

ESCAPE BEST OF

The 15 most fabulous villas in the world

Whether you fancy sleeping underwater in a one-off art installation, channelling Bardot in a Riviera mansion or living large at the ultimate Ibiza party hotspot, *SOPHY ROBERTS* presents all you need to find the perfect retreat for you and a few of your favourite people

BLUE-SKY SCENARIO
Above and right: Dar Ahlam





1 DAR AHLAM, MOROCCO

Owned by Parisian events organiser Thierry Teyssier, the 19th-century kasbah Dar Ahlam in Ouarzazate, southern Morocco, is all about theatre. One moment the staff will be draping multicoloured silks in olive groves and scattering rose petals as a carpet for your alfresco lunch; the next, they will be lighting a dozen candles for a tented Moroccan feast. Breakfast might be served beside the pool or on a roof terrace, while swallows swoop and camel herders pad through the *palmeraie* below. The menu itself might vary accordingly: finger food for the orchard; traditional Moroccan in the tents; and French in the formal dining room, served on porcelain and silver. Stunningly positioned between the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara, Dar Ahlam is both a hotel and a private rental, with nine rooms and three self-contained garden suites. Whether you take over the place for a special celebration, or come as a couple, the emphasis is on personalised service and privacy – with some lovely extras included, such as daily massages, riding and trekking expeditions, and adventures into the surrounding desert and kasbahs. *From €1,150 a night (sleeps 12), including transfers, excursions, meals, most drinks and hammam and Jacuzzi, with Cazenove + Loyd (020 7384 2332; www.cazloyd.com).*

2 VILLA TAGLIONI AND VILLA SERENA, ITALY

For the multi-generational house party (when the Godfather is paying), dream of this almost-matching pair of houses on Italy's Lake Como. Originally dating from the 1840s, they are adjoined by a loggia, and stand poised above the water, beneath the village of Blevio and opposite the magnificent Villa d'Este hotel. Following a 16-year restoration, the two villas (between them sleeping 26) are almost unique in Italy: historic houses that have been professionally updated for the 21st century, with baths that fill as fast as those in a Four Seasons; air-conditioning; ADSL; high-definition satellite TVs; a lift; and an underground carpark (so as not to ruin the view). In front, there's a charter turbine seaplane dock and a Riva bouncing on the water; behind, a hillside garden with bamboo. There are lawns, ancient trees and moss-green statues, a heated pool, and an onion-domed Russian chapel – dating from the property's years as a hideout for the banished Prince Trubetskoy, who was accused of conspiring against Tsar Nicholas I. *Villa Taglioni, from about €2,500 a night (sleeps 14); Villa Serena, from about €1,700 a night (sleeps 12). To book, email villasinblevio@alice.it.*



Villas Taglioni and Serena

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TOTALLY TROPICAL
Below and right: Tamarind Hut



LUXE
for
LESS

3 TAMARIND HUT, SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is bustling with great-value villas. This is one of the best: a traditional wattle-and-daub home with a palm roof, in a coconut grove surrounded by rice paddies. It's set in the valley of Yatagala Temple, directly inland from Unawatuna, one of southern Sri Lanka's better beaches. You're only 20 minutes' drive from Galle, for low-key social life and a decent restaurant. Sleeping just four people in two doubles, it's intimate and the last word in tropical outdoor living. Simple details include teak furniture, traditional textiles and polished-cement bathrooms. There's a 16-metre pool and lawned gardens. Sure, the showers are cold-water, and the staff are limited to a houseboy and gardener (they'll do the shopping, cleaning and laundry), but you'll want for nothing.

*Seven nights, from £350 (sleeps four), including staff,
with Ampersand Travel (020 7723 4336; www.ampersandtravel.com).*



SKY'S THE LIMIT
Below and left:
Villa Roca

4 VILLA ROCA, SPAIN

This is the Ibiza party house to beat – a white-concrete and glass 16-person villa built against a 200-metre-high rock face, six kilometres above Ibiza Town. It's like something out of the Hollywood Hills – except here the 180-degree views take in Formentera and Las Salinas beach.

Everything about this modern, minimalist extravagance is designed for bad behaviour: a vast infinity pool for skinny dipping; terraces (spanning 6,450 square feet); a rooftop eyrie with a scarlet Bedouin tent; an alfresco dancefloor; and eight bedroom suites with DVD players, sound systems and flatscreen digital televisions. You're tended to by 10 staff (including a Michelin-standard head chef, two butlers and a pool barman).

The stairs and balconies make it totally unsuitable for small children, but it's the perfect party pad for Sienna Miller, James Blunt and other Balearic regulars seeking sunny mischief away from the clubs.

*Villa Roca (+34 686 351 098; www.villarocaibiza.com). Seven nights,
from £20,948 (sleeps 16).*

www.harperbazaar.co.uk



5 GREAT MERCURY ISLAND, NEW ZEALAND

Great Mercury Island, a private fiefdom, takes the New Zealand super-lodge to a different level. It occupies the country's third-largest island, four miles off New Zealand's north-east shore – which, despite the sense of wilderness, is easily accessed, via a 30-minute helicopter flight from Auckland. Prices are heady, but you're getting the mother of all lodges.

Accommodation is made up of two houses: the Up House and the Down House. Despite being searingly modern, the constructions appear to be whittled from the landscape.

The roofs are covered with rocks and moss; driftwood timber is used for furnishings; wall-to-ceiling windows bring the outside in. Toys for thrill-seekers include jet skis, kayaks, horses and bikes. The chef gets ingredients from the sea and farm, with meals enjoyed on the beach, on a boat or on the deck of the boathouse. Here, it's all about hours of meaningful downtime, your company consisting of staff, 4,000 sheep and 500 cows.

From about £12,100 a day (sleeps 22), with Seasonz Travel (+64 9 360 8461; www.seasonz.co.nz).





L'Hôtel Particulier

6 L'HÔTEL PARTICULIER, FRANCE

While Saint-Tropez crawls with tourists like summer ants on bread, escape for something closer to the old Brigitte Bardot style at L'Hôtel Particulier. This little-known gem of a private house is secluded in its own 5,000-square-metre garden, stuffed with cypresses and palms. You're high above the former fishing village, overlooking the bay of Les Canoubiers (Bardot's neck of the woods), yet you can still dip into the scene: the villa is a 10-minute scooter ride from Club 55 and Baie de Pampelonne's vast carpet of yachts. The property, sleeping eight, combines classic Thirties Riviera whites with contemporary black – the piping on chairs, the chequerboard tiles, the black wooden sunloungers and dazzling white beds. The look is simple and so chic, with the layering of whites played out in crisp porcelain, cool cotton and voile, creamy limestone, sun-bleached terraces, and stark leather and steel chairs.

The finish is immaculate: TV, DVD, internet and daily staff, including an exceptional chef who has cooked for the Ferragamos. There's a separate one-bed apartment – ideal for security, the nanny, or your daughter and her beau.

Seven nights, from £30,000 (sleeps eight), with Unique Properties & Events (020 7788 7815; www.cedricreversade.com).



Casa Niki

7 CASA NIKI, ITALY

Pantelleria, off the southern tip of Sicily, might be diminutive – bristling with cacti, and offering no sandy beaches – but it packs a big punch (and prices); this place is brutally beautiful. The lunar black volcanic isle attracts glamorous regulars including Gérard Depardieu and Sting. Most stay at photographer Fabrizio Ferri's delectably rustic Monastero. A lesser-known alternative is this Dammuso-style house (a domed construction built in lava rock), renovated by the architect behind Giorgio Armani's Pantelleria home. The design is hippie-esque, with Indian and North African cotton, linen and silk bolsters, cushions and carpets slung under sackcloth awnings and palm-thatched shade. The pool – an unreal shade of milky turquoise – is like the thermal lake at the island's heart. There's little to do, so just chill.

Seven nights, from £24,000 (sleeps 12), with Unique Properties & Events (020 7788 7815; www.cedricreversade.com).



Above and right: Skinos

8 SKINOS, GREECE

‘Super-agent’ Ileana von Hirsch is the scion of one of the great Greek shipping families. She comes from the Ionian island of Ithaca, where she occasionally rents out her family estate, Skinos (it’s a bestseller, which is why von Hirsch now matches interested clients with alternative properties throughout the Greek islands, working alongside Athens It girl Eva Antonopoulou). Skinos itself consists of 400 acres with a harbour, private beach and fleet of little boats. The property, built in 1960, is a colonial-Mediterranean villa with two guesthouses sleeping a total of 14. It’s on its own pebble beach, with a sandy enclave, and there are no other houses around (which is why Madonna likes it, even though it lacks a pool). Skinos comes with a staff of seven, made up of local families, so don’t expect white-gloved butlers. Skinos isn’t flash, and is certainly not for the Mykonos crew – although, if you’re asking, von Hirsch is your girl for that island, too.

For details, contact Five Star Greece (020 8422 4885; www.fivestargreece.com).



9 CASA PRAIA DOS NATIVOS, BRAZIL

Trancoso has to be the most fashionable fishing village in the tropics – Gisele holidays there, as do a clutch of Dellals and Brandolinis. Located on the coast of Bahia, it’s where moneyed Paulistas keep second homes. Some of these you can rent. Casa Praia dos Nativos is the perfect family beach house: two rooms flanking a central dining-lounge area, the centrepiece of which is an outsize day-bed beneath a double-height thatch ceiling. With cream cottons and unvarnished woods, beds swathed in white muslin and views of Trancoso’s vast Atlantic sands, the villa has its own confident and subtle glamour. The cinema projection screen and Bose music system are both hidden so as not to interfere with the aesthetic, and there’s no air-conditioning. Just be sure to get the look perfect: Havaianas with H Stern diamonds and a teeny Rosa Chá bikini.

Seven nights, from £4,000 (sleeps four), with the Brazilian Beach House Company (+55 11 3812 5703; www.brazilianbeachhouse.com).



Casa Praia dos Nativos



Quinta Maconda

10 QUINTA MACONDA, GUATEMALA

More than half the appeal of Quinta Maconda is its owner, John Heaton. Born to American-French parents, he moved in 1986 to Guatemala, where he lives for part of the year in Antigua. This is where his exclusive-use 16th-century townhouse is located. The house sleeps eight in four doubles, and includes a magical, overgrown garden at the back. The interiors are stuffed with a striking collection of antiques and artefacts collected during Heaton's peripatetic life. Most clients couple a stay here with one of Heaton's brilliantly crafted journeys for groups of four to six; these incorporate visits to private collections, homes, boats, helicopters and planes. He'll share his preferred sources for local artefacts and textiles, and open his jungle river retreat, Rancho el Corozal, to the more intrepid. Past clients have included Francis Ford Coppola and Ashley Judd. *Quinta Maconda* (+1 866 621 4032; www.quintamaconda.com). *Seven nights, from £4,750 (sleeps eight).*

11 LE CARRÉ ROUGE, FRANCE

No water, no electricity, no room service – just concrete, brick, glass and wood. Yet Le Carré Rouge – a country escape for die-hard modernists – is about the best deal you'll find in France, costing €120 for a weekend (and €30 a night thereafter) and sleeping six. This simple little cube in fire-engine red is plonked in a rough field of grass in the rural Haute-Marne, a three-hour drive from Paris. Its one double-height wall of glass overlooks a large pond, bringing you in close contact with the isolated valley.

Conceived by German artist Gloria Friedmann, who has been living in France since 1977, Le Carré Rouge was constructed in 1997 by French architect Adelfo Scaranello. It's like living in a Whiteread installation in a Technicolor dream – but what a place for a love nest. Upstairs there are futon-style beds; downstairs, a simple wooden table with benches and a wood-burning stove.

Le Carré Rouge (+33 3 25 84 22 10; www.leconsortium.com/carrereg). *Seven nights, from €270 (sleeps six).*



Le Carré Rouge

12 UTTER INN, SWEDEN

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We couldn't resist this one: as an installation-cum-private-rental on Lake Malaren in Sweden, it makes a welcome change from super-villas. It's called Utter Inn (which in English, means 'Otter Inn') and is designed by Mikael Genberg, a local artist and sculptor also known for creating Sweden's quirkiest treehouse. The property is located one kilometre into the lake, and is reached from the port of Vasteras (you're dropped off by boat), a direct Ryanair flight from Stansted or Luton. It's made up of two simple parts: a typical wooden Swedish house, painted red, which sits on the surface of the lake; and six metres below the water, a small twin bedroom with a glass window. There is a floating deck from which you can swim, but otherwise, nothing. To eat, you need to use a canoe and visit the closest inhabited island, or ask for dinner to be delivered. To some, the size might be hell; to others, it's an opportunity for conversation.

Seven nights, from about £885 half board (sleeps two), with Private Islands Online (+1 647 477 5581; www.privateislands.com).



Utter Inn

ESCAPE BEST OF



Pambele

13 PAMBELE, MOZAMBIQUE

The cognoscenti in search of a beach holiday with a difference make a beeline for Mozambique. Pambele, on the tip of the San Sebastian Peninsula in southern Mozambique within the Bazaruto National

Park, is reached via speedboat from Vilanculos, 40 minutes away. Overlooking a stunning beach, the four discreet villas accommodate a total of 10 adults and five children. Bedrooms are connected by raised wooden walkways leading to the central hub of the property, where a bar and dining and living *salas* overlook the infinity pool. Creative use is made of natural materials: a dhow serves as the bar; wooden coracles are shelves. A dozen fabulous staff will organise a sundowner picnic on a distant sand spit, adventurous bush drives, or fishing expeditions.

From £1,100 a night full board, including boat transfers, laundry, babysitting and activities including guided bush drives and catamaran cruises, with Pulse Africa (020 8995 5909; www.pulseafrica.com).



Aashyana

14 AASHYANA, INDIA

Aashyana is tucked away in the middle of bustling Candolim beach in north Goa. Set within its own coconut grove, leading onto the beach, the villa, carved from Rajasthani marble, captures the rays of the setting sun. The garden lends itself well to dinners under the stars. The swimming pool is hidden from the beach by mangrove trees; there are hammocks, a Pantheist chapel, five double bedrooms and two treatment rooms with masseurs.

The villa runs like clockwork, thanks to the bevy of gardeners, maids, butlers, security and a chef – whose rice pudding you won't forget in a hurry. *Seven nights, from £3,130 (sleeps 10), with Steppes Travel (01285 880980; www.steppestravel.co.uk).*



The Owner's Cottage at Grande Provence

15 THE OWNER'S COTTAGE AT GRANDE PROVENCE, SOUTH AFRICA

For the flipside of the South African safari moment, head for the town of Franschhoek – an oasis of civility in a manicured landscape. The sleek Owner's Cottage at Grande Provence consists of four rooms and a deluxe suite. The style speaks to a contemporary design aesthetic: slate greys, marble whites and a crisp pool flanked by lawn and clipped hedges. The estate's restaurant is run by award-winning chef Peter Tempelhoff.

The Owner's Cottage at Grande Provence (+27 21 876 8600; www.grandeprovence.co.za). Seven nights, from about £12,285 halfboard (sleeps 10), including drinks and a wine-tasting tour. □

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