

## This week's dream: One night inside a mammoth Vietnam cave

Under the mountains of central Vietnam lies a vast hidden world, said David W. Lloyd in *The New York Times*. A series of "mind-blowing" caves—some used as shelter from U.S. airstrikes during the Vietnam War—dots Quang Binh province. But the largest have been so recently explored that you can still meet their discoverers. When I traveled to the village of Phong Nha recently, I stayed at a guesthouse owned by a local hero who, in 1990, stumbled upon arguably the world's largest cave. I was planning to instead visit Hang En—a cave whose main cavern is big enough to house a 747—when I had dinner with the English scientist whose team first explored it. Visiting Hang En, he told me, is "one of the best, most amazing things it's possible to do in Vietnam."

He wasn't kidding. Our group was dripping with sweat the next morning by the time we reached the valley floor in the nearby national park. But the rest was bliss. As we



Sunlight warms a swimmer in Hang En cave.

followed the Rao Thuong River, "swarms of butterflies wove a dance in front of us," and "magnificent" lime-green hills rose on either side. The shallow river flowed right into the cave, and we waded in darkness through the cool water before encountering a wall of boulders. At the wall's summit, "we were stopped dead in our tracks by the

view before us"—a cavern 300 feet high, with a natural turquoise pool far below us and beams of sunlight pouring in from above. It was here we'd camp for the night, in tents pitched on the pool's sandy beach. After a refreshing swim, we drank rice wine and enjoyed dinner cooked by our porters over an open fire.

By the next evening, we were back in Phong Nha, chatting over dinner at a roadside joint with a sign that read, "The Best BBQ Pork Shop in the World...Probably." We all knew that Son Doong, the region's largest cave, is visited by a small number of tourists each year. But everyone agreed that Hang En was everything he or she had hoped it would be, and that the pork we were eating was only the world's second best: It couldn't top the dinner we had had the night before.

*Oxalis Adventure Tours (oxalis.com.vn) offers two-day treks to the Hang En cave starting at \$275.*

### Hotel of the week



A balcony cooled by shadows

#### El Blok

*Vieques, Puerto Rico*

"El Blok is easily the most stylish new hotel in the Caribbean," said Peter Frank in *Travel + Leisure*. If you know Vieques and its "sleepy, eccentric" charm, your first reaction to the sight of El Blok's curving concrete walls "might be a double take." But the 22-room hotel "is designed to encourage relaxed socializing": The roof hides a small infinity pool with sea views, and the building's entire second floor is "a single open-air space that flows from reception to bar to restaurant." Guests pad about barefoot, taking sustenance from chef José Enrique's open kitchen and his signature rum-and-ginger cocktails. [elblok.com](http://elblok.com); doubles from \$305

### Getting the flavor of...

#### A seaside gem in Mississippi

Mississippi's self-titled "city of discovery" remains "every bit a revelation," said *Coastal Living*. Ocean Springs, located on the site of a settlement established by French explorers in 1699, "puts art at the center of its economy" and pulls in visitors year round with its lively array of shops, galleries, live music, and more than 100 restaurants. Battered by Hurricane Katrina, this community of 17,500 pulled together to rebuild, and it's now more vibrant than ever. The historic downtown sits five miles east of Biloxi on the Gulf Coast, and America's largest national seashore practically surrounds it. A ferry runs to West Ship Island and its quiet "bone-white" beaches, and it's only a short walk from downtown to Front Beach, "a true community destination." As a typical day fades, children romp on the playground while a shrimp boat passes by and a pair of brown pelicans dive for a dinner of their own.

#### Sailing Lake Champlain

Crossing by boat from New York to Vermont this fall, "I was pleasantly reminded of how much I love lake sailing," said Eric Vohr in *The Dallas Morning News*. I often dream of chartering a sailboat to explore the Caribbean or even the Mediterranean, but a week out on "absolutely breathtaking" Lake Champlain convinced me there are many domestic waters I should see first. The lake stretches 125 miles between the Green Mountains and the Adirondacks, and chartering from Navtours ([navtours.com](http://navtours.com)) put us in a perfect midlake location to start our journey. Blue skies and fall's colors surrounded us as we made our way to Point Au Roche State Park, where we tied up in a quiet bay and took our bicycles out on a network of trails. Every day brought new pleasures: a cider tasting on North Hero Island, fossil hunting on Valcour Island, watching a sunset on the porch of an old inn. Next year, we're skipping the Caribbean and trying another American lake.

### Last-minute travel deals

#### Spain to Morocco

Explore Spain and Morocco in March or April next year and save \$400 per couple on the two-week package. Book by Dec. 31 to pay just \$6,878 for two, including all lodging and round-trip airfare from New York City to Madrid. [keytours.com](http://keytours.com)

#### For Sun Valley's early birds

From Nov. 26 through Dec. 21, pay just \$84 to ski Sun Valley by day and spend the night at the Sun Valley Resort. Rooms at the resort in central Idaho's Smoky Mountains normally start at \$149 a night and lift tickets at \$69. [sunvalley.com](http://sunvalley.com)

#### Fijian paradise

Escape to Toberua—a privately owned 6-acre Fiji island—and save up to 40 percent by booking this month. With the offer, a luxury beachfront *bure* costs \$754 for three nights or \$1,078 for five. For travel through May 31. [downunderendeavours.com](http://downunderendeavours.com)