

THE VIP LOUNGE | MISA KURANAGA

On her toes or on her own, her place is among the stars

When she is not wowing audiences as a principal dancer with Boston Ballet, Misa Kuranaga loves stargazing in the great outdoors. A native of Osaka, Japan, Kuranaga has been with the ballet company since 2003. Her next appearance will be in “Third Symphony of Gustav Mahler: A Ballet by John Neumeier” at the Boston Opera House Oct. 22-Nov. 1. We caught up with Kuranaga, who lives in Jamaica Plain, to talk about all things travel.

Favorite vacation spot? Places I can see stars well. I love stargazing. My favorite location to stargaze is in Vail, Colo., where I perform every summer as part of the Vail International Dance Festival. The most peaceful moments after a busy rehearsal and performance schedule are the evenings when I get to sit back, relax, and take in the amazing night sky. The most rare and unique trip I have been on is to Mongolia with other current and former Boston Ballet dancers. The countryside is stunning. I would oftentimes find myself staring into the never-end-



ERIN BAIANO

ing horizon [and] getting lost in the moment.

Favorite food or drink while vacationing? I always love Asian food and I like sweet, bubbly wine. Oysters are also a favorite to enjoy.

Where would you like to travel to but haven't? I would love to travel to Egypt to see the pyramids and feel the history. I can only imagine what it is like to stand among those incredible structures.

One item you can't leave home without when traveling? Compression socks and SK-II skincare products. Compression socks help prevent my feet and calves from swelling up when I fly. They are a lifesaver for me so that I can dance right out of the plane! SK-II products are the best I have found for my skin and I absolutely cannot travel without them.

Aisle or window? Aisle, because I like to stand up a lot.

Favorite childhood travel memory? My sister and I traveled together when

we were 7 and 8 years old to visit my grandmother in her tiny village in Japan. It was the first time we were flying without adults, and we thought it was the most exciting adventure of our lives. I will forever cherish the memory with my sister.

Guilty pleasure when traveling? When I visit Japan, I am so in love with the food that I end up consuming way too much of it in a short period of time. (Japanese yogurt, sushi, sweets made of sweet potato, and BBQ). The result? I get really sick. Every time I know it is going to happen, but I just can't stop myself. It's worth it. There is so much delicious Japanese food that I can't get in the United States, so I have to take advantage of it when I visit home.

Best travel tip? Pack light. JULIET PENNINGTON

Everyone's on board with cruises around Asia

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

We arrived in Hong Kong aboard the Diamond Princess ship, and our first glimpse of the exotic, frenetic metropolis was from stunning Victoria Harbor, the largest harbor in China, and the third largest in the world. The deep, watery superhighway separating Hong Kong Island and Kowloon in the South China Sea was filled with cruise liners, cargo ships, yachts, ferries, and traditional Chinese multistaged junks. Flanking the harbor's shores, for as far as we could see, were shiny stands of soaring skyscrapers, the largest concentration of tall buildings in the world.

Hong Kong, along with other East Asia cities, including Tokyo, Shanghai, and Taipei, had long been on our top-places-to-visit list. But planning a trip in the region can be problematic, requiring several flights and time-sucking and budget-busting travel from one city to another, hotels to hotels. The Tokyo to Hong Kong itinerary offered by Princess Cruises was a perfect solution. We tacked on a few days in Tokyo at the start of the cruise, and a couple more at the end to further explore Hong Kong, and visited some interesting places along the way, includ-



PAMELA WRIGHT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

ing Okinawa, Kyoto, and Taipei. We're not the only ones who think that cruising this part of the world is an easy way to go; it's one of the fastest growing segments of the cruising market.

“Interest in cruising East Asia is growing steadily,” says Jan Swartz, the president of Princess Cruises. “The region still holds a certain mystery and mystique for Americans, and is especially appealing to travelers looking for destinations beyond the well-known Caribbean, South Pacific, and Mediterranean hot spots. And cruising is an easy way to explore this vast region, allowing travelers to visit many of the great cities of Asia in one vacation.”

Princess Cruises was a pioneer in the market and, in 2013, became the first big cruise line to homeport ships in Japan and China. Recently honored by Porthole magazine as having the “Best Asia Itineraries,” Princess will offer more than 25 sailings to East Asia this year. Many are convenient four-

seven-day cruises, with same city flight arrivals and departures. Popular port stops include Tokyo, Taipei, Beijing, and Hong Kong. Longer cruises may include stops in Singapore, Vietnam, Bali, and Australia.

Other big cruise lines have followed suit with more frequent East Asia sailings and varied itineraries to meet the growing consumer demand.

“The momentum for cruise tourism in Asia has significantly escalated,” says Lorri Christou of Cruise Lines International Association. “It's a popular cruise destination for Americans and Europeans, and all the major carriers are creating interesting itineraries to destinations throughout Asia.”

According to CLIA, by 2017, China is expected to be the world's second-largest cruise market, after the United States. Carnival, the industry's largest cruise line and travel company with nine brands, plans to base at least four ships in mainland China this year, and

East Asia's mystique appeals not only to Western tourists but also increasingly to Asians.

Royal Caribbean International is also increasing its presence there, basing its new Quantum of the Seas in Shanghai. According to a recent CLIA study, 52 ships will provide 1,065 cruises in Asia in 2015, with a capacity for 2.17 million guests. That's a 19.5 percent jump from the 1.4 million guest capacity in 2013.

And, it's not just Americans with an interest in cruising Asian waters. “The appetite for cruising by Asians is also growing,” says Christou. Cruise lines are taking that into consideration, offering more onboard facilities and amenities targeted to their Asian passengers. Onboard our Diamond Princess ship, for example, we dined at Kai Sushi, with a traditional sushi bar and a menu of Japanese dishes, and relaxed in the new Japanese bath area, soaking in a hot stone bath and under cascades of warm water. We'd estimate that at least half the passengers onboard were Asians.

Our cruise was seven nights, one of the more popular itineraries. (Short cruises — under one week — are the fastest growing and largest segment of the East Asia cruising market, making up more than 80 percent of itineraries.) We arrived early to spend the three days exploring Tokyo on our own, before boarding the 18-deck, 1,337-cabin Diamond Princess. The ship had all the bells and whistles: several restaurants, anytime dining, full-service spa and fitness center, a slew of bars and lounges, theater, and four pools. We were most interested in seeing the port cities (the menu of guided shore excursions was impressive), but hanging out on the ship wasn't bad,

and certainly beat catching flights and locating hotels. Two days were spent at sea, and the rest in port, exploring the region's historic sites and museums. In Okinawa, we visited Shuri Castle, built in the 1300s for the Ryukyu kings. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the castle served as headquarters for the Sho dynasty. Destroyed during World War II, the restored castle and museum complex details life during the time of warlords and warriors.

When we docked in Osaka, we boarded a bus to the nearby ancient city of Kyoto, which once served as Japan's capital and the emperor's residence for more than 1,000 years. Today, it's home to several impressive UNESCO World Heritage sites. We would have liked to spend more time here, but managed to cram a lot of sightseeing into a long day.

In Taipei, the cosmopolitan capital of Taiwan, we toured the National Palace Museum, home to nearly 700,000 pieces of ancient Chinese art and artifacts, many from the Forbidden City in Beijing, brought to Taipei by Chiang Kai-shek in 1949. The Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall highlights the life of the controversial president of the Republic of China. Outside the museum, we strolled the public plaza, surrounded by Chinese gardens, the National Concert Hall, and National Theater.

By the time we disembarked in Hong Kong, we'd learned to speak a few Chinese and Japanese phrases, made friends with a couple from Tokyo who vowed to stay in touch, and crossed several must-see sights and cities off our travel wish list. It left us, like a growing number of travelers, with a gnawing appetite for cruising East Asian waters.

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Guatemala shows its Maya side on the river

By Claudia Capos
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ALONG THE RIO DULCE, Guatemala — Two Maya Q'eqchi Indians in a small cayuco paddle forcefully toward our white-canopied panga, as we motor up the broad Rio Dulce in eastern Guatemala. Their strong, rapid strokes churn the jade water, leaving a serpentine wake that crackles the mirror-like reflection of thick jungle vines draping steep cliffs. A spear gun lies in the bow of their hand-hewn wooden dugout.

In ancient times, these two Maya might have been fierce warriors advancing on a phalanx of 12 intruders from a warring city-state, ready to do battle. Today, they come peacefully, as residents of the Maya Q'eqchi indigenous river community living along the flooded banks of the Rio Dulce. Drawing alongside our launch, the older man and his son proudly display the day's fresh catch: two glistening, 25-inch-long robalos, a white fish found in tropical waters. They accept our gifts of orange soda, dried soup, and cookies before setting off.

We have come to the Rio Dulce for the day to meet the modern descendants of the ancient Maya who centuries ago built massive temple complexes and sprawling cities throughout Mexico and Central America. Their highly advanced civilization extended from the Yucatan Peninsula in the north through neighboring Belize and Guatemala to Honduras in the south. Today, nearly 12 million Guatemalans trace their roots to this lost empire and embrace the legacy it left for subsequent generations.

We continue motoring upriver and tie up at the wooden-plank dock in front of a thatched-roof, open-air



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

house on stilts. Inside, a short, dark-haired woman, encircled by a smoky haze, kneads tortilla dough in a small bowl near a rustic wood-fired stove. Our tour guide, Chico, whose parentage is a mix of Maya and Italian, gives each of us a small dollop of the sticky dough. We flatten it with our hands and then toss it onto the blackened sheet metal suspended on stone blocks over burning wood. The woman flips the tortillas until they are golden-brown and then piles them on a plate alongside a bowl of homemade tomatillo-pepper salsa.

Last stop is the Ak' Tenamit, a Maya Q'eqchi community development on the Tatin River, where nearly 500 children from poor rural families attend school and receive vocational training. A gentle rain pelts our ponchos, and viscous mud tugs at our sneakers, as we thread among thatched-roof classrooms to a large cafeteria-style enclosure where students are eating their lunch of tortillas, soup, and bananas. The girls giggle at our broken Spanish. We pass out food gifts before sloshing back to the launch.

The return ride to Livingston, a fishing village where we had stopped earlier, is bone-chillingly wet. At the Hotel Villa Caribe, we warm up with grilled fish, shrimp, chicken, beans, and rice, accompanied by energetic Garifuna drumming and punta dancing, an echo of West African influence

in the Caribbean. Another hour of thumping over the heaving waters of Amatique Bay takes us back to the cruise pier at Santo Tomas de Castilla, Guatemala's bustling deep-water port, where the tour began.

Our adventure on the Rio Dulce is one of the highlights of our 10-day “Mayan Mystique” cruise on Oceania's newest flagship, the Riviera. The round-trip sailing from Miami features popular ports-of-call in the western Caribbean that are gateways to well-known Maya ruins, including Tikal in Guatemala and Copan in Honduras, and off-the-beaten-track sites, such as Belize's Dragon's Mouth, the ceremonial entrance into Xibalba, the Maya underworld. Lively shipboard lectures and knowledgeable Maya tour guides on shore provide insights into the extraordinary culture and architecture of this storied Mesoamerican civilization.

“This cruise itinerary offers an excellent opportunity to see Maya ruins during five to seven days of shore excursions and to explore the area from a historical perspective,” says Sandy Cares, Oceania's guest lecturer. “Much of this history is not taught in our North American school curriculum. A lot of our information on the Maya comes from Hollywood.”

Archeologists believe the Maya arrived as early as 1500 BC at some sites in Mexico and Central America. During the golden age, roughly 300 AD to

Fishermen from the Maya Q'eqchi indigenous river community in Guatemala.

900 AD, their kingdoms flourished, and workers used stone tools to build elaborate palaces, ceremonial pyramids, citadels, plazas, and dwellings for thousands of people. Priests and scribes developed the complex Maya calendar, used hieroglyphs to record events, tracked celestial movements, and invented the concept of zero. In the 10th century AD, Maya civilization began to collapse, and people abandoned their cities, which were engulfed by the encroaching jungle. Some Maya ruins, such as Kahunlich on the Yucatan Peninsula, were not excavated until the mid-1970s, and others remain buried.

Tales of the Maya's clandestine rituals, human sacrifices, and lost gold have piqued the curiosity of treasure hunters, authors, film writers, and movie directors. Filmmaker George Lucas shot his first “Star Wars” movie at Tikal, in 1977. The Indiana Jones movie, “The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull,” was inspired by the mystical crystal skull purportedly discovered in 1924 by Anna Mitchell-Hedgeson an expedition to the lost Maya city of Lubaantun in Belize.

Hollywood's fascination with the Maya has sparked efforts to preserve and promote the mysterious civilization and culture. At Mexico's Puerto Costa Maya cruise terminal, we are greeted by Maya warriors, straight out of central casting, who wear elaborate war paint, immense feathered headdresses, and animal bones in their pierced ears. A two-hour bus ride takes us to the Kahunlich Maya ruins, where we stroll through a serene, manicured park, shaded by rustling cohune palms, to the Temple of the Kings, the acropolis and the Palace of the Stelae. At the Temple of the Masks, archeological workers are busy repairing large face-like images honoring the Sun God. Our guide, Luis, asks us to close our eyes and imagine we are back in 514 AD as he blows into a conch shell, which was used to signal the naming of a new king.

At our port-of-call in Belize City, the

Youngbloods join our 20-person tour group on a high-speed motorboat at Orange Walk Town. Freddie, the boat captain, takes us careening through the labyrinth of mangroves in the New River Lagoon to the Lamanai Archaeological Reserve. Lamanai, meaning “submerged crocodile,” is one of the few Maya sites in Belize that was still occupied when the Spanish arrived in the 16th century. Howler monkeys roar from the treetops as Gilberto Coom, a Maya descendant, guides us to the Jaguar Temple, a sprawling complex glistening in the sunlight.

We pass through the ancient ball court and approach a grove of spindly palm trees. Unexpectedly, the towering Temple of the Rain God erupts from the jungle floor like an apparition from Xibalba. We ascend a wooden staircase and then scramble over jagged limestone to reach the top of the temple where the lush tropical canopy and placid lagoon unfold at our feet. The view is both exhilarating and dizzying. It is easy to imagine all-powerful Maya rulers surveying their kingdom from this lofty pinnacle.

Once again on solid ground, we continue walking to the Mask Temple, where one-story-high countenances of Maya kings gaze stoically from their eternal resting places in the limestone walls. The crumbling bones of their predecessors lay buried in tombs somewhere deep within the imposing pyramid.

“I'm proud to be a Maya and to have known three generations of my parentage who were full-blooded Maya,” Gilberto tells us. His broad features break into a smile, as he adds: “It's good for you to come and see these ancient buildings and to understand the culture of a race of people who are still living.”

OCEANIA CRUISES *Mayan Mystique 10-day cruise round-trip from Miami, with 2015 departures on Nov. 29 and Dec. 12, and 2016 departures on Jan. 13, Feb. 2, March 3, and April 2. Prices per person, including airfare, \$2,299 to \$13,499. 800-531-5658, www.oceania.com*

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