

Encounter

North Dakota

And to all a good night

Who would be out on such a December evening, its darkness turned to a blizzard of white by 50-mile-per-hour gusts? There is, after all, only raging wind, and cold.

Few would dare venture into this, unless there was a job to do.

And then: That sound, somewhere not too distant, was that a jolly little laugh? What now? The pounding of caribou hooves? The jingling of bells?

Overhead, hidden in the whiteout, comes that voice again — a hearty ho, ho, ho!

Impossible!

It is just the winter weather playing tricks.

TOM HAINES

Globe-trotting

Notes from our blog

Room to maneuver

Let's face it, booking a hotel room can be a crap shoot. If you would prefer to avoid being next door to the ice machine, first visit TripKick.com. (Thanks to Travellious.com for guiding us here.) The website offers up little-known facts about particular rooms in hotels, mostly in larger cities.

For instance: Did you know that Room 1100.006 at the Library Hotel in Midtown Manhattan is the only suite with an outdoor balcony and is available by request only? Or that the Grand Hyatt San Francisco will be renovating all guest rooms in 2009, but two (Rooms 2523 and 2524) are already done and have new decor, stand-alone glass showers, and 42-inch flat-panel TVs? Or that it's best to leave the odd-numbered rooms at the Miami Marriott Biscayne Bay for someone else because the even-numbered rooms have better views?

TripKick's list of hotels is not exhaustive and focuses on higher-end accommodations and chains, but there are lots of insider tips and reviews that could come in handy before you book.

CHRIS MURPHY

 NEWS, DEALS, DISPATCHES

Boston.com/travel is where to go no matter where you want to go.

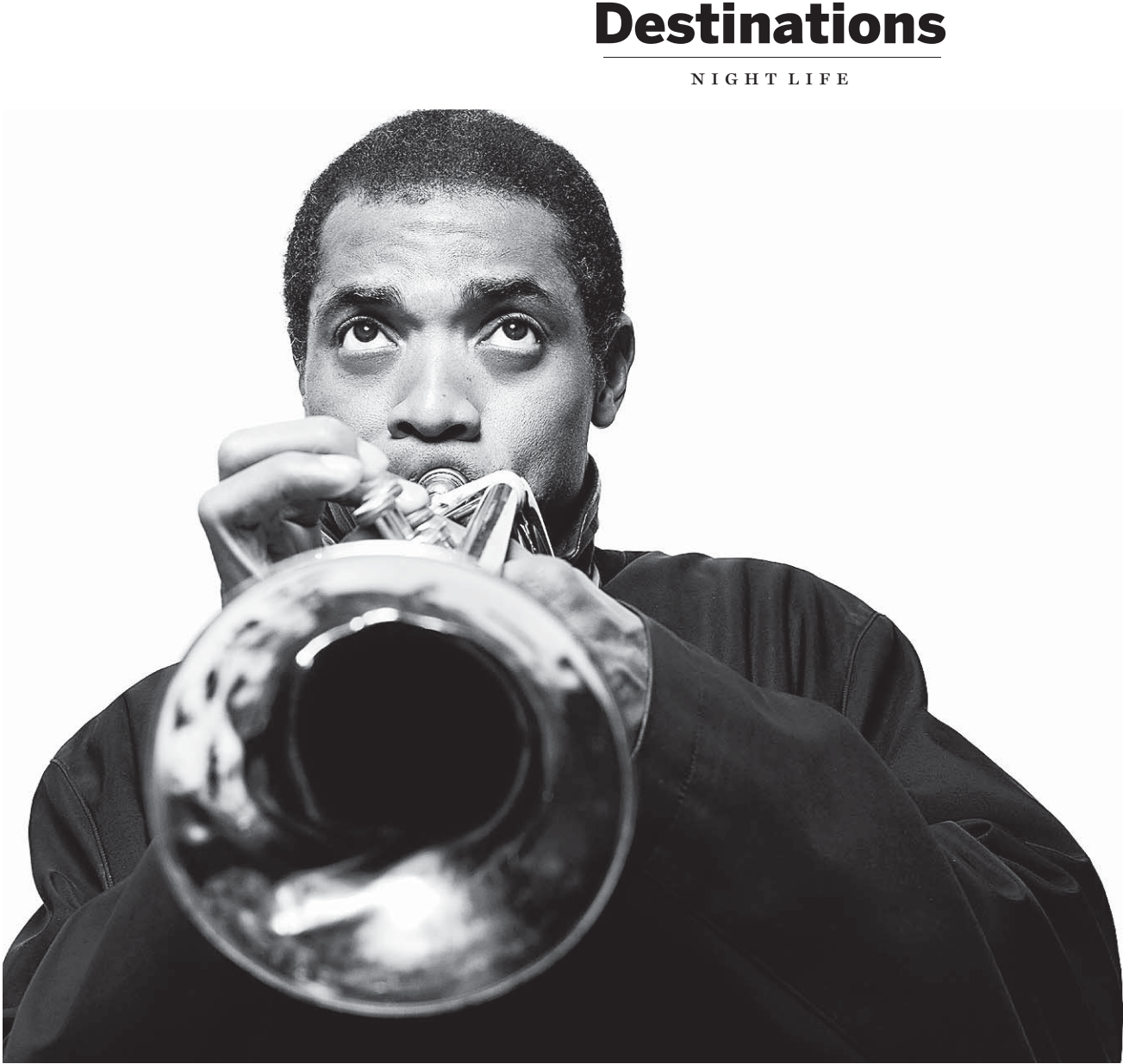
Gearing up

You can get there

When I drove from Boston to Bellingham, Wash., with several detours en route, I never looked at a map or got lost. My portable global positioning system guided the way. The latest tricked-out GPS units, such as the Magellan Maestro 4250, have even more handy features to keep you on track: SmartDetour, which alerts you to traffic jams and offers alternative routes; built-in AAA TourBook information and roadside assistance details; 6 million points of interest, from museums to gas stations; voice command; and hands-free calling for those with Bluetooth phones.

This easy-to-read device, with its 4.3-inch screen, retails for \$399, but sells for much less online (recently \$199 at Amazon.com). See www.magellangps.com for a list of online and brick-and-mortar retailers, or call 800-707-9971.

KARI BODNARCHUK



Femi Kuti, oldest son of Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti, is on the bill with his Positive Force at Global Fest in Manhattan.

World beat, local tariff

JAN. 11
NEW YORK
Global Fest: Perhaps that trip to Europe was tabled when the stock market nose-dived and the vacation savings disappeared, along with the retirement fund and the college accounts. Fear not. A slice of global culture is arriving in Manhattan next month that will help sate your international wanderlust — at least for exotic sounds. Webster Hall hosts a dozen acts from all over the planet who are performing a daylong concert called Global Fest. Acts range from Kailash Kher (who is also a judge on “Indian Idol”) to Nigeria's Femi Kuti & Positive Force. Also on the bill are acts from France, Spain, Brazil, and Canada. The best part: This trip around the world will only set you back \$40. *Webster Hall, 125 East 11th St., 212-353-1600, www.websterhall.com.*

Where they went

Western US

WHO: Jeanne, 58, and Harvey Hansen, 61, of Arlington.
WHERE: Western United States.
WHEN: 11 days in June and July.
WHY: “We love seeing new states, and we’ve always wanted to see Yellowstone and Rushmore,” Jeanne Hansen said.
RODEO ROMANCE: The couple flew into Billings, Mont., and rented a car, which they put 1,300 miles on. In Cody, Wyo., where they stayed with friends, they had a pleasant surprise. “They took us to the rodeo, and at first we thought, whatever, we’ll go because it’s there. It’s every night in the summer. But it was really fun and it was quite interesting to experience another way of life. They involve children, and the riders showed a lot of skill and courage.”

BUSES, BISON, BEAR . . . Only an hour away was Yellowstone National Park, where they stayed at the historic Lake Yellowstone Hotel. “There was a lovely dining room, but you have to make a reservation months in advance,” she said, and they missed out. They took two park tours, one exploring geysers and hot springs, including Old Faithful, and the other wildlife. “Last year they started using 1936-37 vintage buses for the tours, which was very cool. They draw a lot of attention.” The couple saw bison, bear, coyote, elk, and big horn sheep.

TWISTS AND TURNS: From Yellowstone they drove toward the Teton Mountains. “We went to Moose, [Wyo.], and had dinner at Dorman’s, a restaurant with a lot of windows where the Teton’s are right in your face. They’re magnificent.” Snow left from last winter and miles of hairpin turns greeted them on Beartooth



Jeanne and Harvey Hansen at the Lower Falls in Yellowstone.

Highway heading out of Yellowstone. “You definitely need to be a good driver,” said Hansen, who let her husband take the wheel. “It’s exhausting. I think he even took an Excedrin afterward.” They stopped in Red Lodge, Mont., “a funky little town with lots of shops and restaurants. The flower baskets were magnificent.”

BADLANDS EFFECT: In Rapid City, S.D., they stayed at the historic Alex Johnson Hotel. “It was very pretty and reasonable.” The town near Mount Rushmore is erecting statues of all the US presidents. It’s also near Badlands National Park, which they visited. “The Badlands is so massive, and you feel like you’re on the moon. It was different from anything we’ve seen.”

RUSHMORE HIGHLIGHTS: The most thrilling point of the trip was watching fireworks explode over Mount Rushmore on July 3. “It’s a really big deal there. They have events all day. They drop the fireworks in by helicopter and they go off by a computerized system. We took a bus because there’s no parking. There were about 35,000 people up there. It was just spectacular, a real highlight, and a great way to end the trip.”

DIANE DANIEL

 SEE WHERE THEY ALL WENT

For more photos or to share yours, visit boston.com/travel/wheretheywent. Send your suggestions within two weeks of your return to diane@bydianedaniel.com.

FEB. 24-MARCH 1
SAN FRANCISCO
Noise Pop Festival: Pop music festivals have a nasty habit of turning into big commercial machines, with the over-hyped band of the moment headlining. But San Francisco’s Noise Pop Festival is a slice of independent music heaven, with headliners such as Stephen Malkmus, Antony and the Johnsons, Martha Wainwright, No Age, and A.C. Newman. The festival also includes films, and, for the more fashion-minded, trunk shows from budding designers. All-access badges are \$150, with a 10 percent discount if purchased before Jan. 10. The festival takes place at venues throughout the city. *www.noisepop.com, 415-375-3370.*

MARCH 1
REYKJAVÍK, ICELAND
Beer Day: Most weekends provide enough excuses for the locals to indulge in an adult beverage or two, but the first of March is practically a drinking holiday as the country celebrates the day that a 75-year prohibition on beer was lifted. This year’s Beer Day will be extra sudsy because locals are celebrating the 20th anniversary of the year the prohibition was lifted. If you’re there on the big day, you’ll have no problem finding a watering hole to lift a pint or two. But if you’re looking for a recommendation, try Vegamót, a cozy two-floor restaurant and pub in the heart of the city. *Vegamót, Vegamótastigur 4. www.vegamot.is.*

FEB. 12
VANCOUVER
Olympic One-Year Countdown Concert: Vancouver is getting excited about hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. So excited, in fact, that it is starting the countdown a year in advance with a concert celebrating Canada’s cultural achievements. Fear not, this appears to be a Celine Dion-free event. Grammy winner Sarah McLachlan headlines, performing alongside Halifax-based singer-songwriter Joel Plaskett. There is also a performance from the Alberta Ballet. If you miss the countdown concert, the city has more than 400 cultural events planned through 2009 to celebrate the forthcoming Games. Tickets range from \$49 to \$69. *Queen Elizabeth Theatre, Hamilton Street at West Georgia Street, www.vancouver2010.com.*

PLAN AHEAD
APRIL 2-5
VAIL, COLO.
Vail Film Festival: The ski resort celebrates the end of its season with a festival that isn’t quite Sundance, but still manages to draw big names and an interesting mix of films. This year’s selections are still being determined, but past Vail premieres have included “Before Sunset,” “Kung Fu Hustle,” “The Oh in Ohio,” and “American Dreamz.” Passes range from \$45 to \$1,000. *866-476-1092, www.vailfilmfestival.org.*

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

Events are sometimes canceled, rescheduled, or sold out. Christopher Muther can be reached at muther@globe.com.

Rave

Grand noshing in Galway City

GALWAY CITY, Ireland — The cobblestone streets of this medieval city center on the West Coast overflow with restaurants, clothing boutiques, souvenir shops, cafes, jewelers selling Claddagh rings, and bookstores.

Shop Street is a pedestrian-only zone, and off this main thoroughfare, where buskers play for euros, you’ll find the Gourmet Tart Co.

The small storefront might be easy to miss. It’s long and narrow, with a brightly lighted, clean and efficient interior or that seems more like sleek New York than old-style Europe. Look for the pink and white sign above the glass transom and step inside for bakery bliss.

On the right, running the length of the shop, curved Plexiglas cases display offerings such as 4-inch tartlets (including apple crumb, chocolate, raspberry, almond, and pear), slices of Black Forest mousse, and whole chocolate fudge cakes. Individual quiches, with a variety of fillings including roasted vegetables and smoky bacon with scallion, are puffy golden pincushions of temptation.

There’s a salad bar and the friendly staff also will prepare your choice of deli sandwiches.

The pièces de résistance are the grapefruit-sized meringues that come plain or streaked with raspberry or chocolate. A steal at about \$2.05, these gigantic sweets provide energy for hours of shopping.

Gourmet Tart Co., 7 Lower Abbeygate St., Galway City. 011-353-91-588-384. Quiches and sweets \$1.90-\$4.50; sandwiches \$4.10-\$5.80.



NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Giant meringues in a decorative pile.

NECEE REGIS

Celebrate in Bermuda, save in New York, or ditch the in-laws in Newton

Fairmont Hotels & Resorts is celebrating the first successful British settlement of Bermuda with a Compliments of Bermuda 400th Anniversary Offer. The package, available at both the Southampton and Hamilton Princess, features a \$200 resort credit for a two-night stay, a \$300 credit for three nights, or a \$400 credit for four nights or more. The credit is good at any of the hotels’ restaurants, the Willow Stream Spa, jet-ski excursions, golf, and other activities. Guests also get a Bermuda 400th Anniversary Passport, good for up to \$1,000 in savings throughout the island. Through March 31, rates start at \$229 at the Southamp-

REAL DEALS

ton and \$259 at the Hamilton Princess, with a minimum two-night stay required for the offer.

Visit www.fairmont.com/hamilton or www.fairmont.com/southampton or call 800-441-1414.

Elude the in-laws

Santa isn’t the only one who visits this time of year. Consequently, the Hotel Indigo Boston-Newton Riverside is offering an Escape the In-Laws package that includes overnight accommodation, breakfast for two, and a Family Decompression Kit with aspirin, aromatherapy oil, and a bottle of wine. The package begins at \$129 and is available through Jan. 14.

Visit www.newtonboutiquehotel.com or call 877-8-INDIGO (846-3446).

NYC savings

The Hotel Gansevoort, in New York’s trendy Meatpacking District, says its Don’t Break the Buck package represents a 20 percent savings. Included are accommodations, an American breakfast for two, two hot toddies on the hotel’s rooftop, an in-room movie, and a music CD. Prices start at \$365 a night.

Visit www.hotelgansevoort.com or call 212-206-6700.

Midweek skiing bonus

Mount Washington Valley’s Midweek Ski Packages cater to outdoor enthusi-

asts on a budget by combining accommodations with a flexible ski pass honored at 12 ski resorts and cross-country centers, with getaways starting at \$59 per person per night (at the Colonial Motel in North Conway). Some include a free breakfast and/or free skiing.

Visit www.mtwashingtonvalley.org and look for Book Your Midweek Vacation under Snow Much Fun or call 800-367-3364.

It pays to call

Windstar Cruises maintains that the best way to choose a cruise is by talking to a travel professional. To show that they are serious, the company is sending past and prospective cruisers a \$100-

per-person shipboard credit to redeem with a travel agent for any 2009 sailing when booked by Jan. 31. (You can also call 800-258-7245 and ask that the offer be e-mailed to you.) Windstar, which has a three-ship fleet of yachts, is also suspending its fuel surcharge for 2009 sailings.

The cruise line’s website is www.windstarcruises.com.

RICHARD P. CARPENTER

Most prices quoted are for double occupancy, minus taxes and fees. Offers are subject to availability. Richard P. Carpenter can be reached at carpenter@globe.com.