



SEARCH

February 9 2004

- NEWSPAPER EDITION**
 Monday
 Tuesday
 Wednesday
 Thursday
 Friday
 Saturday
Sunday
 Sunday - Britain
 Sunday - Comment
 Sunday - World
 Sunday - Scotland
 Sunday - Ireland
 Sunday - Review
 Sunday - Football
 Sunday - Sport
 Sunday - Business
 Sunday - Money
 Sunday - Property
 Sunday - Magazine
 Sunday - Travel
 Sunday - Culture
 Sunday - Books
 Sunday - Doors
 Sunday - Style
 Sunday - Jobs
 Sunday - Motoring

- TIMES ONLINE**
 Home
 Breaking news
 Britain
 World
 Sport
 Business
 Your Money
 Comment
 Sports Book
 Travel
 Entertainment
 Shopping
 Law
 Classifieds
 Games
 Crossword
 Motoring
 Property
 Health
 Student
 Weather
 Sunday Times

NEWSPAPER

- Monday
 Tuesday
 Wednesday
 Thursday
 Friday
 Saturday
 Sunday

QUICK CLICKS

- Appointments
 Arts
 Books
 Charity Appeal
 Contact Us
 Creme
 Education
 Encounters
 Fast Times
 Finest
 First night
 Food and drink
 From the Archive
 Good University Guide
 Online Specials
 Photosales
 Promotions
 Public Agenda
 Style Guide
 Supplements
 Talking Point
 The Register
 Times e-mail
 Times 2
 Times Services

The Sunday Times - Travel

February 08, 2004

Castaway: The world's 10 best secret beaches

We don't want hippies on our beach. Or someone else's noisy kids. Or donkeys. Or ice cream vans. All we want is gorgeous sand, turquoise seas, a beachside hotel and a seafood dinner with a view. Easy, say Jeremy Lazell and Piers Pickard

We love a palm-fringed piña colada and barefoot sandy stroll as much as your next lily-legged Brit, but the trouble with beaches these days is that you need a holiday just to work out where's hip. In the 1980s, we all thought it was Thailand. In the 1990s, you were nobody unless you'd been to the Seychelles, or at the very least Mauritius. Then Croatia switched from war-torn to Dior-worn, and the Dalmatian coast was the place to dip your discerning toe.

This isn't just about keeping up with the Joneses (who, incidentally, have just got back from two weeks in Lakshadweep, and swear it's the new Maldives). It's about space: one year you're tripping over coconuts and conch shells, the next it's all beach towels and bottles of Ambre Solaire. Time and tide wait for no beach: today's pristine paradise is tomorrow's crowded cove.

The good news is, we want your towel to get there first. We've scoured the world's beaches and bays, leaving no conch unturned, to bring you the 10 hottest beaches of 2004. Most can be reached through operators, others you'll just have to pioneer yourself, but fear not, we tell you how. So, grab your bikini, pack your copy of Robinson Crusoe and book yourself a trip to The Beach.

BEST FOR TIME-TRAVELLERS - Mafia Island

Where? Ten miles off the coast of Tan-zania, 80 miles south of Zanzibar.

Why? Mafia may not possess Zanzibar's sheer embarrassment of white-sand riches, but it doesn't have Zanzibar's bright lights and political unrest, either. With three hotels on an island the size of the Isle of Wight, and a main road that's little more than a sandy track, this is a slice of the Swahili Coast fast disappearing from the horizon. The only problem we can spot is choosing which beach to call your own, although the area around Pole Pole Resort has the sort of sand that'll make you want to toss your return air ticket into the Indian Ocean.

For all Mafia's above-water charms, it's what's underwater that's all the talk on the castaway grapevine, particularly Chole Bay Marine Reserve, spectacularly rich in tropical fish and home to some of the best corals in the Indian Ocean.

Where to stay: Pole Pole Resort (00 255 22 260 1530, www.polepole.com; doubles from £160, full-board) is the best on Mafia. Translating as "slowly slowly", it's a nine-bungalow, Italian-designed ecoresort — all thatch, muslin and mahogany. Where to eat: don't even think about straying from the Italian-Swahili options overlooking the beach.

Don't miss: Chole Bay is the undoubted highlight — don't leave without snor- kelling here at the very least.

Get me there: Kenya Airways (01784 888222, www.kenya-airways.com) flies from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam via Nairobi; from £378. From Dar, Zan Air (00 255 24 223 3670, www.zanair.com) flies on to Mafia; from £70 return.

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Sample package: from £1,320pp for eight nights, full-board, at Pole Pole Resort, with one night in Zanzibar en route, through Steppes Africa (01285 650011, www.steppeafrica.co.uk). The price includes flights with Kenya Airways and Zan Air. Or try Audley Travel (01869 276200).

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BEST FOR GOURMETS - Plage de Saleccia

Where? Nine miles west of St Florent, in the north of Corsica.

Why? Some say that nearby Plage de l'Ostriconi has the finest sand in Europe, but it is too close to the road to score a perfect 10 — for that, you have to take a boat from St Florent to Plage du Loto, then walk the half-hour to the half-mile Plage de Saleccia. It's the best beach on the Mediterranean, but, because it's a half-hour walk from the nearest transport point, you won't see a bucket and spade all day. Yes, it'll chew into your tanning time, but if there's one spot in Corsica worth getting up early for, this is it.

Where to stay: the recently refurbished three-star Hôtel de la Roya (00 33 4 95 37 00 40, www.hotellaroya.com; doubles from £135, B&B) is a 15-minute walk from St Florent, and you can cheat — it runs boat trips to Plage de Saleccia.

Where to eat: on the harbour, La Gaffe has the best fish in town, while L'Auberge, in the hillside village of Oletta, has old-fashioned Corsican fare the way the craggy old boys sunning on the square like it, including an unmissable duck in maquis honey.

Don't miss: pastis (called casa here) and pétanque on the main square, followed by a harbourfront meal at sunset.

Getting there: British Airways (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com) has flights from Heathrow to Bastia; from £99.

In Ireland, Trailfinders (01 677 7888, www.trailfinders.ie) has flights with Air France from Dublin to Bastia, via Paris; from €395.

Sample package: from £449pp for seven nights, self-catering, based on four sharing a two-bedroom villa near Ile Rousse, near Plage de Saleccia, including car hire and flights with Excel from Gatwick to Bastia (Edinburgh departures on Duo are £80pp extra). Contact Voyages Ilena (020 7924 4440, www.voyagesilena.co.uk).

BEST FOR CULTURE - Ochheuteal Beach

Where? Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

Why? Take one Southeast Asian beach idyll (cobalt bay, talc-coloured sand, fruit-sellers hawking mangoes), throw the hippies and hotel touts to the sharks, and what you're left with looks a lot like Sihanoukville, Cambodia's delightfully undeveloped version of the seaside resort. If it's white sand and splendid isolation you crave, then Ochheuteal — in particular the last two miles at its northern tip, known, fittingly, as Serendipity Beach — is your answer. While you're out there, you have to see the spectacular temples of Angkor, a day's bus and boat journey north — the perfect two-centre holiday.

Where to stay: the Seaside Hotel (00 855-34 933641; doubles about £30, B&B) is the best on Ochheuteal Beach (Cambodia's prime minister always goes for suite 214) — but as tourism is still in armbands here, you're not exactly spoiled for five-star choice. House of Malibu (12 733334; doubles about £25), on Serendipity Beach, is the next best thing, with thatched cab-anas on the sand.

Where to eat: Chez Claude, on a hill overlooking Sokha Beach, is one of the best restaurants in Cambodia, with Franco-Vietnamese seafood.

Don't miss: local delicacies, such as lizard, at one of the nameless cafes near the market.

Getting there: Trailfinders (020 7938 3939, www.trailfinders.co.uk) has returns from Heathrow to Phnom Penh with Malaysia Airlines; from £570. Regional connections cost about £110. From Phnom Penh, it's a three-hour bus ride (£5) to Sihanoukville.