

TRAVEL SECTION OF THE YEAR

The Daily Telegraph

10 fresh reasons to visit South Africa right now P.12

TRAVEL

The Great British B&B revolution

Once the ideal option for a cheap (and chintzy) weekend away, now the best properties offer fabulous luxury, says Becky Lucas



SHANE MCKENNEY FOR THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

Forget the American Dream. In Britain, the national go-to career fantasy has long been the idea of selling up, migrating seawards and "opening up a little bed and breakfast".

There's something about the thought of having a revolving door of interesting guests to talk to, combined with only being responsible for feeding them until mid-morning, that seems to appeal to many of us, especially after a hard day. For the traveller, the accommodation has always held a simple, friendly appeal: a place to rest and reboot in the right location, with real-life, reliable locals. But lately the *grande dame* of British holiday-making has had something of a glow-up.

The core identifiers remain: landladies and gentlemen live on-site (that is, in their own home), hearty breakfasts come as standard, with other meals not guaranteed and, crucially, prices typically offer value for money. Yet now another kind of B&B is rising up within the ranks. At these, you really have to squint to tell them apart from hotels at all.

Take Piglets Boutique Country Stay in Essex, whose name even brings to mind one of England's most popular boutique hotel brands, The Pig. It's the best B&B in the land, according to its shiny 2023 VisitEngland Award for Excellence, thanks mainly to the fact it's not much like a typical B&B at all – there are chickens, a carefully clipped

▲ Beside manor: set in 500 acres, Georgian Whaddon Hall, in rural Shropshire, has six rooms with lake and garden vistas

croquet lawn, self-cleaning swimming pond and an honesty bar with a gin library worth lying for.

In fact, the only difference between these next-gen B&Bs and hotels is that they're more intimate, or, perhaps, more special – both because they tend to have fewer rooms, and because they have genuine personality and features that only their owners would have included.

What's more, regular hotel room rates are rocketing – by 11 per cent year-on-year at last check – thanks to the usual suspects (inflation, energy costs, labour shortages), and some new ones: high occupancy, independents closing, and a post-pandemic desire to collect experiences over things.

Even more surprisingly, the likes of Airbnb and Vrbo rental hubs are generally pricier than hotels at the moment, according to a *Which?* investigation published this month. They're also becoming thinner on the ground thanks to local licensing laws, as well as for making headlines for the wrong reasons – from fake listings to in-house cameras. It's time for the not-so-humble B&B to shine.

Here are 20 exceptional "homes" – showcasing how very much more than a mere bed plus breakfast a B&B can be.

Continued on page 2

THE PLACE TO BE

QUINTESENTIAL ISLAND PARADISE

Escape to a tropical wonderland with a choice of two award-winning island resorts in the Maldives. Enjoy the ultimate family holiday at Centara Grand Island Resort & Spa, a palm-fringed destination featuring stunning overwater villas on a Grand Inclusion programme. Or unwind at an adults-only retreat at Centara Ras Fushi Resort & Spa in the North Male Atoll, where world-class scuba diving, intimate dining experiences, and idyllic couples' spa journeys await your discovery.

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Travel trends

Choose a winter sun escape that's a little out of the ordinary

These beautiful yet less-visited long-haul options are ready to hit the mainstream. But make your plans now, says Sarah Marshall, before the masses catch on

A few years ago, a bored hotel manager invited me to join him in a conspiratorial game designed to while away dull hosted dinners with guests. The aim was to identify as many instances of one-upmanship as possible: those cringey moments when travellers attempt to trump one another by casually dropping - often unnecessarily - obscure destinations into conversation.



volcanic plugs where air temperatures are a far-from-molten 27C. Eight nights self-board from £3,740pp (two sharing), including flights (02960 849160; aaritsvarkafaris.com)

ANDAMAN ISLANDS

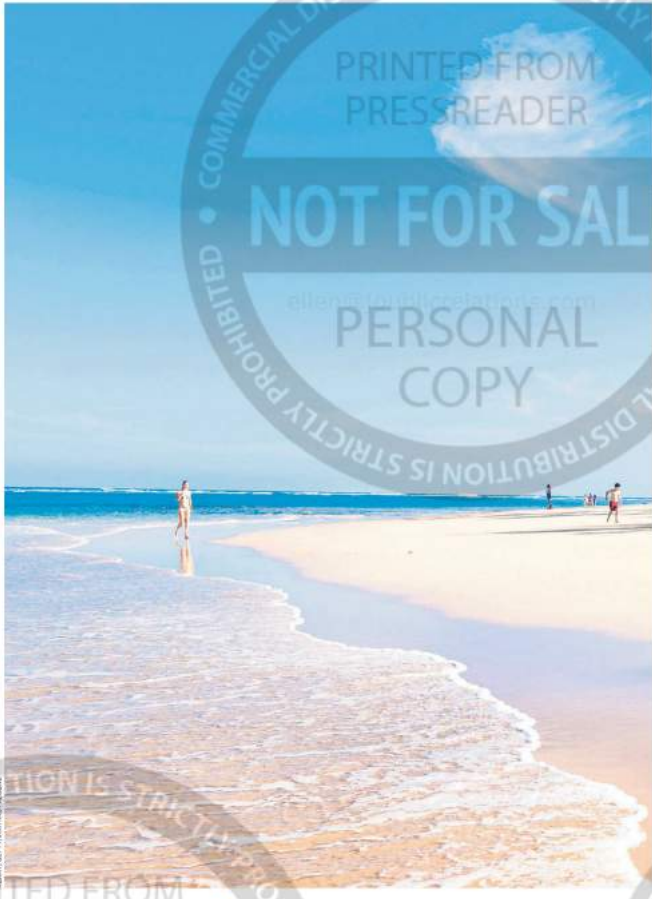
Sharing the land with indigenous hunter-gatherer tribes who feast from the sea and forest is perfect dinner-party material. Up until a few years ago, foreigners needed a special permit to visit this archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, closer to Myanmar but governed by India. Only 30 of the 572 islands are accessible, making the largely unknown destination even more tantalisingly appealing.

While tribal areas are rightly off limits and the famously isolated Sentinelese people remain uncontacted, pristine beaches and virgin forest are within reach. Havelock Island is the best base for exploring, with a good mix of beach huts and boutique spa hotels. Learn to worship nature like the local Onge people by kayaking through mangroves, diving on remote reefs and climbing an active volcano.

A 15-day Golden Triangle and Andaman Islands trip costs from £3,400pp, including B&B and flights (020 3582 4990; originaltravel.co.uk)

NICARAGUA

Swapping ocean waves for black sand slopes, volcano surfing is a breeze-worthy way to experience Central America's



volcanic peaks. Slide down on a sand board at speeds of 50mph, feeling the warm ash under your feet.

Nicaragua also has long stretches of cooling coastline washed by the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Choose from Playa Popoyo for surf breaks, Playa Maderas for a sociable chill-out and Playa La Flor for turtle nesting.

Inland there's also an option to swim or dive between the 365 islets of Lake Nicaragua. Once an ocean bay, until blocked by a volcanic eruption, it's the only freshwater lake where you'll find bull sharks, tarpon and swordfish. A nine-night luxury Ultimate Nicaragua trip costs from £6,900pp, including B&B, activities and transfers. Flights extra (020 7426 9888; blacktomato.com)

RÉUNION

Everyone knows Mauritius and the Maldives, but few have sampled sun loungers on the Indian Ocean's lesser-known island. Officially part of France, Réunion's croissant-filled patisseries make it feel comfortably close to Europe in a landscape that's wildly exotic.

The safest swim areas are along the beaches of Ilex Saint Gilles, the island's only high-end resort, but there's more to do than lie on a beach. Drive along a new ocean highway rising from the seabed (declared the most expensive road in the world) but ditch the car for a helicopter ride and hike in the cirque of Mafate - a natural amphitheatre of calderas where isolated villages have no roads.

In the south of the island, climb to the rim of ever-rumbling volcano Piton de la Fournaise or cycle along solidified lava flows trailing to the ocean. A 10-night self-drive trip costs from £2,950pp, including B&B, car hire, activities and flights (020 8131 2707; rainboutsours.co.uk)

ST HELENA

Less than a decade ago, it took almost five days to reach this remote island in the South Atlantic Ocean on a Royal Mail ship departing Cape Town every three weeks. A new airport has eased access, but Napoleon's place of exile still feels remarkably disconnected from the real world. Huge areas have no mobile connectivity, the nearest neighbours are 1,200 miles away and the wildlife has been left in peace.

Between December and May, male and female whale sharks gather in equal numbers - the only place in the world where this phenomenon occurs. Sightings of humpback whales, devil rays and hawksbill turtles are also common.

On land, hike one of 21 signposted walks, passing through cloud forests, volcanic beaches and arid plains, stamping a logbook to prove you've completed the trails. Meeting 191-year-old Jonathan the tortoise, thought to be the world's oldest living animal, is another anecdote to write home about on a postcard that'll probably travel at the same speed as the retired HMS Helena.

A 12-day Untouched St Helena trip costs from £3,095pp, including direct B&B accommodation and flights (01962 302 087; diveworkshouse.com)

- ▶ Atlantic surf: Brazil's Marau Peninsula
- ▶ Reef encounter: diving in West Papua
- ▶ Dolphin dance: in Mexico's San Juan
- ▶ Active living: a volcano in Nicaragua's Ometepe Island
- ▶ Sand slide: getting ready to surf the Cerro Negro volcano in Nicaragua
- ▶ Remote viewing: the Rupert Valley in St Helena

WEST PAPUA, INDONESIA

Making Papua New Guinea look like Burtin's, its unruly Indonesian-governed neighbour still beguiles visitors with tales of fluorescent bats, walking sharks and belligerent tree-dwelling tribes. Although land travel is possible, it's pricey and complicated. A much easier option is to join an expedition cruise, covering a list of destinations that few independent travellers could locate.

Find resident whale sharks swimming below steep limestone karst cliffs at Triton Bay, sail through the Numatote Passage to gaze up at ancient rock paintings, and swim under the Kitiiti waterfall, gushing from the jungle directly into the sea.

In Raja Ampat National Park, more than 1,500 islets form part of the Coral Triangle - making it one of the most diverse places on the planet. Explore the area around Misool to swim through sea caves decorated with giant stalagmites and snorkel in a lake packed with stungless jellyfish. A 10-day cruise between Faknana and Raja Ampat costs from £5,724 full board. Various dates between October and January. Flights extra (0062 361 474 3902; seatrikhai.com)

Meeting 191-year-old Jonathan the tortoise is another anecdote to write home about



SÃO TOMÉ AND PRINCIPE

It's not yet possible to venture to the Earth's core - and it's unlikely anyone would want to - but you can live out a Jules Verne fantasy of sorts by travelling to the centre of the world. Sitting along the Equator at one degree north and seven degrees east off the coast of Gabon, Africa's second-smallest country is overflowing with fairy-tale flora and fauna.

Founded by a philanthropist, HBD Principe manages four beachside hotels and social enterprises across the two volcanic islands including Rocca, a house set on an historic cocoa plantation, and Jewel in the crown Bom Bom, re-opening after an extensive renovation next year.

Walk along beaches marked only by the flipper trails of turtles, nesting from mid-October to January; swim beneath rainforest waterfalls while watching tropical birds perform courtship displays; and explore bays surrounded by

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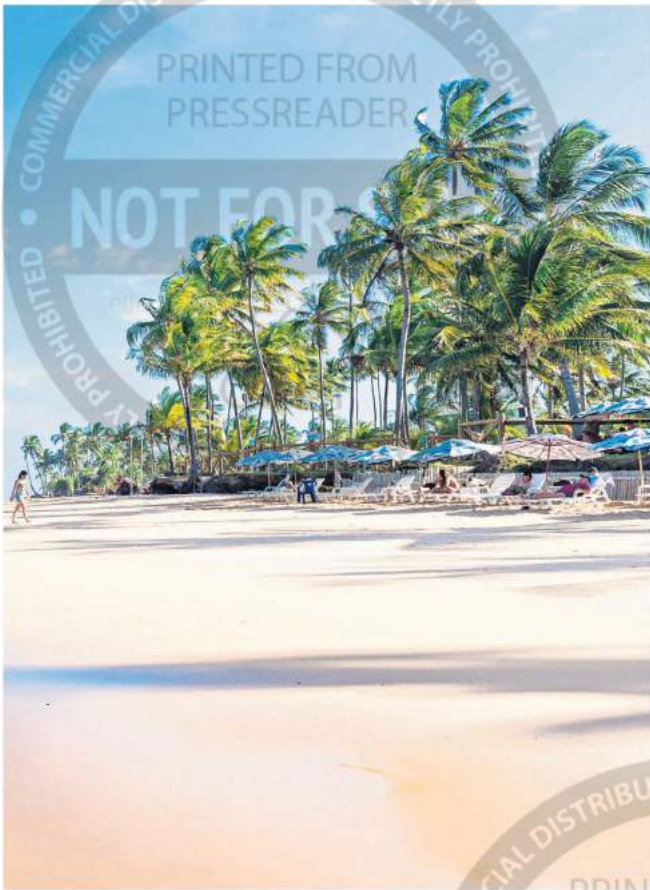
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SIERRA LEONE

Starring in a Bounty advert typically guarantees worldwide fame. But, unlike the Seychelles and Dominican Republic, West Africa's "taste of paradise" coastline is yet to savour success. A 45-minute drive from capital city Freetown, River Number Two beach is

a section of a 402km coastline still largely ignored by European travellers. Aside from the postcard scenery, it is the human encounters that leave a lasting impression: watch fishermen heading out to sea in wooden dhows, chat to women sifting through buckets of freshly caught fish, or get caught up in a five-a-side with excitable kids. Seeing the country's potential, the British actor

Idris Elba (who was given citizenship of Sierra Leone, the birthplace of his father) has ambitions to transform an island into a luxury destination, while the opening of a flashy new airport earlier this year is likely to attract investment. *A 10-night highlights trip costs from £3,098pp, including B&B, private guide and flights (020 7938 0276; traintours.co.uk).*



SIAN KAAN, MEXICO

Thick jungle and Mayan ruins run along the Yucatan Peninsula, making beaches feel more like castaway escapes. Once a bohemian enclave, Tulum has been taken over by luxury resorts, but a little further south is a spot that remains blissfully untouched.

Meaning "where the sky is born" in the Mayan language, the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve is the largest protected area on Mexico's Caribbean coast. A mix of tropical forest, savannahs, blue lagoons, mangroves and coral reefs, it's also a place to find petenes (freshwater swamps) and cenotes (freshwater sinkholes).

Opened at the beginning of this year, beachfront Casa Chable is the only hotel inside the reserve. Kayak or paddleboard to search for turtles and dolphins and take a boat tour along a Mayan canal system packed with manatees. *A nine-day trip twinned with Chable Maroma on the Riviera Maya costs from £5,949pp, including excursions and flights (020 8747 8315; journeylatina.com).*



in a place where the secret will inevitably soon get out. *Five nights from £4,859pp, including half-board accommodation, transfers, flights and a boat trip. (020 7607 1943; laterallife.com)*

NECKER ISLAND, BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

Neither undiscovered nor so far-flung that it takes an age to reach, Richard Branson's private Caribbean getaway is firmly on the map. But how many people can say they've stayed there? Booking the 24-room property for exclusive use costs a wallet-shredding

\$334,500 (£108,476) per night, limiting it to movie stars and wealthy CEOs, although "discovery weeks" scattered throughout the year give normal people a chance to sample the A-list living on offer.

In October and November this year, it's possible to book an individual room at a fraction of the price. Laze in a hammock on crowd-free beaches, meet Branson's exotic menagerie of lemurs, giant tortoises and flamingos, and use the island's fast speed Wi-Fi to post photos on Instagram and gloat about the getaways.

Four nights from £2,178pp (two sharings), including full-board accommodation and boat transfers from Virgin Gorda or Beef Island airports. Flights extra (020 8800 0430; virginlimitededition.com)

BRAZIL'S MARAU PENINSULA

A few hours south of Salvador in Bahia, palm trees hem a coastline of wide, shimmering beaches polished by the frothing Atlantic surf. The Marau

Peninsula is the third-largest bay in Brazil but still largely unknown to foreign travellers, although it's teetering on the edge of becoming the next cool barefoot holiday find.

Sandy streets link relaxed bars and pousadas in laid-back village Barra Grande, but elsewhere there's been little development, making this as close as you'll get to seeing the unspoilt Brazil of 50 years ago. Landscapes shift with the moon's cycle, creating pools at low tide filled with fish from the coral reefs at Taipá de Fora; on the other side, pristine mangrove forests and uninhabited islands decorate the Bay of Camamu.

Try yoga, horse-riding or capoeira (a Brazilian martial art with a dance-like quality, performed to musical instruments) at boutique seven-room Casa dos Arandis, one of the only properties

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