

8 HOLIDAYS YOU *THINK* YOU CAN'T AFFORD – BUT YOU CAN

WARM TROPICAL WATERS, YOUR OWN PRIVATE INFINITY POOL, A LUXE PENTHOUSE – ALL PIPE DREAMS, RIGHT? NOT WITH SOME CLEVER PLANNING...

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PARADISE IN THE MALDIVES

Travel off-season to a less showy resort and all the tropical charms you've ever dreamed of can be within your grasp, as Niki Browes discovered

To be honest, I never thought I'd go on holiday somewhere like the Maldives. I'd gaze at pictures of tropical gorgeousness, sigh at the crystal-clear waters – then book a more affordable trip to Europe, instead. I certainly never thought that the first place I'd take my eight-month-old baby, Burt, on holiday would be... the Maldives. But if you pick your time of year and resort cleverly, you can cut the cost of a trip to paradise. Okay, so it's still more than a week in France – but think of the colour of that water!

We stayed at Velassaru, not an über-luxe resort, but gorgeous nevertheless and – like its ritzier neighbours – built on its own atoll (coral island). The resort was maintained to within an inch of its life, and that extended to the sugar-soft sand. Our beach villa came with a garden bathroom (below) and a bed so big, we needed mobile phones to communicate. We didn't have a private butler, but decided we'd have been embarrassed by that level of attention, anyway. The staff we did have access to were adorable. Every night at one of the five very decent restaurants, one of the team would ask politely if it was okay to take the baby. And off they would

go, keeping a delighted Burt within our sight, but leaving us to enjoy dinner.

We went in low season, which is much kinder on the bank balance. Yes, there was the odd tropical rainstorm, but for five out of the seven days it was sunny, if a little overcast at times.

My only word of warning would be to keep an eye on the bar bill. We didn't, and spent a small fortune on expensive wine. Everything is imported, so nothing comes cheap – even the crisps from the minibar. You probably need at least £500 each for food and drink.

We will go back, though (albeit with some snacks stashed in our suitcases and a few bottles of duty free). Velassaru may not be the most exclusive resort in the Maldives, but it felt plenty luxurious to us. Besides, the true luxury of the Maldives is a gift of nature: the bath-warm azure sea, the dazzling marine life. As the waves rolled in, our stresses and anxieties rolled out. And that's priceless. *Seven nights' b&b at Velassaru, from £1,243pp sharing in low season (May to September), with Kuoni (01306 747 008, kuoni.co.uk), including flights with Sri Lankan Airlines and boat transfers.*



Wash al fresco in a garden bathroom at Velassaru
 LEFT Peace, tranquillity and a bath-warm sea

2 FIVE-STAR VILLA ON THE MED

Holidaying in a luxury Mediterranean house can be a stretch, unless you swap the Côte d'Azur for the equally photogenic Turkey, says Lindsay Frankel

I've always fancied my own private holiday house. In my fantasy, it has sweeping sea views, an infinity pool and a terrace on which my friends and I gather for evening cocktails. It also tends to be in the south of France. Needless to say, that holiday has never happened. But now I know that the dream can become a reality, if I switch locations to Turkey.

Kalkan is a beautiful spot on the Lycian coast in the south west of the country, and a fantastic, chichi alternative to the more obvious Mediterranean resorts. Our house, Villa Ayse, was far enough from the centre of town to be tranquil, but near enough to walk when the designated driver (ie, me) had had enough of negotiating tight parking spots in the enormous rental jeep. Midway up a hill, the villa was all about the sea views – from the huge patio windows and balcony of the master bedroom to the outdoor dining area. And it was enormous. No matter how much we love our friends, most of us need a moment of me time in a full villa. Fortunately, you could pack two doubles and one twin at Villa Ayse twice over, and still have room to swing a cat.

And did I mention the three-tier garden set with sofas and loungers, infinity pool (pictured) and – the absolute highlight – a private decking platform from which



Amazing views from Villa Ayse. BELOW: Kalkan is chic, charming – and quieter off-season

to launch oneself into the sea (the water is warm enough to swim off-season)? Local hairdressers offer bargain-price massages, and the more energetic can try one of myriad water sports available, or take off on a walk through ancient history.

The villa came with oodles of five-star touches. A welcome hamper included olives, feta cheese and a bottle of organic olive oil, while every morning, a still-warm loaf of freshly baked bread was left in a basket outside. A complimentary hammam, breakfast and evening meal at the nearby hotel, Villa Mahal, notched up the wow factor yet further. And by buying freshly caught sea bass and bream from the fish market in Kalkan and barbecuing it at the villa, we conjured up several very tasty lunches on the cheap.



Seven nights at Villa Ayse in Kalkan, from £1,200pp for the first two people, then £550pp for each additional guest (so £766pp for six) with Exclusive Escapes (020 8605 3500, exclusiveescapes.co.uk), including flights, transfers and car hire.

Dine under the stars at Kwandwe Private Game Reserve



3 GO ON AN AFRICAN SAFARI

A luxury bush and beach safari doesn't have to bankrupt you, if you choose a country with a favourable exchange rate and drive yourself. In South Africa, Nicola Shepherd of African Explorations recommends the malaria-free Eastern Cape, with four nights' full-board (including two daily game drives and house wines) at

Kwandwe Private Game Reserve near Port Elizabeth ('the best wildlife on the Garden Route'), then three nights' b&b at Laird's Lodge, near Plettenberg Bay ('an intimate Dutch homestead with superb food'). Beach-wise, you can sunbathe in spring and autumn, but you'll need a wetsuit to swim. Seven nights in South Africa, from £2,299pp off-season (try November, April and May), with African Explorations (0844 504 1907, africanexplorations.com). Includes flights and car hire. See andbeyondafrica.com and lairdslodge.co.za.





Las Vegas strip and the desert beyond. RIGHT: a penthouse-style salon suite at Wynn Hotel



5 A STATESIDE CITY PENTHOUSE BREAK

More exclusive than a hotel, your own penthouse is the ultimate urban crash pad. Head to Vegas, rather than New York for a deluxe mini-break, says Cat Martin

We'd all love a penthouse in NYC for the weekend, but in Vegas you can have the VIP treatment even if you don't have the bank account. The 2,716-room Wynn Hotel is one of the city's glitziest check-ins, with 135 salon suites across all 55 floors. Ours was on the 24th, and it certainly felt like a penthouse with its dizzying views of the strip and desert. It was also vast (1,800 square feet), state-of-the-art (50-inch plasma-screen TV) and lush (marble floors, velvet sofas, cloud-soft beds, in-room bar – even a massage room).

All Wynn tower suites (including the tower kings, parlour suites and salon suites packaged through Virgin) have their own reception area and lifts, and use of an exclusive outdoor pool. To be honest, I would have been equally thrilled with a tower king: half the size but still roomy and glam, and a great deal at £889pp for three nights with Virgin. Ask to be as high up as possible when you book.

Whichever room you choose, the Wynn will make you feel like a high roller. As indeed will the rest of the new 'luxury' Vegas, with its designer boutiques, celebrity-chef restaurants (don't miss the tapas by Julian Serrano at the new Aria), cocktails (at Mix, on the 43rd floor of TheHotel at Mandalay Bay), and Cirque du Soleil shows (I loved the Beatles-inspired Love at The Mirage and the aquatic Le Rêve at the Wynn). Not to mention the sensational clubs: Pure at Caesars Palace and Tryst at the Wynn were both heaving. Give yourself a few hours to recover in the spa at the Wynn or Qua Spa (complete with cold room and fake snow) at Caesars Palace. For a final five-star outing, hop on a helicopter to the Grand Canyon: the transition from man-made spectacle to jaw-dropping nature is unforgettable (sundancehelicopters.com).  Three nights, from £1,249pp sharing, with Virgin Holidays (0844 557 3859, virginholidays.co.uk), including room-only accommodation in a salon suite at Wynn Las Vegas, flights and car hire.

4 RIDE THE SILK ROAD

For those who don't have two weeks and two grand to spare (the usual Silk Road option), Wild Frontiers has a nine-day Ride The Caucasus trip in Georgia. It's easy to feel as if you rule the world as you ride up from the mountain village of Omalo into an alpine meadow ablaze with wildflowers (below), and on to a watchtower in the hamlet of Verkhovani for dinner and cupfuls of delicious Georgian wine. The trip also takes in a fireside chat with local horsemen and a swim in a turquoise lake. It's suited to intermediate riders, who will be guided by former Grand National champion Richard Dunwoody.

Nine-day 'Ride The Caucasus', from £1,195pp with Wild Frontiers (020 7736 3968, wildfrontiers.co.uk). Next trip: August 6th-14th 2011.





6 TOUR THE AMALFI COAST

Visit in October and stick to four-star hotels, says Laura Long of Long Travel. She recommends the Hotel San Francesco Al Monte in Naples, a converted monastery with a rooftop pool ('stunning views of Mount Vesuvius'); the Hotel Villa Garden in Sant'Agello outside Sorrento ('run by a lovely family and right by the sea'); the Hotel Tramonto d'Oro in Praiano ('eat outside with the lights of Positano twinkling in the distance'); and the Hotel Giordano in Ravello ('five-star, but without the price tag').

Long's other budget-stretching tips include standing at the bar for breakfast ('you pay extra to sit down'), drinking prosecco not champagne, and following the locals to trattorias for dinner. She also suggests using public transport: the ferry to Sorrento, a water taxi to Positano, and the hydrofoil to Amalfi. *10-night Red Amalfi Coast Itinerary, from £795pp sharing in October, with Long Travel (01694 722 193, long-travel.co.uk), including easyJet flights to Naples and b&b accommodation.*

7 PALATIAL RAJASTHAN

Rajasthan ('Land of the Kings') is the jewel in India's crown, with an embarrassment of Rajputani riches, including Amber Fort and the vast 15th-century Mehrangarh Fort. India's biggest state also has a range of characterful heritage hotels (with swimming pools), such as the 29-room Samode Haveli in Jaipur, the 34-room Rohet Garh (below), where Madonna has stayed, and the 29-room Hotel Fateh Prakash Palace in Udaipur. Go off-peak, sightsee by rickshaw without a guide, drink beer, instead of wine, eat in local Thali restaurants, keep small change at hand for tips and remember to barter – and you'll have money left over for silver jewellery and carved four-poster beds.

10 days, from £1,195pp in September with Bales Worldwide (0845 057 0600, balesworldwide.com), including flights and accommodation.



Elk herds at the valley of Jackson Hole, Wyoming

8 SKI JACKSON HOLE

Go off-peak on a boutique-hotel package with a top ski specialist and you can have stylish accommodation with all the treats and a quality ski experience for less than half the price of the usual A-list rates.

Hotel Terra, a four-star boutique property a matter of minutes from the base of the Gondola and new aerial tram, was new to Ski Independence last season. It has 135 rooms and suites (upgrade to a suite or studio for Bose surround sound, a gas fireplace and a terrace), an Italian restaurant with an outdoor fire pit, a spa with a rooftop relaxation lounge and outdoor hot tub, and a heated infinity pool.

Seven nights room only, from £1,019pp sharing in January, with Ski Independence (0131 243 8097, ski-i-com), staying at Hotel Terra, including flights and transfers (price also valid in late March). Factor in an additional £410 for a six-day lift pass and ski and boot rental (book in advance through Ski Independence to save money) and at least US\$50 (around £31) for food. 🍷