

the travel Calendar

Norah Casey plots a year of great travel destinations, unmissable festivals and events for the year ahead.

Carnevale di Venezia



I have this huge map of the world on my wall and every now and then, I lose a few hours plotting new destinations to visit. For me, the planning is often the most exciting part of travel; the contemplation of the unknown, the excitement of the possible and the belief that I will magically ditch work and wander the planet in search of all its hidden wonders. It took an age to write this travel calendar for the next year because I found myself lost in Google searches of wonderful places I have never been. But here it is: my 2017 nominations for the best place to be, and the best time to be there, for every month of the year.

JANUARY

HARBIN ICE AND SNOW SCULPTURE FESTIVAL, HARBIN, CHINA. 5 JANUARY

Recently, I was among the crowds gathered to watch a couple of men with various implements create an ice sculpture outside Weir & Sons on Grafton Street to launch its new Fashion Room. So imagine the draw of seeing the world's most spectacular ice sculpture show. Back in 2010, I arrived into Beijing just after the new year. The temperature was -16°C, snow and ice was piled up on the roadside and the air was so

dry that indoors, moisture was constantly being sprayed from humidifiers. To the north of Beijing, Harbin is on the Chinese border with Siberia and is known as Ice City. But it was once also known as the Paris of the Orient and the Russian influences are evident in the grand boulevards. Every year, for over 50 years, thousands of spectacular ice sculptures are created by hand and laser from the frozen Songhua River, creating a dramatic



Harbin ice and snow sculpture festival

two-month winterscape that attracts nearly a million (mostly Chinese) visitors. The origins date back to the Qing Dynasty, when locals dug candles into hollowed out buckets of ice to light up the night while fishing. It evolved into an Ice Lantern Festival and has now exploded into the biggest ice artistic festival in the world. icefestivalharbin.com

FEBRUARY

CARNEVALE DI VENEZIA, ITALY. 11 TO 28 FEBRUARY

From St Stephen's day until Shrove Tuesday, while Ireland waits in misery for the start of Lent, the Venetians are partying like it's 1162. The decadent home to Casanova goes all out with fantastical, ornate masks and costumes to recreate that mystical, magical time when the elite of Venetian socialites hid behind the veil of anonymity to peruse all manners of pleasures and madness. The official Carnevale now lasts ten days and I've been twice. The first time we went purely as spectators and while the atmosphere was great we did feel like outsiders. So the second time we went on to the official website, booked to attend some of the events and bought beautiful handmade masks in Ca'Macana one of the oldest *mascherari* (mask makers) in Venice (Camacana.com). This is an opulent, elegant festival with elaborate costumes, decorative masks and a host of parties and balls. Don't miss the official opening at St Mark's Square and the Flight of the Angel (a winged figure takes flight to the backdrop of Vivaldi) at midday. The finale Notti de la Taranta (Night of the Tarantula) on Shrove Tuesday is equally unmissable, with a candlelit water parade of gondolas culminating in a magnificent fireworks spectacle at midnight. Only then should you contemplate giving anything up for Lent! carnevale.venezia.it

THAIPUSAM, BATU CAVES, KUALA LUMPUR. 10 FEBRUARY

The festival of Thaipusam falls on a full

moon and is celebrated by Tamil Hindus in Malaysia, Singapore and India. My recommendation is the barefoot procession up 272 steps to the wall paintings in the Batu Caves just outside Kuala Lumpur to get the true spiritual experience of this sacred pilgrimage. Thaipusam commemorates Lord



Thaipusam

Murugan, the Hindu God of War who slaughtered three demons using a sacred lance in a battle of good over evil. Beware, because enroute you can encounter many oddities: pilgrim goers use spikes, knives and hooks during ritualistic piercings of their bodies to cleanse their flesh of sins. The true faithful walk through the heat in a trance-like state and carry *kavadi* (a burden of pots of milk) on spiked harnesses, catatonic from fasting for days beforehand. Behaviour can be erratic and startling, sometimes involving extreme self-torture. (Before you judge, think of Matt Talbot, born in the North Strand area of Dublin, the patron saint of those struggling with alcoholism who used 'mortification of the flesh' as a way of condoning for his failings.) I can't promise that Thaipusam will be fun, but I promise you will never forget the experience. wonderfulmalaysia.com

MARCH

CAPE TOWN INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL, SOUTH AFRICA. WEEKEND STARTING 31 MARCH

I love jazz and in my younger years tried to attend as many festivals as possible including memorable ones in Canada, New Orleans and London. The Cape Town International Jazz Festival has mushroomed into a broader fashion, art, photography and craftwork showcase and is now one of the biggest of its kind in the world and certainly the biggest music festival in Africa.

Don't miss the Fashion and All That Jazz Gala Dinner which celebrates local artistry and the wonderful music of jazz. There are lots of performances throughout the weekend



Mardi Gras



Mardi Gras



AfrikaBurn

which you can book in advance or there is a pre-festival, free community concert at the heart of Cape Town in Green Market Square where devotees of jazz are treated to world class musicians and the best of South Africa's jazz talent. Even if you don't love jazz this festival has something for everyone. Cape Town is a city well worth discovering at any time, but catch it this weekend and you will see it in all its glory. capetownjazzfest.com

APRIL

NEW ORLEANS MARDI GRAS, LOUISIANA. 28 FEBRUARY TO 16 APRIL

When a festival's motto is *Laissez les bons temps rouler* (Let the good times roll), you know it's going to be fun. I love New Orleans; myself and Richard went there on three occasions and managed to stay at a hotel right in the middle of Bourbon Street for Mardi Gras. Plan no rest because the already crazy streets of New Orleans' French Quarter go into a frenzy of dancing and music to mark the party of all parties before the barren days of Lent. And it's very Irish. Nothing starts when it's supposed to, parade routes might change at the last minute and spontaneous street entertainment is often better than costly venues. To really enjoy Mardi Gras pile on bling and rows of beads, wear as much purple green and gold (faith, justice and power) as you can and go with the flow. Look out for mega crowd madness during 'throws' from parade floats – it could be a pile of beads or toys or sweets, and it creates quite a stir. Plan ahead, flights and hotels get booked quickly. It's not all about nudity, debauchery and drunkenness (but you won't have to look to hard to find it). mardigrasneworleans.com

SONGKRAN, CHIANG MAI, THAILAND. 13 TO 15 APRIL

You're bound to get wet at this traditional Buddhist festival that started out as a spiritual purification, but has turned into a three-day water fight. You don't have to go to Chiang Mai, you'll find Songkran festivals all over Thailand, but this is the best place to enjoy the unparalleled freedom to unleash your inner child and wage water war on all you come cross. Oddly, building a sandcastle is a tradition of the festival and there are plenty of elephant parades and large Buddhas on floats.

I have celebrated Songkran in Bangkok also and that is quite a different and more sedate spiritual experience, with lots of praying at Buddha statues while cleansing them with scented water. But up in Chiang Mai anything goes and you're a target regardless of who you are or how well you're dressed for a night out. Get your hands on some Super Soakers and get into the zone, even when you think you want to hit the next person who douses you with water. songkranday.com

AFRIKABURN, KAROO, SOUTH AFRICA. 24 TO 30 APRIL

If you feel the whole world got to Burning Man before you'd even heard of it then head to it's much younger (and smaller) sister festival, AfrikaBurn, and be the first to brag about it. You will need lots of clothes for night time, as the temperature plunges in the arid semi-desert area of the Karoo in the Northern Cape and if the sun doesn't do the burn damage, the wind might. The festival is hosted on a small farm called Stonehenge. The main sculpture is San Clan and it is far, far away from civilisation (far more remote than Black



The Battle of the Wine

Rock Desert). It's perfect for the weirdly, MOOP (Matter Out Of Place) soul-searching that personifies Burning Man, and it still has all the mad stuff and nudity, while being a bit more fun. afrikaburn.com

MAY

PRIMAVERA SOUND BARCELONA, SPAIN. 31 MAY TO 4 JUNE

Not that you should ever need a reason to visit Barcelona, but during urban music festival Primavera is one of the best times to see this eclectic city come alive. The best of indie and all manner of music from jazz to hip-hop plays across multiple stages at the Parc del Forum facing the Mediterranean. Radiohead headlined in 2016 and the Primavera alumni features mega-stars like Lou Reed, Neil Young, Iggy Pop, Pulp and Blur. The festival has grown to gargantuan proportions, more because of the hipster alternative vibe and music lovers that flock there and the unknown up and coming artists than for the more established ones. There's a lot on



Primavera Sound

at Primavera, often concurrently, so plan ahead if you want to make the most of it. As well as the pre-festival free concert there's a great kid's programme with *minimúsica* and a side festival (In-Edit) of music-related movies and documentaries. Sun, sea and music in the air – what's not to love about a long weekend in one of Europe's greatest party cities? primaverasound.com

JUNE

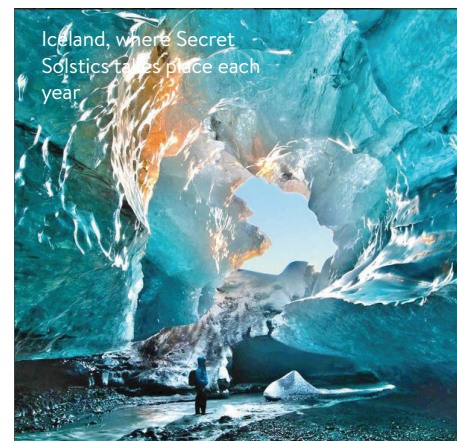
SECRET SOLSTICE, REYKJAVÍK, ICELAND. 16 TO 18 JUNE

Celebrate the longest day of the year at one of the world's most unique festivals, in a place where the sun hardly sets for three long days. Better still, catch the great music of Monsters and Men (I'm a huge fan) and many others at Secret Solstice, an all-night (or all-day) electronic dance party set over football fields, concert halls and various outdoor spaces at Laugardalur in Reykjavík. Last January we snowmobiled across one of Iceland's largest glaciers at Langjökull, but at the height of summer you can dance and party in the same spot and recover in the many geothermal baths (official and otherwise) in the area. There are over a hundred acts over the weekend, all staged in the surreal Icelandic landscape and midnight sun. This is an adventure of the body, mind and soul and the good news is that it's on a direct flight route from Ireland through Wowair.com. secretsolstice.is

HARO LA BATALLA DEL VINO, RIOJA REGION, SPAIN. 29 JUNE (SAINT PETER'S DAY)

The best advice I can give you for the

madness of this weird festival is to wear clothes you never want to wear again. Once tinged with pungent Rioja, the stain, if not the smell, will never leave. There is a bit more to the Battle of the Wine at this pretty little Spanish town – but not much. The Mayor heads off at 7am on the morning of St Peter's



Iceland, where Secret Solstice takes place each year

Day and leads the white (apart from red scarfs) procession through Haro up to the Bilibio cliffs. Aficionados bring bota bags (a wine satchel lined with goat's bladder) slung over their shoulder for drinking and splashing. And while you can drink the wine, you can't fling it until after you go to mass at the Hermitage of San Felices de Bilibio. Typically, there are thousands who show up just for the after-mass party when the pristine white attire turns crimson as the biggest wine fight unfolds. When everyone is totally sozzled, soaked and falling down with tiredness, the battle ends and it's time to head to an even more extraordinary sight: the local lads taking

on heifers in the bull ring. I can assure you, the inebriated youth don't stand a chance. batalladelvino.com

JULY

WORLD SANTA CLAUS CONGRESS, BAKKEN, DENMARK. 24 TO 27 JULY

Yes, there is such a thing as a World Santa Claus Congress (WSCC) and there is a perfectly good reason why it happens in July – it's their downtime. Whether you have kids or not, you will smile a lot and find the whole thing very convivial, especially as the elves and pixies have joined in. Every year in July, Santas from all over the world hitch up their sleighs and head to Bakken, north of Copenhagen, for the oldest Santa Claus Congress in the world. A time to catch up with old friends and compare notes on the naughty and nice list. The various Santa outfits are amazing and without even thinking, you will find yourself hit with a little bit of Christmas magic (why should it be only once a year?). The parades are the highlight across the three days led by the master of the Guild of Danish Santas followed by the newly crowned pixie of the year. Free sweets from cuddly santas are an added bonus. Believe and make your way to Brakken for one of the most unusual events ever. worldsantaclauscongress.com

WOMAD, WILTSHIRE, ENGLAND. 27 TO 30 JULY

Co-founded by Peter Gabriel of Genesis, The World of Music, Arts and Dance (WOMAD) began life in the 1980s in Shepton Mallet in Somerset as a way of showcasing emerging talent. In a way it is the founding father of all world music festivals and has put many global stars on the map. There are spinoff WOMADs in Australia and New Zealand and a series of travelling shows but the main one is in Charlton Park in Wiltshire each July. This is a kind of kooky music lovers dream where you can learn about indigenous instruments and have banter with the musicians off stage. Campervans and tents are the accommodation choices and WOMAD is very family friendly with lots for the kids. Take some time to explore Salisbury Cathedral and Stonehenge in the surrounding countryside. womad.co.uk

AUGUST

STREET PARADE ZÜRICH,

SWITZERLAND. 12 AUGUST

I love house and techno but I am not wild about all the bad stuff that comes with wanting to hang out with the cool kids – crowd crushes, warm beer, greasy food, litter... need I go on? But when the Swiss decide to organise a day-long music party, you know it's going to be the best organised one in the world. Street Parade Zürich was inspired by Berlin's Love Parade (now no longer) but it's bigger, better, more beautiful (winding around the lakefront) and less Swiss than you might imagine. It's also free. The city plays host to over 100 parties over the weekend of the Street Parade with the main spectacle being the parade itself complete with love mobiles, hundreds of DJs (always 1pm on the second Saturday in August) and of course the city which is a delight to walk around during quieter pre-Parade days. Give peace a chance and head to the most tolerant happy day ever – and all so well organised you just get swept along on a love wave. streetparade.com

SEPTEMBER

LISDOONVARNA MATCHMAKING FESTIVAL, COUNTY CLARE IRELAND. 1 SEPTEMBER TO 1 OCTOBER

I'm long overdue a chat with Willie Daly about finding that perfect match. Willie is a man of many talents: Farmer, publican (his pub is in Ennistymon), horse dealer and third generation matchmaker. His famous matchmaking ledger is brimful of hopefuls from shy farmers to overworked career women, all looking for love.

Last year, Nathan Carter turned to Willie for help and even Naomi Campbell was urged to turn up to Ireland's famous soulmate searching festival. People say he's got an eye for the perfect match, or the nose, or perhaps the gut instinct. Whatever it is, he's famous for it, even penning a book on the subject titled *The Last Matchmaker*. Lisdoonvarna claims to be Europe's largest singles event and a month of barn dances, music sessions, speed-dating and liberal amounts of alcohol has led to some



Willie Daly

success. There's always a long queue to see the maestro himself but word is that his daughter Claire is an up-and-coming matchmaker worth seeking out. Around lunchtime (whenever you wake up) the dancing starts so even if you don't find love, at least you might get fit. matchmakerireland.com

OCTOBER

NEW YORK CITY WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL (NYCWFF), NEW YORK. OCTOBER

Foodies flock to this brilliant festival every autumn where America's famous TV chefs and increasingly international culinary stars join forces for a city-wide celebration of all the great eateries and gourmet haunts of New York. And it's all for a great cause: So far NYCWFF has raised over \$10 million to eradicate hunger. This October, the festival featured great tastings, parties, demos, walk-around sampling and all manner of eating from roof-top brunches to intimate dinners. If you love food and you love New York, then this is a great time to visit. nycwff.org

NOVEMBER

DIA DE LOS MUERTOS, OAXACA, MEXICO. 1 TO 2 NOVEMBER

Not as depressing as it sounds, the Day of the Dead is a great celebratory party held on All Saints and All Souls day, honouring the dead with a blend of Catholic and Aztec culture. Festivals are held throughout Latin America but Mexico, where it originated, is the place to be for Dia de los Muertos. Expect to eat, drink and be merry as the dead are honoured by doing and consuming all they enjoyed while alive. So despite the prevalence of sweets



The World Santa Claus Congress



Street Parade, Zürich





Holi festival, India



Dia de los Muertos

and masks of *calacas* (skeletons) and *calaveras* (skulls) they are generally happy, jaunty caricatures befitting a party where the dead are the guests of honour. A procession via a funfair to the cemetery is the highlight where, after munching on candied skeletons and crucifix cakes, an impromptu picnic and prayer (perhaps at the tombstone) ends the date fittingly. It's not a time of mourning, it's a celebration of the cycle of life. visitmexico.com

DECEMBER

HOGMANAY, EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND.
30 DECEMBER TO 1 JANUARY

I lived in Scotland for five years and managed to get the best of both worlds by



Hogmanay
Scotland

being home for Christmas and back for Hogmanay. Scotland doesn't really do Christmas (it was banned for 400 years) but no one does New Year's Eve as well as the Scots. In my small part of Scotland up at Loch Lomond, the traditions of Hogmanay were really important. Like first-footing, where the first visitor through the door after midnight brings coal (the dream visitor is a tall dark handsome man). A good first-footer can make for a fortunate year ahead. The home of *Auld Lang Syne* (a Robbie Burns poem) is at the heart of the mass arm-linking tradition and in case you didn't know, the final verse must be sung with your arms crossing your companion's chest. Edinburgh is where all the action is for visitors, where Hogmanay is celebrated with parties, torch lit parades, fireworks, music and the odd dram of whisky. edinburghshogmanay.com



Bucket List 2018

There's nothing like forward-planning to keep your travel bug satiated. Here's my bucket list for 2018, already starting to take shape.

Banish the January blues and head to MIAMI, FLORIDA to board the music-loving, carefree and laid back **JAM CRUISE** for a five-day non-stop party festival across the beautiful Caribbean seas of the Gulf of Mexico. Great for singletons, you'll meet thousands of fellow jammers at the pool, casino and on the dance floor. Book well in advance (2017 sold out early). jamcruise.com

Catch **CHINESE NEW YEAR IN HONG KONG, CHINA** (usually around February). We caught the New Year only once in Hong Kong and it was amazing. Great fireworks at Victoria Harbour and lots of loud drums, firecrackers and flames throughout the day to fend off attacks by the mythical beast, Nian. Book well in advance as hotels fill up quickly.

Also on my list is the joyous colour bomb welcoming of spring festival **HOLI** in MUMBAI, INDIA on 13 March, which paints rainbows on streets, people, walls and anything that moves across various parts of India, particularly in the Juhu Beach area of Mumbai. This is a spectacular way to say goodbye to the dreary days of winter and welcome the season of warmth, colour and love. incredibleindia.org

The **FESTIVAL OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES** takes place in PONTEVEDRA, SPAIN on 29 July and this is definitely on my bucket list for 2018 because I am one of the few who qualifies to be part of the main event rather than a bystander. My recent brush with death (thanks to an ignored ruptured appendix) means I can join the hundreds of others who sit erect in their own coffins to celebrate surviving a near death experience. The Fiesta de Santa Marta de Ribarteme is an annual pilgrimage in this tiny town not too far from the Santiago de Compostela. spanish-fiestas.com

OKTOBERFEST, MUNICH, GERMANY is the biggest beer-guzzling festival in the world (16 October to 3 November). Dress code is a push up bra for women, lederhosen for men and a capacity to down huge quantities of beer stronger than wine. A 12-gun salute kicks off the 16-day festival, the mayor of Munich taps the first keg and the beer flows freely from then onwards. Top tents to visit include Hofbrauhaus, Augustiner, Hippodrome and Schottenhamel. Pace yourself. oktoberfest.de 