

LOOSE LEAF

ESCAPE EDITION #122

DEXTER DARDEN

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

22 CITIES WE LOVE FOR YOUR 2022 ADVENTURES

FROM THE COAST OF CALIFORNIA TO THE ICONIC SHORES OF CAPRI

Introducing...

A Beloved Guest Star
of Smash Hit Comedy
Series "Ted Lasso"

A Celebrity Fitness Trainer
and Her Secrets to Staying
Healthy During the Holidays

The Award-Winning
Chef Bringing Innovative
Concepts to Mexico

making the issue

December 2021 /// Escape Issue

COVER

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Santa Monica



2021 is coming to a close, and if you know anything about us, you know we like to end things

with a bang. Meet our December escape issue! This magazine is packed with an amazing assortment of people, places and activities that'll leave you inspired as you step into a new year. From our favorite cities in California and beyond to insanely cool dining experiences in our own backyard, this issue was designed to tickle your travel bug, get you out of your comfort zone and highlight all the adventures that await you in 2022. Whether it's exploring California's central coast, experiencing San Diego's burgeoning culinary scene or finally making moves on that dream home renovation, we hope this issue inspires you to cross things off your bucket list with gusto!

For those that don't know where to start, we recommend page one! Gracing the front cover of our December issue is the breakout star from South Jersey, Dexter Darden. As a rising American star in the film industry, Darden is a walking example of someone who continues to use his gifts, overcome obstacles and bet on himself. We hope you find his story inspiring as you gear up for a new year with new challenges, but more importantly, new opportunities.

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All *Eyes* on Him

MEET THE BREAKOUT STAR FROM SOUTH JERSEY
WHO'S SHAKING THINGS UP IN HOLLYWOOD

WRITTEN BY: KERI BRIDGWATER // PHOTOGRAPHED BY: TRAVIS MCCOY // STYLED BY: SARAH NEARIS



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Born to Act

• “My favorite movie is “Rush Hour.” I used to run around and recreate [Chris Rock and Jackie Chan’s] scenes on a little VHS camera and get my cousins to play some of the other characters. I think my mom still has the tapes.”

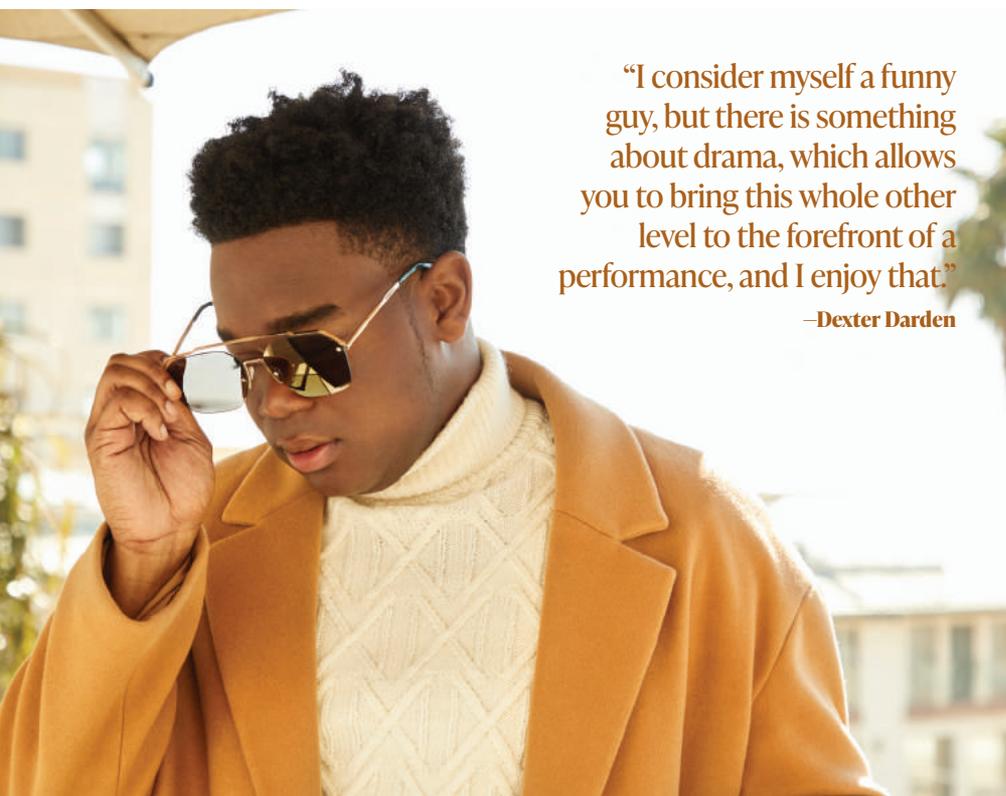
Serving the Community

• A celebrity ambassador for the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America, Darden regularly uses his platform to champion charitable organizations, including the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and The Boys and Girls Club.



“I consider myself a funny guy, but there is something about drama, which allows you to bring this whole other level to the forefront of a performance, and I enjoy that.”

—Dexter Darden





This rising star considers screen legend Paul Newman a mentor, has worked alongside numerous Academy Award winners and other A-listers and starred in 2020's wildly successful "Saved by the Bell" reboot. Touted as one of Tinseltown's most talented up-and-coming young actors, Dexter Darden discusses his humble beginnings and big breaks.

"My mom always says that my first solo show was when I was three years old singing in church," explains Darden over the phone from Los Angeles. "The choir is where I got my foundation for music, but I didn't think it could be anything other than a hobby or something that I did to have fun. I guess the Lord had other plans."

Born and raised in Camden, New Jersey, Darden also excelled at sports (he still loves to play basketball), but it was attending Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in Connecticut in 2000 that inadvertently charted his future career course.

Stints at the Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, off-Broadway shows and TV appearances swiftly followed. However, it was landing the part of Walter Hill—a teen with Asperger's syndrome in the 2012 pop-gospel comedy "Joyful Noise" alongside Dolly Parton and Queen Latifah—that cemented his big break. "When [the movie] came out and I got all this attention, I said, you know what, I'm just going to leave New Jersey. So, I bought a first-class, one-way ticket, got to Los Angeles and realized I had no money," he says with a self-effacing laugh. "Growing up in South Jersey, wanting an opportunity to spread my wings, going to a place like California—I mean it was a dream come true and a culture shock for sure. I emceed, hosted and sang at weddings—yes, I was a wedding singer! I just did what I had to do to survive."

His talent and dedication saw Darden work steadily after moving out west, racking up credits as Frypan in "The Maze Runner" trilogy before playing Forest Whitaker's son in the critically acclaimed "Burden," which won the Audience Award at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival. "It's not often that you get to work with somebody

who's considered a master at what they do, and Forest is definitely a master," he says of starring alongside the Academy Award winner. "Everything he does—how he moves, how he conducts himself—taught me something. And he was someone I wanted to sit back and learn from."

Flexing his range further the following year, Darden jumped straight into Spike Lee's "Son of the South" and his second significant dramatic role as legendary American statesman John Lewis. "Transitioning from 'Burden' to 'South', it was great being able to come from that experience and say, 'Okay, how do I feel about this influential figure, this man who gave immeasurably to the civil rights movement? What is it I want to bring to the character?'"

Looking up to versatile and in-demand actors like Will Smith and Jamie Foxx who can "dive into any role and provide performances that transcend demographics," whether it's comedy or drama, Darden follows suit and likes to keep his options open when it comes to reading scripts. "I consider myself a funny guy, but there is something about drama, which allows you to bring this whole other level to the forefront of a performance, and I enjoy that."

As a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) actor, he's passionate about changing the narrative on racial stereotypes and pioneering diversity through his work—something he got to do on Peacock's "Saved by the Bell" reboot last year. "I try to not limit myself in terms of the projects I'm doing, the roles I'm accepting, or that come through," he says. "I don't want to play the gangster. I don't want to play the guy who might have killed somebody because I don't want to have that be the only representation of a Black man on television. We're so much more."



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—Dexter Darden



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Catch Him in the Kitchen

• After discovering a passion for cooking during lockdown, Darden’s standout dish is his “good old-fashioned Southern-style ribs,” which he marinates for 48 hours before putting them in his prized smoker.

Improving Every Day

• Must read? “Can’t Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds” by David Goggins—an inspiring book about the ups and downs, trials and tribulations of life and how to flip negatives into positives as we navigate our way through.”

Party Trick?

• A talented impersonator, Darden can do a solid Bernie Mac, James Brown and Stevie Wonder, among several others.



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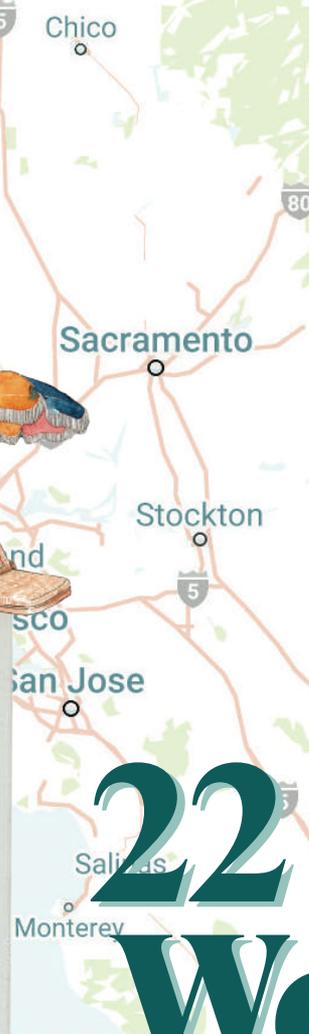
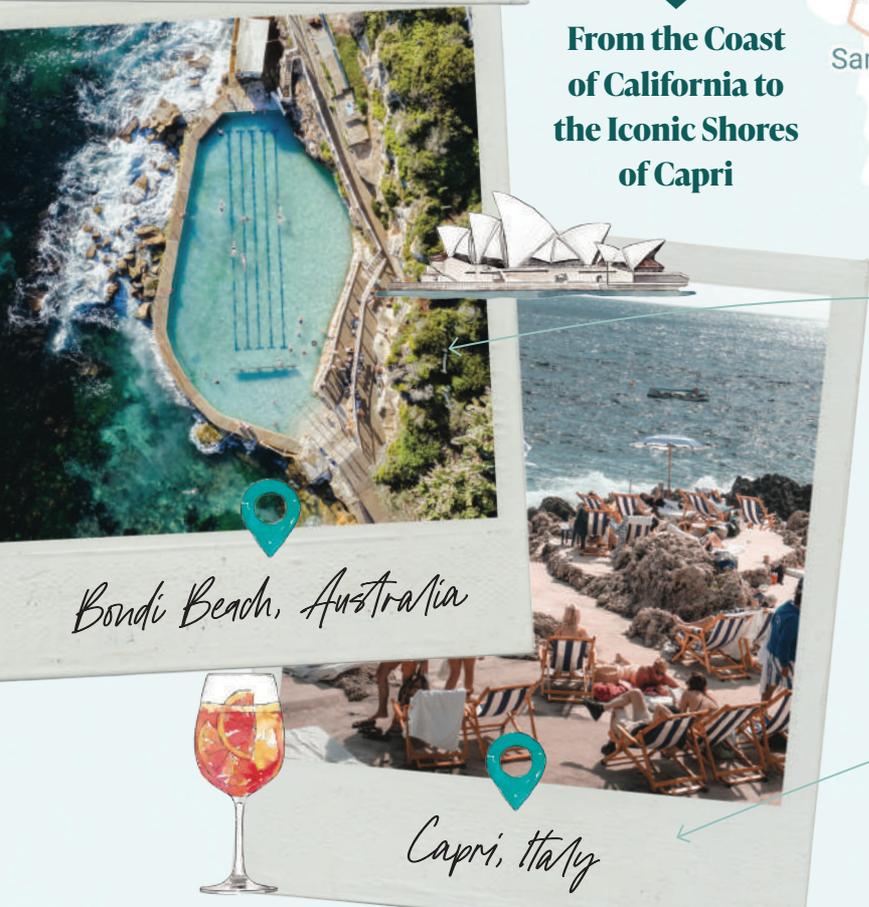
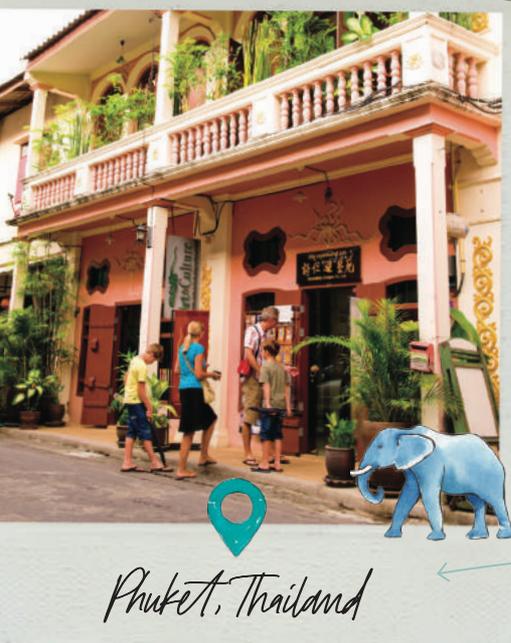
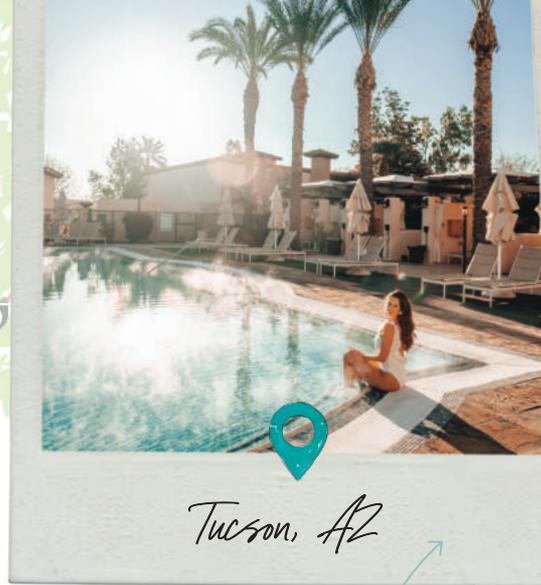
While writer Tracey Wigfield’s *Bayside High* still played home to a familiar privileged clique in her witty reimagining of the iconic ’90s sitcom, a new generation of disadvantaged students—including Darden’s character Devante—helped tackle relatable issues of race, education inequality and classism with a pop-culture spin. As a kid who grew up watching the original series on Saturday mornings and reruns before school, he says the satirical yet sincere new self-aware direction felt timely. While getting the chance to audition for a favorite childhood TV show was surreal, once Darden got a feel for Wakefield’s spin on the hot-button topics she intended to cover, he knew the role would be a meaningful opportunity. “We need to be having these kinds of conversations with the younger generation—Gen Z and the 13- to 16-year-old kids on social media who are going to be the voice of the future. We need to promote these conversations instead of skipping over them so that they’re comfortable having them with their friends.”

As a fan of the original, Darden also counts working alongside Mario Lopez as a major career highlight. “You know, growing up and being someone who was a dancer myself, you always heard about Mario. How he could just kind of do it all—hosting, acting, dancing or whatever—so working with him was a total dream come true.” Another dream role for Darden? Playing legendary Motown artist Stevie Wonder, which is a project he is actively pursuing. “He’s one of the greatest, and I really want to tell his story,” he enthuses. “I would love to do a biopic about his life so that audiences could learn more about this incredible man who, honestly, people just don’t know that much about.”

With movie release dates delayed, premieres and award shows canceled, Darden admits that despite COVID-19 upending the global film industry, 2020 still marked one of the best years of his career to date. “I was blessed and had some really cool projects come in that I was incredibly grateful for,” he says. With a 10-episode second season of “*Saved by the Bell*” greenlit by NBCUniversal earlier this year, he says the upcoming season is going to put a lot of smiles on people’s faces. “It’s bigger, better and the writing is even more incredible. We’re opening more conversations about ethnicity, sexuality and gender in such a creative way. I’m proud to be part of a show that pushes the envelope and makes itself available for the whole family to enjoy.”

On a personal note, for Darden, much of 2021 was also dedicated to reconnecting with loved ones: from a new romantic relationship and spending more time with his mom in Philly to being best man at BFF Jordan Fisher’s wedding. “Having a COVID wedding in Disney World was crazy, but it was still a dream come true,” he notes. With filming projects pushed back due to the ongoing pandemic and additional logistics required when it comes to shooting on set, he shares one (of many) projects that readers can look forward to seeing him in next year is the sequel to “*The Binge*”—a follow-up to Hulu’s 2020 Jeremy Garelick-directed dystopian comedy with Vince Vaughn and Skyler Gisondo.

From making his mark in movies to dominating streaming platforms, Darden’s already sparkling career credentials have certainly cemented his place in the spotlight as one of the industry’s brightest and most bankable young stars to watch. ■



22 Cities We Love

From the Coast of California to the Iconic Shores of Capri

» With a new year comes new adventures, and there's nothing more exciting than stuffing a suitcase. Whether you're heading up the coast for a Golden State escape or you're catching a flight overseas, it's time to dream big and plan your next epic getaway. This guide highlights 22 of our favorite cities near and far—from the rolling vineyards of Napa to the pristine beaches of Malibu. May these pages be your 2022 guide to adventure, relaxation and all kinds of exploration. *Bon Voyage!*