgrawhavana.nights.com
 — MARY FORGIONE

WYOMING

Home on range

Sharpen your cooking skills while you ride, hike and play on a 25,000-acre working ranch and resort in Ten Sleep, Wyo. Red Reflet Ranch is offering new seasonal farm-to-table cooking classes, which give participants a chance to put on an apron and learn the executive chef's secrets for preparing special dishes. Upcoming classes focus mainly on holiday food prep, including meat skills, Jan. 26; chocolate, Feb. 9; Mardi Gras, March 2; Irish specialties, March 16; and noodles, April 6.

Dates: Winter-spring cooking classes through April.

Price: A three-night/four-day all-inclusive winter stay starts at \$1,680 per person, double occupancy. Includes accommodations in a private chalet, meals, beverages and use of ranch facilities, including dirt bikes, mountain bikes and zip lines.

Info: Red Reflet Ranch, (866) 766-2340, lat.ms/redrefletcookingclasses
 — ROSEMARY MCCLURE

AIRFARES

	ATLANTA	CHICAGO	DENVER	HONOLULU	LAS VEGAS	NEW YORK/NEWARK, N.J.	PHOENIX	SAN FRANCISCO	SEATTLE	WASHINGTON, D.C.
LAX	\$332	\$254	\$202	\$522	\$98	\$395	\$138	\$100	\$166	\$318
SNA	351	318	222	533	122	388	166	108	172	348
BUR	334	294	242	521	146	384	167	112	176	359
LGB	314	318	232	397	119	364	186	104	164	324
ONT	344	303	303	520	192	379	167	118	160	314

INT'L	AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND*	CABO SAN LUCAS, MEXICO	LONDON*	PARIS*	SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA*	TOKYO*	VANCOUVER, CANADA
LAX	\$949-\$1,357		\$258	\$546-\$1,172	\$746-\$1,201	\$816-\$1,587	\$817-\$1,279

Restricted round-trip airfares are researched on Thursday, the day before the Travel section goes to press. Fares change daily, and availability is not assured. Fares, which may involve a change of planes, are for airlines serving Los Angeles International (LAX), Orange County/John Wayne (SNA), Hollywood Burbank (BUR), Long Beach (LGB) and Ontario (ONT). Domestic fares and international airfares include taxes and fees. *These international fares vary because of differing fuel surcharges on different airlines. Sources: Sabre reservation system, airlines and web.

\$167 TO SALT LAKE CITY

Fare: From LAX, \$167 round trip, including all taxes and fees, to Salt Lake City on Southwest.

Restrictions: Subject to availability. You must buy your ticket by 11:59 p.m. on Thursday. It is for travel from Jan. 29 through May 22.

Info: (800) 435-9792, southwest.com
 Source: Airfarewatchdog.com