

Perfect holidays made easy

If you've been looking forward to getting away from it all, you need to make sure you get it right. So follow our expert tips for booking your ideal break

Words by Maxine Cleymann

BEFORE YOU BOOK

A bit of research can go a long way when it comes to booking your holiday. **Don't feel pressured into booking somewhere beyond your means.** Says Christine Northam of Kialoa: "Once you've agreed on your budget think about what you want out of your holiday. Do you want to spend all your time on the beach or would you prefer a cultural break? Discuss options with your partner and be prepared to compromise. One idea is to take turns choosing your holiday." **Being in a different climate** may make you susceptible to illnesses that your body isn't used to dealing with. So to be on the safe side it's vital to check whether you need any vaccinations before you book

your holiday. Most jobs are required six weeks before travel. The World Health Organization lists the relevant vaccinations needed to travel to any country. See www.who.int/en for info. **If you want to find out more about the place you're thinking of visiting before you book,** holiday tourist information websites are a great starting point. Says Craig Doyle, former presenter of BBC1's *Holiday programme* and consultant editor on *Travel: Where To Go When*: "Another tip is to book any restaurants or shows that you'd like to visit before you go."

Decide what you want from your holiday – to spend it all on a beach or do you prefer a cultural break? **to avoid disappointment and any unnecessary hassle since you're there.** **For up-to-date travel advice and news on the destination of your choice** call 0845 850 2829 or visit www.fco.gov.uk for more information. **If your holiday involves a long-haul flight and you don't want to be cramped, try to book your seats with a certain number of people go, so it's worth shopping around.** **Travel: Where To Go When**, published by Dorling Kindersley has great advice on the best places to go for the time of the year you want to travel. To order your copy, see www.tescocommunity.com

KEEPING YOUR FINANCES IN CHECK

Make sure you get the most for your money when it comes to your holiday both here and abroad. **The Association of British Travel Agents puts the average holiday spend at £300 each for a family of four, so choosing the best credit or debit card to use on holiday can make a big difference.** Beware of hidden costs when using your cards abroad. Debit card providers often charge for converting currency but there are additional charges for withdrawals from cash machines (typically 1.5 per cent) and sometimes for over-the-counter transactions. **Where you buy foreign currency can make a big difference to the rate you pay.** says Andrew Osado, editor of thisismoney.co.uk. "Commission free providers may still prove more expensive, depending on what exchange rate they offer. Foreign exchange rates at bureaux de change, or often be better in the afternoon rather than the morning and in city branches as opposed to country ones."

Regional airports may charge you a supplement to fly locally so check with them before you book your flight about booking it all yourself you can use an agent such as Travel Counsellors, the UK's largest independent travel company. For a one-off fee they'll shop around for the best deal for you. For more info call 01204 536000 or see www.travelcounsellors.co.uk.

Picture perfect Tesco's processing labs (in over 270 stores) offer a one-hour service from 5p per print. Stores without labs will return your prints in two days. You can even post your photos onto Facebook, mousesets and buy rings, or print online and you get unlimited storage too. Visit www.tesco.com/photo for more details.

WHEN SHOULD I BOOK AND WHAT TYPE OF HOLIDAY IS BEST?

You've made your mind up on where you're going but how do you get the right deal for you? **To bag a bargain, avoid popular dates in the UK, such as Valentine's Day, Easter (one of the priciest times of the year) and Christmas, as holiday prices tend to jump up.** Also, bear in mind holiday times in the country you will be visiting. For example, Easter in a religious country such as Italy means that everything will be closed. **The earlier you can book the better the deal you're likely to get.** says Lindsey Fletcher of Travel Counsellors. Brochures come out as far as 18 months in advance. Obviously that won't suit everyone. **If you are planning to go at the last minute, remember you might still need to get vaccinated.** If jobs are necessary for your preferred destination, you may not have enough time to get them, so it may rule out some places. The same applies to visas, which may take a few weeks to be processed. **There's a group of you travelling together, apartments are usually your best bet.** Some companies offer group discounts, or give you a free place if a certain number of people go, so it's worth shopping around. **Don't rule out activity holidays, even if you're not that sporty.** Lots of companies offer active breaks that cater for all levels and interests.

February Florida Keys. While the rest of the US is a bit chilly, Florida is basking in the sun. March Whitler, Canada. Mild weather and still lots of snow in this all-action ski resort. **April Amsterdam.** The best time to see blooming tulips and beautiful canals. **May Prague.** The legendary Spring Festival concerts mean the cobble streets and squares ring with music every evening. **June Rome.** Ideal time to see Italy's capital as it's the start of the Estate Romana, Roman Summer. **July Cancun.** Not as crowded as other Mediterranean destinations with such great beaches for families. **August Black Forest, Germany.** Perfect for a driving and walking tour of the great outdoors. **September Madeira.** Good weather, fewer crowds and beautiful countryside. **October Budapest.** Hungary's capital celebrates its Autumn Arts Festival. **November Burgundy, France.** Indulge in gastronomic delights at local harvest festivals. **December Lapland.** Visit Santa at home, but only if you've been very good all year.



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AFFORDABLE CHIC

With great deals and direct flights you don't have to be a millionaire to holiday in Barbados



My friends thought I'd won the lottery when I told them I was off to Barbados. Sadly, that wasn't the case. But these days you don't have to be rich or famous to be able to afford some Caribbean glamour. By booking last minute, my friend and I bagged ourselves a real bargain. For a flavour of where the most hang out, we hired a car and headed for the west coast of the island. Hopping to spot a celebrity, we took a walk along Sandy Lane Beach, where the famous Sandy Lane Hotel is located, which is home to the glitzier when they holiday in the Caribbean. We spent some time sunning ourselves on the pink-tinged sand at Crane Beach, named one of the top 10 most beautiful beaches in the world, and passed another "hard" day sipping cocktails in the shade of the palm trees. Then one morning we decided to venture off the beaten track with an organised 4x4 tour, which allowed us to visit stunning beaches such as Bathsheba on the east coast of the island. St Lawrence Gap, known as The Gap to locals, with its buzzy nightlife of bars and restaurants to suit all tastes felt like a home away from home. But if you're looking for a really special holiday experience you can always hop into a taxi and then dance the night away on the sand at the open-air nightclub, Harbour Lights. Best of all, our inexpensive, last-minute deal ensured that we didn't have to watch our pennies, so could splash out and treat ourselves to a sumptuous dinner in one of The Gap's cosy fish restaurants with a splendid waterside view of turtles. After a week of sheer bliss we headed home, where my first thought was to buy a lottery ticket in the hope of returning soon. To book, call the special late deals line on 0871 222 1203.

Best time to go July to September is the rainy season in the Caribbean so holidays tend to be cheaper then, although you may not be guaranteed good weather. However, if it does rain it usually doesn't last long. **Getting there** A seven-night break in Barbados starts from £389 with Virgin Holidays. This includes scheduled flights leaving from London Gatwick with Virgin Atlantic and seven nights' accommodation at the 3V Butterfly beach hotel, room only, with transfers. To book, call the special late deals line on 0871 222 1203.



GROUP GETAWAY

Women-only ski trips open up a whole new world of fun, adventure and great shopping



Helen (left) and friends prepare for their ski run at Breckenridge

Women-only skiing? A wonderful idea for those fed up with bossy partners ("Come on, it's not that steep"), but would it suit those wanting something more taxing than a nice bump-free run? I decided to give it a go. Flying out with a group of pals to Denver, then based in the Rockies, my doubts were quashed by some of Colorado's amazing female instructors from the resorts of Vail, Breckenridge and Keystone. The first two days were run by veteran skiers Nancy and ex-rocket scientist Jane. Self-styled 60-something, they have skied so far off piste into the wilderness it's surprising they haven't lost any fingers to frostbite. Jane told us women can easily match men on skis because the sport is all about balance, but she has a different approach to teaching the men. "Generally, men don't like to lose face, while women hate losing control. So I tell men "do this to look better", whereas to women I say "This is how you want to put the brakes on. You can have an advantage if you do ballet or gymnastics." We got so caught up with practising our gliding turns that our increasing speed was barely noticeable. Jean eventually took us easily down a black run – any advance warning and some of us might have gone on strike. Other highlights included a ski session with a female instructor from the Argentinean Olympic sailing team, going up America's highest chalet, plus skiing in pink boots on one of Keystone's all-women 'Betty Frost' days. The great thing about women's skiing is being able to set your own pace so you gain more confidence. But if you want a break from skiing, Colorado resorts have plenty of shops, spas and sports centres – the exchange rate means everything is a great value.

Best time to go Mid-April is the quietest time. Best deals are available from two months to departure, right up to the week before. **Getting there** Seven nights in Breckenridge with Virgin Holidays, staying at the 4V Great Divide Lodge, starts from £722. Price includes flights, accommodation and car hire. To book group discounts for 10 or more call 0870 990 8545, otherwise call 0871 222 1308 or visit www.virginholidays.com. Discounts vary depending on numbers and time of year. Visit www.now.com for Colorado resorts, info and booking women's group skiing lessons before you fly, such as Keystone's Betty Frost weekends 0301 970 496 4170.

HALF-TERM BREAK

A 4x4 tour of the Greek island of Rhodes is the ideal solution for some mum-and-son bonding



Mum and son enjoying their Greek holiday

For a 13-year-old boy obsessed with *Top Gear*, the prospect of a 4x4 tour of the island of Rhodes was too good a prospect to miss. So it was with gritted teeth that I joined my teenage son on a 4x4 safari. But it was worth every burn-clenching minute. Our convoy of vehicles drove across an army training ground, to a small strip of land at Prasonissi, where we were treated to a view of both the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. A deserted beach was our next pit stop. Here we tucked into a hearty 'olive oil' picnic of Greek salad and fresh bread. From there it was a short drive to the tiny village of Saima, to sample some local honey, before continuing up the coast through cool forests, stopping to pick fresh herbs and admire the stunning vantage points. The beauty of Rhodes is that there's something for everyone – and both my son and I were enchanted wandering round its historical Old Town, with its beautifully preserved castle as well as breathtaking views from the Clock Tower. From Mandraki Harbour we caught a ferry across the Turkish coastline to the postcard-pretty island of Symi, with its ice-cream coloured cottages, harbour-side bars and restaurants. In addition to fresh fish, souvlaki (skewered chargrilled meat), dolmades (vine leaves stuffed with savoury rice and minced tatziki dip) and fried pitta bread, the local pastries were divine. As we quickly discovered, the lighter than air cheese pies were all too mouthful, as was the baklava – a sweet, sticky combination of filo pastry, pistachios and honey, which we indulged in from one of the local bakeries. Fortunately we were able to burn off any excess calories we'd consumed as our hotel boasted an incredible 12 swimming pools – one for every group of rooms. So my son and I happily splashed around in the pool by our terrace. We followed this with a night game of after-dinner snooker in the hotel's excellent games room. There was so much to do on holiday that we didn't argue one. Although that could have been something to do with the fact my son best me every time. Of course I let him, but then I would say that.

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Mum and son enjoying their Greek holiday

Best time to go October is a great time to visit Rhodes as it's less crowded but the weather is still warm. **Getting there** Through Cosmos, seven nights at the five-star Aldemar Paradise Royal Mare in Kalithea starts at £579 per person on an all-inclusive basis based on two people sharing, including return flights from London Gatwick, Birmingham or Manchester, private transfers and onboard upgrade to Monarch Plus.

Capital idea Irish eyes will smile on you at the stylish Dylan Hotel in Dublin. Housed in a handsome Victorian building in a quiet, leafy area, this chic boutique hotel is just minutes from Grafton Street and the city centre with its diverse entertainment and shopping. Perfect for a romantic getaway, sip a cocktail at the bar before exploring the nightlife in the popular Temple Bar area. And of course a trip to Dublin won't be complete without visiting the Guinness Storehouse to sample this famously smooth tipple. **Travel details** A stay at the Dylan, Eastmoreland Place starts from £75 per person per night, including breakfast, based on two people sharing. Call 0116 842285 or visit www.knockderryhouse.co.uk. For more about Loch Lomond and the surrounding area visit www.lochlomond.com.

Beside the sea If you're looking to get away from the hustle and bustle of daily life then the tranquillity of the Isles of Scilly provides the perfect antidote. The colonial-style Island Hotel in Treco is set in its own private beach so you can relax by wandering along the seashore. Or if you prefer to take it even easier, simply chat out in one of the hotel's lounge areas or on the terraces and enjoy the stunning waterside view, overlooking Old Grimby Sound. **Travel details** Skybus flies from Land's End to the Isles of Scilly. Visit www.islesofscilly-travel.co.uk or call 0845 710 5555 for more information. The Island Hotel in Treco is open from 3 March 2008 – 3 November 2008. A stay includes dinner, bed and breakfast and starts from £150 per person per night, based on two people sharing. To book call 01792 427285.

Welsh rarebit For total peace and quiet you can't beat the Fairhill Hotel, Reynoldston. The hotel is set in 24 acres of landscaped grounds, with a bubbling trout stream and its very own lake, so you can treat yourself to some affordable undisturbed luxury. It's close to the spectacular bays of the Gower Peninsula, one of Britain's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and the historic ruins of Reynoldston Castle. Situated in Cranbrook, capital of the Kentish Weald, it is the ideal base for exploring the Garden of England. A short drive from Royal Tunbridge Wells, Goswigham Castle and the historic town of Tonbridge, it's also delightfully easy to lose yourself in the narrow medieval streets of this picturesque market town. **Travel details** The Fairhill Hotel costs £165 per room, per night, based on two people sharing, and includes breakfast. Call 01792 390139 or see www.fairhill.net for details. For more about Wales go to www.visitwales.co.uk.

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Summer or winter, Tenerife is the perfect destination for all the family

Best time to go The Canaries are at their best in January and February, though a mild climate makes them an ideal destination all year. **Getting there** Seven nights in the five-star Berostar Grand Hotel Anethia in Tenerife with Cosmos starts from £749 per person (from £379 for a child). The price includes half board, flights, upgraded to Monarch Plus First, and private taxi transfers. Call 0871 423 8422 or visit www.cosmos.co.uk.

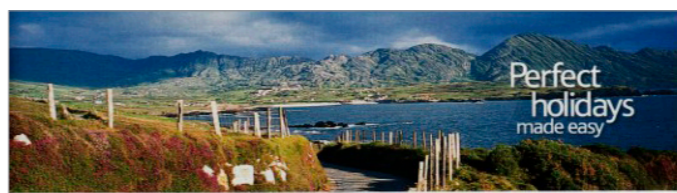
YEAR-ROUND SUN

Fed up with the cold, and my daughter Hannah asking why mummy's nose was always red? I opted for Tenerife, the largest of the Canary Islands off the Moroccan coast, also known as the island of eternal spring because of its mild climate. Scenery lovers note that it boasts Spain's highest peak, Pico del Teide, also the world's third largest volcano. Our upmarket hotel was located right on the waterfront and a stone's throw from the two main beaches of Playa del Duque and Playa de las Americas, with their gorgeous, wide sands. Hannah was so excited as us to be going to the beach in T-shirt and shorts even though it was winter. And despite the popularity of Tenerife, we were pleasantly surprised at how peaceful it was. After chilling out on the beach for a few days we headed for the Octopus waterpark, luckily open year-round. The water slides and pools more than made up for Hannah's initial disappointment at finding out that the park wasn't full of real crocodiles. And that was about as busy as things got. After dark, we passed on the nearby bars and clubs on Playa de las Americas. I'd have stayed up all night there in my party animal days. But with everything from cable car trips, atmospheric old towns in the north and lunar landscapes, our Tenerife trip was still a sight for sore eyes.



Tenerife's marina and (below) the golden sands of Las Teresitas

Deals This means that you can enhance your Clubcard Deals status and receive 4 x their face value in Deals tokens that can be redeemed against any Cosmos holiday



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WEEKEND ESCAPES

Want to unwind but don't have time for a long break? A couple of days at one of these idyllic hotels in the UK and Ireland will leave you feeling refreshed

The high road Less than an hour's drive from Glasgow, Knockderry House is nestled on the banks of Loch Long in a quiet, leafy area. This chic boutique hotel is just minutes from Grafton Street and the city centre with its diverse entertainment and shopping. Perfect for a romantic getaway, sip a cocktail at the bar before exploring the nightlife in the popular Temple Bar area. And of course a trip to Dublin won't be complete without visiting the Guinness Storehouse to sample this famously smooth tipple. **Travel details** A stay at the Dylan, Eastmoreland Place starts from £75 per person per night, including breakfast, based on two people sharing. Call 0116 842285 or visit www.knockderryhouse.co.uk. For more about Loch Lomond and the surrounding area visit www.lochlomond.com.

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