

TRAVEL BRIEFS

'Love flights' put new spin the on mile-high club

So-called "flights to nowhere" may not do much to quicken the pulse, but a Taiwanese airline hopes its twist on the gimmick — speed-dating at 30,000 feet — will get a few hearts racing. Joining efforts by aviation operators to stay relevant amid steep drops in demand, Taiwanese carrier Eva Air has rolled out its "Fly! Love is in the Air" campaign in partnership with travel experience company Mobius. The three-hour matchmaking flights will take off on Christmas Day, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day from Taipei's Taoyuan International Airport — and the yule excursion has already sold out, with 400 lonely hearts bidding for just 40 spots split evenly between men and women. Chiang Tsung-Wei, a spokesperson for Mobius, told CNN that the airline has been organizing "faux travel" experiences to feed the desire for exploration. "When single men and women travel, apart from enjoying the fun in travel, they may wish to meet someone," she explained. "Like a scene in a romantic movie." Flight crews will deputize as "love cupids" and singles will be allowed to wander around if they do not click with their assigned seatmates. Meals will be served by a Michelin-starred chef and passengers will have two hours on the ground to become acquainted before lifting off. Alas, the lovelorn will still be required to wear masks when not eating or drinking.

Author pleads to save Joyce's 'Dead' house

A celebrated Irish author is fighting efforts by Dublin city council to turn a house made famous by James Joyce into a 50-bed tourist hostel. Novelist Colm Tóibín, whose works include Brooklyn and The Testament of Mary, has lodged a joint appeal against the decision by the council, which insists transforming the house at 15 Usher's Island is the "best way to secure its long-term conservation." Described by Joyce as a "dark gaunt house," it was once home to his grand-aunts and was the setting for his best-known short story, The Dead, but has deteriorated badly and has been closed to the public for years. Tóibín and others say the hostel plan will "destroy an essential part of Ireland's cultural history" and wipe out the interior fittings that were "so splendidly described" in the story, the Irish Independent reported. In the appeal, they added: "In the decades since Joyce's death, too many of the places that have been rendered immortal in his writing have been lost to the city. Let us not repeat this mistake today. A decision is expected next March.

Stranded backpacker seeks 'girlie' friends

A German backpacker stranded in Australia is begging for "girlie girlfriends" to help her ease nine months of coronavirus loneliness. The 20-year-old au pair, Line Schallmayer, has had only children under 10 and male Tinder dates for company since arriving from Frankfurt shortly before the pandemic locked down most of the world. Schallmayer told newscom.au that she's been overwhelmed by the response since posting her plea on social media, with more than two dozen Aussies reaching out to offer companionship. The university student, who looks after a three-year-old and a 10-year-old for a single mom in Port Macquarie, New South Wales, said she had no choice but to shelter in place because of financial reasons. Most of her fellow backpackers, with whom she briefly travelled after lockdown restrictions were eased, have since flown home, leaving her battling homesickness and isolation. "The mom is the only adult person I'm talking to," she said of her employer. And social media dates fall short. "With all these Tinder boys, I'm so sick of small talk," she said. "I just want a girlfriend to chat to." She wrote on Facebook: "I would love to catch up at a coffee, a day at the beach, nice walks or a movie night to make some friends."

FAMILY TRAVEL



Santa's Dining Room at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel sparkles with showstopping festive decor. PHOTOS: CURT WOODHALL

BANFF PREPARES FOR UNUSUAL CHRISTMAS

Decked out town managing COVID with glittery holiday spirit

MHAIRRI WOODHALL

Christmas is my favourite time of year. The whimsical season, festooned in shiny baubles and satin bows, fairy lights and glitter-crust-ed ornaments, is deeply rooted in family traditions. My childhood memories are a colourful, sparkling blur of crafts and carols, hand-sewn stockings, family movie nights, and the thrilling feeling of hopeful anticipation. Love, joy and a touch of magic are beautiful sentiments to close out any year — especially this one.

My husband and I have created our own family traditions, which typically include a sun-drenched beach in the tropics. We've actually never spent the holidays close to home, and this year our daughter, Brooklyn, made it her Christmas wish. We luckily happen to live a stone's throw from a life-size Christmas snow globe, which gives me all the festive feels and makes it easy to indulge her wish.

Visiting Banff in December is like stepping into a Hallmark Christmas classic. Think quintessential Canadian winter wonderland, although this year it comes with some mandated rules and restrictions. To deal with rising COVID cases, the town just implemented a local state of emergency, which includes mandatory masks and reduced hours of shops. More details are coming on Nov. 30, but in the meantime be sure to check with local operators on what is open and accepting guests.

We were gifted a sneak peek of the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel's showstopping Christmas at the Castle recently, and deck the halls is being taken to the next level.

Alberta-based designer Cory Christopher, the king of Christmas decor, has returned with the sole purpose of outshining himself.

In addition to five holiday-luxe, pet-friendly Santa Suites — each boasting an enchantingly unique theme, ranging from white winter wonderland to Canadian Christmas — Cory and his team have brought an extra whisper of magic to the Castle this year. Santa's new dining room offers families a cosy Claus-inspired setting to enjoy a private holiday five-course wine-paired feast. The Christmas culinary journey begins with local wild game charcuterie and small-farm cheese, followed by soup and a palate-cleansing granita before the main event. Even Santa would be hard-pressed to finish his indulgent apple pudding cake after steaming in the decadent spread of roast turkey, carrots and sprouts, brown butter mash,



Brooklyn takes in some of the pretty decorations in Santa's dining room.



Classic Christmas dinner with turkey, mashed potatoes and candied yams.

pan gravy and the most delicious candied yams.

The North Pole is returning to the Gatehouse Foyer again, where Mrs. Claus will be hosting family-friendly holiday craft and gingerbread house decorating workshops. Additional special touches that guests can arrange include private family crafting sessions and photos with Santa, guestroom Christmas trees and holiday stockings — stuffed with locally made gifts — and a Virtual Good Night Zoom session, personalized by Santa. Per government restrictions, indoor activities will not be available until Dec. 16 at this time. Complimentary in-room craft kits and scavenger hunts, as well as gingerbread kits for purchase, can be picked up at the Resort Activity Centre.

Due to the hotel's extensive COVID safety-protocols, the hotel is only accessible to registered guests at this time.

For Albertans, Christmas comes early care of the Fairmont's annual Advent Calendar. The special Alberta resident rate, of up to 30 per cent off, includes an extra gift each day for stays between Dec. 1 and 24. For information on Christmas at the Castle, including how to book a Santa Suite and take advantage of the annual Advent Calendar, visit christmasatthecastle.ca

While the Fairmont should be crowned holiday headquarters, there are plenty of festive happenings on offer throughout the town of Banff. Mountaintop Christmas at the Banff Gondola is our favourite event of the season.



All Santa Suites at the Fairmont Banff Springs are pet friendly.

Firstly, the view is gorgeous, especially in winter. Secondly, the holiday decor is always on point, and Brooklyn adores all of the family-focused fun. She still talks about her elf name, Sugarmouse Greensparkles, bestowed to her a few years ago. The Banff Gondola is safely bringing back almost all of its top activities, including the Elf Name Generator, cookie decorating, Disney movies, crafting and visits with Santa.

Limited admission and private gondola rides are two welcome additions this year. A third is the Elf Express — a fun-filled storytelling round trip ride from downtown Banff to the base of Sulphur Mountain.

Try to book your winter family adventure before 12 p.m., as kids ride for free.

Visit BanffGondola.com for the complete Mountaintop Christmas schedule, running Dec. 19-30.

If you're still searching for the Spirit of Christmas, head to Banff Avenue. The merry little boutique promises plenty of good tidings and joy. Supporting small business is always a good thing, and this year it's even more critical.

Some of my favourite mountain finds for last-minute stocking stuffers include Banff Doghouse for canine couture; BRANCHES Marketplace specializing in Canadian-made artisan gifts; Natur'el Tea, hand-blended in Banff; and the Rocky Mountain Soap Company.

Many Banff retailers also offer online purchasing and delivery, making it easy to bring a little Canadian Rockies' magic to your doorstep.

For more destination information, visit arrivalstravel.com.