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Asia's first travel destination club, Banyan Tree Private Collection, offers members exotic retreats for the rejuvenation of the senses.

BY JILLIAN BLUME

Shangri-La. The name alone conjures up the most exotic, sensual legend in literary and cinematic history. A fictional location created in a novel, it's a mystical, peaceful, and secluded place synonymous with a lost paradise. Well, Shangri-La is lost no more. The Chinese government has officially designated a mountainous area in the Yunnan province and part of Greater Tibet as Shangri-La. And a remarkable collection of resorts are now accessible to an elite group of travelers who are members of the Banyan Tree Private Collection, the first asset-backed destination club in Asia.



The infinity pool of the Bayfront Pool Villa at sunset, Banyan Tree Bintan; Previous page: Bayfront Pool Villa, Banyan Tree Bintan



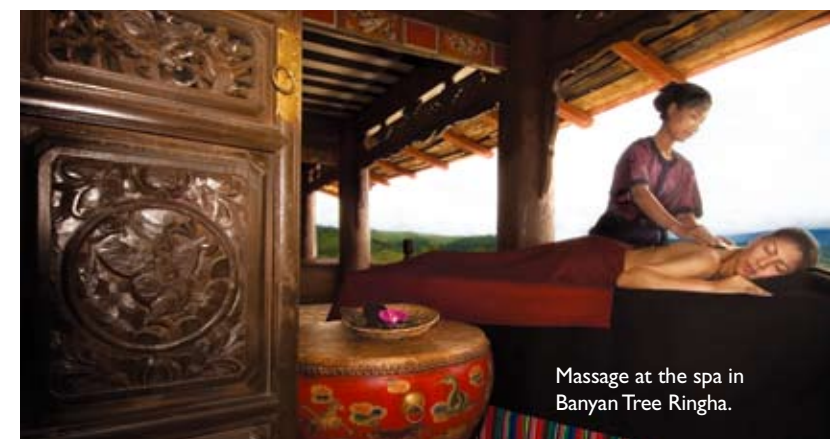
Left: the DoublePool Villa at dawn, Banyan Tree Phuket; Right: the Garden Axis at Banyan Tree Lijiang.



The spa flower jacuzzi at Banyan Tree Seychelles; Below left: yoga at Banyan Tree Seychelles.



The Pagoda at Dawn at Banyan Tree Lijiang.



Massage at the spa in Banyan Tree Ringha.

Launched in October 2006, this destination club is a new take on a fairly young industry. Rather than a portfolio primarily based in private residences, the Collection is an assortment of spectacularly beautiful Banyan Tree resorts in exotic, tropical locations including Bintan Island in Indonesia; Lijiang, China, the ancient capital of the Naxi kingdom; the island of Phuket in Southern Thailand; Intendance Bay on Mahé Island in Seychelles; and Shangri-La. The Banyan resort on Velavaru Island in the Maldives will be available in 2009, and the club plans to expand to 20 additional destinations including Bali, Marrakech, and others. Members also have the option to stay at a growing selection of private residences and villas. Each resort features a Banyan Tree Spa, inspired by ancient Asian healing traditions.

Banyan Tree Hotels and Resorts—with its central purchasing power—manages

the club, and because of this unique set-up, the membership and maintenance fees are comparatively low for the destination club market. Individual Membership fees start at \$120,000 with a \$3,000 yearly maintenance fee for a 7-night stay at any of the Private Collection resorts or villas; membership fees and maintenance doubles for each additional week. A corporate membership (targeted at companies for use by their top directors and executives as perks or to reward top clients) is \$240,000 for 2 weeks assigned to any 2 nominees a company chooses per year.

For people who don't want to commit to an Individual Membership, Banyan Tree offers a Term Membership, good for 3 years at a \$30,000 fee, which can be converted to an Individual or Corporate Membership at the end of the term or allowed to expire. Since a stay at a Banyan Tree Resort is approximately \$14,000 a week, your membership will be paid back after 7 years, and

after that, for the rest of your life, your holidays are essentially on the house.

The club also allows for flexibility and tailor-made vacations. A week can be split into a 3- or 4-night stay at different resorts, and if the time allotment is not used in a given year, it is carried through to the next year. Friends and family may accompany a member as long as the maximum occupancy for the villa is not exceeded, and members can give their time to family or friends without having to be present (think your parent's golden wedding anniversary). As with most destination clubs, membership is in perpetuity and can be passed on to future generations or transferred out into the secondary market.

What makes Banyan Tree Private Collection a true standout in this emerging industry is the unique opportunity it offers to experience some of the most exotic and previously inaccessible locations in the world.



Dinner of the Legend, a destination dining experience, at Banyan Tree Bintan.



BANYAN TREE BINTAN

Located on the island of Bintan in Indonesia, about an hour from Singapore via high-speed Catamaran, this rustic yet luxurious property is situated on Tanjong Said, a tropical beach on a secluded bay of the South China Sea. One of Bintan's most exclusive resorts, it is set among the mystical, tropical beauty of the sea, ancient forests, coconut trees, mangroves, and white, powdery beach.

Overlooking the sea, 64 villas perched on the forested slopes are raised on stilts in the style of traditional fishing villages on Bintan. One of the most unique aspects of the villas is that they are built around the old growth trees, and guests may find a tree trunk rising out of their villa. The selection of villas includes the Spa Pool Villa, featuring a pool set up for personal spa treatments with music, oils, flower petals, and incense; the Bayfront Pool Villa, with a private swimming pool, an open air-jet pool, and awesome views

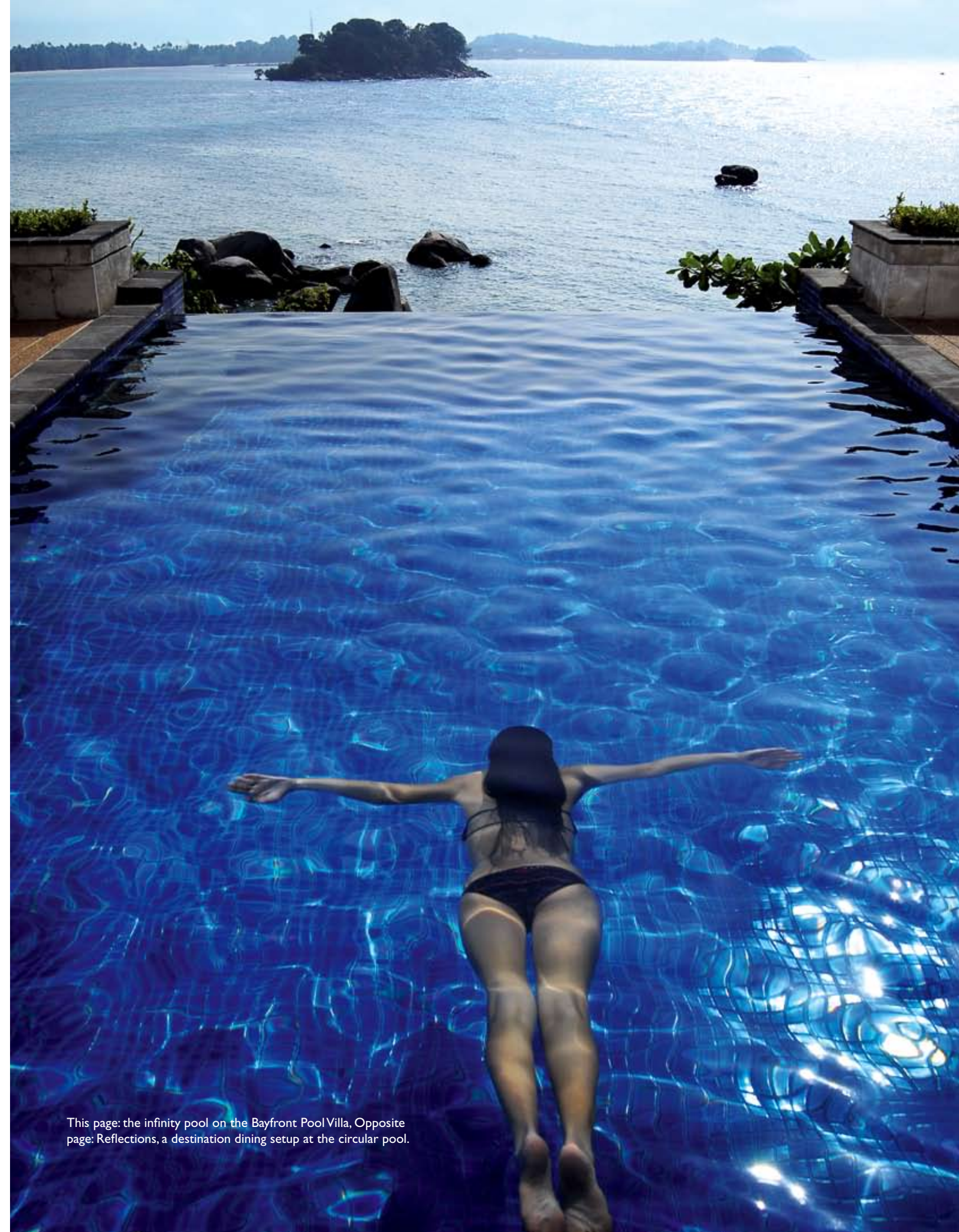
of the ocean; the Villa On-the-Rocks, built on the boulders next to the sea; the Seafront Villa, built into the hillside above the sea; the Bayfront Villa, with a jet pool on the verandah; the Seaview Villa, perched among the ancient trees and built on stilts to preserve the lush foliage on the hill; and the Valley Villa, hidden away on the edge of the jungle.

Water is an integral element of the experience at Bintan. From the circular, rock edge pool that resembles a mountain lake high above the sea among the trees to the coconut trees and dramatic boulders on the shore of the South China Sea, water is a peaceful yet energizing force. If guests are seeking water adventures, the resort's Beach Club offers sunset cruises, canoeing, catamaran sailing, speedboat and banana boat rides, waterskiing, windsurfing, snorkeling, and fishing trips. On land, all-terrain vehicles are available for jungle treks, and The Laguna Bintan Golf

Club adjacent to the resort provides an 18-hole, Greg Norman-designed golf course and two tennis courts.

Although there are enticing restaurants, including the gourmet Saffron, which specializes in Thai and fusion cuisine; the more informal Treetops, set high above the sea among tropical trees and specializing in Indonesian cuisine; and The Cove, which offers a hearty menu of Mediterranean cuisine; it is the destination dining experiences that most elevates dining at Bintan.

Enchantingly romantic, Dinner on the Rocks seats couples on the beach among the boulders, surrounded by the sounds of waves. Dinner of the Legend is a hypnotic experience on the shore of the sea. Seated under the flowing white curtains of an open cabana, the event features a gourmet Indonesian Rijstafel accompanied by a reading of the Indonesian folk tale, the "Legend of the Violet Rainbow



This page: the infinity pool on the Bayfront Pool Villa, Opposite page: Reflections, a destination dining setup at the circular pool.



Destination dining experiences are unforgettable at Bintan. Top: Dinner of the Legend group dinner; Bottom: Dinner at 8, group dinner.

Goddess.” Dinner at 8 is an intricate five-course gourmet meal prepared at the eighth hole at the Laguna Bintan Golf Club, on the shore of the South China Sea. While guests savor dishes from land and sea, such as five-spice duck with wild mushroom ravioli and Sulawesi lobster tails, lighted boats glide silently past. Massage of the Senses draws on Banyan Tree’s specialty in spa treatments and their gourmet, Asian cuisine. Guests first receive a signature massage in their private beach cabana while a gourmet meal sizzles over a slow flame. The private four-course meal under the stars may include dishes such as tamarind-marinated carpaccio of seared veal tenderloin, Atlantic monkfish braised in a clay pot with rice wine and galangal, and a chocolate-ginger truffle tart with pear-caramel sauce.

Other destination dining includes Reflections, where dinner is served on a wooden platform over the circular pool, and Fisherman’s Dinner, set on the beach. Each experience is carefully orchestrated and prepared by a personal chef, and every meal is unforgettable.



The spa is a physical and spiritual highlight of the resort, designed to be an exotic, sensual retreat. Four spa pavilions named after local flowers are equipped with plush daybeds modeled on the bale bengong, a traditional Indonesian resting place. The spa’s signature treatment packages indulge and pamper guests while dissolving all traces of tension and stress. The Royal Banyan package, for example, features a series of intoxicating massage treatments that were used for centuries in the Royal Thai Palaces, a lemongrass and cucumber scrub, and an herbal bath. Rainmist Rejuvenation combines a choice of six body scrubs with names like Kemiri Nut Purifier, a choice of eight different massages (you can’t go wrong in this category with options like the Nusantara, which uses a combination of strong kneading and thumb pressure to release tension and improve circulation, topped off with Spirit Oil to enhance the warming sensation), a footbath, and a Rainmist Shower.

There’s a long list of other spa packages and individual treatments that possibly have the power to change the rest of your life — along with every lavish element at the extravagantly beautiful Banyan Tree Bintan.



Top: a guest receives a massage while dinner simmers nearby during the Massage of the Senses dining experience; Bottom: the spa room in the Spa Pool Villa.



BANYAN TREE RINGHA

Possibly the most unusual in the exotic portfolio of the Banyan Tree Private Collection, Banyan Tree Ringha is located in Shangri-La at 3,200 meters (approximately 10,500 feet) above sea level in the mountains of Greater Tibet. Scenery among the cloud-topped mountains is literally breathtaking, with dramatic ridges and deep canyons, surging rivers and magical plateaus, lush valleys, crystalline streams, and serene lakes. “Ringha is a place where someone can explore and experience the remarkable culture of this country,” notes Rannie Tan, Group Director of the Banyan Tree Private Collection.

Infused with a sense of this extraordinary place, the resort is constructed from authentic Tibetan farmhouses selected by the group and then dismantled and reconstructed in the traditional style at the resort site in the Ringha valley. True to Banyan Tree’s conservationist roots, no new timber was cut and the original character of the structures remains intact.

The Ringha Lodges were originally built as the personal homes of Tibetan villagers, their families, and their livestock; with two bedrooms and bathrooms, historically accurate furnishings including large, circular wooden bathtubs, and bewitching court-

yards, it makes for a perfect family retreat. The Tibetan Spa Suites offer a private spa treatment room for couples who want to relax after a day of mountain trekking, while the Tibetan Lodges feature intricate carvings, a rustic fireplace, and a wooden balcony with a view of the valley or the river. Like eclectic cottages, the one-bedroom Tibetan Suites feature a handcrafted wooden hot tub and extraordinary views from a private balcony.

The resort offers a long list of 4-wheel drive tours to places like the largest Tibetan Buddhist lamasery in the Yunnan Province and the White Water Terraces at the foot of Haba Snow Mountain. The list of treks includes a Shu Du Gang Acclimation Trek, following the course of Ringha’s holy river into the mountains, and a Shangri-La cultural tour where guests visit villages and farmhouses, try local specialties such as homemade yak butter and cheese, and observe yaks, horses, sheep, and pigs residing under the same roof as their owners.

Dining at Banyan Tree Ringha is appropriately traditional. Guests can experience the tea house Jakhang and hot-pots and steamboats at Chang Sa Bar & Restaurant. Llamos, which in the Tibetan language refers to a communal gather-

ing place for friends and family, features Tibetan and Western cuisine and unusual local liquors. Of course, in-villa dining is always available as in every other Banyan Tree resort.

Sacred Himalayan beliefs, Chinese Tui Na, and Chinese Five Elements philosophy inform the spa treatments at Banyan Tree Ringha. Treatments include sensory indulgences such as Himalayan Bliss that utilizes soft river stones hand carved by monks from Kopan monastery and inscribed with holy mantras and auspicious symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. This treatment begins with a Black Sesame Scrub, followed by a Gui Shi Hot Stones massage and a rice wine bath. Individual massages include Lomi Lomi, which originates from Hawaii and uses full body techniques. Hand and foot treatments and facials are available, based on elements such as Wood (the Cherry Mask) and Gold (the Peaches & Cream mask). The Ringha spa has also developed special techniques to help guests ease muscle strain after their trekking adventures.

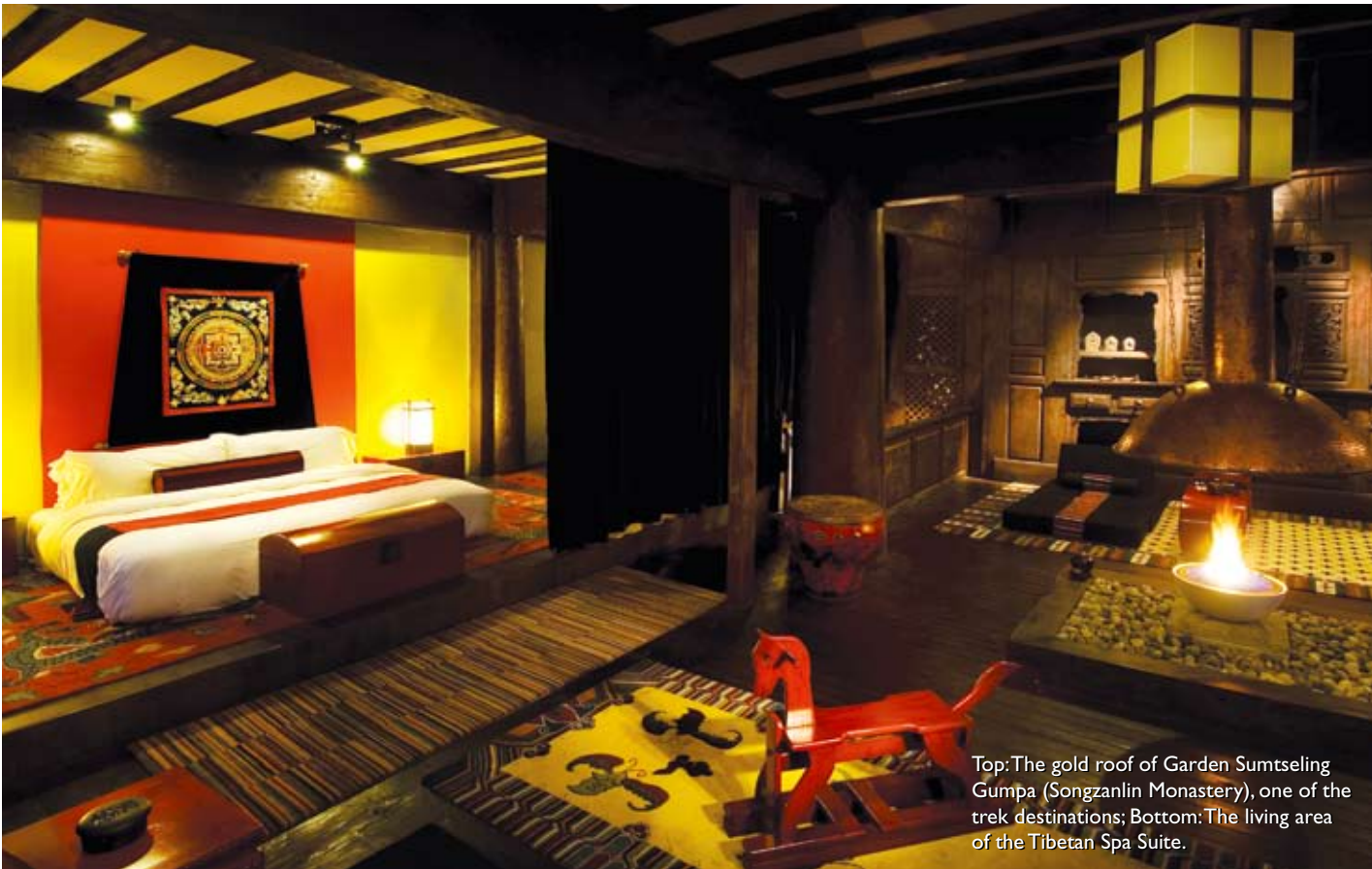
There is no other place in the world quite like Banyan Tree Ringha. After all, it’s not often that you can spend your vacation in the paradise of Shangri-La. 🏡



This page: soaking in a traditional tub in the Banyan Tree Ringha Spa; Opposite page: a native tribe crossing a nearby bridge.



Top: Hotpots, steamboats, and snacks at Chang Sa restaurant; Bottom: Bitu Lake, a trek destination.



Top: The gold roof of Garden Sumtseling Gumpa (Songzanlin Monastery), one of the trek destinations; Bottom: The living area of the Tibetan Spa Suite.