

Destinations

NIGHT LIFE

Bundle up for 2011's first festival season

JAN. 29
SEATTLE
Science Fiction + Fantasy Short Film Festival: We film buffs who are annually bombarded by doings at the Sundance Film Festival must not forget the alternative, short, and quirky movies featured at this extravaganza. One of the more colorful films will be the stop-motion film out of Australia called "Zero," about a world where beings are assigned numbers that indicate their worth. Poor Zero, the star of the film. But at some point Zero finds a partner and things look up. A heartwarming film to see on vacation, right? *Cinerama Theatre, 2100 4th Ave., 206-324-9996. www.siff.net/presents/seriesDetail.aspx?FID=203*

JAN. 28-30
DUNCAN, Okla.
Trail Dance Film Festival: Another quirky film festival, next year's Trail Dance includes films called "Pancake Mistake," billed as a movie about a "meal gone wrong"; "Bad Romance," a film about a bad breakup; and "Super Geek Math Boy!" about a nerd who becomes a superhero. Get there on Friday for the opening party, what the festival cleverly calls "Where the Beer and Buffalo Foam." Various locations. Weekend passes \$25-\$40. *580-470-9330, www.traildancefilmfestival.com*

JAN. 22
ALDERSHOT, United Kingdom
Retro Computer Games Festival:



JOE BLADES

Among over 80 films at the Trail Dance Film Festival in Oklahoma in January will be "Super Geek Math Boy!"

Why would you fly to England to play computer games? Because Aldershot is scenic — and because if you've secretly wanted to find a romantic partner with a sexy accent who likes Nintendo as much as you do, they'll probably be at this event. The Garden Gate pub hosts this day of partner game playing, which

includes Tetris, Halo 2, and Mario Kart. If those names don't mean anything to you, skip this trip. But if the list gave you goose bumps — check flights, because there's plenty of other things to do in Aldershot (and nearby London) to justify the voyage. *The Garden Gate, Church Lane East, [http://www.facebook.com/](http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=142535612464722)*

event.php?eid=142535612464722

JAN. 22
CONROE, Texas
Seventh annual Montgomery Teen Book Festival: Young adult books are all the rage, especially for adult audiences who, for whatever reason, are finding

peace in vampire dramas and narratives about teens who battle evil forces in dystopian futures. This festival features appearances by some of the best authors in the business, including local Lois Lowry; Anna Godbersen, who wrote "Bright Young Things"; and Thomas E. Sniegowski, whose "The Fallen" became a miniseries on the Family Channel. *Woodland College Park High School, 3701 College Park Drive, www.montgomerycountyteenbookfestival.com*

PLAN AHEAD

APRIL 15-28
PHILADELPHIA
Philadelphia Science Festival: This two-week event has family vacation written all over it. The city will have hands-on science projects in multiple locations, and it all starts with a carnival that takes over Benjamin Franklin Parkway. In past years, events and exhibits have featured snakes, robots, skulls, and plants. If you're taking teens on college visits, it's a good way to check out Drexel, UPenn, and LaSalle, which hosts events throughout the two-week celebration. *www.philasciencefestival.org*

MEREDITH GOLDSTEIN

Events are sometimes canceled, rescheduled, or sold out; check online. Meredith Goldstein can be reached at mgoldstein@globe.com.

Currents

New Paris match: a Shangri-La hotel

The Shangri-La Hotel, Paris opens this week, becoming the hotel group's first European property. Situated on the Right Bank, the historic building once served as the private home of Napoleon Bonaparte's grand-nephew Prince Roland Bonaparte. The 81-room hotel blends Asian hospitality with French art de vivre. Forty percent of the rooms and 60 percent of the suites feature unobstructed views of the Eiffel Tower and the River Seine, and nearly half of the rooms have balconies and terraces. La Bauhinia, the hotel's all-day dining restaurant and lounge, features a newly uncovered and restored glass cupola modeled after the tower. Easy walking distance to museums, restaurants, shops, parks and the famous Trocadéro Square. Rates start at \$1,000. *866-565-5050, www.shangri-la.com*

Health and beauty tips for globetrotters

Travel can take a toll on your diet, health, appearance, and overall well-being. Boston-based author Debbi Kickham's new book, "The Globetrotter's Get-Gorgeous Guide" (Outskirts Press, \$20) offers useful beauty tips, diet and exercise advice, cosmetics information, and shopping secrets to help you feel fresh, fit, and in charge of your health while on the road. Learn how to stay thin on a cruise, discover the top 10 travel snacks, and hear travel advice from celebrities, flight attendants, and travel professionals, including a professional golfer and a Las Vegas showgirl. Kickham will sign and sell books at the Dedham Strength and Fitness Center (781-326-7669) on Jan. 15, 1-3 p.m.; register for the event by Dec. 14 to reserve a book. The guide is also available for \$24.95 at amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com, and borders.com. *781-407-9305, www.gorgeousglobetrotter.com*

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SHANGRI-LA HOTEL

The Shangri-La Hotel, Paris once housed a Napoleonic grand-nephew on the Right Bank.

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KARI BODNARCHUK

Where they went

P A R I S

WHO: Sarah Singer, 58, of Roslindale.

WHERE: Paris.

WHEN: One week in March.

WHY: "I've traveled all over the world but I'd never been to Paris. I decided that what I should do there should epitomize glamour, and that was to learn French cooking."

REMEDIAL NEEDS: "Part of the difficulty when I was searching for cooking classes is I really am a poor cook and not a very sophisticated eater. I was worried that some schools would be way too advanced. I used TripAdvisor to see what people said about the different schools, and got all kinds of great recommendations." She chose two half-day classes at Cook'n With Class and one at the renowned Cordon Bleu. "With Cordon Bleu, people were a little worried for me."

STUDIO SPACE: One important tip from her online friends: Rent an apartment for keeping class leftovers. Through www.homeaway.com, she found a "tiny studio" in the 7th arrondissement, near the Eiffel Tower.

SWEET TREAT: Singer's first classes, at Cook'n With Class, were in desserts and breads. "We made chocolate mousse, crème brûlée, and a French cookie. It was a fun way to spend an afternoon. We got the recipes e-mailed later, but the class was more about technique, which is different from classes in the US. I left with lots of desserts." The baking class was "more ambitious. We made croissants — I never knew they had 24 layers of dough — and focaccia bread. I wouldn't try these at home, but I came away with a lot of goodies."

FORK IT OVER: Soups were the subject of her Cordon Bleu class, whose Parisian chef was accompanied by an English translator. "Before class, a group of professional chefs from all over the world came out with apple cakes they'd just made. A Chinese



Sarah Singer — poor cook, unsophisticated eater — made foods from sweets to soups in cooking classes in Paris.

woman asked if I wanted a taste, and whipped out a fork from a pocket in the sleeve of her whites. I just loved that."

SOUP'S ON: Donning her souvenir Cordon Bleu apron, Singer got to work. "We had individual stations with ingredients for the soup and three kinds of salt. We made French onion soup, but I don't think it was a great recipe. But we did make a great shrimp soup. I was always a beat or two behind everyone, but it was still fun. The chef would taste everyone's soup using the same spoon, but his lips never touched the spoon. How does he do that? I left with two big containers of soup."

FINALE: When Singer wasn't cooking, she played tourist. "I spent a lot of time just walking around and looking. One day I went to a hammam, like an Arab bathhouse." She soaked, bathed, and got a massage befitting a French chef.

Send suggestions to diane@bydianedaniel.com.

Where you never thought to go just might click with you

► WEBSITES

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preferences for good recommendations? Trying out Tripbase.com and Wanderfly.com, I found they provided interesting options, though nothing I rushed to book, and they can point travelers in the right direction.

For as long as I can remember, I've been adding to a list of places I'd like to visit, some feasible, some fanciful. Galápagos, Morocco, Spain, Australia, Argentina, Antarctica, Bali, Wyoming, Hawaii, Alaska, for starters.

Mapped out, my wish list is the definition of scattershot. I was skeptical an online site could make sense of my preferences and find a place I would enjoy but hadn't considered.

That feeling increased when I saw the five personal parameters used by Tripbase and the 12 offered by Wanderfly. Both sites covered the basics — shopping, food, attractions, city versus more nature-oriented activities.

Looking for a weeklong getaway in mid-February, I played around with the settings on Tripbase.com, moving the pictures of silverware, a butterfly, and onion-domed building along different sliders, indicating a moderate interest in dining and strong interests in nature and attractions. I left the night life and shopping icons untouched. As the site determined my ideal destinations, the

names of distant cities flashed slot-machine style across the screen: Dakar, Beirut, Mumbai, Bamako, Tallinn, Parati. I was excited about the possibilities.

Then, my list of matches appeared with something of a thud. San Diego was in the top spot. Visions of adventures in exotic locales disappeared. But scrolling through the 14 other suggestions, my disappointment lessened. There were places I had visited and enjoyed — Portland, London, Berlin, Moscow, Vienna, Rome — and places I had always wanted to go — Warsaw, Madrid, and a couple places I would now consider — Budapest, Stockholm.

I changed some of the settings, adding a little shopping interest, a little more dining, and pulled back on attractions. The second round of results didn't differ much. The new list was still largely a mix of West Coast US cities and well-known European capitals, though a couple more cities piqued my interest and a couple screamed stay away.

"Some of the positive feedback has been people saying, 'You guys didn't find me an exact destination, but you narrowed it down for me,'" Levitt said. "We helped reduce the headache of finding where they're going. Am I happy with that? Yeah, I'm happy I'm helping people. It's not my ultimate goal. Eventually, I would like to pinpoint it and say, go there."

Upon closer review of my options, I find exactly the information snapshot I want for each location without leaving the site. Tripbase.com entries come with brief, tourist-brochure-ready blurbs and indicate how cities match my criteria. The average weather for when I plan to travel is described, along with calcula-

"Then, there are quite a few [destinations] that you wouldn't think of or consider, but that meet your criteria . . . almost like hidden gems."

CEZARY PIETRZAK
Cofounder of Wanderfly.com

tions for the estimated cost per person, including hotels and flights. At little more than a glance, I can determine what would be fun and feasible. More details about the destination — hotels, flights, deals, photos, maps, articles — are a click away.

I found Tripbase.com at its best and most helpful as an aggregator. And, at this point in the evolution of travel inspiration sites, the same could be said for

competitors such as Wanderfly.com.

I don't see a future where these sites become the only source for trip planning. While they work on becoming more attuned to individual travel quirks and on drawing recommendations from like-minded travelers, I don't see how they remain easy to use.

After setting parameters for a seven-day, mid-February vacation at a cost of \$2,000 to \$3,000, Wanderfly.com asks me to indicate what interests me. I click on "food," "culture," "outdoors," and "entertainment" and disregard eight other categories, including "party," "luxury" and "casino." Unlike Tripbase.com, Wanderfly.com doesn't ask me to rate how much I like something. And certain categories appear too vague.

Wanderfly.com generates a seemingly random list of destinations, as if someone threw darts at maps of the United States and Europe. How else could you explain the combination, in order, of Aix-en-Provence, France; Natchez, Miss.; Conshohocken, Penn.; Syracuse, N.Y.; Naples, Italy; and San Sebastian, Spain, from a site programmed with 1,200 destinations to recommend?

It made me wonder if some places pay to be included on the site. But both Pietrzak and Levitt emphasized that their systems arrive at destination recommendations using special algorithms and information manually curated from

multiple sources. At Wanderfly.com, the seeming randomness is a point of pride.

"The really cool thing is that there's a mix of some places you would expect, that are very well known for certain things," said Pietrzak of Wanderfly.com. "Then, there are quite a few that you wouldn't think of or consider, but that meet your criteria. They're almost like hidden gems."

Not sure I'd consider Syracuse in February a hidden gem.

As with Tripbase.com, each city profile comes with information about flights, hotels, activities, and weather. Wanderfly.com gives travelers more eye candy in its destination displays, which is not always helpful when hoping to sift through on-line clutter. But as Wanderfly.com continues to grow, it will undoubtedly change and add content. For example, with travelers requesting more affordable vacations in light of the recession, Tripbase.com added a drive-to-your-destination feature.

Both sites want to please as many types of travelers as possible in as many ways as possible. That's the obvious direction for inspirational travel sites. Even if it doesn't translate to a dream getaway, I'm curious to see where the on-line journey goes from here.

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