
From The Sunday Times

November 16, 2008

The 20 best winter sun destinations

Our guide to the winter sun destinations where you know exactly what you're getting



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Satisfaction has been in short supply this year. The pound has plummeted, the summer was a washout and your house is now worth less than your shed.

What you need is a double dose of full-fat, supersaturated satisfaction, and we know exactly where you'll find it. From nonews, no-shoes desert islands to full-spec, plasma'd-up spa resorts, here are the destinations where your satisfaction is guaranteed.

Prices, unless otherwise stated, are per person for seven nights, B&B, including flights from London and transfers

AFRICA

1 Shiri beach, Fumba, Zanzibar

The mangrove-fringed beaches of Zanzibar's southwest coast are less popular than those on the north and east, but if you're visiting between December and February, when the northeast monsoon is blowing, this is where you want to be. The water is the same ludicrous shade of blue, the sand slightly more golden and, as Shiri beach faces west, it offers awesome sunsets. Day-trippers are unheard of and the guests at the Fumba Beach Lodge, five minutes away, seem reluctant to leave the hotel's own perfect little strip of sand, making Shiri beach all yours.

Getting there: the signposts from the ramshackle, driftwood-built idyll of the Fumba Beach Lodge are suspiciously hard to find. Ask the owner Edwin van Zwam, to show you the way. The price is £1,442 with Expert Africa (020 8232 9777, www.expertafrica.com).

2 Vamizi Island, Mozambique

Part managed by the Zoological Society of London, Vamizi is a favoured haunt of Nelson Mandela and the apotheosis of the African ecoresort. Just eight miles long by a mile wide, and considered among the last untouched African wildernesses, the island describes itself as "a conservation project funded through low-impact, upmarket tourism". It goes without saying that the white-sand beaches are Bounty-bar perfect, but the biggest draw is the wildlife, with 112 avian species, samango monkeys and giant coconut crabs playing supporting roles to the main event – a pristine reef within wading distance, said to be home to more types of coral than the Great Barrier Reef, on which new marine species are still being discovered.

Getting there: to share the beach with Nelson, book a package at the luxury Vamizi Island Lodge; £3,647 with Expert Africa (020 8232 9777, www.expertafrica.com).

3 Nkwichi beach, Malawi

There's something of Neverland about Nkwichi – “squeaky sand” in the local dialect – a brilliant white beach on the rocky shores of Africa's third largest lake. The six chalets, with crooked terraces, are straight out of PeterPan, and the fireflies that dart around the campfire at night are clearly pals of Tinker Bell. All that's missing, fortunately, is Captain Hook and that infernal crocodile.

Getting there: Okavango Tours (020 8347 4030, www.okavango.com) has four-night stays for £1,954pp.

INDIAN OCEAN

4 Anse Georgette, Praslin, Seychelles

There is an obvious satisfaction in experiencing the incomparable, but attempting to pick the most beautiful beach in the Seychelles is like trying to pick the spottiest dog in a kennel full of dalmatians. Since you asked, however, it is widely believed that the best is Anse Georgette, a small but perfectly formed strand that coyly hides her charms beneath the takamaka trees at the back end of a golf course. The problem is that her firm, gently sloping sands, her ample shade and her perfect curves are too small to share, so if there's another soul there when you arrive, let me know and I'll have them moved.

Getting there: if you're staying at the decadently indulgent Constance Lemuria Resort – from £2,795 with Elegant Resorts (01244 897516, www.elegantresorts.co.uk) – you need only lift a finger and a golf cart will drive you to the beach. If not, you'll have to sneak across to the 15th hole of the Lemuria's golf course. Anse Georgette lies just beyond.

5 Zighy Bay, Oman

It's not the easiest beach to get to – guests arrive, Milk Tray-style, by paraglider – but for sheer spine-tingling drama, you can't beat Zighy. Cut off from the rest of the sultanate by the UAE, the mile-long sweep of sand, pinched between soaring 8,000ft peaks of glistening limestone and the Strait of Hormuz, looks like the kind of place you'd see Bond wading ashore in his Speedos.

Getting there: I wasn't joking about the paraglider, which is the preferred means of entry to the extraordinary Six Senses Hideaway. A luxury resort disguised as an Omani village, it never quite dispels your suspicion that it might be Captain Scarlet's secret training camp. Prices start at £1,340 with Western & Oriental (0845 277 3389, www.westernoriental.com).

6 Radha Nagar, Andaman Islands

The primeval wilderness of Radha Nagar, or Beach Number Seven, as it's more prosaically known, is reputed to be the best beach in Asia, but if the Andaman islanders were expecting a rush of tourists, they've been disappointed. If you come to this land that time forgot in search of an unspoilt paradise of untrodden beaches, smoking volcanoes, virgin rainforests and surfing elephants, you won't be disappointed. If you're looking for shopping, nightlife and neon, however, you probably will.

Getting there: book into Barefoot, a jungle eco-retreat on Havelock island (£1,298, with TransIndus; 020 8566 2729, www.transindus.co.uk), and your beach is that great big empty one right in front of you.

7 The Beach House at Manafaru, Maldives

The Beach House at Manafaru aims to satisfy your every whim by applying the shotgun effect to hospitality. Each of the 68 villas comes packed with WiFi, DVD players, iPod docks and swathes of plasma, as well as huge outdoor bathrooms, plunge pools and glass floors. If lounging doesn't satisfy, there's tennis, volleyball, badminton and the only 18-hole golf simulator in the Maldives. Spa? Of course. Infinity pool? Yep. Kids' club? Absolutely. Private desert islands for indulging castaway fantasies? Have a wild guess . . .

Getting there: prices start at £1,959 with Destinology (0800 634 2848, www.destinology.co.uk).

ASIA

8 Bai Dai, Phu Quoc, Vietnam

Phu Quoc is being called the new Phuket, so you'll need to move fast before they pave paradise and

put up a parking lot. The best beach on this tiny island off the south coast of Vietnam is Bai Dai, a strip of beauty wrapped around the island's northwestern tip. Halfway along is a solitary shack where a man called San will fry you fresh fish, bring you cold beer and string a hammock from a palm tree for your postprandial nap.

Getting there: hotels open weekly on Phu Quoc, but your best bet is the chic, colonial-style La Veranda; from £1,800 with TransIndus (020 8566 2729, www.transindus.co.uk). To get to Bai Dai, take a £6 taxi ride from the hotel, through the small town of Cua Can, to Vung Bau beach. Bai Dai lies at its northwestern end.

9 Ko Lone, Thailand

Discovering the island of Ko Lone so close to the neon-lit atrocity that is Phuket seems as unlikely as finding Fellini in Kerry Katona's DVD collection, but take a 15-minute boat trip from the flashing lights of Chalong Bay and you'll find a dolce vita. Just two miles long and half a mile wide, Ko Lone has no roads or shops, and the only footprints you'll see on the beaches will be those of the native fishermen. What makes it doubly satisfying is that it's as cheap as Iceland's chips. Well, almost. Getting there: flights to Phuket start at £522 with www.cheapflights.co.uk; a beach cottage at Ko Lone's rustic Baan Mai Cottages (00 66-7622 3095, www.baanmai.com) costs £735 per week, booked direct.

10 Shangri-La's, Rasa Ria, Sabah

Heaven — a place designed for the dead — rapidly becomes rather boring for the living. Swinging in a hammock and staring slack-jawed at a distant reef is all very well for the first 24 hours, but then what? Shangri-La's extraordinary Rasa Ria resort, in the Malaysian state on the northern tip of Borneo, has the answer: go feed the orphaned orang-utans. The rangers in the resort's on-site sanctuary will also fix jungle hikes, sunrise breakfasts, nocturnal wildlife adventures in the dense forest surrounding the resort and riding on the spectacular wilderness of nearby Pantai Dalit beach.

Getting there: Sabah is two hours by air from Kuala Lumpur, itself a 12-hour flight away. A week at the Rasa Ria resort starts at £1,286 with Tropical Locations (0845 277 3310, www.tropical-locations.com)

11 The Serendip Riviera, Sri Lanka

Rubbish name — what was wrong with the Coconut Riviera? — but that fails to detract from the beauty of these shores. The basic ingredients — lapis-lazuli waters, icing-sugar sands, long hours of winter sunshine and exclusive little beachside hideaways — are here in spades. All that's missing is the crowds: times are tough for Sri Lanka, and many hotels on the island consider 60% occupancy to be a crazy dream. The result is empty beaches, uncrowded pools, room upgrades for the asking and more time devoted to you. The place to stay is the brand-new Talalla Retreat, a boutiquey yoga place on mesmerising Talalla beach, with a resident Aussie surf guide to steer you through the world-class breaks.

Getting there: seven nights at Talalla start at £1,238 with Real Holidays (020 7359 3938, www.srilankaportfolio.co.uk).

12 Palawan, the Philippines

If you ever wondered what Goa looked like before the hippies, or Thailand before the high-rise hotels, the 1,780 emerald isles of Palawan could be your last chance to find out. With so many picture-perfect castaway beaches — try Malapascua, Bantayan or Pulo islands, or find your own — it seems impossible that one day they could all have spa resorts and cybercafes. But that's what they said about Thailand.

Getting there: on the private island of Pamalican (off Palawan), the Amanpulo resort — part of the haut luxe Aman chain — is so perfectly situated that any half-baked notion of exploring the surrounding islands will evaporate the moment you arrive. The price is £2,865 with Seasons in Style (01244 202000, www.seasonsinstyle.com).

CARIBBEAN

13 Malliouhana, Anguilla

It is rare to find a hotel where the staff start to cry if they see a guest so much as frown. Family-run Malliouhana is one such place, overlooking the perfect beach at Mead's Bay, on Anguilla. The huge rooms have stunning views, the huge staff have stunning smiles and the huge restaurant has two Michelin stars and a stunning cellar of 25,000 bottles that holds the Wine Spectator Grand Award. For children, there's the best adventure playground in the Caribbean; for ladies, a 15,000 sq ft spa; and for

the gentlemen... did I mention the cellar?

Getting there: it's a bit of a schlep, involving a scheduled flight to Antigua and a puddle-jumper, but you won't be disappointed, and with Harlequin Holidays (0845 277 3397, www.harlequinholidays.com), you can get a week there from £1,785.

14 Maroma Resort and Spa, Mexico

Despite its sugar-soft sands, sparkling turquoise seas and jungle-fringed beaches, the Riviera Maya has often failed to fulfil its promise of exotic tropical idyll — a case, perhaps, of all mariachi trousers and no action. Keep the faith, though, because the further south you drive, away from the horrors of Cancun, the better it gets. By the time you reach the Maroma Resort and Spa, you'll find exactly what you had in mind. Set in 25 acres of jungle, the hotel is a low-key jumble of thatched palapas, staffed by locals and offering obscure Mayan spa treatments (the Mayans had spas?).

Getting there: Maroma lies half an hour south of Cancun airport, and prices start at £1,699 with Sovereign (0871 664 0227, www.sovereign.com).

15 Tayrona National Park, Colombia

Known to breathless backpackers as "the new Goa", Tayrona offers a Garlandesque idyll of hippie living on the Caribbean's most dramatically beautiful beaches. Reached via slippery jungle paths, a necklace of white-sand coves such as Concha, Chengue and Cinto lie between the green fingers of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta like platinum worry beads, their isolated charm falling somewhere between Conan Doyle's Lost World and Milton's Paradise Regained.

Getting there: designed to look like a traditional Tayrona village, Ecohabs is a huddle of thatched villas that ooze minimalist jungle chic, perched above a beach where turtles crawl ashore to lay their eggs. The price is £1,920 with Original Travel (020 7978 7333, www.originaltravel.co.uk).

16 Eden Rock, St Barts

It's never been difficult to guarantee satisfaction on St Barts, the chicest of the Caribbean islands, but with prices dropping fast, it's now easier than ever. Eden Rock is the island's most glamorous hotel — it's the one the permatanned clientele of painfully trendy Nikki beach, just across St Jean Bay, drool over from their daybeds. Once a cluster of precarious shacks bolted to the rock from which it takes its name, and patronised by the likes of Howard Hughes, Greta Garbo and Robert Mitchum, the hotel has spread its rock'n'roll charm onto neighbouring Filao beach, where a scattering of five-star beach shacks is but a short strut from the Caribbean.

Getting there: arriving at St Barts is always interesting, thanks to the presence of a mountain on the final approach to the island airport. Clearing it involves a last-minute leap over the ridge, followed by a Stuka-style dive onto the runway. The price is £2,255 with Harlequin Holidays (0845 277 3397, www.harlequinholidays.com).

17 Glover's Atoll, Belize

There are many who believe there's hidden treasure on this tiny, nine-acre atoll, named after the pirate John Glover and lying 45 miles off the coast of Belize. If you're looking for a truly uncommercialised desert-island idyll, you won't find better than this. Water comes from a rainwater well, breakfast from the coconut palms and supper — if you're lucky — from the sea. The beach is straight out of Cap'n Jack Sparrow's dreams, and there's a spectacular 2,700ft drop-off into Bartlett Trough, which lies 100yd offshore, so if you can't dive, this is the place to learn.

Getting there: Glover's Atoll Resort (00 501-520 5016, www.glovers.com.bz) offers extremely simple beach shacks — think drop toilets and solar showers — for £160 per week, self-catering, including boat transfers. Instructions on how to meet that boat are on the resort's website. Flights to Belize City start at £756 with Trailfinders (0845 058 5858, www.trailfinders.co.uk).

18 Petit St Richardson, the Grenadines

It's important not to take the desire for seclusion too far, because if you insist on utter privacy, with no chance whatsoever of anybody stumbling into your desert-island dream, you could end up on Petit St Richardson, a minuscule sand bar some distance from the fabulous private fantasy of Petit St Vincent (PSV). There's only one umbrella and, when the boat leaves, you're on your own. Serves you right.

Getting there: PSV is a private island, so the only way to get to that sand bar is to book a package. The luxury specialist Carrier (0161 491 7620, www.carrier.co.uk) has a week in a cottage from £2,370, full-board.

19 Los Roques, Venezuela

Imagine an archipelago of 351 coral islands, scattered in seas so shallow that you could almost wade between them, virtually unpopulated and fringed with more than 1,000 untouched beaches. Add turtle colonies, lobsters so cheap you can eat them for breakfast, and world-class sport fishing, then subtract mass tourism, high-rise hotels and neon lights, and the result is Los Roques, a national park just a 35-minute flight from Caracas that may well be the Caribbean's best-kept secret.

Getting there: what passes for a tourism industry on this determinedly lazy archipelago is based on the island of Gran Roque. Typical of the tiny hotels here is La Cigala, which proudly offers no plasma screens, no WiFi, no air conditioning and no spa. The price is £1,746 with Sunvil (020 8758 4774, www.sunvil.co.uk).

ATLANTIC

20 São Miguel dos Milagres, Brazil

Few travellers outside Brazil have heard of this local secret, between the resorts of Recife and Maceio, but that's all about to change. The limpid, jade-green, reef-formed swimming pools, the seemingly endless, empty sands and the gentle, friendly vibe have attracted the attention of top-end outfits such as Amanresorts and middle-market specialists such as the travel giant TUI, whose scouts have been seen hard at work researching the beach. Go now, if only for the immense satisfaction of having been there first.

Getting there: if you know your Brazilian A list, you could spot one or two at the boutiquey Pousada do Toque, the first hotel to open here all of eight years ago. With Black Tomato (020 7610 9008, www.blacktomato.co.uk), a week starts at £1,999, half-board.

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