

Sunday Times Travel's team of writers have spent selfless decades hurdling breakers, flinging Frisbees, sipping sundowners and sweeping sand from their suitcases on a mission to find the best beach holidays on the planet.

So, which was the finest of them all? We have put our scribes on the spot, asking each to choose their favourite strand, anywhere in the world — and added the practical know-how you need to plan a dream escape there.

It is an eclectic mix, from cornets with the kids in Cornwall to swimming with sharks in the Maldives. Dig out your swimsuit, spit in your mask and dive in.

### DEVIL'S BAY

#### British Virgin Islands

Forget, for a moment, the gorgeous sands, the spearmint sea and the rainbow of fish disporting themselves a skip and a dunk from the shore. I love Devil's Bay because just getting there is a sensational experience.

This pearly-white, coconut-palm-shaded spot is one small corner of the Baths, a national park at the southern tip of Virgin Gorda, an island better known to sailors than hotel guests. It can be reached only by a slow, snaking wade through a labyrinth of obese pink boulders, a natural wonderland of Gaudi-esque grottoes. You edge through a maze of tunnels and crevices, wander through caves that echo to the slosh of the sea, splash through rock pools, scale wooden steps and tread rickety boardwalks. Finally, in a

blinding scream of tropical sunshine, you burst out onto the finest beaches in the Caribbean.

Wear as little as you dare — and jelly shoes, so you can alternate between paddling and rock-scrambling. Go in the late afternoon, after the day-trippers have returned to other islands, so you can have the beach to yourself. Cap the day with sunset cocktails at the aptly named Top of the Baths restaurant, which has its own pool, so you can desalinate before seasoning your dinner.

**Take me there** There are two ways to approach — by land or by sea. Caribtours (020 7751 0660, [www.caribtours.co.uk](http://www.caribtours.co.uk)) has seven nights at Biras Creek from £1,950pp, including flights from London via Antigua, transfers and all meals. Nautilus Yachting (01732 867445, [www.nautilus-yachting.com](http://www.nautilus-yachting.com)) can arrange a 10-day bareboat charter, sleeping four, from £839, excluding flights. Cheap Flights ([www.cheapflights.co.uk](http://www.cheapflights.co.uk)) has return fares from London, via Antigua, from about £600. The Top of the Baths restaurant is on 00 1 284 495 5497, or call on VHF channel 16, if you're sailing.

David Wickers

### IHURU ISLAND

#### Maldives

Only a fistful of places on earth are more beautiful in the flesh than on the postcard, with sand whiter than a dentist's grin, sky bluer than a Hockney swimming pool and water clearer than... you get my drift. Ihuru is one of these spots.

The archipelago's tourist board couldn't have hoped for a

shapelier Maldivian model. Ihuru is a perfect circle of sand, ringed by a concentric belt of reef — it has been the pin-up star of many a glossy brochure. But you'd be mistaken in assuming its assets are the norm. Elsewhere in the Maldives, reefs lie miles away from islands, meaning a long boat ride to see the underwater show. On Ihuru, you simply have to roll out of your hammock and walk 20yd into the water to be swimming with batfish, baby sharks and green turtles.

And, compared with rival islands, this paradise doesn't have a perturbing price tag. The sole resort is Angsana, an affordable (relatively) pad with 45 chic beach villas and a sumptuous spa. **Take me there** Tropical Locations (0845 277 3310, [www.tropical-locations.com](http://www.tropical-locations.com)) has a week at Angsana from £1,779pp, including flights from Heathrow. Or try Seasons in Style (01244 202000, [www.seasonsinstyle.com](http://www.seasonsinstyle.com)).

Katie Bowman

### CALA D'AIGUAFREDA

#### Catalonia

Let's consider sand — and I'm going to be a bit controversial here. Sand is overrated: the mineral equivalent of Sienna Miller, it looks good on a beach, but quickly becomes rather irritating. Sand clouds the water, contaminates your sandwiches and exfoliates you where you'd prefer not to be exfoliated.

My favourite beach is called Cala d'Aiguafreda, and it doesn't have sand. It has flat rocks as warm as electric blankets, and tiny rock pools that make perfect wine coolers. Wrapped in

pine woods and sheltered from the tramontane wind, it smells intoxicatingly of ozone and resin, and is lapped by waters as clear as Bombay Sapphire.

That's nothing special in these parts. The beaches of the Baix Empordà, as this part of the Costa Brava is known, belong in a superleague of their own; but, for my money, tiny Aiguafreda is number one. That's due in no small part to the fabulous Hostal Sa Rascassa, located in heavenly isolation a few steps from the beach. Owned by the ebullient Oscar Gorriç, this simple, stylish place (recently voted one of Spain's best-decorated hotels), with a candlelit open-air restaurant and a beach bar, is a diamond set in an emerald forest beside a sapphire sea. And did I mention that there's not a grain of sand in sight?

**Take me there** Aiguafreda is 39 miles from Girona. Fly there with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)), rent a car from Economy (0845 450 0877, [www.economycarhire.com](http://www.economycarhire.com)); from £87 a week and book room 2 at Hostal Sa Rascassa (00 34 972 622845, [www.hostalsarascassa.com](http://www.hostalsarascassa.com)) for £75 per night, B&B.

Chris Haslam

### ANSE LAZIO

#### Seychelles

Anse Lazio should be a disappointment. Stick its name into Google, alongside "best beach in the world", and you get 229 results. So it's bound to be over-touristed, too gorgeous for its own good.

I didn't know it was so fêted when I first

washed up there, swimming ashore from my Sunsail yacht on an island-hopping holiday in the Seychelles. The beach was utterly deserted and, as far as I could see, utterly impenetrable to non-yachties. Boulderly pink battlements corralled the bay, defended by full-bore tropical jungle. My spine duly tingled.

Anse Lazio is on Praslin, the second largest island in the Seychelles, and it turns out you can get there by road. Take the thin concrete catwalk that wriggles out to the northwestern tip of the island, praying that nothing comes the other way. There is even a beachside restaurant, Bonbon Plume, where you can eat scallops in garlic butter and spicy mango salad while tiny ghost crabs trot transparently among your toes.

Despite the plaudits, you can always find your own palm-tree parasol, draped across the spotless sand, and a private cove for snorkelling among the firework fishes of the reef.

**Take me there** Elite Vacations (01707 371000, [www.elitevacations.com](http://www.elitevacations.com)) has a 10-night trip to the Seychelles, with six nights on Praslin at La Reserve, a 10-minute drive from Anse Lazio, from £1,789pp, including flights from London and private transfers. Alternatively, try Just Seychelles (020 7228 9021, [www.justseychelles.com](http://www.justseychelles.com)).

Vincent Crump

### CALA ERBAJU

#### Corsica

If I had a pound for every "secret beach" where you need elbow pads to barge through the crowds, I'd have enough to buy my own Bondi. Squirrelled away on the southwest coast of

Corsica, however, lies a one-mile strip of ice-white sand that's so far off the tourist map, you almost need a GPS to find it.

Why so empty? Well, it's a 45-minute walk from the nearest road, at Roccapina, via a coastal path fair dripping with the scent of lavender and myrtle — great news if you like your beaches hard-won, but bad news if you're schlepping beach balls, lilos and ice-cream-addled kiddies, who won't make much of Erbaju's total absence of beach shops or cafes.

It can be windy, too, and there's little natural shade, so be here from 10 until 12, or as the sun dips towards the cobalt horizon, when there's only the odd determined German to remind you this is Corsica, not the Cook Islands.

**Take me there** Villa pickings are thin here, but VFB Holidays (01452 716840, [www.vfbholidays.co.uk](http://www.vfbholidays.co.uk)) has the beautiful, stone-built Villa A Tighiaccia, sleeping four, from £830 per week in May. Closer to the beach is U Cavaddu Senza Nome (00 33 495 771847), a semi-wild camp site where two people sharing a tent will pay £15.50; tent hire costs £5 per night. Figari is 14 miles from Roccapina. Fly from Gatwick or Manchester with Thomsonfly ([www.thomsonfly.com](http://www.thomsonfly.com)).

Jeremy Lazell

### PORThCURNO

#### Cornwall

Bali and Barbados are pretty, but if you want somewhere that does beaches as beaches should be done — secret coves,

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# Is this the best beach on earth?

It is an emotive issue: what's the most seductive seaside in the world? We had to bully and bribe our team of writers to reveal their secrets, but, after many tears, here they are — the 10 finest and how to find them



Ihuru island: 'A perfect circle of sand, ringed by a concentric belt of reef'

# The world's best beaches

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craggy cliffs, soft sand, rock pools and spooky caves — you want Cornwall. And the acme of Cornish beaches is snug, sheltered Porthcurno, a creamy-yellow confection hedged around by dramatic dark granite.

It is miraculously unspoilt, but civilisation is close at hand. There is a lovely little cafe 200yd back up the valley and, on a clifftop to the west, the open-air Minack Theatre ([www.minack.com](http://www.minack.com)) does for the mind what the beach below does for the soul.

Get there early on even the sunniest summer day and you'll have Porthcurno almost to yourself. Later, it attracts gaggles of excited, sandy children — time, if that irks you, to stride out along the cliff path to Pednounder. But if, like me, you think that's how beaches should be, send your own little ones off to join the gang, kick back and drink the place in.

**Take me there** Porthcurno is signposted off the B3315, eight miles from Penzance. Just two miles away, Classic Cottages (01326 555555, [www.classic.co.uk](http://www.classic.co.uk)) has the stone-built Blue Barn, with a games room, a terrace and a spectacular 40ft beamed living room: it sleeps four, and a week from July 19 costs £794. Or try Helpful Holidays (01647 433593, [www.helpfulholidays.com](http://www.helpfulholidays.com)).

**Stephen Bleach**

## CALA MONDRAGO

### Mallorca

Protected by steep rocks and national-park status, Mondrago's twin coves shelve gently into a glittering sea. The first beach, Fonts de n'Alis, is the busier, with sunbeds to rent and two friendly restaurants set among the pines. Twice a day in high season, a pair of sunburnt oldsters wheel a barrow of fruit onto the sand and sell freshly sliced melon and pineapple.

Too much like civilisation? Walk around the headland and you will find S'Amarador, untouched bar a handful of thatched parasols and a rustic drinks hut, and uncrowded even in August.

If you tire of sandcastles and lilos, you can swim between the beaches or tackle the clifftop trails. For me, the highlight was ducking beneath the safety rope to swim around the bay, exploring hidden caves and gazing down through the clear, deep water at schools of silvery fish.

**Take me there** Cala Mondrago is five miles south of Cala d'Or. Stay beside Fonts de n'Alis at Hostal Playa Mondrago (00 34 971 657752, [www.playamondrago.com](http://www.playamondrago.com)), which has high-season doubles from £62, B&B. Or rent a villa from Mallorca Farmhouses (0845 800 8080, [www.mfh.co.uk](http://www.mfh.co.uk)); Can Alou, sleeping four, starts at £615 per week in April, including car hire. S'Horta is 20 miles from Palma. Fly there with EasyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)), Flythomascook.com ([www.flythomascook.com](http://www.flythomascook.com)) or Jet2 (0871 226 1737, [www.jet2.com](http://www.jet2.com)).

**Mark Hodson**

## PLAYA MONTOYA

### Uruguay

Deserted beaches are fine as fantasy fodder, but put me on one for five minutes and I'm bored. That never happens in Punta del Este.

This jet-set vacation town, a 45-minute flight from Buenos Aires, is where Argentina's beautiful people strip off and demonstrate just how beautiful they are. Sitting on the white sand at Playa Montoya, you have swimmers in front of you, surfers riding the big breakers on either side and the shabby-chic settlement of La Barra just a stroll away.

Playa Montoya keeps me content for days, but to glam it up local-style, you need to beach-hop. Start your day with the mini-Miami vibe of Playa Mansa, promenading along its beauty-contest boardwalks. Then it's over to Playa de los Ingleses, a surf's-up stunner, before a lazy lunch at Cactus y Pescados, above Playa Bikini.

Don King / Getty



## Deep research in Turquoise Bay

Aim to watch the sunset from the boho beach town of Jose Ignacio. Arrive at about 5pm, grab a cold beer from a beach bar and sit beside the flaming tiki torches while DJs float chilled-out sounds across the sand.

**Take me there** The Punta del Este season runs from December to February. Exsus (020 7292 5060, [www.exsus.com](http://www.exsus.com)) has a 10-day trip, with seven nights at Mantra Resort ([www.mantraresort.com](http://www.mantraresort.com)), and two nights in Buenos Aires, from £2,820pp, B&B, in February, including flights from Heathrow and transfers. Or try Steppes Travel (01285 880980, [www.steppestravel.co.uk](http://www.steppestravel.co.uk)).

**Richard Green**

## PANORMOS BAY

### Mykonos

The perfect Greek beach is like a detox for the soul, a restful retreat from the dark but fun side of island life, somewhere to clear your head from the daiquiri-dazed night before.

Here's the plan: pack your fashion garb and your Frisbee, then make for Mykonos. Away from the island's celebrated sardine-can social scene, breezy Panormos Bay feels like a remnant of an older, farther-flung Greece.

A £12 taxi ride north from Mykonos town, it comes with a hotel, a net-roofed bar and a great big butter-curl of beach on which to close your eyes, switch off and reboot. Later, when the heat has passed, sarong up and pad back to Panormos Beach Bar, to flop on the tutti-frutti scatter cushions for mojitos and lounge music. Ready for a night out?

**Take me there** The Mediterranean Experience (0870 499 0676, [www.medexperience.co.uk](http://www.medexperience.co.uk)) has a week at Kivotos Clubhotel, on Mykonos, from £1,015pp, B&B, including flights from Gatwick. Or try Islands of Greece (0845 675 2600, [www.islands-of-greece.co.uk](http://www.islands-of-greece.co.uk)).

**Nick Redman**

## TURQUOISE BAY

### Western Australia

Take a bone-white beach, lapped by an azure sea, then mix in the intensity of Australia's iconic red rock. The result is Turquoise Bay, set at the tip of Australia's North West Cape, where the ochre-coloured Cape Range slips into the Indian Ocean.

I shared it with a handful of bleached-blond Aussie surfers and some noisy, naked Germans, but even they couldn't spoil my mood. As I waded into the water, a green turtle popped up and blinked at me. I thought I'd been incredibly lucky — until I put on my snorkel and discovered that the colourful corals, part of the 150 pristine miles of the Ningaloo Reef, teem with life, including manta rays, dolphins and humpback whales.

The nearest town is Exmouth, as fair-dinkum Straylian as it gets: standard dress is singlets and bare feet, cafe menus advertise roadkill and emus roam the streets. The whole experience is just bonzer, mate. **Take me there** Bridge & Wickers (020 7483 6555, [www.bridgeandwickers.co.uk](http://www.bridgeandwickers.co.uk)) has a week at the Ningaloo Reef Retreat from £2,323pp, full-board, including flights from London and transfers. Or try Austravel (0870 166 2020, [www.austravel.com](http://www.austravel.com)).

**Susan d'Arcy**