

## Need to escape Canada's cold winters? Try these five underrated destinations

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As temperatures dip and winter approaches, international travel to warmer destinations is once again a realistic and welcome way to escape Canada's cold weather – even if it's only for a week or two.

For those eager to eschew the usual crowds at all-inclusive resorts, there are a host of under-the-radar destinations to explore. From beachy locales to family-friendly city escapes and food-forward spots, here are five locations to consider this winter.

### Beach-meets-jungle for party-seekers and wildlife lovers in Panama



In Panama, tourists in some areas can see three-toed sloths as they wander around their lodge.

VISIT PANAMA

When planning a bachelor party getaway for himself and eight friends in March 2022, Panama was the first place that came to mind for Sean Hebert. "I was looking for a destination that offered a few staples of a bachelor party itinerary but wasn't going to send you home absolutely exhausted and in need of rest," Hebert explains.

His trip began with a few nights out at the rooftop bars of Panama City (there are direct flights from Toronto, Montreal, and Quebec City), followed by five days at the Palmar Beach Lodge in Bocas Del Toro, an archipelago along the northeastern coast of Panama. "Each of us had our own jungle bungalow," he says. "On the pathway from the dock to get to our rooms on the island, we could see sloths in the trees, frogs and alligators in the water."

While the island party circuit is popular with young travellers – the Black Magic pirate ship is an all-day, open bar boat tour – there are also plenty of opportunities for adventure-seekers. "It's an incredible destination for snorkelling and diving," Hebert says. "A lot of the hostels cater to surfers. There are really nice breaks just off the coast."

### A family-friendly city escape in San Diego



A top family destination in San Diego is Sesame Place, a Sesame Street theme park.

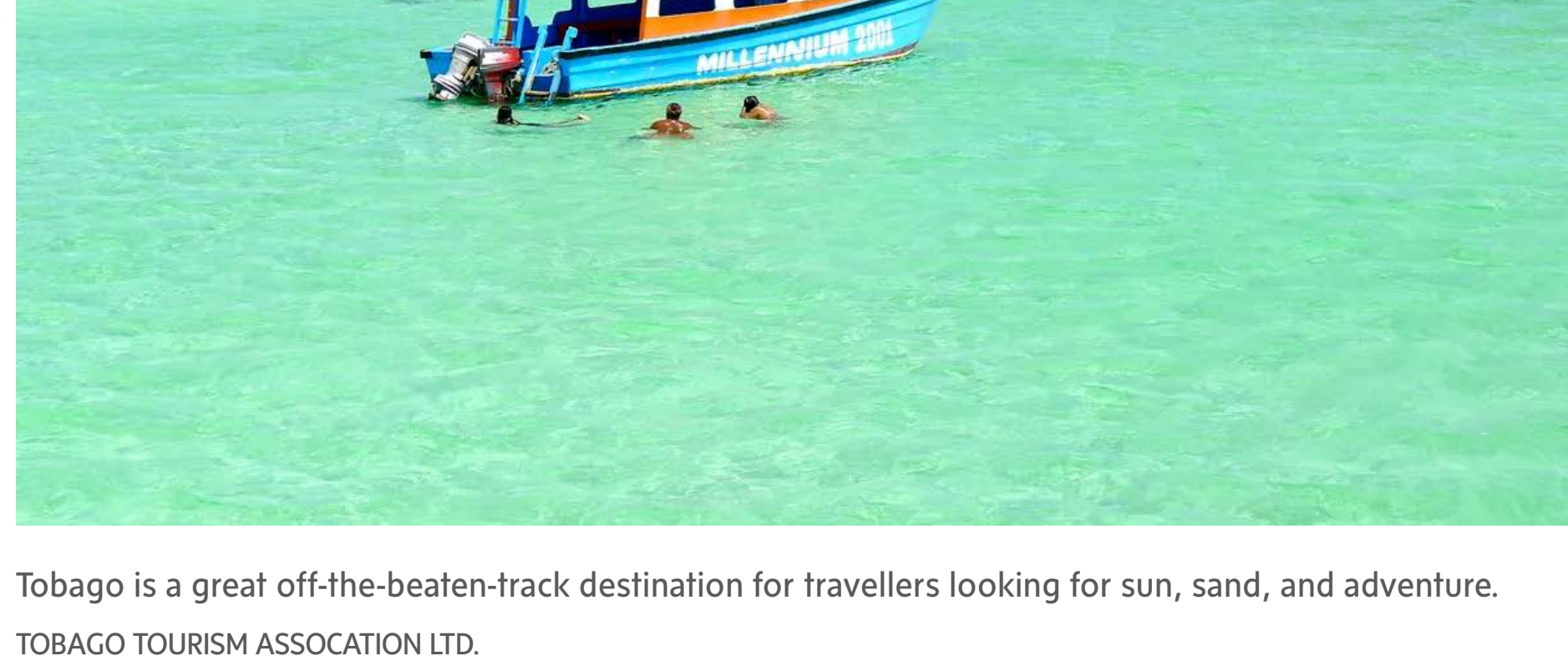
SAN DIEGO TOURISM

An off-forgotten Californian destination, San Diego's wintertime highs sit around a comfortable average of 19 degrees Celsius. Sesame Place, a Sesame Street theme park featuring family-friendly rides, water slides, parades, and plenty of iconic characters, opened in March 2022 on the former site of a water park in Chula Vista. For families with sensitive kids, Sesame Place San Diego is designated as a "Certified Autism Center": Each attraction at the park has a sensory guide, rated from 1 to 10, indicating the degree of sensory stimulation expected on the ride.

While it might not be sweat-inducing weather, most winter days are pleasant enough for a day on the beach. Water temperatures will probably be too cold for most to swim but rounds of beach volleyball and sandcastle-building are still on the table. Head to the Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve for the best of both worlds – hike along coastal trails (in the winter, you might spot gray whales migrating along the coastline) then hit the Torrey Pines State Beach to relax.

In May 2022, Air Canada launched direct flights from Montreal to San Diego, the first time this route has been serviced non-stop. There are also direct flights from Calgary, Toronto, and Vancouver.

### Off-the-beaten-path beach vacation in Tobago for the anti-all-inclusive crowd



Tobago is a great off-the-beaten-track destination for travellers looking for sun, sand, and adventure.

TOBAGO TOURISM ASSOCIATION LTD.

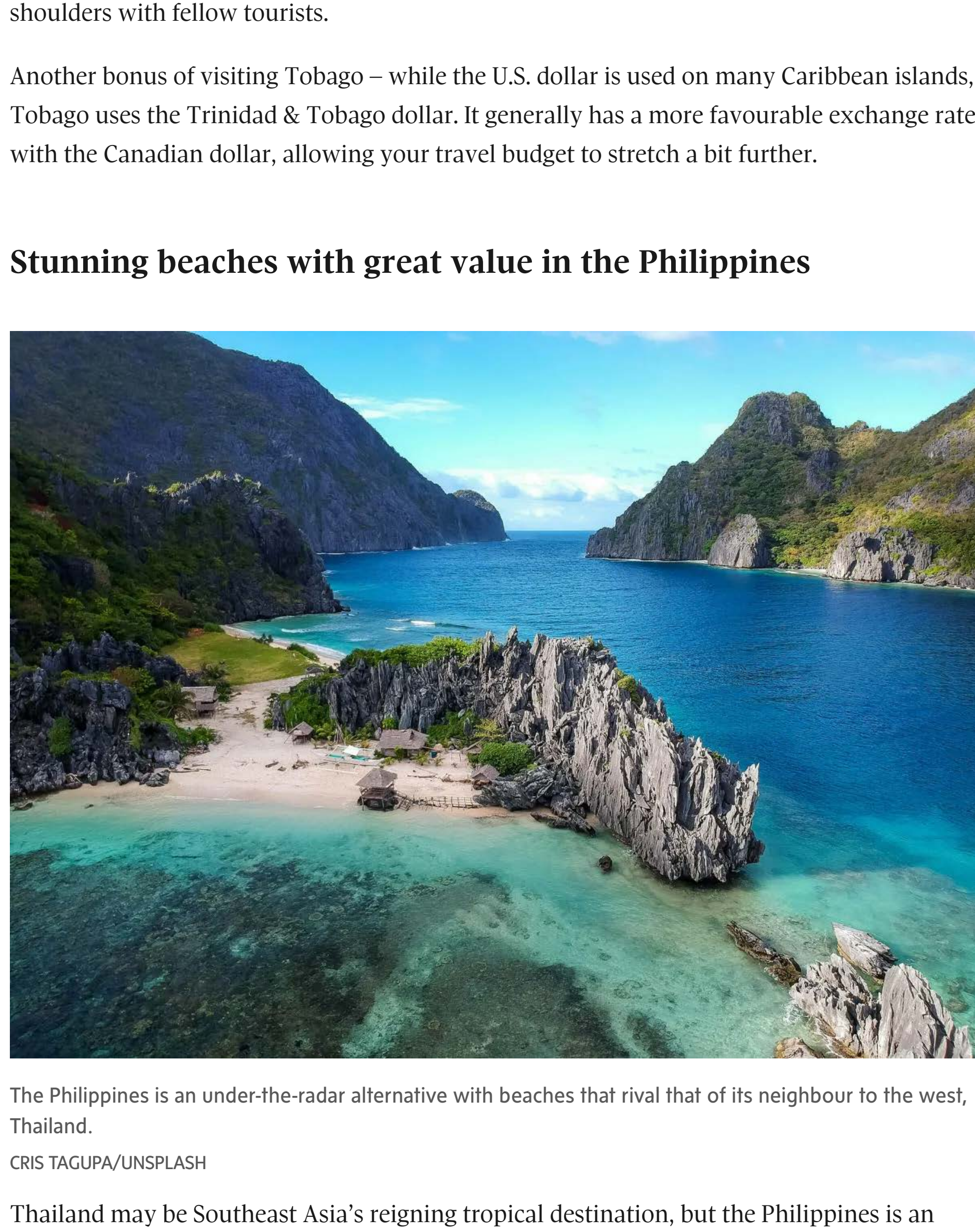
If you were itching to escape the confines of your all-inclusive resort or dismayed by crowds of tourists at your last beach vacation, a further-flung Caribbean destination might be the solution. "Tobago appeals more to people interested in going a bit off the beaten track with the payoff being a much richer experience," explains Sheena Des Vignes, a marketing coordinator at the Tobago Tourism Association Ltd.

When I visited Tobago in February 2022, as a guest of Tobago Tourism, Sunwing operated a direct flight here from Toronto. That route has since ended, so it's now a longer trek here compared to most Caribbean destinations – an eight-hour journey from Toronto which includes a two-hour layover in Trinidad. But visitors will be rewarded with fewer crowds. "If you hike to a waterfall in Tobago, there won't be any tour buses when you arrive, and chances are good you will have the entire place to yourself," says Ms. Des Vignes.

The beaches here are of the postcard-perfect, white-sand variety. Take a minutes-long boat ride out to the picturesque Nylon Pool, an offshore sandbar located a few kilometres off the coast with clear waters and a smooth, sandy bottom. (Princess Margaret visited the spot during her honeymoon in 1960.) Snorkel or dive into the Arnos Vale Reef to admire coral, sea urchins and brightly-hued fish weaving in and out of rock formations without bumping shoulders with fellow tourists.

Another bonus of visiting Tobago – while the U.S. dollar is used on many Caribbean islands, Tobago uses the Trinidad & Tobago dollar. It generally has a more favourable exchange rate with the Canadian dollar, allowing your travel budget to stretch a bit further.

### Stunning beaches with great value in the Philippines



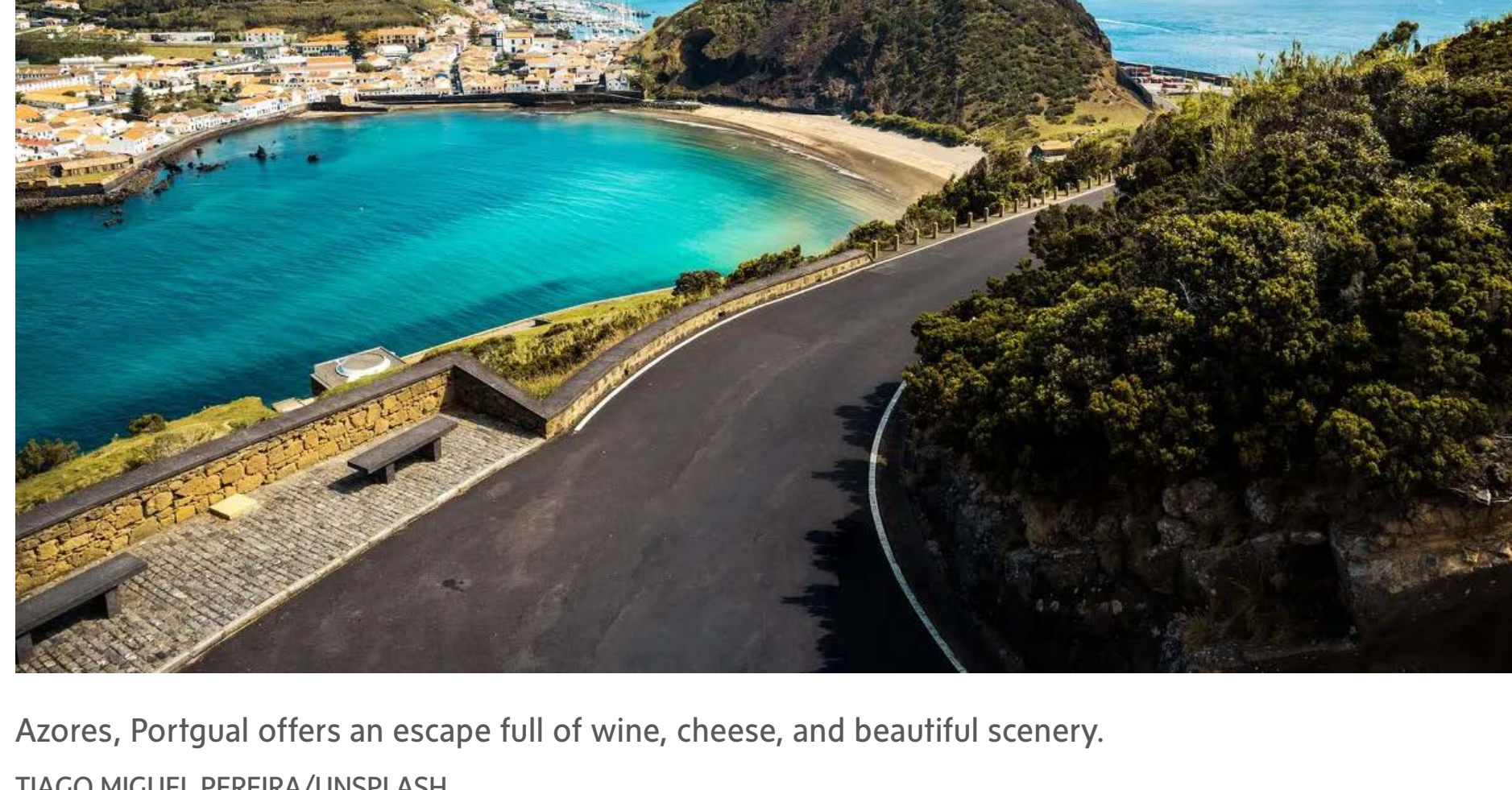
The Philippines is an under-the-radar alternative with beaches that rival that of its neighbour to the west, Thailand.

CRIS TAGUPA/UNSPLASH

Thailand may be Southeast Asia's reigning tropical destination, but the Philippines is an under-the-radar alternative with beaches that rival (and maybe even surpass) that of its neighbour to the west. For starters, the archipelagic country has more than 7,000 islands and an impressive 10 times the coastline of Thailand. Palawan's lagoons, underground rivers and idyllic beaches rightly earn comparisons to Tahiti and the Amazon while Cebu, the second-most populous island of the Philippines, combines historic forts with waterfalls and wildlife reserves.

The locals are known for being warm and welcoming (the country regularly ranks as one of the world's friendliest) and English is one of the country's official languages. Tourism operations in Asia were particularly hard-hit by COVID-19 lockdowns: The Philippines only re-opened to fully vaccinated tourists in February 2022, making it a worthwhile place to spend your tourism dollars.

### Wine, cheese, and scenic drives in the Azores, Portugal



Azores, Portugal offers an escape full of wine, cheese, and beautiful scenery.

TIAGO MIGUEL PEREIRA/UNSPLASH

Katie Bridges, editor of the Toronto-based food magazine Foodism, was surprised by the bucolic landscapes of the Azores when she visited in 2019. She describes lagoons and lakes that reminded her of Iceland and scenes akin to the English countryside. "It feels very 'at nature'," explains Ms. Bridges. "On some islands, there are more cows than people."

A car rental is a must to properly explore quaint villages, black sand beaches and waterfalls on the Azores' largest island, São Miguel. The archipelago is also known for its cheese (Ms. Bridges visited as a guest of Say Azores Cheese), appealing to food-forward travellers.

"Every restaurant you go to, they plunk down this cheese in front of you," she explains. The "queijo fresco" (which translates to "fresh cheese" in Portuguese), is served as an appetizer for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, often with bread and a pickled pepper condiment called pimenta del terra. The Azores also boasts the only two commercial tea plantations in Europe, along with wineries growing grapes that thrive in Azorean volcanic soils.

The Azores are the most western part of Europe. A non-stop flight to Ponta Delgada from Toronto takes just under six hours with Azorean Airlines. The weather here is considered "subtropical" year-round, with winter highs at a pleasant 15 degrees Celsius. However, be prepared for unexpected rainfall.