

News, Apps, Deals, and Gear from New England and Beyond

HERE

COUNTDOWN TO SUMMER ON NANTUCKET

Take advantage of preseason rates and start dreaming about the beach. Nantucket's retro-chic hotels, The Veranda House and Chapman House, are offering Countdown to Summer 3-2-1 packages (May 19-June 27). Includes two complimentary round-trip passes on the Steamship Authority's Fast Ferry service from Hyannis (valued at \$138) for a three-night stay, and one complimentary pass for a two-night stay. Rates start at \$199 midweek and \$249 on the weekends at The Veranda House, and \$169 midweek and \$209 weekends at Chapman House. Both offer a complimentary morning meal, free Wi-Fi, and afternoon chocolate chip cookies. 877-228-0695, www.theverandahouse.com



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BABY ANIMAL DAY IN VERMONT

Take the family to Baby Animal Day at Billings Farm and Museum in Woodstock (March 30, 10 a.m.-3:30 p.m.) to see cuter-than-cute chicks, ducklings, goslings, lambs, and calves. Programs include learning how to care for and feed the animals, and craft activities for children. Got a green thumb? Learn the importance of heirloom seeds and select a few varieties to plant at home. Admission includes all programs and activities, farm life exhibits, plus the working dairy farm and horse-drawn wagon rides. Adults \$12, age 62 and over \$11, children 5-15 \$6, 3-4 \$3, under 3 free. 802-457-2355, www.billingsfarm.org

THERE



PAN-LATIN FLAVORS IN MIAMI

Savor the tastes of Latin America in Miami's new contemporary steakhouse, Toro Toro, where chef Richard Sandoval offers a menu highlighting the region's distinctive flavors, indigenous ingredients and spices. Small plates feature hot and cold items such as smoked swordfish dip with pickled chilies, and corn cake pockets filled with shredded short ribs. Or try a la carte grilled meats and seafood. Located in the lobby level of the InterContinental Miami, the restaurant is part of a \$32 million property redesign and is modeled after Sandoval's Dubai Toro Toro. Small plates \$8-\$12, churrasco and grill \$34-\$49. 305-372-4710, www.torotoromiami.com

NEW SWISSÔTEL IN INDIA

Going to Goa? The new Swissôtel Goa celebrates its debut with a hard-to-resist opening promotion. Stay at least two nights and receive a discount of 25 percent off the best available rates (though May 31). Includes daily complimentary buffet breakfast and a three-course set dinner or buffet dinner at North Café as well as checkout at 4 p.m. Located in the town of Calangute, a popular tourist destination in North Goa, the hotel features adult and children's pools, pool bar, fitness center, kids club (ages 4-14), and contemporary rooms and suites. From \$130 per night (before discount). 800-637-9477, www.swissotel.com/hotels/goa

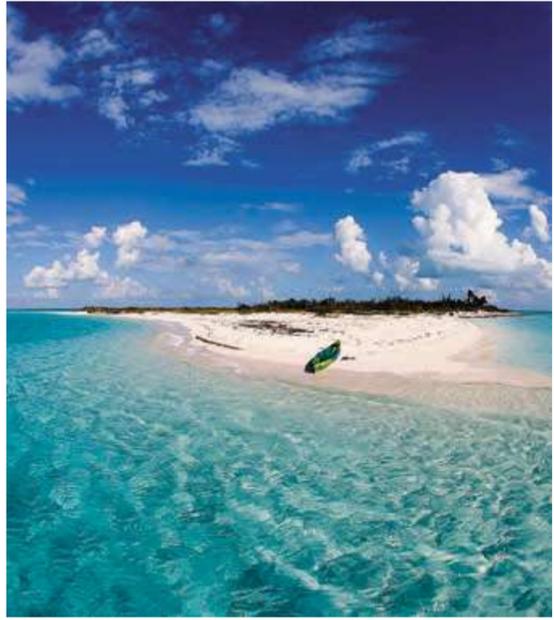
FINGER LAKES GOLF-AND-GAS PACKAGE

Tee off in New York this spring and take advantage of a \$50 gas card and golf package available at two championship courses: Ravenwood Golf Club, host of the 2003 and 2009 New York State Golf Championships (585-924-5100, www.ravenwoodgolf.com), and Bristol Harbour, a Robert Trent Jones-designed course known for its views of Canandaigua Lake (800-288-8248, www.bristolharbour.com). Starting April 1, the package includes one day of golf and one night accommodation at the Holiday Inn Express and Suites, Victor, N.Y., or at the Bristol Harbour Resort Hotel, Canandaigua, N.Y., \$50 gas card per twosome, unlimited golf, cart and range, and lunch at the course. Through May 23. From \$159 per person. www.visitfingerlakes.com/golf-the-finger-lakes

EVERYWHERE

FIND FAB BEACH GETAWAYS

Attention beach-o-philes: If you're yearning for a warm and sunny getaway but don't know where to go, Fodor's 80 Degrees by the Sea beach finder tool can help you choose your perfect vacation. This free website is fun to use: Simply click on a series of photos that best depict your ideal trip, and then, based on the selections, the site generates customized getaway suggestions, complete with hotel and restaurant recommendations. Featuring 80 beach destinations from the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, Florida, and Hawaii, including new destinations added this year such as St. George's Cay, Belize; Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica; Mayakoba, Mexico; and more. www.fodors.com/80degrees



TRAVEL PLANNING WITH AARP

AARP is introducing a new online travel planning toolkit. Designed to aid travelers, especially those 50 and older, the webpage offers ways to compare costs when planning an upcoming vacation, determines whether it's best to drive or fly to a destination, and assists members in booking every aspect of their trip, including flights, car rentals, hotel accommodations, and cruises. For those who prefer to drive, the toolkit maps your route, calculates ways to save money using AARP member discounts, and estimates the cost of fuel based on current national average prices. www.discounts.aarp.org/planyourtrip/index/uSource/HCTN

NECEE REGIS

Austria's revolutionary chocolatier

By Claudia Capos
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BERGL, Austria — A cascade of pure chocolate shimmers down a curvaceous fountain inside a see-through cylinder at the Zotter Chocolate Factory in

southeastern Austria. To release the dark-hued ambrosia from its confines, I tug hard on the polished stainless-steel knob at the fountain's base. A thick stream of chocolate fills my small ceramic tasting

spoon, obliterating the smiling face of factory founder Josef Zotter imprinted on the spoon's bowl. The rich, earthy texture and slightly bitter taste of the unadulterated cocoa dollop conjure images of steamy cacao forests in some far-distant land.

After a few licks I am ready to move to another fountain. Next, I try mountain chocolate, followed by milk, white, and sheep's milk. At the nougat chocolate fountain, I linger. The tantalizing blend of almonds and sweet chocolate excites my taste buds.

The fountain room is among the highlights of an all-you-can-eat chocolate-tasting odyssey through Zotter Schokoladen Manufaktur GmbH, one of Europe's premier family-run chocolatiers. Our 90-minute tour of the bean-to-bar production process stretches into three hours of chocolate indulgence and discovery.

Zotter, 52, who began his career as a cake baker and started dabbling in chocolates 20 years ago, opened his chocolate factory on his parents' farm near Riegersburg, southeast of Graz, in 1999. The enterprise, operated with his wife, Ulrike, attracts 170,000 visitors annually.

Over the past decade, Zotter has revolutionized the onestaid milk and nut chocolate industry by incorporating flavorful, exotic ingredients from around the world into his chocolates. He also has popularized "hand-scooping" (layering and filling chocolates by hand) and introduced "trinkschokolade" (drinking chocolate), Mitzi Blue round chocolates, CHOCshots, and Lollytops for children. At the factory's Mi-Xing Bar, visitors can create their own concoctions in hundreds of combinations.

All Zotter chocolate products are organic, and the chocolate czar is a champion of Fair Trade and sustainable growing practices in developing economies. His delicacies have garnered many awards, including the 2011 Academy of Chocolate silver award for the best bean-to-bar milk chocolate and the 2006 Eurochocolate Award as the best European chocolate manufacturer.

The narrow country road



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

On the tour of the Zotter Chocolate Factory, in Bergl, Austria, a girl watches "chocolate grand cru" being made.

If you go . . .

Zotter Schokoladen Manufaktur GmbH
8333 Riegersburg, Bergl 56 A
011-43-3152-5554
www.zotter.at
Indulge in an all-you-can-eat tasting tour of the Zotter Chocolate Factory, and then select from among 300 cocoa-based chocolate creations in the gift store. Tours are offered Mon-Sat 8 a.m.-8 p.m.; reservations recommended. Adults \$15, teens \$11, children \$7.

leading to the Zotter Chocolate Factory meanders through rolling Austrian hills laced with vineyards and peach orchards. Bright banners emblazoned with the words "Schoko-Laden Theater" flap from poles outside the entrance. Our introduction begins with a short film showing Zotter riding a mule through the jungles of Nicaragua in search of perfect beans from the Theobroma cacao ("food of the gods") tree. Cacao pods are harvested by hand, and the cocoa beans inside are removed, then fermented and dried before being shipped.

After the film ends, the fun begins. Armed with English-language audio handsets and our tasting spoons, we descend into the tasting room. Burlap bags of beans are stacked high in an adjacent storage room, waiting to be roasted, ground, conched (kneaded), and processed. The factory annually processes about 460 tons of raw

cocoa from Central and South America, as well as Asia. From small bowls, we select and crack open roasted beans grown in different locales to taste the "nibs" inside. The next tasting area features receptacles containing ground chocolate powder with incremental amounts of sugar added.

After nibbling thin chocolate squares and sniffing containers of dried mint, rose petals, cummin, anise, and other condiments, we file into a long hallway lined with 24 stainless-steel sample-dispensing machines. Each contains a different slab of flavored chocolate, ranging from elderberry to caramel. With a swift flick of a lever, a small blade cuts a sliver to taste.

At the Mi-Xing Bar, small trinkschokolade bars, which dissolve in hot milk, circulate on a miniature Doppelmayr cable car. Cameroon-born bartender Charles Ngangue greets us. "I have something special for you," he says and returns carrying three bars flavored with pumpkin, masala Indian, and East Asia green tea and whips up a glass of each.

We are nearly at the bursting point when we pass a waterwheel-style lift offering assorted chocolates. But we rally in a room filled with copper kettles containing marble-size chocolate snacks.

Our final stop is the gift shop. We select six packages of chocolate, then double our order. We know they won't last long once we get home.

Claudia Capos can be reached at capocomm@sbcglobal.net.

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