

# Escape

IS THIS THE MOST  
BEAUTIFUL HOTEL ROOM  
IN BRITAIN?  
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## Dear Reader

THE ice cream parlours of Braemar will be ordering in extra tubs following news that Balmoral, the late Queen's favourite residence, will be open to visitors this summer.

It's a glorious spot, with the River Dee chattering, red squirrels stocking up on beech nuts and, if you're lucky, a golden eagle on a regal fly-past.

I was there some 15 years ago as a guest of Her Majesty — well, not exactly invited in person but certainly with her permission when she allowed the Aberdeen Artists Society to hold painting courses on the estate.

There were 12 of us and we were put up just beside the castle in the Queen's Building, where staff members live when the monarch is in residence.

One minute I was in the ballroom examining works of art by Sir Edwin Landseer and Carl Haag, the next I was peering through the windows of Garden Cottage, where Queen Victoria sometimes took breakfast.

I talked to the gardeners about the then Queen's passion for the



Picture: IAN DAGNALL / ALAMY

mixed-coloured stocks planted along one side of the castle, and about the Duke of Edinburgh's growing irritation at the way the Virginia creeper had been allowed to take over.

My efforts with a paint brush were rubbish, but what a treat — and now the King is making good on his promise to open royal residences to the public.

Victoria wrote how Balmoral seems to 'breathe freedom and peace, and makes one forget the world and its sad turmoils'.

In nearby Ballater, almost every street is named after Victoria or Albert. And dotted about the countryside are monuments, statues and cairns dedicated to her memory, most of which were paid for by workers and tenants on the estate.

But it'll be the interiors of Balmoral that will be a poignant reminder of our much-loved Queen Elizabeth II. I do hope some of her Tupperware will be on display.

Mark Palmer

TRAVEL EDITOR



Unlike their more famous counterparts, these truly magnificent sights are still largely crowd-free. That's why we're calling them...

## THE NEW WONDERS of the WORLD



Picture: SHUTTERSTOCK / MINTIMAGE



by NIGEL TISDALL

**M**ANY of us have had the good fortune to visit some of the great wonders of our planet — perhaps the Pyramids, Taj Mahal or Great Wall of China, or terrific natural spectacles like the Grand Canyon and Victoria Falls.

There is just one problem: the number of tourists who descend on these show-stoppers. There are many more marvels to be seen that are just as impressive but less busy or commercialised. From majestic landscapes and ancient ruins to an art deco gem, here's our top ten less-visited wonders of the world, and how to experience them.



Spectacular: Raja Ampat in Indonesia and (inset) encountering turtles on a reef

### CORAL TREASURES

RECENTLY featured on BBC Two's *Wilderness With Simon Reeve*, the Coral Triangle is so rich with fish and coral that scientists have dubbed it a 'species factory'.

Stretching across the Pacific from the Philippines to Bali and the Solomon Islands, its bullseye is a remote corner of eastern Indonesia known as Raja Ampat. Here you

can go exploring on a *phinisi* (traditional wooden sailing boat), with ample time to snorkel, dive and visit island communities.

**OUR TIP:** Travel between November and March for calm seas and a good chance of spotting manta rays.

**BOOK IT:** A ten-night, all-inclusive group voyage costs from £6,995pp, including

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# Escape:

## VALLEY OF FIRE



**Dramatic:** These bacon-like formations

wildlife that includes elephants, lions, rhino and, on the smaller side, geckos. The chance to climb colossal sand dunes, meet the indigenous Himba and explore the shipwreck-strewn Skeleton Coast make this a must for romantics and wilderness-lovers.

**OUR TIP:** Distances are vast so hop around

## BUDDHIST SPLENDOUR



**Adventure:** Lhasa's Potala Palace is at 12,000ft and (below) a webbed-foot gecko in Namibia

£635 return ([ba.com](#)). Plan an itinerary with [travelnevada.com](#) and [parks.nv.gov](#).

### ANCIENT TIBET

SET at just over 12,000ft, the gargantuan Potala Palace in Lhasa dates from the 17th century and has over 1,000 rooms housing a wealth of Buddhist treasures.

The adventurous way to get there is on the world's highest railway which runs across the stark Tibetan plateau from Xining, covering 600 miles with hundreds of bridges built over the permafrost.

**OUR TIP:** The weather is warmest from June to September.

**BOOK IT:** A ten-day Ancient City Of Lhasa tour costs from £2,690pp, including a two-night train ride to Lhasa plus accommodation and some meals and excursions ([worldexpeditions.com](#)). Flights from Heathrow to Chengdu and back from Lhasa are extra, from £1,167 return ([atrchina.co.uk](#)).

### FLY OVER NAMIBIA

THE Namib Desert is believed to be the oldest in the world, barely inhabited by humans but with a remarkably adapted

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transfers, meals and activities ([responsibletravel.com](#)). Flights from Gatwick to Sorong via Jakarta are extra, from £1,059 return ([qatarairways.com](#)).

### CROWD-FREE MAYAN RUINS

CARACOL is the largest of many magnificent but rarely busy Mayan ruins sprinkled across Belize, a still barely discovered English-speaking country in Central America that is slightly larger than Wales.

Some 1,300 years ago this was a flourishing city with 150,000 residents, now its lofty temples and broad plazas are a jungle-wrapped home for toucans and black howler monkeys where you can sit in peace contemplating the candle-ends of history.

**OUR TIP:** Stay at Blancaneaux Lodge, a 90-minute drive away, which is owned by film director and winemaker Francis Ford Coppola.

**BOOK IT:** An eight-night tour combining beach and rainforest, spending three at Blancaneaux Lodge, costs from £3,975pp, including flights from Gatwick to Belize City via Cancun, transfers and breakfast ([rainbowlours.co.uk](#)).

### WET AND WILD IN BRAZIL

CLINGING to the borders of Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil, the Pantanal is the largest tropical wetland on the planet and home to a thrilling wildlife that includes giant otters, the maned wolf and the gorgeously blue, 3ft long hyacinth macaw. It has the greatest concentration of caimans (crocodiles) in the world plus around 5,000 jaguars.

**OUR TIP:** May to October is the dry season when it's easier to spot animals.

**BOOK IT:** A nine-night Wildlife Of The

Pantanal group tour, visiting three lodges, costs from £5,995pp, including flights to Cuiaba via Sao Paulo, transfers, meals and excursions ([wildlife-worldwide.com](#)).

### VIETNAM'S SECRET

WITH its towering run of jagged karst pinnacles, Ninh Binh is as dramatic a sight as the better-known Halong Bay, but doesn't come with hordes of trippers. Two hours south of Hanoi and bordered by rivers, farms and temples, it's best discovered by bike or by gliding downstream on a sampan.

**OUR TIP:** Visit in October and November when water levels are high and the rice fields are ready for harvest.

**BOOK IT:** A 12-night Landscapes Of Vietnam tour, which spends two nights in Ninh Binh, costs from £3,415pp, including flights into Hanoi and back from Ho Chi Minh City, transfers, most meals and some excursions ([insideasiatours.com](#)).



### HOT ROCKS IN NEVADA

ONLY an hour's drive from Las Vegas, the Valley of Fire State Park is an overlooked natural wonder that can't fail to amaze. Get ready for swirling red sandstone formations that look like streaky bacon, 4,000-year-old rock carvings and hiking trails to suit all levels.

**OUR TIP:** Nevada is perfect for a road trip with many routes from two to five days — go from October to April when it's cooler.


**BOOK IT:** British Airways flies from Heathrow to Las Vegas, from









Bay of Fires, Tasmania

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Call **TRAILFINDERS** on **020 7938 0250** or visit your local Travel Centre

Prices are per person based on a twin/double share & valid for #Sep/Nov departures. Offers are subject to availability & restrictions may apply. Prices correct at time of going to print on 5 Apr 24.



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# Cover Story



*Its swirling red sandstone and 4,000-year-old rock carvings never fail to amaze*

are just an hour's drive from Las Vegas

by small plane savouring the mesmerising views over time-worn Africa.

**BOOK IT:** A seven-day safari costs from £3,642pp based on four travellers flying together, including meals and safari activities ([travellocal.com](http://travellocal.com)). Flights from Heathrow to Windhoek via Frankfurt are extra, from £1,203 return ([lufthansa.com](http://lufthansa.com)).

## ART DECO JEWEL

REBUILT in the 1930s after an earthquake, Napier is a genteel port in New Zealand that has close to 150 colourful and well-preserved art deco buildings that are a joy to explore.

Decorated with sunbursts and fountains, they include a theatre with original neon and chrome fittings and a bank adorned with stylised hammerhead sharks. Framing this, the Hawke's Bay region is famous for its beaches, wineries and food.

**OUR TIP:** Napier fits in well with a North Island tour flying into Auckland then back from the Kiwi capital, Wellington.

**BOOK IT:** A 14-night North Island Classic self-drive tour, spending a night in Napier, costs from £1,966pp, including some excursions ([discover-the-world.com](http://discover-the-world.com)). Flights from Heathrow to Auckland and back from Wellington are extra, from £1,419 return ([airnewzealand.co.uk](http://airnewzealand.co.uk)).

## DOMINICA'S BOILING LAKE

STEAMING waters that boil like a witches' cauldron lie at the heart of the mountainous Caribbean isle of Dominica.

At 230ft wide and set at an altitude of 2,600ft, the bubbling grey lake offers a rare glimpse of the earth's violent interior and is one of many scenic thrills in the World Heritage-listed Morne Trois Pitons National Park, which also has impressive forests, waterfalls and birdlife.

**OUR TIP:** If you don't fancy the 12-mile hike, hang on till the end of next year when a cable car will open.

**BOOK IT:** Seven nights at Fort Young Hotel costs from £1,699pp B&B, including flights from Gatwick via Barbados and transfers ([caribtours.co.uk](http://caribtours.co.uk)).

## CRUISE THE KIMBERLEY

AUSTRALIA'S immense and empty northwest corner has become an exciting destination for expedition cruises voyaging between Broome and Darwin.

Highlights include natural wonders that are a result of extraordinary tides, such as the Montgomery Reef which appears to rise from the ocean, and the Horizontal



**TOWERING LANDSCAPE**

Peaceful: The Ngo Dong river in Vietnam

## CLOSER TO HOME AND NOT TO BE MISSED

■ **TYNEHAM** is an atmospheric ghost village on the Dorset coast that's been deserted since 1943 – you can still see the church, school and terrace houses ([visit-dorset.com](http://visit-dorset.com)).

■ **THE Great Glasshouse** is the largest single-span glasshouse in the world, designed by Foster+Partners and home to endangered plants from Chile to Australia. See it at the National Botanic Garden of Wales in Carmarthenshire ([botanicgarden.wales](http://botanicgarden.wales)).

■ **PUFFINS, terns and grey seals** are just some wildlife stars on the Farne Islands, off the coast of Northumberland, where Inner Farne has just reopened to walkers after a two-year closure ([nationaltrust.org.uk](http://nationaltrust.org.uk)).

■ **PAIRING** dramatic scenery with a harsh history, the remote Outer Hebridean archipelago of St Kilda can be reached on an adventurous, three-hour voyage from the Isle of Harris. ([wildernessscotland.com](http://wildernessscotland.com)).

■ **WILDFLOWERS and a moon-like landscape** of limestone pavements make The Burren a memorable sight on the west coast of Ireland – follow the self-drive Discovery Trail ([discoverireland.ie/the-burren](http://discoverireland.ie/the-burren)).

Falls, where huge volumes of water get squeezed through cliff passages.

**OUR TIP:** Add on some time in Broome to enjoy its enormous beach, Asian cuisine and pearl farms.

**BOOK IT:** A nine-night Kimberley Coast Adventure cruise aboard the 140-passenger Heritage Adventurer costs from £6,995pp, including meals, drinks and excursions ([aptouring.co.uk](http://aptouring.co.uk)). Flights from Heathrow to Broome and back from Darwin are extra, from £1,512pp return ([qantas.com](http://qantas.com)).

PICTURES: GETTY IMAGES / ISTOCKPHOTO / SHUTTERSTOCK / ALAMY

WHAT a sad day it was in 2002 when Brussels ushered in the euro for general use, heralding the end of interesting European currencies such as the Greek drachma (with its antiquated grandeur) and Dutch guilder (who could forget those rainbow-coloured notes with eye-catching designs of sunflowers and lighthouses?).

From as long as I can remember, I've kept these mini works of art from every foreign country I've visited.

Forget collecting stamps. From age five, I hoarded lucre. My first was a crisp 100 peseta that my mum put in the wash by accident and was forced to dry and iron (taking money laundering to the most literal level).

In Vietnam, when I presented each of my three young sons with 1,000 dong, their faces were a picture. They couldn't believe their luck until the penny dropped that they were in possession of a measly 32p.

I'm not denying that foreign currency can have its challenges and, fresh off the plane, I've often made friends for life by tipping extravagantly in error.

Not to mention the look on a porter's face in Costa Rica when my husband, thinking he was being generous, gave him 100 colon (16p). In Uganda, the star of the shilling note is a handsome

**THE BEST THING ABOUT A HOLIDAY IS...**  
Foreign currency



mountain gorilla; and in the Seychelles, it's the island's biodiversity that is celebrated on the rupee. The tiger chameleon and scops owl are just two of the creatures you'll find in this charming monetary menagerie. This summer, I'm looking forward to adding the Brazilian two-reais note to my collection, with a hawkbill turtle emblazoned across it.

The euro? Profoundly dull.

**KATE WICKERS**

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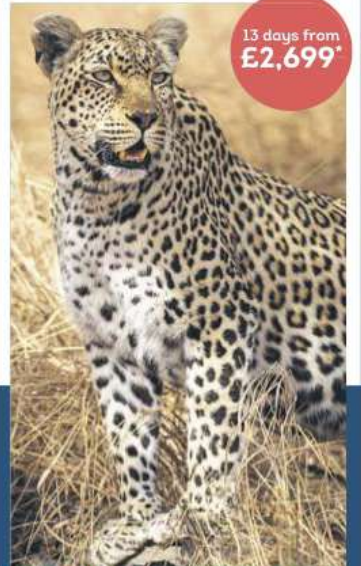
#### What you'll see

- Embark on a coastal journey to the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Point
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