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The just-for-you secret Caribbean corner

A private island, an empty beach, even a vacant hammock — you *can* have a little bit of the Caribbean to yourself...

Make the dream come true

● Let's nail this 'private beach' misnomer once and for all. 'Private' doesn't mean that you and your lover get it all to yourselves. It means it belongs to the resort — and your fellow guests. You may actually find the free 'public' beach has a solitary fisherman, while the 'private' one you paid for is packed. So ask the hotel how busy the beach gets during your trip (the quietest months in the Caribbean are June and September), and never choose a hotel with more than 50 rooms. Look for lone hotels on an enclosed bay, where walkers can't trail past on foot: we love **Cobblers Cove** in Barbados, which is almost impossible to walk past unless you're a guest or a strong swimmer (00 1246 422 2291, cobblercove.com; doubles from £349, B&B).

● If you want true privacy, prepare for a long journey: the Bahamas does the job, but you're looking at a twin-prop flight, boat ride *and* your transatlantic trip. You won't see another soul at

Musha Cay (00 1208 309 1106, mushacay.com; pictured top right), which sleeps 24 from £27,000 a day in five private-island houses, but you can get something similar, cheaper, at **Kamalame Cay** (020 3318 1191, kamalame.com; doubles from £165, B&B; top left and bottom right), also in the Bahamas: there's just one resort on the island, hosting up to 60.

● Want to get there as quickly and cheaply as possible? Think Puerto Rico. It's little-visited by Brits, but there are cheap, direct flights from Gatwick on Norwegian (norwegian.com; from £369 return). Try the boho-chic **Horned Dorset** (00 1 800 633 1857, horneddorset.net; doubles from £414, room only) and avoid US national holidays for a surprisingly small price tag.

● Got little ones? Then it's Anguilla (bottom left). **Anacaona Boutique Hotel** (00 1877 647 4736, anacaonahotel.com) has a week for two adults and one child in summer from £1,855, including most meals (but not flights). For one of the most exclusively private islands in the Caribbean, this is a steal. *Rob Crossan*

The Gucci-glamorous Italian Lakes classic

A hyper-glossy, peacock-blue lake is the backdrop. The cast lies, tanned on glinting sundecks. You're living the Hollywood-abroad lifestyle, in one of the glitziest destinations on Earth. But don't be intimidated — there's a piece of paradise for everybody...

Make the dream come true

● Timing matters. Don't plot a Valentine's escape or Christmas jaunt just yet — most Lakes hotels aren't even open (they close from the end of October until April). And at Como, where you'll be sharing your lake view with George and Amal, you're looking at £350 or more for a night in spring and autumn, but up to £600 a night in August. **Grand Hotel Tremezzo** (00 34 827 0133, grandhoteltremezzo.com; from £318, B&B), with its sexy pool floating on the lake, fits the picture-postcard image but is cheaper (it's

also beside a ferry stop with boats to Bellagio village, so you're in well-connected seclusion).

● There are exceptions to the rule. August isn't considered high season at Stresa, Maggiore's beautiful villa-strewn resort — May and June are — so last-minute rates at some hotels drop in summer. Old-school beauty queen **Regina Palace** has doubles from £140, B&B, right in the middle of the school hols (00 39 323 936936, reginapalace.it). But beware bargain rates made possible because of dodgy views — the car park, even the road: do you really want to come to the Lakes and forfeit a lake view?

● Maggiore and Garda are cheaper and lower-key than Como, if you're there for the rustic lakes scenery rather than the scene. Their most authentic stays are **Villa e Palazzo Aminta**

(00 39 323 933818, villa-aminta.it; doubles from £239, B&B; pictured) and **Gardesana** (00 39 457 225411, gardesana.eu; doubles from £130, B&B), right on a medieval port.

● You can save a packet on flights. Low-cost fares to Milan Malpensa and Bergamo (for Como and Maggiore) go for about £50 return, and no-one will judge you for flying EasyJet and flopping five-star. For Lake Garda, Verona is closer than Bergamo but more expensive (from £98 return; various low-cost airlines). The airport to avoid is Milan Linate, bang in the centre of town, so susceptible to traffic jams. And once you're at the Lakes, many of the charms are freebies anyway: infinity pools, secret walled gardens, Jacuzzis. Not to mention that hypnotising balcony view.

Lucy Thackray >



The monkeys-in-the-trees, overgrown jungle retreat

Climb giant trees, canoe downriver, or just listen to the chatter of monkeys as you stargaze from your bed — set free your inner Boy or Girl Scout at the ultimate jungle hideaway.

Make the dream come true

● For the full king-of-the-swingers experience — jaguars, giant otters, boas and piranhas — go for the Amazon Basin (Brazil, Ecuador, Peru). For weird and wonderful ecosystems — metre-wide flowers, migrating birdlife, skipping-rope centipedes — look towards the untouched rainforests of Southeast Asia. Or if it's serenity you want, try the backwoods of Bali. Most lodges come with private rooms, simple meal plans and daily activities, but you'll find everything out there from humble straw-topped treehouses to luxurious retreats with private swimming pools. Exodus is a tour operator with specialist knowledge of all these destinations (0845 314 2166, exodus.co.uk).

● Don't let accessibility fears put you off — some 'remote' retreats are fairly easy to get to. From Phuket, it's just a three-hour drive to rustic riverside hideaway **Our Jungle House** (00 66 814 170546, khaosokaccommodation.com; doubles from £18, treehouse £45, room only) in the super-sized Khao Sok National Park, home to elephants, fluffy orange gibbons and banana-beaked hornbills. Stay in a treehouse: they're more fun — and the cobras are less likely to get in.

● Season is everything. Visit in May or June, between the rainy seasons, and you'll get clear dry nights and high water levels perfect for midnight kayaking at the **Kapawi Ec lodge & Reserve** in Ecuador (00 593 2600 9333, kapawi.com; from £693pp, full board, minimum three nights). It's the full Indiana Jones experience, a 10-day walk from the nearest village, with Achuar tribespeople for neighbours (but, if you must, you can arrive by seaplane and motorboat for an extra £260pp).

● If you don't fancy being an action hero, and are looking for a more peaceful affair, check out the teak eco-homes at **Bambu Indah** (00 62 361974357, bambuindah.com; doubles from £95, B&B; pictured) in the monkey-filled forests of Ubud, Bali. Or set sail on a houseboat across Temenggor Lake (looking out for swimming elephants) at Malaysia's **Belum Rainforest Resort** (00 60 57916800, belumresort.com; doubles from £119, B&B). *Lee Cobaj*



The frilly yet formidable French *château*

In a brutish world, we crave *ancien régime* finesse: gardens with a possibility of peacocks, fire-warmed salons, and the voluptuous joy of good manners. We crave the French *château*.

Make the dream come true

● *Château*-hotels come in two species. One type is run by hotel groups, ensuring startling, but standard, standards. The others are in the hands of private owners (couples, families) for whom the *château* represents a life rather than career progression — thus there is warmth and pride that makes you feel like a personal guest, rather than a customer. Better yet, there may indeed be real aristocrats, such as the Count and Countess de Vanssay at the **Château de la Barre**, moments from the Loire Valley (00 332 4335 0017, chateaudelabarre.com; doubles from £300, B&B). The Countess can even sort out chauffeured trips to other *châteaux* via her website countessconnections.com.

● Ask for a *modeste* room (*modeste* being French-hotel-speak for 'small') if you want *château* finery on the cheap. This will in no way hinder your enjoyment of the salons, grounds, pool or sense of privilege as you swing in through the gates of, say, the **Château de Lalande** in the undulating Dordogne landscape, near Périgueux (00 33 55354 5230, chateau-lalande-perigord.com; doubles start at £88, room only).

● But star *châteaux* aren't always a schlep from the ferry port. Handy for Cherbourg and St Malo, there's opulence at the newly revived **Château de Chantore** in Normandy (00 33 6 7430 6664, www.chateaudechantore.com; doubles from £130, B&B). And less than three hours' drive from Caen or Le Havre is the straight-out-of-A-level-French-textbook **Château d'Artigny** near Tours (00 33 2 4734 3030, grandesetapes.com; pictured). It looks every bit the immaculate 18th-century *château*, yet a room can be had for £78 — rates are kept so low because *château* owners tend to spend their cash on day-tripper-pleasing gardens and facades rather than rooms.

● Big groups should rent a whole *château* — and enjoy awesome architecture on a shoestring. Dominique's Villas offers the five-bedroom **Le Petit Château** in Lot-et-Garonne for as little as £23pp per night, self-catering (020 3553 7524, dominiquesvillas.co.uk; from £1,970 a week, sleeps 12) — you still get the charm but skip the hotel bills.

● Don't fret: not all *châteaux* are musty and filled with antiques. Fresh-faced **Château de la Resle** in Burgundy, near Chablis, has a vintage facade, yet design-mag interiors (00 33 6 86112922, chateaudelaresle.com; doubles from £151, B&B, including use of spa and pool). *Anthony Peregrine* ➤



The looked-fab-on-screen movie-star hotel

Where would *Pretty Woman* be without the Beverly Wilshire? Or *Lost in Translation* without the Park Hyatt Tokyo? And why wouldn't you want to stay where the on-screen action happened? Fold up your 3D glasses because you can — these one-off wonders are real.

Make the dream come true

● Dodge movie-themed packages. Hotels will always capitalise on their silver-screen status with marked-up prices. Take the 'Be the Bond' package at the **Taj Lake Palace** in Udaipur, for example (aka *Octopussy's* badass lakeside retreat). It includes two nights, Martinis on arrival, a cruise of Lake Pichola and a black-tie dinner for £1,302pp. Fun, but pricey. Put the experience together yourself and save a bundle (00 91 294 242 8800, tajhotels.com; doubles from £181, room only).

● Ask the right people and you can get the movie-star hotel *and* the movie-star room. Room 414 at **Hotel Degli Orafi** in Florence delivers the actual view from *A Room with a View* (00 39 055 26622, hoteldeglorafai.it; doubles from £111, B&B). Or room 623 at the

InterContinental Carlton Cannes was Grace Kelly's suite in *To Catch a Thief* (00 33 4 9306 4006, intercontinental-carlton-cannes.com; from £1,105, room only; pictured top right). Real places, real wow factor. Ask front-desk staff for the right room when you book.

● Sniff out the less obvious film sets and you can bag a bargain. Contemporary, little-known **Juvel Landscape Hotel** in the wilds of Norway doubled as the hip, glassy compound in sci-fi flick *Ex Machina* — #architectureporn — and has doubles from just £257, B&B (00 47 950 32010, juvel.com; bottom left).

● Follow the gossip sites and stay ahead of the crowd; we like tmz.com, popbitch.com and perezhilton.com for celebrity hotel spots. Our spies tell us the Jolie-Pitt clan have recently vacated **Phum Baitang**, a ravishing new eco-lodge near Siem Reap, following the wrap of Angie's Netflix saga *First They Killed My Father*. Bona-fide Hollywood gold (00 855 6396 1111, phumbaitang.com; doubles from £250, room only). You heard it here first... *Leo Bear*

The dazzling-white Greek island sugar cube

White walls basking in that clear, classical light against an immaculate blue sea and sky... In the Greek islands, stress melts away as you kick off your shoes, pull on your cozzie, and slip into the infinity pool with those caldera views (yes, the ones you've seen in all the photos). If days here are lovely, the evenings are divine: sink into a cushy terrace sofa, ouzo in hand, and watch the sun go down in a crimson prelude to the starry, starry night.

Make the dream come true

● Accept no substitutes — aim for the Cyclades, birthplace of the sugar-cube style. Mykonos has the covetable direct flights and literally hundreds of designer Cycladic hotels — but rarely for less than £150 a night. Instead, take a domestic flight or ferry from Athens to Milos, and you can have similar style (and reams more tranquillity) for much less: cubist **Perla Rooms** on the beach outside the fishing village

of Pollonia does the trick and comes with air-conditioning and wi-fi (00 30 22870 41432, perlaramos.gr; doubles from £40, room only).

● Avoid July and August — an easy way to save money. Go in April, May, September or October, when prices plummet by 50 per cent — nearly all hotels are small, and don't want empty rooms (it's worth ringing up to ask for their 'best price'). At the swanky five-star **Aegialis** on Amorgos, off-season specials include free use of the thalassotherapy spa (00 30 22850 73393, amorgos-aegialis.com; doubles from £84, B&B).

● Too expensive with kids? Don't pay for kids' clubs: in child-friendly Greece, proximity to a gently shelving sandy beach is all they need. Naxos has some great ones, and the **Naxos Kavos**, immersed in Mediterranean gardens, is only a 10-minute walk from one of the best

(00 30 22850 23355, kavos-naxos.com; doubles from £70, room only; apartments sleeping four from £110).

● Since sunset here is almost the whole point, make sure your balcony faces west. Cliffside **Anemomilos** on Folegandros, a short hop from Santorini, has spine-tingling sunsets and free goodies, including complimentary flip-flops (00 30 22860 41309, anemomilosapartments.com; doubles from £118, B&B; pictured).

● Put in the legwork. If you're willing to put up with, say, 100 extra steps to get to your room, you can have Santorini's swoon-inducing caldera views without blowing the kids' inheritance: **Scirocco's** spacious studios have it all, and a pool, at a quarter the price of its neighbours (00 30 22860 22855, scirocco-santorini.com; doubles from £60, B&B). *Dana Facaros* >

The Northern Lights—from-your-bed igloo

Snuggle up with a loved one and get ready to watch the greatest show on Earth — the Northern Lights. Igloo and ice hotels only make the experience more magical... if you know how to do them properly.

Make the dream come true

- Want to see the *Aurora Borealis* from your bed? You need a glass-domed igloo (don't worry, they're heated). But choose wisely: not all igloos have showers (even at the famous Kakslauttanen Igloo West Village in Lapland) and you don't want a nippy walk every time you need a wash. Ask about facilities *within* the igloo (loo, shower, kettle) when you book.

- Your choice of igloo needs nous, too. At **Golden Crown Levin Iglut**, the cheaper Superior igloos may have an extra sofa bed, but the pricier Premium counterparts boast the best, unobstructed mountain views. Either way, it's a winner compared to Kakslauttanen, since its glass igloos are more spacious, have en-suite showers, and you're just as likely to see the Lights (00 358 44 056 6334, leviniglut.net/en; Superior igloo, from £230, B&B).

- Make for Norway if you prefer an ice hotel — you'll have to take a trip outside to see the Northern Lights, but the "building" itself will

be truly spectacular. Unlike igloo hotels, which are open year-round, ice hotels melt and are built again, uniquely, for the winter season — so book early to guarantee a spot. Luckily, ice hotels are rather a one-night event (they really are very cold) so the odds are tipped in your favour. Try **Sorrisniva** (00 47 78 433378, sorrisniva.no; from £190pp B&B) or the **Kirkenes Snow Hotel** (00 47 78 970540, kirkenessnowhotel.com; from £214, B&B).

- If you are sleeping in the cold, don't be tempted to don a dozen layers. Too many may make you sweat — and sweat freezes, making you colder. Bring some of your own snacks, too — these resorts can be seriously isolated and, consequently, the food expensive.

- Don't assume you can't take kids. Yes, some ice hotels advise against travelling with young children, but the **Hôtel de Glace** in Québec, Canada, is family-tastic. Including ice slides and themed suites, this glacial fairy tale has discounted kid prices and modified sleeping bags for children, so they warm up that bit quicker. There's even husky-dog sledding, just in case the little ones weren't already convinced (00 1418 623 2888, hoteldeglace-canada.com; suites from £300, B&B; pictured). *Hannah Ralph*



The polished Parisian five-star grande dame

A tailcoated doorman ushers you in from a grand boulevard. Your greeting: expanses of marble, fancy furnishings, schmancy artwork and slick staff with a what-can't-we-do? attitude. Here's how to do Paris on the chic.

Make the dream come true

- Book the poshest palaces through a tour operator and you'll travel for free. At the fab, A-list **Four Seasons George V**, say, doubles start at £1,143 a night (£572pp), and breakfast is £45pp on top. But three nights there with Kirker (020 7593 1899, kirkerholidays.com) starts at £1,798pp, B&B — so that's £53pp cheaper even before you account for the Eurostar or flights, museum passes and transfers that Kirker throws in as part of the deal.

- You don't need to pay top dollar for Eiffel Tower views. Whooping at the icon from the same **Plaza Athénée** balcony as Carrie in the *Sex & the City* film sets you back at least £9,450 (00 33 15367 6667, dorchestercollection.com). But you'll pay way less for a deluxe Eiffel-view suite at the five-star **Lancaster** (00 33 14076 4076, hotel-lancaster.com; deluxe suites from £626, room only), which has hosted Marlene Dietrich and Ewan McGregor — it's just spa-less and has a mere one Michelin-starred restaurant.

- Don't assume that paying *un bras et une jambe* will get you a *piscine*, even if there is a swanky spa. Pool winner for us is **Le Bristol's** (00 33 15343 4300, lebristolparis.com; doubles from £738, room only) — in a rooftop space decked out like a vintage yacht.

- Three of the most important things when picking your *grande dame*: location, location, location. Most of the swishest hotels are in the Mayfair-ish 8th *arrondissement*, near couture boutiques and the Champs-Élysées, so if you want to be more central and Louvre-handy, choose Tuileries-bordering **Le Meurice** (00 33 1 4458 1010, dorchestercollection.com; doubles from £693, room only; pictured), or, when it reopens in June, the **Ritz**. If you want boho Left Bank, you'll find a bargain in Oscar Wilde's last home, **L'Hotel** (00 33 14441 9900, l-hotel.com; doubles from £239, B&B).

- Relax. You don't have to tiptoe round the designer and/or antique furniture. Staff at these places excel at the art of remaining unruffled in the face of rock-star antics and unorthodox guest behaviour. When Salvador Dalí stayed at Le Meurice, he'd walk his pet ocelot through the grand salons. *Liz Edwards >*

The off-grid, off-line, remote wilderness lodge

You want to flee the 9-to-5, to forget the office grind. You long to feel the desert sands between your toes, to swap suburban sprawl for unkempt vistas. You want — no, you need — to answer the call of the wild.

Make the dream come true

● Make sure your wilderness lodge affords real privacy — some still manage to pack you in like cash-cows-cum-sardines. Ask how many rooms in how much space: at **Wolwedans Dune Camp** in Namibia (00 264 612 30616, wolwedans.com; doubles from £239, full board), there are swathes of sand between tents, so all you'll see from your luxury pitch is desert, mountain and the odd passing oryx.

● It's also essential the lodge offers plenty to stop you getting bored. Canada's good at this: at **Arctic Watch Wilderness Lodge** (001 819 923 0932, arcticwatch.ca; doubles from £3,145 per week, full board), 800km north of the Arctic Circle, rafting, trekking, kayaking and all-terrain-vehicle safaris looking for whales,

musk ox and polar bears are included in the price. For grizzlies, try **Nimmo Bay** in the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia (001 778 379 8882, nimmobay.com; from £889pp, full board, including all activities; pictured).

● Then there's New Zealand. Bigger than Britain but with a tenth of our population, it's the spiritual home of the wilderness lodge. There are some belters at lodgesofnz.co.nz, including **Minaret Station** (00 643 443 5860, minaretstation.com; doubles from £900, full board) on Lake Wanaka, with four beautiful chalets in mighty Alpine surrounds.

● Don't forget there's wilderness on your own doorstep. Accessed by a mere 1.5km walk from Corroor — Britain's remotest train station — **Loch Ossian Youth Hostel** (01397 732207, syha.org.uk; from £18pp for a bed in a shared dorm or £350 per night exclusive hire) is a converted boathouse on a thrillingly remote, Munro-ringed Highland loch on the edge of Rannoch Moor. *Jeremy Lazell*



The live-like-a-maharajah exotic Indian palace

Sundowners on a colonnaded pavilion, rose-strewn marble baths and service so perfect you'll wonder if that brocaded four-poster is bugged... there's no pampering as opulent as Indian-palace-hotel pampering.

Make the dream come true

● For all-the-pomp palaces, choose Rajasthan, with its crenelated piles in old princely cities. Udaipur does lakeside romance; the rose city of Jaipur does royally sprawling palaces; Jodhpur has heart-in-your-mouth views; or choose Jaisalmer in the Thar Desert for turreted forts emerging from a shimmering desert expanse.

● Go small. Prices at the big-hitters range from £250 to £450 per night, but bargains can be had at smaller properties such as the **Devi Garh** near Udaipur (doubles from £180, room only; pictured top right and bottom left). Book through Mahout (01295 758150, mahoutuk.com), which is good for dinkier properties.

● Look south and you'll get even more for your money. Kerala and Karnataka abound with Portuguese colonial haunts reborn as

Ayurvedic retreats, such as **Soma Kerala Palace** in Kochi, where doubles start at £56, B&B (00 914829271350, somakeralapalace.com). The old digs of the Wodeyar dynasty in less-visited Mysore are also a snip: roomy doubles at the white-marble **Lalitha Mahal Palace** come in at £52, room only (00 918212 526100, lalithamahalpalace.in; bottom right).

● Consider a luxury tented camp, often cheaper yet even more atmospheric than a palace — and you still get the regal treatment (eg, Taj's **Banjaar Tola**, from £312pp, all-inclusive, with game drives; 00800 4588 1825, tajsafaris.com).

● In general? Be alive to scandalous internet charges at palace hotels (up to £20 per day in-room) and B&Bs without the B (email the hotel to check inclusions, as breakfast is often omitted). On a budget? Experience palace grandeur for a snip with a G&T in the Trophy Bar at Art Deco **Umaid Bhawan Palace** in Jodhpur, named World's Best Hotel 2016 (00 91291251 0101, tajhotels.com; top left). Cocktails cost less than £10 — rooms significantly more! *Sally Howard* >



The paparazzi'd, A-list, new New York trendie

Jay Z stayed last week, Tom Cruise the week before — and you've just spotted Gwyneth in the lobby. Chiselled doormen welcome you like you're an old friend and usher you towards the bar. Guess what? You're on the list!

Make the dream come true

● Get the perks without paying top whack by booking a dinky bunk-up — who cares when you're spending most of your time in the sexy lounge bar or rooftop pool anyway? Reserve a 'small room' at Gwen Stefani's fave **Soho House** in the Meatpacking District and still enjoy the cinema, spa and private club (001 212 627 9800, sohohouseny.com; from £250, room only; pictured bottom left).

● Consider NY's up-and-coming 'hoods to get even more design for your dollar. In arty Queens, the **Paper Factory Hotel** is an industrial space reborn as a boutique cutie (00 1718 392 7200, paperfactoryhotel.com; from £99, room only). Or try a brownstone townhouse on for size, in historic Harlem's **710 Guest Suites** (00 1 212 491 562 2710, guestsuites.com; from £107 for a one-bed, self-catering).

● Get on Twitter. Engaging with hot new hotels via social media can put you first in line for special offers. The **Roxy Hotel** treated followers to serious savings for its re-launch, which included a stellar line-up in its on-site jazz club (001 212 519 6600, roxyhotelnyc.com; from £200, room only; top left).

● Choose your dates. Sundays and Mondays offer the best rates, as does deep winter. Dodge Fashion Week (February and September), try for late-November Thanksgiving deals, scroll past Christmas-shopping crazy season and bag the best pickings and prices January through April.

● Left it late? Apps such as Hotel Tonight and Stayful hook you up with the best deals at the 11th hour (even at red-hot **Sixty Hotels**, bottom right). And don't dismiss big-name brands — Hyatt, Kimpton, Starwood — as too pricey. All three have launched affordable collections (try **Ink 48** in Midtown; 00 1 212 757 0088, ink48.com; doubles from £118, room only; top right).

Juliet Kinsman



The snow-topped, chocolate-box, cosiest of cosy of ski lodges

The fire crackles as you sink into an armchair, mulled wine in hand, while the sun sets on snowy peaks in the distance. Life looks like Wham!'s *Last Christmas* video (but with a hot tub), and the slopes are only a step away. This is how to ski in style.

Make the dream come true

● The first decision is whether you'd like to stay in a lodge-style hotel or a comfy, catered chalet. That's easy: four people or fewer, go with a hotel; more than that and you should look for a cosy chalet to suit your needs.

● Use a specialist tour operator. Sawday's Canopy & Stars (0117 204 7830, canopyandstars.co.uk) has a brilliant selection, with prices from £1,120 per week for a chalet sleeping 10, self-catering. **Chalet la Foret** (pictured), near Chamonix, comes with all the trimmings — hot tub, wood-fired sauna, patchwork quilts and even a *raclette* set — and costs from £2,900 per week (sleeps 10). Likewise, Consensio Chalets (020 3393 0833, consensiochalets.co.uk) has a diverse collection of hideaways, allowing you to compare boutique hotels against the more prevalent luxury chalets.

● Always consider proximity to the slopes when choosing your pad. Even the most magical ski lodge will shed its stardust pretty sharpish if you have to trudge uphill for half an hour to get to the lift every morning.

● And don't just look towards Europe. Yes, the top resorts of Colorado and Canada might seem too far or too much hassle, but America's east coast is not — and some of the prettiest properties can be found there, particularly in resurgent Vermont. Stowe is your best bet, with newly opened luxury lodge **Field Guide** (00 1 802 253 8088, fieldguidestowe.com; doubles from £110, B&B) offering incredible value, while the **Pitcher Inn** (00 1 802 496 6350, pitcherinn.com; doubles from £250, B&B) looks and feels like a Christmas movie.

● Still struggling? On your next trip, ask the true locals (your ski instructor, boot-rental guy, barman) where they send their friends and family when they come to visit. Our secret is the **Milk Hôtel** in Les Carroz-d'Araches, France (00 33 6 1777 7023; doubles from £95, room only). It ticks every box from roaring fire to proximity to the slopes. And while it still remains a relative secret, its price tag means the 'milk' is not just for the fat cats. Jonathan Thompson >

The totally tropical desert-island beach hut

Swinging in a hammock, staring up at blue skies, and drinking from a coconut before leaving footprints on virgin sands — who hasn't dreamt of a Southeast Asian escape?

Make the dream come true

● The majority of Thailand's virginal beaches have been deflowered by developers, but not all. Skip paved-over Phuket and, instead, fly to Ko Kood (Bangkok Airways has flights from the capital to nearby Trat from £99 return; bangkokair.com), making tracks for the palm-topped cottages of **Pa Hin Sai** (18 Moo 5, Takean Beach; 00 66 89 898 8444; doubles from £10). On the same beach, there are also the luxury

thatched villas of **Soneva Kiri**, if you want the five-star fripperies but the same *Jungle Book* hideaway look (00 66 82 208 8888, soneva.com; doubles from £696, B&B; pictured).

● Don't write off monsoon season (September to November). It's a great choice for detoxers, dieters and yoga bunnies, when the rains add a meditative quality to massages and fasts — and rates are slashed. **The Sanctuary** on Ko Phangan (00 66 86 478 4213, thesanctuarythailand.com) is a hippie-ish spa retreat where, for £22 a night, room only, you can bed down in wooden huts perched on huge rocks above Haad Tien Beach.

● Get to Vietnam before everyone else — and choose Phu Quoc island. For four-poster beds close to the sea, try **Mango Bay** (00 84 903 382207, mangobayphuquoc.com; doubles from £53, B&B). Or head to Cambodia's Koh Rong Peninsula, home to the chic beach retreat **Song Saa** (00 855 2398 9012, songsaa.com; doubles from £600, B&B). You get butlers and it can accommodate a whole family.

● Check out travelfish.org for more of Southeast Asia's off-the-grid sands. It lists even the most remote beaches, with honest opinions of each hut and guesthouse. *Lee Cobaj*



The period-drama great British country house

Liveried staff. Clawfoot bathtubs. Roaring log fires. And enough gin to sink a ship. *This* is what great British country-house hotel weekends are made of. Pack your Barbour and your little black dress for a trip back in time.

Make the dream come true

● Not all country-house hotels are created equal, even if they charge roughly the same. To get the best bang for your buck, choose one with all the bells and whistles thrown in free (spa, golf course, gym, kids' club, tennis courts, outdoor pool). The all-singing spa at **Chewton Glen** in Hampshire has so many pools and jets, you could fritter away a day without spending a bean (01425 275341, chewtonglen.com; doubles from £280, room only; pictured).

● Sunday nights offer the best deal, whichever country-house hotel you plump for — by then the dirty weekenders have checked out, but the retirees and expense accounts haven't arrived. Beware the word 'Wing' when you find a very low rate — it *might* mean you're in the modern (ugly) annexe; check that your room is in the original building when you book.

● Don't dismiss four-stars. Handpicked Hotels come as a relief to budget travellers — a collection of 21 ancient houses, many four-star, without the old-school price tag. Half board starts at £152 in winter, while last-minute rooms have been known to go for £100 or less (0845 458 0901, handpickedhotels.co.uk).

● Don't assume you'll be turned away if you have kids. We like the unsnooty Luxury Family Hotels — with manicured gardens and creeping ivy, these historic places look the part, but welcome children. You'll find rooms equipped with sterilisers, cots and toys (0844 482 2152, luxuryfamilyhotels.co.uk; from £50, B&B, when you spend a minimum of £75 at dinner).

● Stuck in the city? Picture-postcard houses aren't only to be found in the sticks. Both the **Grove**, Hertfordshire (01923 807807, thegrove.co.uk; doubles from £265, B&B) and **Stoke Park**, Buckinghamshire (01753 717171, stokepark.com; doubles from £190, B&B) are less than an hour's drive from London, or a short cab ride from a commutable station. *Katie Bowman* >



The lovers' Indian Ocean over-water lagoon villa

Scorching rays, sleek sunbeds, and a ladder from your back door into an ocean dotted with starfish and reef-tip sharks... Pack your snorkel — a lagoon villa in the Maldives is as close as it gets to paradise.

Make the dream come true

● There's no getting around the price tag — even the cheapest start at about £450 per night. But you can mix bling with budget digs. The **Charming Holiday Lodge** has doubles from £40 a night, B&B (00 960 965 8363, charmingholidaylodge.com) and is within spitting distance of the Shangri-La Villingili (pictured) — so you can scrimp one week and splurge on the other.

● If you're not willing to rough it, avoid high season (our winter, Nov–April). It's hot all-year-round anyway and there's no guarantee of dry weather because it's the Tropics.

● Don't assume a quick jaunt is cheapest — many resorts throw in extra nights if you stay longer (at sleek Huvafen Fushi, get seven for the price of five; 00 960 664 4222, peraquum.com/huvafenfushi). Resorts that are owned and run by Maldivians tend to be better value, too; try Sun Siyam resorts, for instance. They might not have Kelly Hoppen furnishings, but ultimately the islands are all the same. **Sun Aqua Vilu Reef** has water villas from £420, B&B (00 960 676 0011, sunaqua.com/vilureef).

● Go all-inclusive. Food and drink costs a bomb out there because everything is flown in. **Constance Moofushi** has chic water villas from £490 all-in — not bad when you consider its sister resort, **Constance Halaveli**, costs £540, B&B (020 3328 7830, constancehotels.com). Book through a tour operator and rates drop even more. Kuoni (01306 856754, kuoni.co.uk) has seven nights all-in at Constance Moofushi from £2,401pp, with flights.

● Be ready for the reality — over-water villas can be more cramped than you might have dreamt. Consider a beach villa if you don't want to greet your neighbours every time you go out. **Leo Bear** ■