

# Room for Surprise

From Oman and Namibia to the Finger Lakes and northern Norway, the most anticipated hotel openings of 2026 will take you somewhere new.

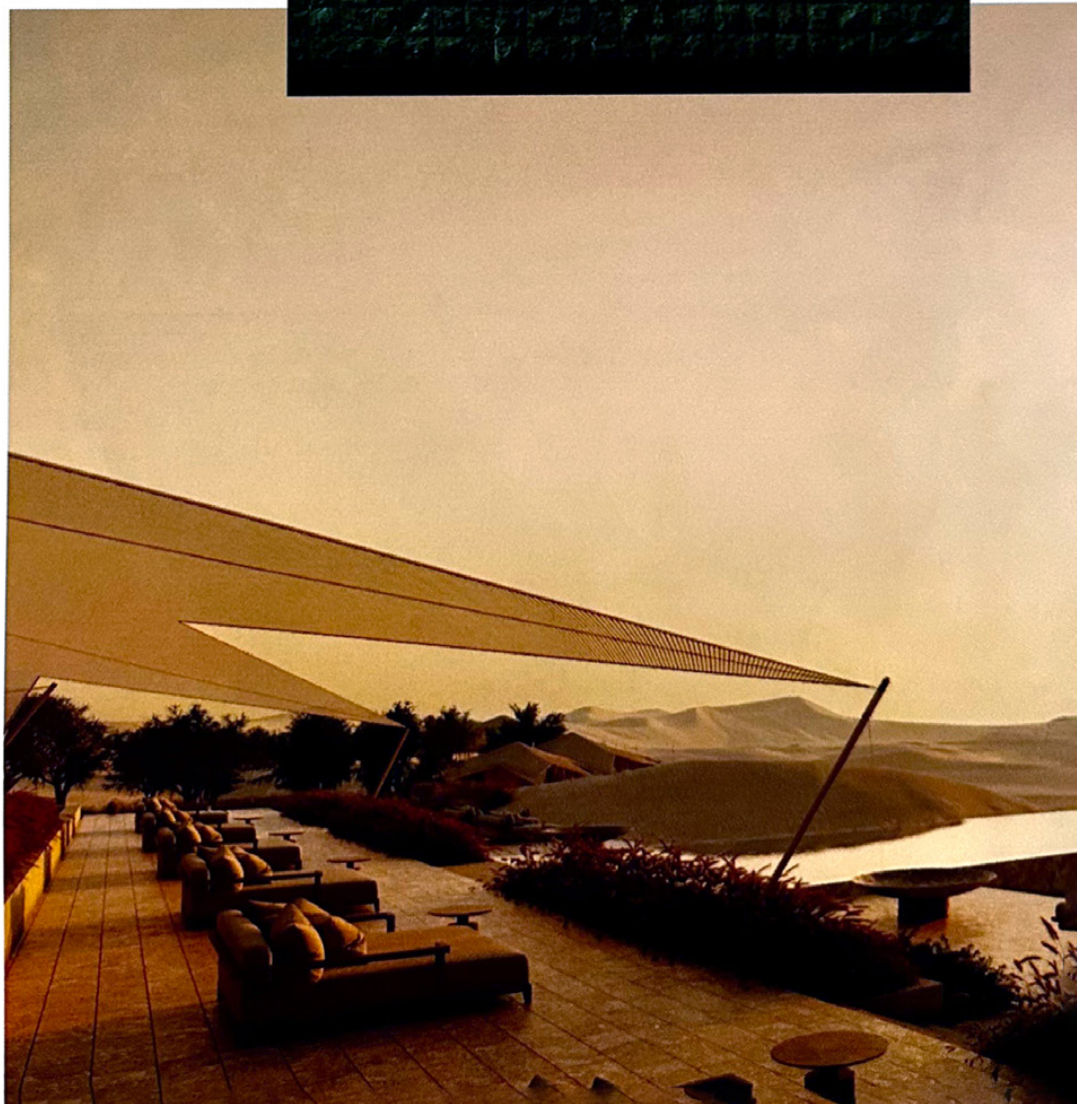
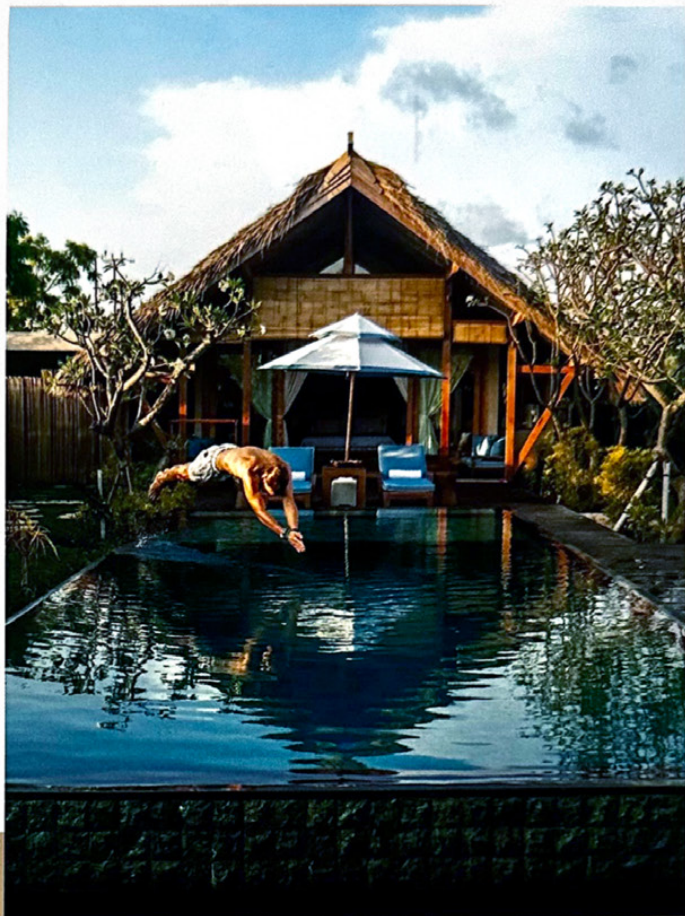
**U**nexpected. It's the word that best describes the next year in luxury travel—and it's a quality that frequent fliers are demanding. "People are asking for something a bit off the beaten track," explains Jules Maury, head of Scott Dunn Private and one of *Robb Report's* Travel Masters. "They're sliding away from that standard hotel."

Take Vestige Collection, the upstart operation owned by the Madera Fernández family, which is venturing outside of Spain for the first time. Soon, it will run not just one but four safari lodges in Namibia. Standout among them: Omatendeka, by the Grootberg Mountains. "This was the most exclusive private lodge in Namibia, [with] complete wilderness and privacy," says Christopher Wilmot-Sitwell of Cazenove + Loyd, another Travel Master. "Now that it's available commercially it will set a new level."

Another Namibia newbie: Hoanib Elephant Camp from Natural Selection, a glamping outpost in the remote Kaokoland. Elsewhere in Africa, Wilmot-Sitwell is also eyeing Asilia's new Erebero Hills in Uganda's Bwindi. The eight-suite gorilla-trekking lodge will ease some of the safari congestion in Rwanda, which has so successfully marketed its five-star hotels for primate-spotting.

In Oman, the prominent Khimji family will open its new project, the Malkai, across three distinct locations. Each property will have just 15 Bedouin-inspired tented rooms. Stays will include your own private guide, vehicle, and driver, so you can visit Barkaa on the coast—near the sultanate's best date farms—or venture to rugged and mountainous Hajar and Sharqiyah, deep within the desert.

Prefer to be on—or in—the water? Adventure specialist Cari Gray of Gray & Co. is keen to send clients to the





CAPTAIN ARCTIC: SHIPST



These pages, clockwise from top: A suite at Omatendeka, an exclusive safari lodge in Namibia; *Captain Arctic*, an eco-conscious expedition cruiser; the main pool at the Malkai Sharqiyah in Oman; making a splash at Indonesia's Nihi Rote.

new Nihi Rote on Indonesia's West Timor. This sister to the Sumba-based retreat will have 25 thatched-roof villas superb for surfers, given the swells nearby. It will replicate the original's business model, operating a hospitality academy to create a talent pipeline. "They're so integrated into the island, and they had to train all the staff—there's only a small handful of foreigners," Gray says. "The effect is tangible, and obvious."

Even European hoteliers are pivoting away from the major hubs. Take Malta, the on-the-rise premium destination that will get more accessible when Delta begins operating nonstop flights from J.F.K. to the Mediterranean island next summer. Rug Company founders Christopher and Suzanne Sharp will debut their five-year passion project, Casa Bonavita, a 17-room reimagining of an 18th-century country estate, around the same time. Look for the antiques that

dot the interior, many inherited from Suzanne's Maltese grandmother.

In Italy, Rocco Forte's arrival in the stylish Sicilian city of Noto will update another classic residence. The 31-room Palazzo Castelluccio occupies a historic house in the center of the UNESCO-protected town. "It's ready for prime time," says Gray, who calls it "desperately gorgeous, with rolling hills and sweeping landscapes." Back on the mainland, Siena has long struggled to offer high-end accommodation. Palazzo Sozzini Malavolti, just steps away from

## "People are asking for something a bit off the beaten track."

the Piazza del Campo, will solve that problem. "It's the only luxury hotel that's in the historical center," Maury says. "And I'm literally planning that trip at the moment for someone."

Farther north, keep an eye out for Ytri on Norway's Træna island. This community-driven project near the Arctic Circle aims to provide both luxury hospitality and local jobs. Guests will be invited to go fishing with a staffer, then have their catch smoked and sent home to them a few weeks later. *Captain Arctic* is a noteworthy addition for devoted cruisers. The charter-first 16-cabin hybrid-electric-propulsion boat has solar-assisted sails that allow it to operate almost silently. "The shallow draft means you can do more than bigger vessels, so it's a rare chance to experience the Arctic in complete serenity," Wilmot-Sitwell says. Meanwhile, on Hiiumaa—Estonia's answer to Nantucket—a local couple has spent eight years perfecting Eha, an idyllic 11-room Baltic retreat. The property will offer three- to seven-day nature-immersion programs starting this summer.

Here at home, there's plenty to discover. Beyond the Hudson Valley's buzzy upgrades (watch for the much-delayed Soho Farmhouse, likely to debut in Rhinebeck before year's end), philanthropist Pleasant Rowland will add a true five-star destination, the Farmhouse at Inns of Aurora Resort & Spa, in the Finger Lakes. The 10-room site will be filled with pieces from her blockbuster art collection and offer access to the 15,000-square-foot spa that anchors the property. She's an unlikely, even unexpected hotelier—the perfect representative for luxury's new approach. **Mark Ellwood**