

Islomania

There is something magical and often mystical about exploring the planet's islands. **Norah Casey** charts a course through the strange, the stunning and the most secluded islands in the world.



THE MOST...

...Romantic

THE TAJ LAKE PALACE HOTEL UDAIPUR, INDIA

● This surely must be one of the most romantic hotels in the world. The Taj Lake Palace Hotel is built in the middle of Lake Pichola meaning its location affords every room breathtaking views of the neighbouring City Palace on one side and the Aravalli Mountains on the other as well as the Machla Magra Hills and Jag Mandir. Constructed from white marble and made famous when it featured in the James Bond film *Octopussy*, it was originally built in 1746 by Maharana Jagat Singh II, 62nd successor to the royal dynasty of Mewar – believed to be descendants of the Sun God. This heritage hotel has 66 luxurious rooms and 17 grand suites spread across a four-acre island – an almost surreal vision in marble floating on the still waters of the lake. taj.tajhotels.com



...Elegant



HOTEL CIPRIANI, VENICE

● My late husband Richard harboured a longstanding ambition to stay at the Cipriani. In his final weeks he described his perfect night at this Venetian jewel, sipping bellinis on the terrace at sunset and dining at the Cipriani's Michelin-star Ora Restaurant. Sadly, he never got to fulfill his dream. A few months after he passed away my son Dara and I went on a special journey to this elegant hotel to dine. It was a bittersweet evening, Dara wore his dad's favourite suit and we swapped stories and shared a memorable dinner in his honour beneath the glittering Murano glass chandeliers and the golden ceiling of the Ora. The Belmond Hotel Cipriani is a very special place. Built on the Island of Giudecca in the 1950s (a collaboration between a group of friends including the Guinness family). The hotel boasts a stunning location and an unrivalled reputation for service. And unlike any other hotel in the city it has a large garden (where Casanova romanced his loves), a tennis court and a swimming pool. Arrival is by private water taxi from Piazza San Marco – a journey of less than five minutes. belmond.com

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For something different book a stay at No Man's Fort just off the coast of Portsmouth. Originally built to defend the seaport from a French invasion, it's now a 22-bedroomed luxurious island escape with spectacular sea views! From £450 per night including all meals. Check out Secretescapes.com for special offers.

SECLUDED SANCTUARIES

PARROT CAY, TURKS AND CAICOS

● Just an hour from Miami lies the private hideaway of Parrot Cay, which was built as a sanctuary for the soul as well as a nature reserve. Along its one thousand unspoilt acres is a mile-long powdered beach where guests can watch egrets pick through the shallows or even watch whales cruise by. They can then take a yoga class with the world's leading teachers, or enjoy a deep-muscle massage from specialist therapists. For those seeking greater privacy, Parrot Cay has six private homes which come complete with private butlers, stunning ocean views and total seclusion. parrotcay.com



Snorkelling in Style

ONE&ONLY HAYMAN ISLAND, GREAT BARRIER REEF

● Set alongside the magnificent Great Barrier Reef, Hayman Island is one of the world's most luxurious private island resorts. It's a tropical paradise and a unique experience offering indulgence, adventure and natural beauty. Its beautiful rooms, suites and penthouses look over the lush gardens, pools, ponds and white sandy beach. It offers everything the discerning traveller could wish for, including fine dining, a fully-equipped spa with expert therapists and consultants. Guests arrive by boat, plane or helicopter. oneandonlyresorts.com



An Unspoiled Paradise

PANGKOR LAUT, STRAIT OF MALACCA, MALAYSIA

● Pavarotti, who knew about the finer things in life, described it as 'paradise' and *Condé Nast Traveller* declared it number one in the world. This eco-friendly resort blends beautifully into the two-million-year-old rainforest that covers most of the island. Pangkor Laut Resort is a privately-owned island a few miles off the West Coast of Malaysia in the Strait of Malacca. Luxurious Malaysian-style villas dot the hillside and line the beach while eight magnificent estates nestle in a secluded cove. Guest lodgings cleverly use wood and foliage to merge with the forest bringing the island's wildlife to the doorstep. As the island is only accessible to guests it makes the perfect private holiday getaway. pangkorlautresort.com



Don't let the name Dark Island put you off staying at this exclusive castle in Upstate New York. Nestled among the Thousand Islands on the St Lawrence River the former Singer Sewing Machine magnate built a hunting lodge on Dark Island and you can stay in the VIP suite for approx.\$700 per night. singercastle.com

“Armed with walking sticks, experienced lion handlers and a bucket of courage we walked for an hour or so with these magnificent animals.”

Perhaps the most memorable experience on an island was walking with lions in Mauritius. We spent an action-packed week there some years ago and loved the lush forests and laid-back life to the south of the island. Armed with walking sticks, experienced lion handlers and a bucket of courage we walked for an hour or so with these magnificent animals. I had never been up close and personal with a lion before and maybe I won't ever do it again but it was a once in a lifetime experience. caselapark.com



HUVAFEN FUSHI, NORTH MALÉ ATOLL, THE MALDIVES

● Positioned on the edge of its own lagoon on the tropical paradise island of North Malé Atoll, Huvafen Fushi (meaning dream island) resort is simply stunning. Arriving at the island either by seaplane or speedboat, guests are offered the choice of staying in a bungalow on land or one that stands over the water. Each lodge is beautifully designed combining modern contemporary styling with traditional Maldivian patterns. And each has its own pool. Taking in views of the dazzling Indian Ocean, both above and below the waterline, it was the first hotel in the world to boast an underwater spa. There is also a yoga pavilion, a butler service, three restaurants and just about any water sport imaginable. minorhotels.com



BEST OF THE SEYCHELLES

● One of my favourite places in the world is Bird Island, an amazing sanctuary for sooty terns, land tortoises, turtles and intrepid travellers. This eco-friendly island in the Seychelles has 24 chalets where you can relax in nature – no TV or wifi. We travelled by ox cart to our hotel on La Digue, a tiny island without cars or airstrip, which boasts one of the most photographed beaches in the world, Anse Source D'Argent. We took a ferry from Praslin (which has a stunning rain forest) and cycled every corner of this beautiful paradise and its iconic beaches with massive granite boulders. birdislandseychelles.com

The best of the Caribbean Islands

The harbour in
Mustique

For those unfamiliar with the Caribbean you might imagine that one island paradise is the same as another. Well, of course the answer is no. Each island in this chain of more than seven thousand has its own character and culture, different in many surprising ways. On one memorable visit, Richard and I sailed St Vincent and the Grenadines visiting many of the smaller islands, retracing the footsteps of Captain Jack Sparrow and his film crew. Our first visit included two stunning Irish-owned hotels, Carlisle Bay in Antigua and Sandy Lane in Barbados. But we also ventured to a little island outpost, Union Island, where we met Heather Grant and her family who ran Erika's Marine Services, supplying most of the yacht supplies and charters out of the small town of Clifton, and we stayed in touch. When we returned to do a month's travel writing Heather organised a catamaran charter and so we set sail with Captain Andell. Our route took us to Petit St Vincent, Tobago Cays, Mayreau, Bequia, Mustique and St Vincent. We fished for our supper at sundown, cooked on board, or we took our little dinghy to the beach to explore some island cooking. We were helped enormously by the handsome and charismatic Andell's popularity with the locals. If you want to do likewise, I can't recommend Erika's Marine enough – just tell Heather I sent you! erikamarine.com

MORE CANNES THAN CARIBBEAN

● St Bart's is one of the most intriguing islands in the world. Now it's not unusual for an island in the Caribbean to be French speaking, nor for the Euro to be the main currency, but where are the rusty buses and run down beach shacks serving rum? Not here. St Bart's is not like any other part of the Caribbean, in fact this is France, the chic, sexy and oh-so beautiful Caribbean Cannes. But why St Bart's stood out for me was the food. A multitude of restaurants provided brilliant food at a very good price from the decidedly gourmand to the beach bar. st-barths.com

THE X FACTOR

● From its opening in 1961, Sandy Lane in Barbados has been renowned amongst royalty and movie stars for its beauty, service and style. We stayed there for a friend's wedding and unbelievably met Simon Cowell who is a regular (and he was perfectly friendly). Built amidst idyllic gardens in the style of a colonial villa, it dazzles in the sunlight. It's also

blessed with a long stretch of beachfront and the dominant colour is pink! It has a vast array of activities, including three world class golf courses – the Old Nine, the Country Club, and the world famous Green Monkey. Each room is fitted with the latest technology and ours had a fabulous view of the Caribbean Sea and its incredible sunsets. Sandy Lane remains one of the great hotels of the world. sandylane.com

GENTEEL CHARM

● St Kitts and Nevis, like no other islands in the Caribbean, seem to embody a kind of lush tropical paradise. The atmosphere here is an intoxicating blend of sunlight, sea air and fantastically abundant vegetation. At the centre of Nevis stands the spectacular, cloud-fringed Nevis Peak, a dormant volcano covered by dense tropical forest. On the island of Nevis the pace of life is very different to say Antigua or Barbados which is why many people continue to return here. Much of the history of the island is bound up with that of the British Navy. There's something about this small, sombrero-shaped island that grabs you. The charm and tranquility takes you back to a time when things were simpler, when life was more peaceful, when stress was just a word, not a way of life. Like they say on Nevis: "You're only a stranger here once." stkitstourism.kn

Dara steering the
Catamaran along
the coast of St
Vincent - he loved
the idea that
the Pirates of the
Caribbean had
been filmed here

The Grenadines

PALM ISLAND

● One New Year's we took a mad notion to escape the incessant rain, flying at 48-hours notice to Barbados, hopped on an inter-island flight to Union and took a boat out to the almost-deserted Palm Island. There were more giant land iguanas than people when we visited. We rented a rustic beach villa and walked the island every night at sunset. We ordered provisions from Union when we needed them and lived a barefoot life for a week or so (no mobile signal or other guests). Now, it has developed a bit and you can book into the Palm Island Resort but I hope it has retained some of its magic. Book a villa through Erikamarine.com.

THE WEIRD AND THE WONDERFUL

The No-Go

● This is an island to die for because you may well have to if you try to set foot on North Sentinel Island in the Bay of Bengal. The hunter-gatherer Sentinelese are as isolated as you can get and a barrage of arrows is likely to greet those who get too close, often maiming, sometimes killing. It is illegal to go within three miles of the island and very few photographs or knowledge of this 60,000-year-old tribe exists, save for their desire for privacy. You have been warned.

The Unluckiest

● Off the coast of Naples there is the cursed and now abandoned Gaiola Island, more precisely two tiny islands linked by a bridge. The untimely deaths and misfortune of the island's owners dating back to the 1920s led to the rumoured curse. It has over time been owned by Fiat supremo Gianni Agnelli, whose only son took his own life, and soon after it changed hands to multi-billionaire Paul Getty his grandson was kidnapped. The first owner was Swiss and was found dead and wrapped in a rug, a few months after his wife drowned, the next hapless buyer had a heart attack while yet another lost his fortune. In 2009 the last owner, Gianpasquale Grappone was imprisoned for insurance fraud.

The Creepiest

● Compelling and eerie are the two words to describe La Isla de las Muñecas in the Xochimilco canals close to Mexico city, translated into English as The Island of the Dolls. The tale behind these hanging dolls variously involves a religious man, Don Julian, who went to the rescue of a drowning girl but was too late to save her. Her screams haunted him nightly so he started hanging dolls out of respect and to protect her from evil spirits. Soon others joined the party and bits of dolls were being strung up all over the place. He himself drowned in the canals in 2001 and his son has taken on the upkeep of the Island of the Dolls.

The Mysterious

● The sky high and distinctive stone moai (monuments) on Easter Island (Rapa Nui) are world-famous even if the island is but a speck in the Pacific. How the early Polynesians built the 800-odd gigantic monuments (some up to three stories high) is a mystery but worth putting on the list. Fly from Chile or Lima.

The Hollywood Haunt

● If Tom Hanks rocks your boat then follow his footsteps to the small, uninhabited Fijian island of Monuriki. Not as difficult to get to as it sounds as there are signs of life on nearby islands where you can get a boat.

Superstitious Paradise

Hard to believe that somewhere as beautiful as Palmyra, an atoll in the North Pacific could also be plagued by supernatural happenings and mysterious shipwrecks. Richard Taylor, a sailor who stayed there in the 1970s, recounted feelings of dread and evil, and another yachting couple were murdered there 1974. But that turned out to be human intervention when an ex-con Buck Duane Walker was convicted in 1985. Still, its spooky reputation means it remains uninhabited and currently the only unorganised incorporated US territory.

Where the animals rule

TOP CATS

● No dogs allowed at Tashirojima Island, a small island in Miyagi, Japan, because it's overrun by cats who were brought to the island to get rid of the mice in the 1850s and who now outnumber the human population...and then some. The islanders see them as good luck charms, or perhaps they are too scared of the feline fury that might be unleashed should they take on these feral creatures.

THE GRAND NATIONAL

● Wild horses left behind by sailors or survivors of shipwreck have the run of Sable island. The island is attractively remote, situated in what is dubbed The Graveyard of the Atlantic, about 100 miles off the coast of Nova Scotia. For a tiny island it has seen a colossal 475 shipwrecks hence the abandoned boats and wild horses. It became a Canadian National Park in 2013.

BRAVE BUNNIES

● Hundreds of feral rabbits who survived chemical weapon testing now rule Okunoshima Island also known unsurprisingly as Rabbit Island. The colony arrived sometime before or during the second world war, when Japan covertly produced thousands of tonnes of poisonous gas. Tours of the abandoned poison gas factories and time with the cute bunnies has oddly attracted tourists to the island.

KAMFERS DAM

● Ten years ago South Africa built a distinctive S-shaped island home, creating two bays, for up to 50,000 Flamingos. Kamfers Dam, near Kimberley, is a sanctuary for lesser flamingos with developers even providing artificial nest turrets, completely ignored by the elegant pink birds who made their own.



Horses at Sable
Michelle Valberg



Cats at Tashirojima
Island

The most famous island of them all, Robinson Crusoe Island (formerly Más a Tierra) a couple of hours' flight from Santiago de Chile was the inspiration behind Daniel Defoe's famous book. Voted one of the best secret islands of the world, this nature sanctuary island awaits the adventurous.

crusoeislandlodge.com



Glamping at its best on offer at Island Lodge Bergholmen just 40 minutes from Stockholm. High-tech tents with spectacular views of the archipelago. For rates and further details contact islandlodge.se.

Tranquil and historic Trinity Island Lodge on Lough Oughter in Cavan can be all yours along with the 150 acres of woodland and the use of the island's private boat. De-stress on your island retreat, even the cooking can be arranged. From €1,300 per week and €600 per weekend. trinityisland.com



UNIQUE ISLES

Alien Island

● The Unesco World Heritage site of the Socotra archipelago off the coast of Yemen has the strangest and most awe-inspiring landscapes on earth. There are plants on Socotra that are found nowhere else, some 700 species according to biologists. Six million years of isolation from the world has preserved these strange and oddly-shaped trees and flowers. Only the Galapagos Islands, Hawaii and New Caledonia can make a similar claim in terms of biodiversity. Socotra is home to about 40,000 inhabitants and harbours other secrets which date back to the first century BC with the discovery of inscriptions and archaeological artefacts hidden in caves and a wooden tablet in Palmyrene dated to the third century AD.



The bizarre landscapes of Socotra Island



Imagine Peace Tower



Mamma Mia island of the Abba-inspired movie fame is a little-known gem called Skopelos just a short ferry journey from Skiathos in Greece. Singing on Kastani Beach optional, as is the wedding! Circa €200 per night at adrianaresort.com

has ponds, a river, a solar-powered waterfall, three beaches and wifi. Sowa has built a

Treasure Island

● Oak Island off Nova Scotia has inspired over 50 books plotting various theories about buried treasure and the tragedies that have befallen those who seek it. The tale begins in 1857 when a newspaper account claimed that Captain Kidd buried his pirate treasure on Oak Island. The area became known as the Money Pit and has been excavated many times with no sign of gold. Other accounts say it contains the Holy Grail buried by the Knights Templar, the jewels of Marie Antoinette, the revelations of Francis Bacon as the real author of Shakespeare's work to name but a few. And the prospect of treasure has lured some famous investors including John Wayne, Errol Flynn and kept Franklin D Roosevelt intrigued and interested for most of his life.

Imagine Peace

● A short ferry ride from Reykjavik will take you the scenic island home of Yoko Ono's spectacular Imagine Peace Tower, a memorial to John Lennon. The sides of the white stone wishing well monument has Imagine Peace carved in 24 languages. Every year Icelanders flock to Viðey Island on his birthday, 9 October, when Yoko officiates over the column of light projection which remains as a beacon until the date of his death on 8 December.

Recycled island

● Near Cancun in Mexico 150,000 empty plastic bottles float Joyxee Island, which unbelievably has a three-story house with two bedrooms, three showers and a wave-powered washing machine. The eco-island is the third attempt by British architect and environmentalist Richard Sowa (Hurricane Emily destroyed the first in 2005). Joyxee

raft of plastic bottles that can take up to eight people out for a tour of the island.

World's End

● If there was a polar opposite of paradise, then Bouvet would be it. Some one thousand miles from any land mass this inhospitable, frozen volcanic mound in the stormy Southern Ocean (next stop Antarctica) has been variously lost and found since it was first discovered in 1739. Yet it is the source of one of the great unsolved mysteries in maritime circles. Nothing other than the hardest of penguins, sea birds and seals survive on Bouvet which is ravaged with winds and fog for much of the year. But in 1964, a South African expedition discovered an abandoned boat with two oars nearby and no sign of passengers or crew. If you love a good mystery you will find some credible theories at Mikedashhistory.com. ■