

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

THE TIP

BEST BUTCHER'S BEEF

"Benvenuto a tutti!" Dario Cecchini called as we entered his small butcher shop in the tiny town of Panzano in Italy's lush Chianti region. Dubbed the world's best butcher, Cecchini draws travelers from around the globe to Antica Macelleria Cecchini, his longstanding meat shop and restaurant. "To beef or not to beef?" he said, waving a T-bone steak. One of his employees rushed to meet us, offering free glasses of wine and food.

We nibbled on lardo-laden crackers and salumi and watched as Cecchini gutted, chopped, and sliced to a background of heavy metal music.

We timed our visit for lunch and were escorted upstairs to a



PAMELA WRIGHT FOR THE GLOBE

tiny dining room and outdoor terrace. Dining at Mac Dario — Cecchini's version of a burger joint — is in "convivio." We sat at a long communal table, surrounded by hedges of rosemary, and ordered the half-pound burger plate.

It came in minutes: a patty of succulent ground beef, grilled over a wood fire, lightly dusted with crumbs, and accompanied with garlic and herb-roasted potatoes topped with a dollop of whipped, herb-infused lardo, crunchy garden vegetables, and warm Tuscan beans. It was sublime. Lunch around \$14-\$28.

ANTICA MACELLERIA CECCHINI
Via XX Luglio 11, Panzano, Italy, 011-39-055-852020, www.dariocecchini.com

PAMELA WRIGHT



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

CHECK IN

MAGICAL CASA IN A PLACE OF GOLDEN BEACHES

PUNTA BALLENA, Uruguay — From afar, it appears that an avalanche has blanketed Punta Ballena from crest to coastline in snow. At a balmy 85 degrees and with the golden beaches of Punta del Este only 15 minutes away, common sense tells us this must be a mirage.

But as we approach Casapueblo, we discover that a playful wizard has been at work, fashioning a cascading cliff-castle with whitewashed features resembling a Martian spaceship, beached submarine, and whipped-cream pie all rolled into one.

We are greeted by the castle's guardian — a bizarre bone-white cactus creature with blue flags flapping from its two horns. Then we are swept up in a wave of visitors heading toward Casapueblo, the quirky sculptural habitat, atelier, and art museum created over several decades by world-renowned artist, writer, and composer Carlos Paez Vilaro.

Near the main entrance, we spot workmen hauling furniture through a wrought-iron gate 20 feet away. We slip inside before the gate clicks shut and wander through open-air passageways named after such luminaries as John Lennon. This part of Casapueblo, or "house-village," contains a 72-room

hotel built by the artist adjacent to his personal residence and workshop. From the labyrinth, we glimpse several swimming pools, outdoor dining patios, and guest rooms with bird's-nest balconies. An elevator whisks us down nine stories to the ground level where we stroll across the lawn to the jagged, jet-black boulders fringing the Río de la Plata, or Silver River. From this angle, Casapueblo takes on the countenance of a sleepy Greek island village with sun-bleached houses tumbling from the dramatic promontory to the sea.

In the crowded gift shop, we find Paez Vilaro, 90, perched on a stool, autographing books and posing for pic-

tures. Silver-haired and soft-spoken, he smiles as I hand him a copy of "la Orana Tahiti," which recounts his Polynesian islands experiences and contains stylized drawings of tropical flowers and fish. Inside the front cover, the artist signs his name with a flourish and adds a sketch of a little bird, just for good measure. He gives me a playful wink as he hands the book back.

CLUB HOTEL CASAPUEBLO Punta Ballena, Uruguay. 011-00598-42-578611, www.clubhotelcasapueblo.com. Doubles \$190-\$280, seasonally. Entrees \$20-\$30. Museum entry free.

CLAUDIA CAPOS



HERE

BIKE RACE THROUGH NORTHERN VERMONT MUD

Embrace mud season with a 47-mile bike race that cuts through some of northern Vermont's most barren landscapes. The 1st annual Rasputitsa ("mud season" in Russian) Spring Classic takes place April 19, when up to 500 riders pedal through Newport, Coventry, Lowell, Westfield, Jay, and North Troy, gaining 2,877 feet of elevation en route. About 31 miles of the race rolls along gravel terrain; the biggest climb is just 1.55 miles long with 1,050 feet of elevation gain. Volunteers will hand out water bottles and Cliff bars. Registration costs \$40 per person, a portion of which goes to the Mary E. Wright Halo Founda-

tion, a nonprofit organization that assists local cancer patients. www.dirty40race.com/rasputitsa.html

SOUTH YARMOUTH CELEBRATES ST. PATRICK

Get out your green garb and head to South Yarmouth for the annual Cape Cod St. Patrick's Parade on March 8, starting at 11 a.m. at the intersection of Long Pond Drive and Route 28. The event features marching bands, colorful floats, antique cars, Irish step dancers, and clowns. Celebrity angler and TV host Charlie Moore, known as The Mad Fisherman, serves as the parade's grand marshal. Meet him at the Grand Marshal's Dinner at the Cape Cod Irish Village on March 7 (\$30 per person). The parade queen and her court, all female high

school seniors of Irish descent, will receive college scholarships from the Cape Cod St. Patrick's Parade committee. 508-362-7239, www.capecodstpatspa.rade.com

THERE

NEW TOUR TO EXPERIENCE PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Explore Papua New Guinea, where you'll find tree-dwelling kangaroos, 850 languages, and people who embrace the art of adornment on a new 11-day adventure with Steppes Travel. Participants can dive or snorkel in the Solomon Sea, paddle traditional outrigger canoes up tropical fiords, and climb an active volcano. Then search for 38 bird-of-paradise species and meet the "mudmen" of New Guinea, and the Huli "wigmen," who paint their bodies with colored clay and decorate their hair with bird feathers, pigments, and flowers (pictured at left). Tours, which depart May 30 and June 13, start at \$9,752 per person, double occupancy, not including flights. 855-352-7606, www.steppestravel.com



LAKE PLACID LODGE KEEPS OLYMPIAN CELEBRATIONS

The Olympic flame may go out today, but you can keep the spirit of the Winter Games alive with a visit to Whiteface Lodge in Lake Placid, N.Y. This luxury resort offers its Olympic Experience Package through March 31. It includes two 50-minute sports massages and two Olympic Sites Passports that provide entry to the Lake Placid Olympic Museum and Ski Jumping Complex and other venues. Also try bobsledding (pictured below), tubing, speed skating (above), downhill skiing, and ice-climbing at nearby sites (extra cost). Package starts at \$476 per night, double occupancy, for a suite with a balcony, fireplace, full kitchen, and daily breakfast; includes 10 percent off bobsledding. 518-523-0500, www.thewhitefacelodge.com

EVERYWHERE

A SAFE WAY TO SORT THROUGH E-MAILS

Stay on top of all your e-mails while traveling, and remain safe as you review them, with a new hands-free, eyes-free mobile app called Talkler. This free smartphone app, created by Belmont-based Talkler Labs, can read your e-mails to you out loud and manage them as it responds to your simple commands: Say "Hey, Talkler" to wake up the app, and then "play my e-mails," "skip to the next one," "delete," "slow down," or "mark unread." The clever app uses advanced text-to-speech technology to read the e-mails, and voice recognition to respond to your commands. It can even record and e-mail your voice reply. The app works with Apple devices, with an Android version coming soon. www.talkler.com

SMALL DEVICE OFFERS BIG CAPACITY FEATURES

The new SanDisk Connect Wireless Flash Drive acts as a portable repository for movies and videos that can be streamed to up to three mobile



devices at once (or up to eight devices for non-streaming files). Download the SanDisk Connect Wireless Flash Drive app to your smartphone, for instance, and connect your phone to the drive's Wi-Fi network. Then start streaming (no Internet connection required). Also use the app to wirelessly transfer music, photos, and other files between the drive and your Apple or Android device, Kindle Fire, Mac, or PC with the click of a button. The drive plugs into your computer's USB port for charging. \$49.99 (16GB) to \$99.99 (64GB) at Best Buy. 866-726-3475, www.sandisk.com

KIDS' HEADPHONES KEEP SOUND AT SAFE LEVELS

Protect your little one's ears with Kidz Gears' new Kidz-Control Volume Limit Headphones, which come with a short cable that attaches to the headphone cord and your device, and keep audio levels between 80 and 90 decibels, considered the safe zone for kids, instead of 108 decibels. Even with the volume-limit cable attached, the headphones offer superior sound. Each pair of headphones also comes with cushy ear pads for extra comfort. The plastic but durable headphones come in pink, purple, green, blue, and orange. \$19.99. www.gearfor.kidz.com

KARI BODNARCHUK

