

This week's dream: a laid-back, low-key Thai island

It doesn't have "cutting-edge" hotels; nor could you honestly describe it as a "secret paradise". But you won't find a large Thai island with a more "mellow, softly tuned vibe" than Koh Lanta, says Issy von Simson in Condé Nast Traveller. Compared with the likes of Phuket and Koh Samui, this sliver of jungle and beach off the country's southwest coast remains largely untouched. A "low-rise, go-slow" place, it has some "gorgeous" small resorts, as well as the kind of simple, driftwood-and-bamboo beach bars "you really do want to find in Thailand".

There are reasons for the island's relative lack of development. It's quite an effort to get there (a short-haul flight from Bangkok to Krabi, followed by a taxi ride, a couple of ferry trips, and more taxiing). And it lies in a fairly conservative, Muslim area of the country, where change comes slowly and "overt displays of wealth" are frowned upon. Indeed, it wasn't hooked up to mains electricity until 1996, and only in the past



Klong Khong Beach: a "softly tuned vibe"

decade have "grown-up" hotels sprung up alongside its backpacker beach huts. They include Costa Lanta, "an overgrown garden punctuated with fabulous polished-concrete minimalist havens"; Layana, whose "easy-breezy" rooms sit on a "wide and deserted" beach; and Pimalai, a large space with 100 rooms, but so "artfully" designed that it doesn't feel like it.

The best beach bars – such as Same Same But Different and Why Not – string up "star-shaped paper lanterns" and throw small, laid-back parties at the slightest excuse. The snorkelling is fantastic; you can sail kayaks among limestone caves, or take a long-tail boat trip through "gnarled" mangrove swamps. The Old Town on the rocky east coast is charming, with "shuttered century-old teak houses on stilts", a red-and-gold Chinese temple and a smattering of "lovely" bars. *Cleveland Collection* (020-7843 3531, www.clevelandcollection.co.uk) has an eight-night trip from £1,590pp, incl. flights.

Hotel of the week



The Pig near Bath, Pensford, Somerset

Since its opening three years ago, the Pig in the New Forest has been a "runaway success". This new 29-room Pig, 20 minutes from Bath, is its third sister venture, says Susan d'Arcy in *The Sunday Times* – and it lives up to expectations.

The Georgian house it occupies is grand, with a deer park, a kitchen garden and a "photogenic" orchard, but the atmosphere within is more "shabby chic" than "posh". And a stay here is great value for money; there are two spa sheds "tucked under apple trees"; and the food, with its "garden-to-plate" ethos, is "irresistible".

Doubles from £139. 01761-490490, www.thepighotel.com

Getting the flavour of...

Walking in the heart of Australia

It looks like a featureless desert from the air, but Australia's remote Red Centre is actually "remarkably lush", full of wildlife, and riven with magnificent gorges. To explore it on foot without foregoing modern comforts, walk the Larapinta Trail, says Mark Rowe in *The Independent*. One of seven tracks known as The Great Walks of Australia, it runs for 223km from Alice Springs over the West MacDonnell Ranges; but most visitors attempt just a three-day section, staying at "comfortable" campsites with electricity and bucket showers en route. Peppered with corkwood trees, native figs, pale ghost gums and purple desert roses, the landscape is "delightful" and sometimes very dramatic – as at Ormiston Gorge, with its sheer, 200m walls of red rock; and there are plenty of cool billabongs to swim in along the way. *World Expeditions* (0800-074 4135, www.worldexpeditions.co.uk) has a three-day trek from £750pp, incl. food and guides.

A medieval Italian horse race

After a year-long list of parades and a day of lesser races, the climax of Ferrara's Palio lasts just three minutes. But this horse race is not only the oldest of its kind, it's also among the most "visceral", says Horatio Clare in the FT. Held annually since 1259, it pits riders from the city's eight districts against one another, and inspires a level of passion in the

largely local crowd that can scarcely have diminished since its earliest days. Ferrara is rich in medieval and Renaissance glories of every other kind, too – from magnificent "pleasure palaces" known as *delizie* to the house of the poet Ariosto – but receives far fewer visitors than nearby Venice and Bologna. *Ferrara's main Palio events take place from 3 May to 1 June this year. See www.ferrarainfo.com.*

Buzios by beach buggy

Brigitte Bardot stopped by in 1964 and the local tourist board won't let you forget it. But don't let that, or the odd cruise ship, put you off Buzios, says Francisca Kellett in *Tatler*. Situated a short drive along the coast from Rio de Janeiro, this is Brazil's "original fishing village turned swanky resort", and it's now home to some of the country's "sexiest" nightlife. The town itself lies on a lush headland fringed by 23 glorious beaches, some of them still wonderfully wild (don't miss the Ponta da Lagoinha), and the best way to explore them and the rugged hinterland is by beach buggy. Finish up your days at Rocka, one of Brazil's "best beach bars", where you can eat divine seafood, drink champagne on giant sunbeds "and dance bossanova in the sand". *Brazilian Beach House* (020-3287 4345, www.brazilianbeachhouse.com) has villas from \$1,250 per night (sleeps ten).

Last-minute offers from top travel companies

4-star Amsterdam

A 3-night stay at the Manor Hotel – Hampshire Eden allows the traveller to explore the beautiful Dutch city. Prices from £267pp b&b incl. flights. Visit www.cheapflights.co.uk. Depart 28 April.

Adventure in Alaska

Book by 21 April for a 10-night Ultimate Alaska Cruise on the Norwegian Pearl, full board, with nights in Vancouver and Seattle. From £1,399pp incl. flights. www.cruisenation.com. Dep 6 May.

5-star Crete

This 7-night stay at the Avra Imperial Beach Resort & Spa, Kolymbari, is great value at £499pp half-board, with flights and room upgrade. 0800-011 4621, www.broadwaytravel.com. April-May dates.

Easter offer in Wales

The Michelin-starred Tyddyn Llan, on the North Wales borderlands, is offering a 2-night break to new bookers with dinner and breakfast for £215pp. 01490-440264, www.tyddynllan.co.uk.