

FAR OUT

Looking for inspiration for your next holiday? Here, seven intrepid writers share their favourite travel experiences, from star-gazing in Jordan to people-watching in Papua New Guinea

Dining under the stars in Wadi Rum, Jordan

'Vast, echoing and God-like' is how TE Lawrence described Jordan's Wadi Rum. Others call it 'the valley of the moon', but Mars might be a more accurate comparison. Red, craggy rock faces, surrounded by voluptuous shifting sand dunes, reach heights of 1,700 metres. The area is still home to several Bedouin tribes, families of goat herders who live as generations did before them, and a handful of welcome visitors. There are no frills here (no electricity or facilities), merely the romance of a night spent in the open desert. Your local hosts will provide a traditional goat-hair shelter, a roaring campfire and the jaunty sound

of a *rababa* (a small one-string instrument made from goat skin). Dinner is a simple plate of *magluba* (a spicy mix of rice, chicken and vegetables) served with paper-thin breads called *shraq*. Afterwards, there's nothing to do except gaze at the stars, listen out for hyenas and share a few secrets, because in Wadi Rum the secrets are endless. **Leo Bear** *Mzied Camp*, from £60pp per night, including bed, breakfast and evening meal. Call 00-962-777 304 501 or email mziedco@yahoo.com. Pick-ups can be arranged from Wadi Rum, or to hire a car visit www.rentareliablecar.com. Royal Jordanian offers return flights to Amman from £413.50. Call 08719-112112 or visit www.rj.com ►

MEANWHILE, OUT WEST California is abuzz with gourmet happenings, reports Leo Bear

CALIFORNIA'S FOOD SCENE IS EVOLVING AT A DIZZYING PACE, LURING BIG-NAME CHEFS WITH PRESTIGIOUS OPENINGS AND ATTRACTING A-LIST ATTENTION

Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe

The Ritz-Carlton Highlands, Lake Tahoe (above), opens this December. The ski-in, ski-out resort's restaurant, Manzanita, will be headed by San Francisco chef Traci Des Jardins, with a menu of French-inspired cuisine. www.ritzcarlton.com

CECCONI'S, WEST HOLLYWOOD ALREADY A HIT, LONDON RESTAURANT CECCONI'S HAS OPENED A SISTER PROPERTY ON MELROSE AVENUE. VICTORIA BECKHAM CELEBRATED HER BIRTHDAY THERE RECENTLY WITH EVA LONGORIA, KATIE HOLMES AND KATE BECKINSALE. WWW.CECCONISWESTHOLLYWOOD.COM



FULFILLED, BEVERLY HILLS

A flamboyant new Japanese pastry shop serving traditional *imagawa-yaki* (pancake-like pastries filled with sweet Azuki bean paste) has become a hot spot for locals and visitors alike. Sample a Green Ninja (spinach, feta cheese and sun-dried tomato) or a Nutty Buddha (Ghirardelli chocolate, toffee and crunchy peanut butter). Visit www.fulfilledpastries.com



The new Cecconi's

Bouchon

Bouchon, one of the most keenly anticipated launches in Los Angeles this winter, opened in November, with Rory Herrmann (formerly at Per Se) serving as Chef de Cuisine. Expect French food and an informal atmosphere. www.bouchonbistro.com

IN OTHER NEWS... MORE MUST-VISIT CALIFORNIAN EATERIES

WOLFGANG'S STEAKHOUSE, BEVERLY HILLS

Wolfgang Zwiener's first venture on the West Coast opened last February and is every inch as good as his sizzling Manhattan outfits. The porterhouse steak is a must; precede it with a jumbo shrimp cocktail or Zwiener's signature extra-thick Canadian bacon by the slice. www.wolfgangsteakhouse.com



SEAGRASS RESTAURANT, SANTA BARBARA

Seagrass Restaurant welcomes executive chef John Pettitt who has put a fresh spin on the restaurant's signature coastal cuisine. Think spiny lobster, rock crab and Santa Barbara spot prawns with a difference. The area is renowned for its vineyards so do try one of the excellent local wines. www.seagrassrestaurant.com

SOHO HOUSE, WEST HOLLYWOOD

Early in 2010, Soho House will open a chi-chi penthouse hangout for the city's media types on Sunset Boulevard. Offering 360-degree views over LA and the hills, it's sure to be every inch as hip as the New York establishment. For details, keep an eye on www.sohohouse.com



NEW IN THE WEST

Fine dine for less in San Francisco The bi-annual restaurant promotion 'Dine About Town San Francisco' (15-31 January and 15-30 June) allows you to eat at the city's finest restaurants at a fraction of the usual price. Visit www.onlyinsanfrancisco.com/dineabouttown