



EYEWITNESS TRAVEL

# WHERE TO GO WHEN



# THE WORLD'S BEST DESTINATIONS 2017





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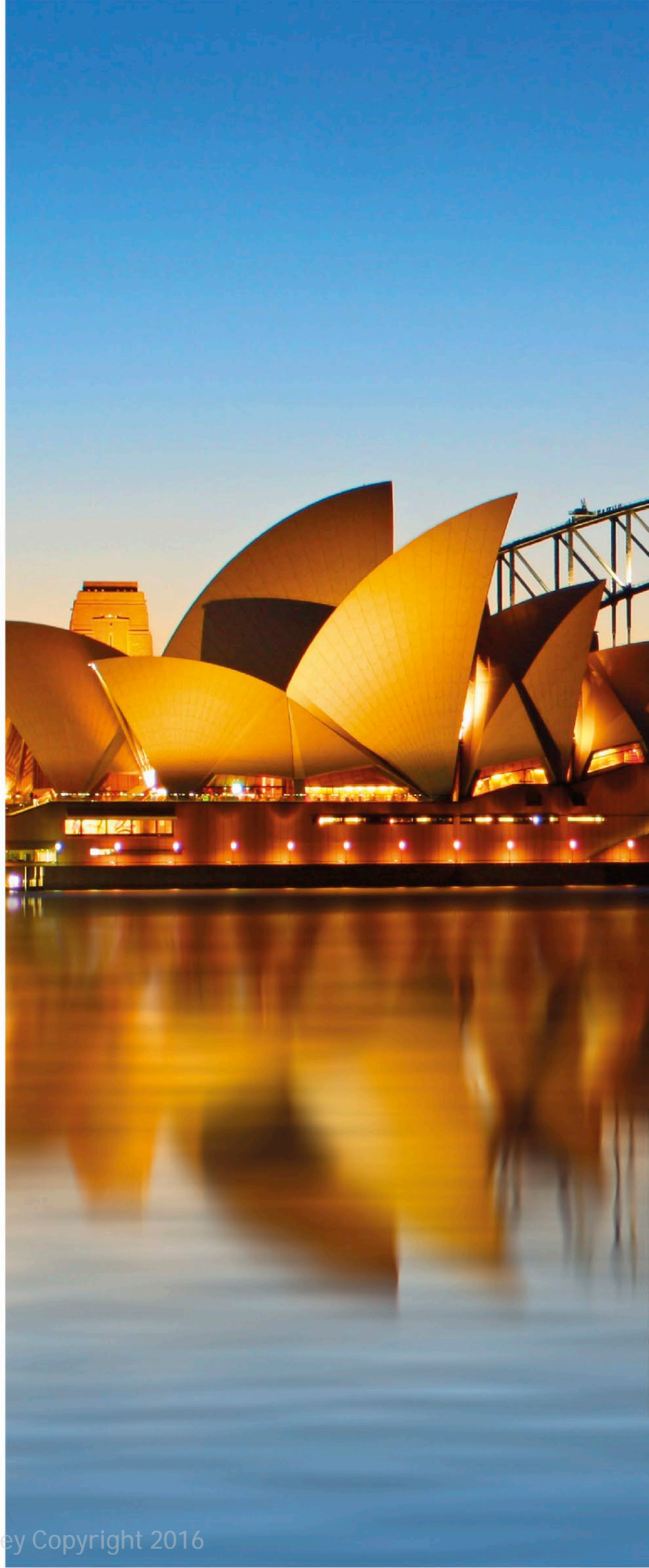
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# INTRODUCTION

*Where To Go When: The World's Best Destinations* is a month-by-month guide to the most incredible places around the globe, including inspirational photography, information on the best restaurants and most unforgettable places to stay, and expertly curated itineraries.

To complement our definitive guide to where to go in 2017, this abridged edition includes the must-visit destinations for the year ahead and all the information you need to plan your perfect trip. From enjoying Ottawa's small-city buzz to seeing Kyoto in bloom, you'll always be in the right place at the right time.





#### GETTING THERE

Jamaica is an island in the western Caribbean. It has two international airports – Montego Bay (Sangster) and Kingston.

#### GETTING AROUND

Kingston has public buses. Elsewhere local minibuses connect towns, but are not for the faint of heart. Charter flights serve regional airports. It's advisable to use taxis for local journeys and trips into the countryside.

#### WEATHER

Clear and balmy with average January temperatures of about 26°C, with the odd cloudy day and occasional cool spells.

#### ACCOMMODATION

Hibiscus Lodge, Ocho Rios, is a favourite place to stay; doubles from £105; [www.hibiscusjamaica.com](http://www.hibiscusjamaica.com).

The Caves, Negril, is the ultimate in relaxation; doubles from £335, minimum stay usually three nights; [www.islandoutpost.com](http://www.islandoutpost.com)

#### EATING OUT

Jamaica has its own cuisine, from codfish breakfasts to pepperpot stew, curried goat and mouth-searing jerk. You can fill up at street-side stalls for £2.50 or spend more than ten times that for gourmet fare at a fancy hotel.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.visitjamaica.com](http://www.visitjamaica.com)

### Rastafarians

Jamaica's homegrown religious adherents are recognizable by their dreadlocks. Evolving in the early 20th-century from the "back to Africa" movement, the faith deifies Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. Appropriating biblical passages to support use of marijuana for enlightenment, believers adopt an Old Testament lifestyle, are vegetarians, and shun Western consumerism.



# RUM, REGGAE AND RELAXATION

JAMAICA, ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING AND DIVERSE ISLANDS in the Caribbean, has lost none of the appeal that lured the likes of Sir Noel Coward, who built a home called Firefly, and Ian Fleming, who penned his James Bond novels close by at his home near Ocho Rios. White-hot blazing beaches dissolving into bathtub-warm waters of greens and blues; sparkling waterfalls tumbling through emerald forests; tree-covered mountains soaring to 2,196 m (7,200 ft); these elements define Jamaica's beauty, but there is also the surprising contrast with the semi-arid, cactus-studded southwest.

From the tropical lassitude of laid-back Treasure Beach to the hedonistic idyll of Negril, each resort area has its own distinct flavour. Where you stay can define your experience. Fortunately,



#### Left (left and right):

Luxurious white house on Millionaires' Row; bottles lit up at a beach bar

Right: Refreshingly cool and lush Blue Mountains

Main: Waves lapping gently onto Long Bay, Port Antonio, one of the many picturesque beaches on the island





Jamaica is renowned both for its pampering historic hotels serving traditional English afternoon teas, and for hip boutique hotels infused with romantic ambience and contemporary décor. Many travellers prefer large-scale all-inclusive resorts while others opt for private villas tucked into coves as serene as their innermost thoughts.

Away from the hotels, clamber up Dunn’s River Falls, where waters cascade down a limestone staircase to the beach. Sailing down the Martha Brae River on a bamboo raft is another quintessential Jamaican experience. Practise your golf swing on fairways that look over teal-blue seas or seek out crocodiles and manatees in the swampy wetlands of the Black River Great Morass and snorkel and scuba dive amid coral reefs teeming with tropical fish. Drift along the coast on a sailboat for a rum-infused cruise, and at night dance to the infectious rhythms of home-grown reggae. As the day draws to a close, head to the Negril cliffs of West End to catch a live concert and watch the sun slide from view below a molten sky turned to flaming orange and plum purple.



CARIBBEAN DIARY

Jamaica is the Caribbean’s most exciting island, with a unique culture and cuisine, rich history, dramatic scenery, lovely beaches, and superb accommodation exuding an air of romance. You’ll need a minimum of one week to sample the highlights, shown at their best in January’s perfect, balmy temperatures.

A Week in a Romantic Idyll

Montego Bay has plenty of attractions, but depending on the time of your arrival, head to Negril, where the island’s loveliest, and most popular, beach awaits.

Relax on the beach and enjoy snorkelling or diving in the crystal-clear waters. After a sunset cruise with cocktails, take in an open-air reggae concert.

Take a boat trip up the Black River to spot crocodiles and tropical birds. Treasure Beach is nearby and this fishing community is a calming place to rest.

Cross the crisp and scenic Dry Harbour Mountains via Nine Miles, where Bob Marley was born and is buried. Arrive in Ocho Rios after a full day touring, relax with a sundowner on your veranda or hotel beach.

Clamber up the tiered cascades of Dunn’s River Falls and, later, swim with dolphins at nearby Dolphin Cove. This afternoon, drive to Firefly, former home of playwright Sir Noel Coward.

Head to Chukka Cove for horse riding in the hills. After exploring the botanical garden at Cranbrook Flower Forest, go west to spend the night near the Georgian town of Falmouth.

Take a bamboo raft trip on the Martha Brae River before transferring to Montego Bay for your homebound flight.

Dos and Don’ts

- ✓ Take care with regard to trying the local and ubiquitous ganja (marijuana). Drug possession for amounts of more than 2 ounces (57 grams) is illegal, except for medical purposes, or for Rastafarian adults, for religious reasons, and foreigners receive no special favours in court.
- ✗ Don’t make the popular all-inclusive resorts the centre of a holiday. You can’t discover the island from inside a hotel.
- ✓ Dress appropriately away from the beach. Jamaica is a conservative society and locals in rural areas are easily offended by tourists wearing skimpy clothing.

Below: Cascading Dunn’s River Falls



JAN

DAY 1

DAY 2

DAY 3

DAY 4

DAY 5

DAY 6

DAY 7

FEB

MAR

APR

MAY

JUN

JUL

AUG

SEP

OCT

NOV

DEC





#### GETTING THERE

Ottawa is in Ontario province, Canada, about 450 km (280 miles) northeast of Toronto. The city is well served by international flights and the airport is 20 minutes from the centre. There are also air, bus and train links to other Canadian cities.

#### GETTING AROUND

Ottawa is easily explored on foot. The small O-Train line is convenient and easy to use, and buses also serve the city centre and outskirts.

#### WEATHER

In February, the average daytime temperature is  $-9^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Night-time can be considerably colder.

#### ACCOMMODATION

The Gasthaus Switzerland Inn has a relaxed European atmosphere; rooms from £80; [www.swisshotel.ca](http://www.swisshotel.ca)

Les Suites Hotel Ottawa has spacious two-room apartments from £122; [www.les-suites.com](http://www.les-suites.com)

Fairmont Château Laurier, the "grande dame" of Ottawa's hotels, has family rooms from £347; [www.fairmont.com/laurier-ottawa](http://www.fairmont.com/laurier-ottawa)

#### EATING OUT

Try *poutine*, a popular snack of French fries, cheese curds and gravy. A decent three-course meal costs about £20 per person. Sophisticated fare is served at Signatures, a Cordon Bleu cooking school (£48 for five-course set menu).

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.ottawatourism.ca](http://www.ottawatourism.ca)



### Pride and Peace

In 1841 Lower and Upper Canada joined together to form one province – with an alternating capital. In 1857, Ottawa was chosen to be the new fixed capital and a set of Parliament buildings was proudly erected. Fire destroyed these in 1916 and they were immediately rebuilt in the same style as the originals – Gothic Revival. As they were being built World War I ended, and the 92-m (300-ft) high Peace Tower was added to commemorate this. There are excellent views from the observation deck.

**Main:** People of all ages skating on the iced-over Rideau Canal.







Above (left to right): Visitor mesmerized by a painting in the National Gallery of Canada; the extravagant nave of Notre-Dame Basilica, the oldest surviving church in Ottawa; the imposing exterior of the Fairmont Château Laurier Hotel

# WINTER PLAYGROUND

IT MAY HAVE BEEN YEARS since you strapped on a pair of ice skates, but the rhythm comes back to you – it’s as easy as falling off a log; and fall you will. After bruising your dignity (and other parts) a few times, you’re soon sliding and gliding along the glassy ice surface of Ottawa’s Rideau Canal, past elegant embassies and under arched bridges. The hiss of steel on ice announces that someone is passing you. A man old enough to be your grandfather effortlessly and gracefully swooshes past followed by young couples pushing well-wrapped toddlers on sleds.

Ottawa is blessed (or cursed) with some of the coldest winters of any national capital. In a city where the snow often starts to fall in November and hangs around until March, people have two choices: huddle indoors or make the best of it. Many Ottawans disregard the thermometer and spend the season enjoying all the sports, shopping and museums this national capital has to offer. During Winterlude, a two- to three-week festival each February, the parks resound with the buzz of

chain saws and the tap of chisels as sculptors create beautiful gleaming fancies from ice and snow, and kids shriek on dogsled rides or have their chilly faces painted. The snow and ice turn the whole city into a huge winter playground. But despite their miraculous internal heating, even kids get cold. To warm up, families can visit the antique steam locomotives at the Canada Science and Technology Museum and the reconstructed dinosaur skeletons at the Canadian Museum of Nature.

As dusk steals over this rugged city, the temperature drops even further, fresh snow squeaks satisfyingly underfoot and visitors are drawn to the warm, inviting lights of cafés and bars. On weekend nights during Winterlude, music-lovers wrap mittened hands around steaming cups of hot chocolate and huddle shoulder to shoulder to watch an eclectic array of bands play outdoor concerts under a glittering canopy of stars.

Inset: Detail from a Nuu-Chah-Nulth totem pole in the Canadian Museum of History  
Below (left to right): Children racing down snow slides; cross-country ski races in Gatineau Park; a glittering and elaborate ice sculpture

Sculptors create beautiful gleaming fancies from ice, and kids shriek on dogsled rides... turning the whole city into a winter playground.



## WINTERLUDE DIARY

Winterlude officially lasts for two to three weeks in February, but almost all of the concerts, races and other activities take place on the weekends. It’s best therefore to come for a four-day weekend, from Friday to Monday, in order to enjoy the best of the festival as well as the rest of the city’s highlights.

### A Weekend on Ice

Start your day by visiting the National Gallery of Canada. Don’t miss the wilderness paintings of the Post-Impressionist Group of Seven, who blazed a trail for other Canadian artists in the early 20th century. Go window-shopping in the nearby ByWard Market, where you can choose from dozens of restaurants for lunch. Rent ice skates for everyone and spend the afternoon on the Rideau Canal.

Kids love the Jacques Cartier Park, where they can careen down snow slides and check out the snow sculpture competition. Learn about totem poles, watch an IMAX movie and explore a reconstructed 19th-century Canadian street at the Canadian Museum of History. Outdoor concerts are held at several venues around town in the evenings – be sure to don your warmest clothes.

Relax over Sunday brunch at a downtown hotel, watch ice sculptors at work at Confederation Park, check out beautiful 19th-century Notre-Dame Basilica or tour the Neo-Gothic Parliament Buildings, where highlights include the vaulted Library of Parliament with its statue of Queen Victoria. In the evening, catch a performance at the National Arts Centre – a play, ballet or concert.

For some fresh air away from the city, head to Gatineau Park for a morning of snowshoeing or cross-country skiing. Return to Ottawa and explore the trendy boutiques and restaurants of the Glebe.

### Dos and Don’ts

- ✓ Learn the lingo for Canada’s currency. The 1-dollar coin, with its engraved loon, is a “loonie”. The 2-dollar coin is, naturally enough, a “toonie”.
- ✗ Don’t rent a car. Ottawa’s system of one-way streets can be difficult to navigate, especially at night, and February weather can make roads slippery and dangerous.
- ✓ Before a performance at the National Arts Centre, sample Canadian fare in the centre’s restaurant, Le Café.
- ✗ Don’t go to the canal on mild weekend afternoons, when crowds reduce the ice surface to mush.
- ✓ Warm up by snacking on a local speciality, a deep-fried pastry called a BeaverTail – you need calories in the cold.

JAN

FEB

FRI

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SUN

MON

MAR

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MAY

JUN

JUL

AUG

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OCT

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DEC





#### GETTING THERE

The Yucatán Peninsula is in SE Mexico between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Cancún airport handles most international flights, Mérida mostly domestic ones.

#### GETTING AROUND

First-class buses are a good way of getting between the main destinations in Mexico, but a car is essential if you want to explore more freely.

#### WEATHER

Tropical and hot, with an average daytime temperature of 31°C, cooler at nights (19°C).

#### ACCOMMODATION

Some of the more enjoyable hotels have wonderful Spanish colonial architecture.

Chan-Kah Village Palenque hotel has a lovely pool; doubles from £60; [www.chan-kah.com.mx](http://www.chan-kah.com.mx)

Hacienda Chichén is next to Chichén Itzá's ruins; doubles from £123; [www.haciendachichen.com](http://www.haciendachichen.com)

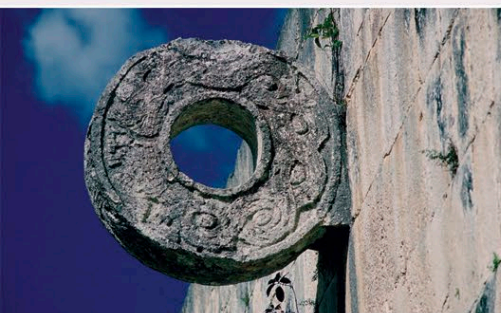
Hacienda San José Cholul, elegant luxury; doubles from £175; [www.thehaciendas.com](http://www.thehaciendas.com)

#### EATING OUT

Hacienda hotels all have restaurants, open to non-guests, serving refined local cooking in lovely settings. Mérida has plenty of charming restaurants, and by the coast there are always a few good seafood cafés. In Palenque, there are likeable places to eat around the town square. You can eat well for £10, or a good deal less.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.yucatanoday.com](http://www.yucatanoday.com)



### The Mayan Ball Game

Dating back over 3,000 years, the Mayan Ball Game is one of the oldest sports known to man. There are courts in all the ancient Mexican cities, but the Great Ball Court of Chichén Itzá at 160 m (525 ft) long is the largest. Here, opposing teams of seven players had to get the ball through stone rings on either side using only the hips, shoulders, head or chest – and the ball couldn't touch the ground. It appears the game played a major part in Mayan religion, and losers were sometimes killed as human sacrifices.







Above (left to right): Windsurfing boards on Cancún beach; Celestún mangrove swamp; Hilton Hotel, Cancún behind Las Ruinas del Rey  
Main: Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque

# MAYAN MYSTERY TOUR

B RILLIANT SUNLIGHT PICKS OUT THE TAIL OF A GIANT FEATHERED SERPENT carved alongside the great north staircase of El Castillo, the massive pyramid at the heart of the ruined Mayan city of Chichén Itzá. As the afternoon moves on, seven triangles of light form a zigzag on the great pyramid's steps and bring the serpent to life; as the sun moves across the sky, they expand to join up in another zigzag that seems to slither slowly down the ramp, all the way to the gaping jaws of the monstrous head at the stairway's foot. Across the grass plaza around the pyramid thousands of patient onlookers watch the spectacle, awestruck. This phenomenon – the Descent of Kukulcán – happens every year on the spring equinox. Aligned with sun and stars with extraordinary precision, El Castillo was built around AD 800. With 365 steps around its four sides, one for each day of the year, it is in effect a supersized clock, a representation in stone of the intricate Mayan calendar. More of the complex, surprising culture of the ancient Maya can also be seen across Mexico's

Yucatán peninsula – from the elegant architecture of Uxmal to the ruins of Palenque, with its labyrinthine Mayan palace and temples rising up the hills amid the thick rainforests of Chiapas. The Maya are also very much alive in the Yucatán today and are very welcoming and charming hosts. This same charm extends into the region's towns and its capital, Mérida, a tropical Spanish colonial city of tranquil squares, shady colonnades and intimate patios. In the rest of the Yucatán, the landscape is equally special, with long white sandy beaches washed by warm seas; verdant forests alive with birds, from hummingbirds to flocks of flamingos; and the cenotes. These unique features are natural "sinkholes" in the local limestone that lead down to underground rivers of crystalline fresh water. To the ancient Maya they were gateways to the underworld, but they're also blissfully cool and magical places to swim.

Inset: Pool in a naturally formed limestone cave or cenote  
Below (left and right): Serpent on the El Castillo steps, Chichén Itzá; Temple of the Warriors, Chichén Itzá

“In the romance of the world's history, nothing ever impressed me more forcibly than the spectacle of this once great and lovely city.”

John L. Stephens writing on Palenque



## MAYAN DIARY

Yucatán has many flavours but a week or so will allow an insight into Mayan culture – sun worshippers, nature lovers or divers may want a few more days swimming, touring, or diving at Cozumel. The Descent of Kukulcán can be seen from mid-February into April, but is at its best at the equinox, on 20 and 21 March.

### Eight Days in the Yucatán

Arriving in Cancún, try out the 23-km (15-mile) beach and maybe lunch in a beachside restaurant. The next day, have another morning on the beach, pick up the car, and drive 200 km (125 miles) to Chichén Itzá.

Look around Chichén Itzá ruins – but get back to the main plaza by at least 12 noon to pick a good spot to see the Descent of Kukulcán, at its best around 4pm.

Drive west to Izamal and its golden ochre buildings; there's a Spanish colonial monastery here built among the remains of Mayan pyramids. Continue on to Mérida.

Wander around Mérida's Plaza Mayor then take a cab to the Paseo Montejo which has an excellent museum of Mayan relics. Eat at one of its great terrace restaurants.

Make the 1-hour drive to Uxmal before touring other Mayan sites – Kabah, Sayil, Xlapak and Labná – in the bird-filled woods of the Puuc Hills. Descend into the awesome caves at Loltún before returning to Mérida.

In the morning, drive to Celestún to explore the mangrove lagoon, a must for any bird watchers, or simply relax on the beach at Progreso. Then hand back the hire car and fly to Villahermosa for a two-hour transfer to Palenque.

Make the most of your last day by getting to Palenque early as the ruins are often shrouded in an atmospheric mist. Climb as many pyramids as you can before exhaustion sets in. Cool off in a hotel pool before heading back to Cancún and flying home.

### Dos and Don'ts

- ✗ Don't forget to book early for the equinox dates – hotels are always very busy at that time of year.
- ✓ Do take precautions to prevent mosquito bites. The region is in the Zika Virus zone.
- ✗ Don't plan on driving at night. There is little lighting, and potholes and bicycles can be hard to see.
- ✓ Ask your hotel to make you a packed lunch for the Descent of Kukulcán as the nearby cafés will all have big queues.

Below: Mérida, Mercado Municipal (city market)



JAN

FEB

MAR

19th – 20th

21st

22nd

23rd

24th

25th

26th

APR

MAY

JUN

JUL

AUG

SEP

OCT

NOV

DEC





#### GETTING THERE

Kyoto is the hub of the Kansai area and is served by Kansai International Airport. The Haruka Airport Express train connects the airport to the city (1¼ hours). Kyoto is also around 2½ hours from Tokyo by bullet train.

#### GETTING AROUND

The city's small subway system includes the convenient north to south Karasuma line.

#### WEATHER

In April, the weather is sunny and mild with an average high of 20°C.

#### ACCOMMODATION

For a taste of authentic Kyoto, include at least one night in a *ryokan*, a traditional guesthouse.

Ryokan Yuhara is a simple but friendly guesthouse with an 11pm curfew; doubles from £30; tel. (81) 75 371 9583.

Hiiragiya is a traditional *ryokan* offering the classic Japanese experience; doubles from £200; [www.hiiragiya.co.jp](http://www.hiiragiya.co.jp)

A trendy, contemporary option is the Hyatt Regency; doubles from £230; [www.hyatt.com](http://www.hyatt.com)

#### EATING OUT

Kyoto is known for a local version of the highly ritualized *kaiseki* cuisine, from around £25 for a large meal, but not all dining is about strict protocol – cheap noodle bars and sushi joints also abound.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.seejapan.co.uk](http://www.seejapan.co.uk)



**Left:** Meditating in a Zen temple

**Right (left to right):** Shinto shrine, Heian-jingu; strolling along the Path of Philosophy; the Torii gates at the Fushimi Inari Taisha shrine

**Below right:** View from Nijo Castle

**Inset:** Zen garden at Tofuku-ji Temple



**Main:** Cherry trees in full blossom in Kyoto

## TRADITION IN BLOOM

### The World of the Geisha

At the age of 16, young women traditionally start the five-year training that takes them from *maiko* (apprentice). Only after graduation will their hair be ceremoniously cut and they can wear the kimono and *geta* (clogs) of a full geisha. However, the geisha are declining in numbers. At their peak in the early 19th century, Kyoto had around 700 teahouses with 3,000 working geisha. Today, there are about 200–300 geisha working in the five districts of Kyoto, plus around 50–100 *maiko*, with ten new entrants to the profession each year.

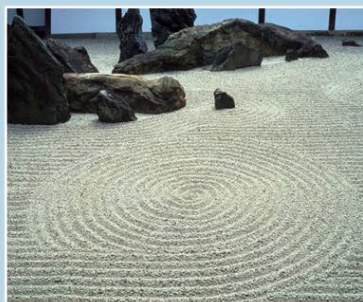
ANCIENT KYOTO IS THE YIN TO MODERN TOKYO'S YANG, providing the ultimate glimpse of traditional Japan. Elegance and philosophy permeate every sweep of a raked-pebble temple garden, every swish of a sliding *shoji* door at a discreet teahouse and every staccato clip-clop of a geisha's *geta* (wooden clogs) as she hurries to work. It is, unarguably, the bastion of Japan's rich cultural heritage, with 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites around the city – 13 Buddhist temples, three Shinto shrines and Nijo Castle. Take it easy on the cultural pilgrimage, though. With so much to soak up, it's easy to overdose on shrines.

Springtime is awaited in Japan with keen anticipation and nowhere more so than in Kyoto when the cherry blossom season, celebrated for centuries in public and private spaces, brings everyone together to contemplate the majesty of the delicate blossom. The meteorological agency even monitors the so-called "cherry blossom front"





Kyoto is synonymous with geisha...who make their home amid the narrow sidestreets and ancient shrines of the Gion district.



allowing the public to follow the festival throughout the season. Meanwhile, geisha stage special cherry dances in performance halls throughout April and pilgrims take to the Path of Philosophy, a pleasant canal-side trail lined by cherry trees, which leads to Ginkaku-ji (the Silver Pavilion).

Kyoto is synonymous with geisha, the “arts person” who makes her home amid the narrow sidestreets and ancient shrines of the Gion district. With dusk falling and the lights of Gion reflecting in puddles, Pontocho, a tiny, narrow street crammed full with exotic restaurants, comes alive with red lanterns illuminating the entrances. Camera-clutching tour groups congregate to indulge in their favourite sport of geisha-spotting, hoping to see a shadowy, kimono-clad figure shuffling along to an appointment at a local teahouse. In reality, however, catching sight of a bona fide geisha in Gion is not easy as geisha are shy and, increasingly, a dying breed.

Traditions still run deep in Kyoto. The city may have succumbed to the noisy mechanical diggers of so-called progress with the development of the area around the train station, but the values of a more refined former age are very much alive behind the city’s discreetly closed doors.

## CHERRY BLOSSOM DIARY

Kyoto comes alive in the springtime when the cherry blossom season provides a magical backdrop to the city. Five days is long enough to visit Kyoto’s numerous shrines and temples, including time for activities such as hiking in the nearby mountains and some shopping. Extend your trip by visiting Tokyo.

### Five Days in Old Japan

Start in the main downtown area, following a morning stroll in the Imperial Palace Park with a visit to Nijo Castle. In the afternoon, check out the latest exhibition at the Kyoto National Museum before heading east to the Gion area at dusk to admire the geisha.

Continue to explore the temples and shrines around the centre – Kiyomizu-dera and Kodai-ji are the main draws – before taking a stroll in nearby Maruyama-koen park, perfect for cherry blossom viewing. After dark, catch a kabuki theatre or geisha dance show.

Start the day with a stroll along the Path of Philosophy, soaking up the scent of cherry blossoms en route to Ginkaku-ji (the Silver Pavilion). After lunch on the go, head to Tofuku-ji Temple to admire the classic Zen garden. For dinner and a taste of old Kyoto, seek out the restaurants on lantern-lit Pontocho.

Spend the day browsing for antique souvenirs along Shinmonzen-dori and watching the world go by in a traditional coffee shop on Kamo-gawa. In the evening, transfer to a *ryokan*, don your *yukata* (gown) and enjoy the ritual of the experience of a slap-up dinner followed by futon beds.

Time to chill out by walking in the countryside around Kyoto – try the twin Kurama and Kibune valleys for fresh air and open spaces. Finish up at the Funaoka Onsen, a gloriously traditional hot springs with a cypress-wood tub and an outdoor dipping pool.

### Dos and Don'ts

- ✓ Cash is still king in Japan, so carry around a bundle of notes in mixed denominations.
- ✗ Don't be afraid to slurp your noodles – it shows that you enjoyed the meal.
- ✓ Everybody in Japan has a *meishi* (business card). The etiquette is to offer and accept *meishi* with both hands.
- ✓ At communal public bath houses make sure you wash outside the bath, using the bath itself purely for soaking.
- ✓ If you are invited to a social event, do take a small gift such as flowers, green tea or a bottle of sake.

**Below:** Apprentice geisha dancers performing at the Pontocho Theatre



JAN

FEB

MAR

**APR**

**DAY 1**

**DAY 2**

**DAY 3**

**DAY 4**

**DAY 5**

MAY

JUN

JUL

AUG

SEP

OCT

NOV

DEC





#### GETTING THERE

The Cotswolds, Hampshire, Wiltshire, Sussex and Kent are in southern England, within 160 km (100 miles) of London, which has two main international airports.

#### GETTING AROUND

Most of these stately homes are within a 1-hour train journey from London, with a taxi or bus from the nearest station. Alternatively, rent a car and combine visits to make a complete tour.

#### WEATHER

May is generally warm and dry with average temperatures of about 12°C. Occasional showers usually pass quickly.

#### ACCOMMODATION

Traditional English-style, Mermaid Inn in Kent; doubles from £80; [www.mermaidinn.com](http://www.mermaidinn.com)

Impressive, fortified Amberley Castle, West Sussex has elegant doubles from £155; [www.relaischateaux.com](http://www.relaischateaux.com)

Beautifully decorated, Belmond Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, Oxfordshire; doubles from £695; [www.manoir.com](http://www.manoir.com)

#### EATING OUT

You can dine well for £30 per head, although the fine dining establishments can cost more than triple that. For a special treat, try Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons (see accommodation) or The Fat Duck in Berkshire, for their creative fare.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.visitbritain.com](http://www.visitbritain.com)

[www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)



### Stately Home Hotels

Many English stately homes, palaces, castles and manors have opened their doors as luxurious country hotels, harking back to the days when their original owners invited friends down for a weekend or longer. Now restored to their former haughty grandeur for a paying clientele, these exquisite properties satisfy clients' nostalgia for historic surroundings and the refinement of days past, with stateliness and civilized comfort as keynotes.







**Above (left to right):** Barnsley House's colourful gardens; Long Gallery in Syon House; Longleat's challenging maze  
**Main:** Row of statues overlooking the water terrace at Blenheim Palace

# GARDENS AND GRANDEUR

**S**PARKLING WITH TREASURES, the sumptuous interiors of England's stately homes are still redolent of the patrician lifestyle, with their gleaming dark hardwood staircases, carved marble fireplaces, suits of armour, and galleries of precious paintings. The great Elizabethan palaces and the grand homes of the 18th and 19th centuries were a deliberate statement of wealth, when it was necessary for nobles to maintain a house in the royal style to cater to Britain's peripatetic monarchs. For those now converted into hotels, such as Cliveden in Berkshire, guests sleep in bedchambers once slept in by dukes, earls, kings and queens. A magnificent setting overlooking the River Thames adds to Cliveden's supreme stateliness. Other homes, such as Petworth in the South Downs and Blenheim in Oxfordshire, also prove the adage that a fine house, like a jewel, is made complete by its setting. Many are in an idealized Arcadian landscape, half-park, half-rolling pasture. No flowers. Just trees, bushes, grass and water and, occasionally, cattle as rural ornaments. At

Stourhead, England's premier 18th-century landscaped garden, the classical-theme paintings of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain became models for imitation in the real world so you literally can step into a painting.

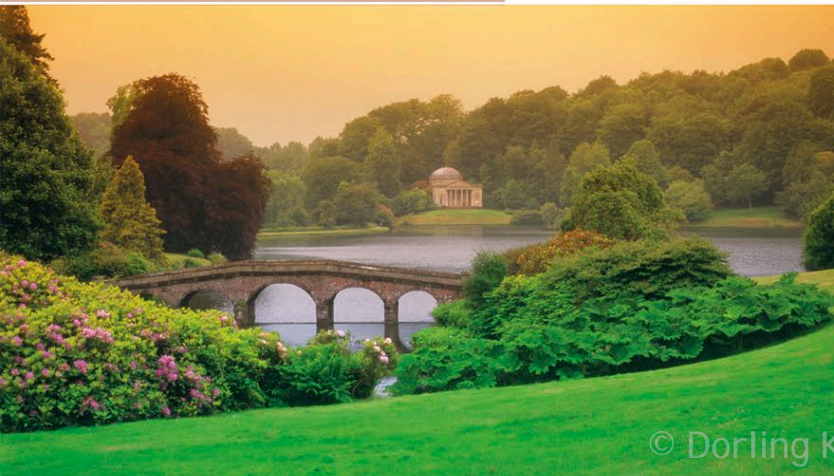
In the 19th century, extraordinary botanical specimens flooded in from every part of Britain's expanding empire and plants became paramount. Roses are everywhere, thriving in the heavy soils. The flowering meadows of Great Dixter create a character of quintessential Englishness thanks to a diversity of soils and climates quite remarkable for so small a country. Without extremes of conditions or temperature, the climate encourages an immense variety of plants, as at Sissinghurst, the ultimate garden for enthusiasts. This large garden, nestled amid the rolling hills of Kent, is a riot of colour with an intoxicating blend of scents difficult to dampen in even the wettest of weather.

**Inset:** Delicate Wisley rose  
**Below (left to right):** Stourhead's magnificent gardens (in Wiltshire); sculptural detail at Hampton Court; Chartwell, Churchill's former home, in Kent



“A garden is the greatest refreshment for the spirits of man... There is nothing more pleasant to the eye than green grass kept finely shorn.”

Sir Francis Bacon



## STATELY DIARY

Many of the finest of Britain's stately homes and gardens are in southern England, in the Cotswolds, Hampshire, Sussex, Wiltshire and Kent. Most gardens are at their most luxuriant in spring, when England is bright and lush. The following suggestions are some of the highlights to choose from over a ten-day visit.

### Ten Days in England's Past

Using London as your base for the next couple of days, take a riverboat to Hampton Court, with sumptuous state rooms and Britain's premier formal gardens.

Visit Syon House in Brentford, then drive down to Cliveden in Berkshire with its delightful water garden.

Head to the Cotswolds and explore Oxford before continuing to Blenheim Palace, the most palatial of the stately homes with huge parklands designed by "Capability" Brown, or visit Broughton Castle.

Travel through lovely thatched villages to Barnsley House and Hidcote Manor, famous for its old roses.

Journey on to Wiltshire to explore the splendid 18th-century Longleat House and Stourhead – considered to be England's finest landscape garden.

Visit Salisbury Cathedral before choosing either Broadlands, in Hampshire, former stately home of Lord Mountbatten or, for nature-lovers, head towards the New Forest to Exbury, featuring vast parks of colourful azaleas, magnolias and rhododendrons.

In the southeastern leg of your tour, travel to 17th-century Petworth House in West Sussex, overlooking an exquisite, landscaped park. Continue into East Sussex to Great Dixter, a 15th-century manor house with a natural garden designed by writer Christopher Lloyd.

Alternatively, visit Kent's Sissinghurst, the jewel in the crown of English gardens, then return to London via Chartwell, once home to Sir Winston Churchill.

### Dos and Don'ts

- ✓ Take an umbrella – you never know when you'll need it for England's famously fickle weather.
- ✗ Don't visit homes over the weekend if you can avoid it – tour groups and amateur gardeners descend en masse.
- ✓ If the budget allows, live it up like a blue blood with at least one overnight stay at a stately home-turned-hotel.
- ✗ Don't forget to check the opening times before you visit to avoid disappointment – stately homes are often closed for several days during the week.

JAN

FEB

MAR

APR

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1–2

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3–5

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9–10

JUN

JUL

AUG

SEPT

OCT

NOV

DEC





#### GETTING THERE

International flights arrive into Keflavík International Airport, about 1 hour west of Reykjavík. There are several bus services that connect the airport to the town.

#### GETTING AROUND

Hiring a car in Iceland is extremely expensive. In summer, the bus system connects all main centres. For sights away from populated areas, use informal bus tours.

#### WEATHER

In June, Iceland enjoys mild temperatures of between 7–11°C. Although the island has a predominately wet marine climate, there are usually a fair number of rain-free days.

#### ACCOMMODATION

In Reykjavík, try the centrally situated, minimalist boutique 101 Hotel, complete with a spa; doubles from £300; [www.101hotel.is](http://www.101hotel.is)

Also in Reykjavík is the luxurious Art Deco Hotel Borg; doubles from £250; [www.hotelborg.is](http://www.hotelborg.is)

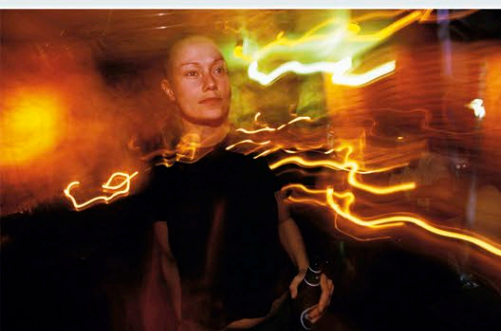
At Landmannalaugar, a night in the communal hut costs from £42 per person. Guests must bring their own sleeping bags; [www.fi.is/en/huts/landmannalaugar](http://www.fi.is/en/huts/landmannalaugar)

#### EATING OUT

Icelandic specialties include puffin, seal and whale. In rural areas, you'll probably be limited to self-catering or petrol station snack bars.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.visiticeland.com](http://www.visiticeland.com)



### Wild in Reykjavík

The word "wild" applies to Iceland in more ways than one. In Reykjavík at weekends, throngs of free-spirited Icelanders and like-minded visitors wind their way through the city's bars, pubs and clubs in an unrestrained celebration of hedonism known as *rúntur*. Beginning with a couple of drinks around 11pm, the enthusiasm and amorous energy of these early hours lapses into an increasingly stupefied crawl until the bright light of the non-dawn casts its unsympathetic rays upon the last vestiges of fun.







Main: Dramatic waterfall at Skogafoss in the south of the island  
Above (left to right): Houses in Reykjavik overlooking the harbour; traditional fishing tools; calm waters near the port of Akureyri

# GEO THERMAL GLORIES

FOR ITS WILD NATURE, Iceland is unmatched in Europe – and it is generally considered to be a part of the European continent. However, this westernmost Scandinavian outpost claims bi-continental status, as evidenced by the diagonal rift that slashes across its interior, the geological boundary between Europe and North America. Culturally, the country combines the youthful *joie de vivre* and care-free attitude of Europe with the frontier spirit of North America.

Nearly everything ever written about Iceland refers to it as “the land of fire and ice” – although it is a rather tired old moniker, it’s true that these natural forces represent some of the island’s greatest assets. The country literally lives and breathes geology, from sheep pastures nurtured by the rich, volcanic soil and sparkling glacial run-off, to the distinctly aromatic geothermal heat and energy that powers the country. Its expansive glaciers, active volcanoes, hot springs, geysers, lonely mountains, wild rivers and innumerable waterfalls appeal to the crowd-weary tourist.



Iceland literally lives and breathes geology, from the sparkling glacial run-off to the geothermal energy that powers the country.

In summer, daylight becomes another Icelandic asset. From May to July, the island is bathed in round-the-clock sub-Arctic daylight (notwithstanding a good measure of North Atlantic rain). Visitors may complain about Iceland’s prices, but they can take solace in the fact that for the money, they are getting two days in one. As the children of the Vikings discovered long ago, that’s twice the time to indulge in Iceland’s decadent offerings. Trot across the moors on a diminutive Icelandic horse, kick up your heels on a lonely white icefield, soothe your skin in the mineral-rich waters of the Blue Lagoon, sip a glass of bubbly in a luxuriant natural hot spring, or defeat the cold drenching rain with an open-air soak in a hot tub. And when you find yourself slouching towards reality, throw all caution to the wind, take out a second mortgage, and head back to Reykjavík for some serious eating, drinking and merriment.

Below (left to right): The extraordinary Blue Lagoon, near Reykjavik; typical Icelandic corrugated-iron church  
Inset: Interior of the West Fjords Maritime Museum, Ísafjörður



## DAYLIGHT DIARY

With a week, it is possible to see the best of Iceland’s capital, Reykjavík, and also take in some sights further afield. The following itinerary includes opportunities to see the country’s eponymous ice, as well as its welcome natural heat. June is an ideal month to visit to experience the round-the-clock daylight.

## A Week in the Great Outdoors

Spend a day exploring Reykjavík’s sights. Visit the National Museum, pop into the unusual Icelandic Phalological Museum or warm up in the free hot tubs at the “hot beach” in Nauthólsvik.

Take the renowned Golden Circle Tour to see the dramatic Gullfoss waterfall, watch the world’s original geysers at Geysir and stroll around intriguing Þingvellir, where the world’s first parliament was born.

Head for a morning swim and soak in the warm waters of the Blue Lagoon. On your way back to Reykjavík, consider stopping at charming Hafnarfjörður, where you can explore the myths of Iceland’s “hidden folk”.

Join a day tour to the vast Mýrdalsjökull ice cap – the glacial ice is best explored by snowmobile.

Explore central Iceland’s magnificent Fjallabak Reserve. Spend the afternoon soaking in the open-air hot springs and overnight in a rustic mountain hut.

Begin with an amble around the technicolour landscape at Fjallabak, through rhyolite hills and over lava fields. Alternatively, head south to see the dramatic waterfall at Skogafoss, or north to the port town of Akureyri.

Return to Reykjavík for some of Iceland’s best dining at a cosy local seafood restaurant and a few beers in a local pub. If you have more time to spare, head to the wilds of the Western Fjords – ride horses in Dýrafjörður and explore Ísafjörður’s interesting Maritime Museum.

### Dos and Don’ts

- ✓ Have a remedial shot of *brennivín* (literally, burnt wine) at hand if you intend to sample such Icelandic delicacies as *hákarl* (putrefied shark meat) or *súrsaðir hrútsþungar* (pickled ram’s testicles).
- ✗ Don’t approach light-coloured soil around hot springs and fumaroles. The typically thin crust can collapse and anything that falls through will emerge hard-boiled (if at all).
- ✓ Have ready access to about twice as much money as you think you’re going to need and then some more for a few necessary incidentals.

Below: Horse riding in Dýrafjörður



JAN

FEB

MAR

APR

MAY

JUN

DAY 1

DAY 2

DAY 3

DAY 4

DAY 5

DAY 6

DAY 7

JUL

AUG

SEP

OCT

NOV

DEC





#### GETTING THERE

Mendoza is in west Argentina. International flights arrive into Buenos Aires, 1,060 km (660 miles) away, and connecting flights to Mendoza take about 2 hours. El Portillo is in Chile, around 150 km (93 miles) from Santiago.

#### GETTING AROUND

Public buses will take you across the Andes and the Chilean border from Mendoza to El Portillo. The hotel in El Portillo has a shuttle to Santiago.

#### WEATHER

In Mendoza, the temperature hovers around 8°C in July. This is a great time to visit El Portillo, with bright sunshine and plenty of snow, and temperatures as low as -5°C.

#### ACCOMMODATION

In Mendoza, the large, modern 4-star Hotel Aconcagua has doubles from £70; [www.hotelaconcagua.com](http://www.hotelaconcagua.com)

A stay at the Gran Hotel El Portillo includes full board and lift passes; doubles from £1,940 for the week; [www.skiportillo.com](http://www.skiportillo.com)

#### EATING OUT

In Mendoza, try the *parilla* (grilled meats) at Trevi or the vegetarian buffet at The Green Apple; both from around £7.

Meals at El Portillo include exceptional Chilean seafood and the best Argentinian beef.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

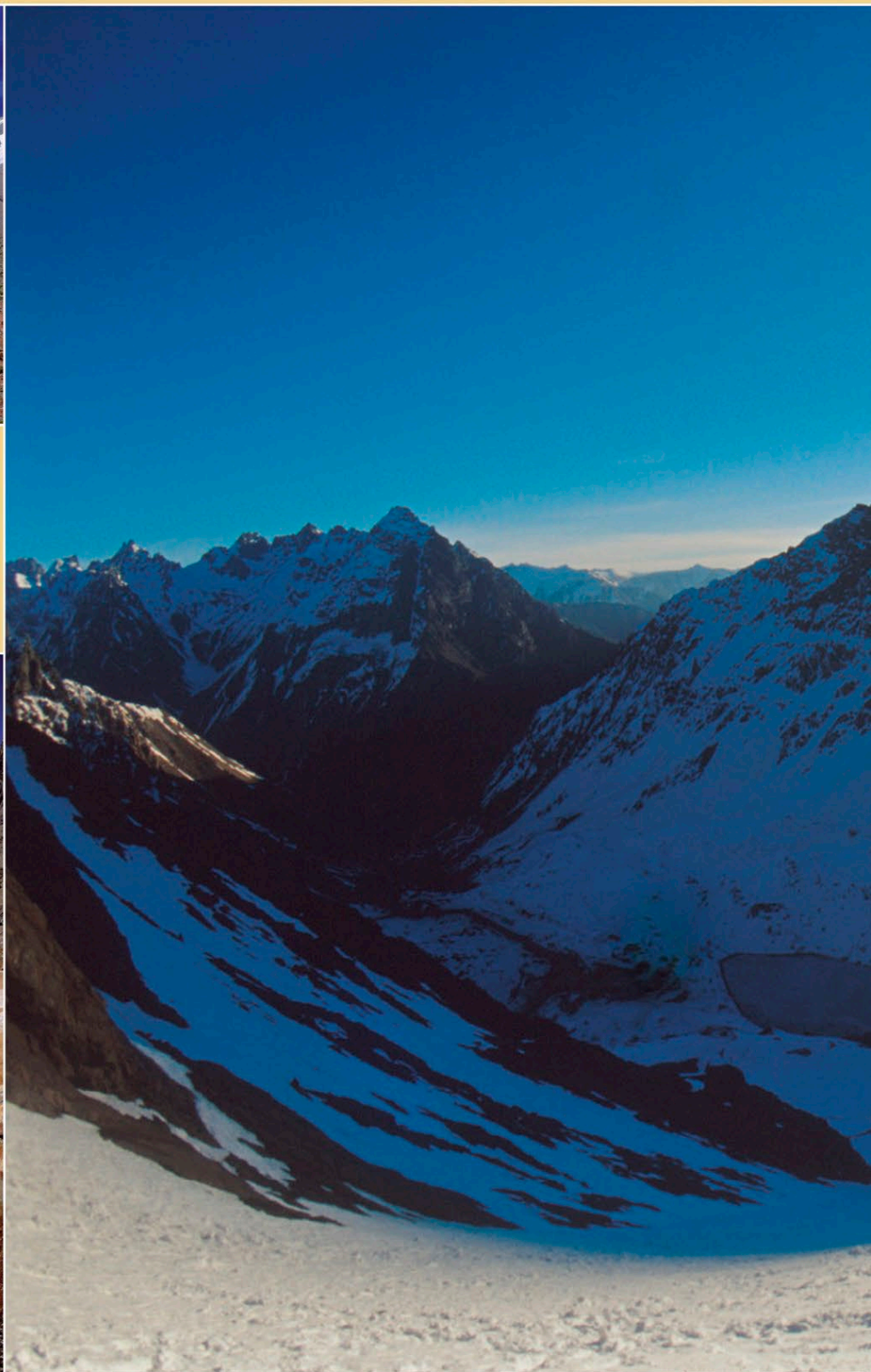
[www.mendoza.com](http://www.mendoza.com)



**Main:** Skiing on the crowd-free slopes of El Portillo in the Chilean Andes

**Above:** Trekking in Aconcagua Park, home to the highest peak in South America

**Below:** Thermal pools at Puente del Inca, Mendoza



#### Gran Hotel El Portillo

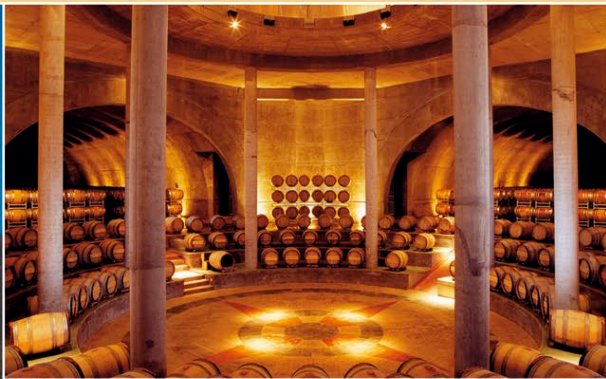
Rearing up from the mountain like a cruise ship, this hotel offers the only accommodation at El Portillo ski resort. All of the 123 rooms have magnificent views, facing either the mountain or the glacial lake, making the most of the wonderful location. Along with its extraordinary setting, the beauty of El Portillo is that queues and crowds are non-existent, so you will feel like you have this snowy, vertiginous paradise to yourself.

## ANDEAN ADVENTURE

STROLLING THROUGH TREE-LINED STREETS AND PRETTY, LEAFY PLAZAS, the feeling is more Alpine than Andean. It is only when you glance up and catch a glimpse of the towering peak of Aconcagua (the highest outside the Himalayas) and its high-altitude neighbours that you realize you are somewhere of far greater extremes. In a fertile valley at the foot of the Andes, Mendoza, capital of the eponymous province, has a relaxed atmosphere, good restaurants and a temperate climate, all of which make it an attractive place for exploring the surrounding area.

Nearby is the extraordinary Puente del Inca, a natural, wide stone bridge over the Mendoza River which was created by glaciers. Its eye-catching golden-copper hue has been coloured by the minerals in the water, and just upstream you can bathe in the bubbling waters of a thermal spring, with views over a dramatic landscape of steep-sided mountains. Mendoza is famous as the centre of the flourishing Argentinian wine industry. The satisfying symmetry of the vineyards





Above: Wine cellar of an Uco Valley wine producer, Mendoza

SOUTHERN SNOW DIARY

Mendoza is the starting place for this trip and a lovely little town in which to spend a few days among great alpine scenery. Explore the surrounding countryside and vineyards before making the crossing into Chile (you will need to allow a full day for this), then spend an unforgettable week skiing in El Portillo.

Twelve Days Among the Peaks

Flights into Buenos Aires usually arrive in the morning so you can fly on to Mendoza the same day. Spend the afternoon exploring the squares and tree-lined boulevards of the city.

From Mendoza, take a trip to the Puente del Inca and enjoy a bath in the thermal springs or a trek at the foot of Aconcagua, the highest peak in South America.

Be sure to visit one of the wineries of the Uco Valley, where you can taste and purchase the excellent wines.

Travel through the Andes by bus via the beautiful Upsallata Valley into Chile – enjoy the spectacular views of peaks thick with snow as you climb up and up. Check into the Gran Hotel El Portillo and unwind in the Jacuzzi or with a drink in the living room.

Spend your first day at ski school – this will help everyone, regardless of ability – beginners will learn the basics of powder skiing and experts will learn the best places to go.

Enjoy days of exhilarating skiing, refuelling with lunch overlooking the picturesque lake. Show off what you’ve learned during the week in the “Sol del Portillo” race – all abilities and ages can take part in the fun.

On Fridays at 8pm, a torchlight parade descends the mountain, making an impressive sight, before an evening of celebrations as the week draws to a close.

Check out of the hotel and enjoy the winding journey through the Andes to Santiago.

Dos and Don’ts

- ✓ Check the weather forecast before setting off from Mendoza. Heavy snow may block the Andean crossing.
- ✗ Don’t overdo it on your first day – El Portillo sits at 2,855 m (9,370 ft) and the altitude takes some getting used to.
- ✓ Take some smarter clothes for the evening. Dress in the restaurant is “smart casual”, with shirt collars for men and no open sandals for women.
- ✓ Look out for visiting Olympic teams – the US, Austrian and Canadian teams have all trained here in the past.

characterizes the landscape here, and fascinating tours of the wineries provide insight into this important industry, as well as a chance to taste the best wines inexpensively.

From Mendoza, a full-day drive across the Andes and the Chilean border will deliver you to the continent’s most famous ski resort, El Portillo. Nearly 3,000 m (9,800 ft) above sea level, amid jaw-dropping Andean peaks, the resort is situated on the shores of Laguna del Inca, a vast glacial lake that freezes over completely during the winter months. The frequent snowfall comes in short, intense bursts of deep, fresh powder, and the narrow, sheer passes make for fantastic skiing. Clear blue skies and brilliant sunshine intensify the landscape of one of the most impenetrable mountain ranges in the world.

There is no town at El Portillo, just one hotel with 123 rooms, so runs are often completely clear without the queues for lifts or crowded runs that are common in European and North American resorts. Bouncing through powder down a deserted run against a backdrop of awesome Andean scenery is undoubtedly one of the most exhilarating feelings on earth.

JAN

FEB

MAR

APR

MAY

JUN

JUL

DAY 1

DAYS 2–4

DAY 5

DAYS 6–11

DAY 12

AUG

SEP

OCT

NOV

DEC





#### GETTING THERE

Kandy is in central Sri Lanka. International flights arrive into Colombo, the capital, 116 km (72 miles) away. Buses, trains and taxis connect to Kandy from Colombo airport.

#### GETTING AROUND

Kandy is easy to navigate on foot. Alternatively, tuk-tuks and taxis are useful for getting around.

#### WEATHER

In August, the temperature ranges from 21–28°C. Kandy is cooler and more prone to rain than the coastal areas.

#### ACCOMMODATION

Spica Holiday Home is a small and homely guesthouse with beautiful panoramic views; doubles from £28; [www.spica.go2lk.com](http://www.spica.go2lk.com)

The Hotel Tree of Life is an eco-friendly resort with a unique architectural design; doubles from £80; [www.hoteltreeoflife.com](http://www.hoteltreeoflife.com)

Mahaweli Reach, close to the Temple of the Tooth, has lovely rooms with river or garden views; doubles from £120; [www.mahaweli.com](http://www.mahaweli.com)

#### EATING OUT

Sri Lankan food typically comprises hot curries, and chicken- and fish-based dishes with rice. These are often accompanied by *sambol* (a mix of coconut, chillies, and spices). A typical meal will cost around £2.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.kandycity.org](http://www.kandycity.org)

### The Legend of the Tooth

The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (Sri Dālada Māligāwa) is Kandy's prime attraction. It houses the most revered Buddhist object – the left canine tooth of the Buddha. Legend has it that after the Buddha was cremated the tooth was salvaged from his funeral pyre. In AD 313, to protect the tooth from enemies, the King of Kalinga concealed it in the hair of his daughter who took it to Sri Lanka.



**Above:** Panoramic view of a tea plantation in the hills of Matale near Kandy

## HONOURING THE TOOTH

THE ANCIENT RELIGIOUS CAPITAL OF BUDDHISM IN SRI LANKA, Kandy is home to the famed Temple of the Tooth, which enshrines within its sanctum the canine of the Lord Buddha. Pilgrims, clad in white, unstitched (and therefore unpolluted) cloth and bearing white blossoms, visit throughout the year. The temple itself was originally built of wood and sponsored by the Kandyan kings between 1687 and 1707 but it was destroyed during the colonial wars of the 18th century and later rebuilt in stone. Serenely positioned at the edge of Lake Kandy, the cluster of buildings with their sloping red tiled roofs are unobtrusive and austere. Their interiors are a sharp contrast – elaborate in design, they make use of lacquer, ivory and wood with inlay work. The tooth itself sits in a gold lotus flower, encased in a jewelled casket on a throne that is protected by two elephant tusks. The erstwhile palace of the king is also in the same compound, so there is much to savour here.

In the past, during the full moon in late July or early August, the tooth was carried in a ceremonial procession, led by elaborately decorated elephants and flanked by smaller ones, for all to see and celebrate. Today, the tooth does not leave its sanctum and instead the procession of torchbearers, fire dancers, jugglers, musicians, elephants, acrobats, noblemen and women in traditional dress, all move towards the temple to venerate the sacred object. On the tenth and last night of the festival, millions of devotees enter the temple, each holding a lit candle, and circumambulate the shrine to pay their respects. It is a spectacular sight, made vibrant by the colours and devotion of the pilgrims – a truly once in a lifetime event for visitors.

This festival of Esala Perahera is the largest Buddhist celebration in the world and draws into its fold nearly a million people each year. Tamil Hindus and Christians also take part in the festival, which has become part of a shared heritage and political leaders also have a ceremony where they dedicate themselves to the service of the people and the protection of the relic. Representing both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, Kandy's unique nature as a sacred site was recognized in 1988 when it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

**Main:** Bedecked in their finery, elephants line up for the Esala Perahera procession

**Below (left to right):** Elephants drinking in the water at Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage outside Kandy; traditional Kandyan dancing with a *Geta Bera* drum; Temple of the Tooth behind Kandy Lake







Above: Performer twirling his flaming torch in the Esala Perahera festival

## FESTIVAL DIARY

August is a great time to visit as the rains have eased and the city is abuzz with the Esala Perahera festival. A highlight of the event is the vibrant procession of elephants, drummers and dancers through the streets. Although it lasts for ten days, six days in Kandy will be ample time to enjoy the festival and the local sights.

### Six Days in the Hills

Arrive in Colombo and take a taxi or intercity bus to Kandy. Take in the lovely setting of the town, before having a wander around the peaceful lake.

Spend the day in Kandy, exploring. This is a laid-back, historical town – have a look at the distinctive architecture and explore the markets and old shops of the town centre. After lunch, pay a visit to the Temple of the Sacred Tooth to watch the ceremonies.

Hire a car to take you to Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage, 40 km (25 miles) west of Kandy. Home to the largest group of captive elephants in the world, the orphanage not only rears orphaned elephants but is also a breeding centre. Return to Kandy to watch the evening's festivities.

Begin your day with a visit to the Peradenia Botanical Gardens, Sri Lanka's largest gardens and home to 4,000 different tree species. Afterwards, find a good spot from which to watch the procession to the temple and enjoy the lively ambience.

Dedicate a day to exploring the surrounding tea plantations – they are stunning, especially those near Ella village and Nuwara Eliya.

Pay a visit to some of Kandy's other temples, including Hindagala Vihara, which has a beautiful setting, and Natha Devale, the oldest shrine in Kandy. In the afternoon, shop for souvenirs before enjoying a traditional Sri Lankan dinner.

### Dos and Don'ts

- ✓ Buy some avocados from local fruit stalls if they are in season – they're cheap and delicious.
- ✗ Don't get into a tuk-tuk without first negotiating the fare – these nimble motorized rickshaws are not metered.
- ✓ Take home some pachyderm paper, locally produced from elephant dung.
- ✗ Don't pose in front of, or beside, a statue of the Buddha – the locals see this as a sign of disrespect.

JAN

FEB

MAR

APR

MAY

JUN

JUL

**AUG**

**DAY 1**

**DAY 2**

**DAY 3**

**DAY 4**

**DAY 5**

**DAY 6**

SEP

OCT

NOV

DEC





#### GETTING THERE

Galway is situated on the west coast of Ireland, 215 km (135 miles) from Dublin. Galway airport is 6 km (4 miles) from the city centre and is accessible by internal flights from Dublin airport. The city is also well serviced by train and bus links.

#### GETTING AROUND

There are taxis and buses in the city and the centre is small enough to cover easily on foot. Hire a car to travel further afield.

#### WEATHER

September is generally a mild month with an average temperature of 12°C, and is often sunny, but rain is not unusual.

#### ACCOMMODATION

Sea Breeze Lodge is a cosy guesthouse overlooking beautiful Galway Bay; doubles from £105; [www.seabreezelodge.org](http://www.seabreezelodge.org)

Jurys Inn has a central location close to the Spanish Arch; doubles from £100; [www.jurysinn.com](http://www.jurysinn.com)

The g Hotel & Spa is stylish and contemporary; doubles from £170; [www.thehotel.ie](http://www.thehotel.ie)

#### EATING OUT

Seafood is a speciality and a highlight of a stay here. Try McDonaghs on Quay Street (mains from £15) or leave the city for its surrounds and visit St Cleran's in Craughwell.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.galwayoysterfest.com](http://www.galwayoysterfest.com)

## OYSTERS AND THE BLACK STUFF

OYSTERS AND GUINNESS ARE THE STAPLE DIET OF GUESTS at the Galway Oyster Festival, which hits this charming Irish city at the end of every September.

The “cracking” Guinness World Oyster Opening Championships is a highlight at the four-day festival, which goes into its 63rd year in 2017. The emphasis rests on fun, food, and, of course, filling up with Guinness – the national drink. After months of summer festivals and *fleadhs* (music festivals), there is always more than enough *craic* (fun) to go round at the last festival of the season. And its line-up continues to draw crowds from overseas every year – the official festival events are guaranteed sell-outs, hardly surprising as the festival is often called one of the best in the world.

**Main:** Revellers enjoying the *craic* in the marquee at the Galway Oyster Festival

The main attraction of the festivities is the oysters, which are carefully selected from beds within Galway Bay where the native oyster still grows wild. After suffering at the hands of eager men frantically trying to beat the world record at the oyster opening championships on the Saturday



### The Claddagh Ring

The Claddagh Ring is a distinct design with two hands joined together to support a heart. The ring is a monument to love and friendship, and how you wear it depends on your love life. When worn on the right hand with the heart facing outward to the nail, it signifies the heart is free. When the heart is facing inward on the right hand, it indicates the heart is no longer available.





afternoon, the oysters are served in all their glory in the festival marquee, which rests at the mouth of the Claddagh – one of the oldest parts of the city, and home of the famous Claddagh Ring. Glamour plays a big part in the whole affair, with high heels and *haute couture* aplenty seen walking past the Spanish Arch to Nimmo’s Pier where the marquee is erected.

Galway is so conveniently located in the heart of the west of Ireland, that most of the 22,000 or so visitors to the festival make the most of their journey and venture beyond the folds of the marquee in search of a real sense of Irish life.

The Aran Islands, Connemara, and The Burren are all on Galway’s doorstep awaiting your discovery. Take the ferry over to Aran, an archipelago of three tiny islands where the primary language is Irish and life has a more traditional pace. A walk along the dramatic rocky coast will certainly awaken your Guinness-dulled senses as you stroll past fields that have been tamed over the years by the locals constantly working the craggy land. Afterwards, stop off in a cosy bar to warm up and get ready to start the *craic* all over again.



**Above (top to bottom):** Looking over onto Claddagh Quay; the Twelve Ben mountain range in Connemara; festival staples – oysters and Guinness

**Below:** Competitors shuck the oysters at the World Oyster Opening Championship



**Above:** Busy streets of Galway during the Oyster Festival

SEAFOOD DIARY

The Galway Oyster Festival is said to be Ireland’s longest running festival, and it remains very popular, providing one last hurrah for revellers after the summer. The festival itself lasts for four days, but a week in Galway will allow you plenty of time to enjoy the town and the beautiful surrounding area.

A Week in West Ireland

Stroll around the town and get familiarized with the pedestrian Shop Street and Quay Street, walk under the Spanish Arch, and take a 10-minute stroll out to Salthill to breathe in some fresh sea air.

Visit buildings of note – the cathedral, the university, and the largest medieval church still in use in Ireland, St Nicholas’s Collegiate Church.

Leave town to take a trip out west to the heart of Connemara. See the Twelve Ben mountains and the unspoilt beauty of Letterfrack and Leenane.

Visit the Aran Islands, Europe’s westernmost point, and make it back just in time to watch Irish oyster openers vie for a place in the World Oyster Opening Championships in The Quays Bar at 8pm.

Browse the art galleries, museums, and arts and craft shops dotted all around the city. In the evening, make your way to the marquee for jazz and seafood.

Visit the eclectic Galway Market which sets up outside St Nicholas’s Church every Saturday, then head to the official opening of the festival in Eyre Square. The fun is centred around the marquee with the Guinness World Oyster Opening Championship. The Oyster Festival Gala Ball is held on the Saturday night.

The party continues at the marquee on the Sunday, but if you are full to the brim of Guinness you could have a windsurfing lesson at Rusheen Bay.

Dos and Don’ts

- ✓ Enjoy the *craic* (fun) with the locals. Irish people really are very friendly and love meeting new people.
- ✗ Don’t expect people to always be on time for things – Irish time runs at a more relaxed pace.
- ✓ Buy tickets and book accommodation in advance. Galway is quite a small city and fills up quickly.
- ✗ Don’t park your car without being sure it is parked legally – clampers are in operation all over the city.

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**GETTING THERE**

Balloon Fiesta Park is located in North Albuquerque, west of I-25, approximately 19 km (12 miles) north of Albuquerque Sunport, the state's only major airport.

**GETTING AROUND**

Most visitors rely on rental cars but Albuquerque (at the junction of the I-40 and I-25) does have the ABQRide bus system. In addition, there are multiple ways to get to the fiesta from the city: park and ride, by bike, or the New Mexico Rail Runner which offers a rail pass with a shuttle to and from the park.

**WEATHER**

The Balloon Fiesta is held when the weather is cool and crisp. Temperatures in the morning are around 4°C, warming up to about 21°C in the afternoon.

**ACCOMMODATION**

Hotel Albuquerque in Old Town offers doubles from £186; [www.hhandr.com](http://www.hhandr.com)

The Hyatt Place Albuquerque/Uptown provides comfortable lodgings; doubles from £172; [albuquerqueuptown.place.hyatt.com](http://albuquerqueuptown.place.hyatt.com)

The Albuquerque Marriott Pyramid North is situated near Balloon Fiesta Park; doubles from £165; [www.marriott.com](http://www.marriott.com)

**EATING OUT**

You'll find food at Balloon Fiesta Park, but for a real taste of New Mexico cuisine at £10 a head, try eateries such as Little Anita's, or Perea's and Sadie's, both famous for the use of fiery green chillis in their culinary creations.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

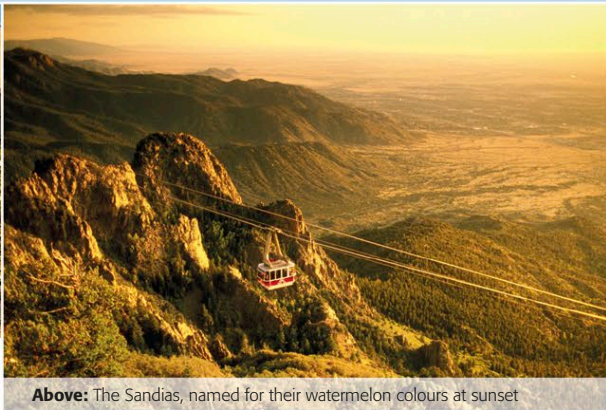
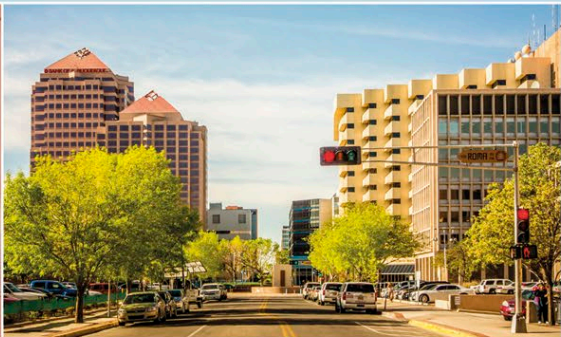
[www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com)

**Let the Ballooning Begin...**

One of the most interesting aspects of the world's largest balloon event is its rather unimpressive start. In 1972, to celebrate the 50th birthday of local radio station KOB, its manager planned the world's biggest congregation of hot-air balloons. He received a go-ahead from 21 pilots, but bad weather limited the turnout to just 13 balloons. Nevertheless, on April 8, 1972, 20,000 people gathered at a parking lot for the very first Balloon Fiesta. The number of registered balloons touched 1,019 in 2000, but has since been capped to ease aerial congestion.







**Above (left and right):** The Old Town Cat House, one of the city's most charming shops; Downtown Albuquerque aglow during late evening  
**Main:** Preparing the balloon for the spectacular take-off known as Mass Ascension

# ALBUQUERQUE

IT'S A ROMANTIC PICTURE – a single hot-air balloon sailing gracefully and silently across the sky, floating with the clouds wherever the wind goes. There's something enchanting about ballooning, as the huge colourful orb just hangs in air as if by magic. If one balloon is magical, seeing hundreds of them dotting the sky in an endless canvas of abstract shapes and vivid colours is beyond words. But this is just what happens once every year at the thrilling Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, the largest convention of hot-air balloons in the world and also according to many, the world's most photographed event.

Held across nine days in early October, well past the sweltering conditions of summer, the fiesta is also the perfect time to enjoy New Mexico's natural beauty. Albuquerque pulls out all the stops, welcoming both visitors and participants from all over the world. From building-sized beer bottles to mythical creatures and cartoon characters, balloons in shapes previously unimagined fill the barren desert sky as the crowds gaze in amazement from below.



If one balloon is magical, seeing hundreds of them dotting the sky in an endless canvas of shapes and colours is beyond words.

Those hoping to catch the best of the action rise at the crack of dawn, when more than 500 balloons lift off simultaneously. Roughly the size of 54 football fields, the Balloon Fiesta Park accommodates the huge crowds the festival draws with absolute ease. When you're not staring up at the spectacle, weave your way through countless docked balloons, chat with pilots, capture breathtaking photographs, and sample traditional New Mexican fare, such as warm, puffy Navajo fry bread and steaming tortilla soup. Enjoy a live musical performance as you eat. At night, stand in awe of the Balloon Glow, as hundreds of balloons on the ground light up all at once from the glow of their burners. Once the field clears, a lively fireworks display wraps up the evening with a bang.

**Inset:** Balloons in the sky: dabs of colour on a clear, blue canvas  
**Below (left to right):** Balloon Fiesta Park in the thick of activity; Balloon Glow, a magical nocturnal event



## NEW MEXICO DIARY

Easily the state's largest festival, the Balloon Fiesta is held every October, when tourists flood Albuquerque and surrounding regions, overbooking hotels and restaurants. If the crowds prove too much, you can always escape north to Santa Fe, a lovely city known for its history and beauty.

### A Weekend in Albuquerque

Ease into the weekend by exploring Albuquerque's Old Town, stopping at shops selling Native American and southwestern wares. Chow down the city's most beloved burger at Bob's, known for its hot green-chilli sauce. At sundown, head to the fiesta for Balloon Glow, as grounded balloons glow in the light of their propane burners. Finish off with a bite and a brew at Monte Vista Fire Station, a relaxed hangout housed in a converted Depression-era firehouse.

Rise early to watch the Dawn Patrol, which begins around 6am. About an hour later, the Mass Ascension begins. Munch on fresh Navajo fry bread. Around noon, explore the area around Albuquerque. Drive along the 84-km (52-mile) Turquoise Trail on Highway 14 on the east side of the picturesque Sandia Mountains. Later in the afternoon, take in the America's Challenge balloon race and cap off the evening with a firework show.

Kickstart your day with a balloon ride, offered by Rainbow Ryders. Then head outside the grounds and visit the Anderson-Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum (free on Sunday mornings). Later, make your second ascension of the day via the Sandia Peak Aerial Tramway, and after, enjoy first-rate barbecue at County Line BBQ. Be sure to stop by the Bien Mur Indian Market Center.

### Dos and Don'ts

- ✓ Before heading out for the day, check the television or the Internet for the "balloon report." Each year, at least one day of the fiesta is usually called off due to inclement weather.
- ✓ Brace yourself for the weekend crowds – queues, parking, and traffic can be quite trying.
- ✗ Don't forget to charge up your camera – you'll likely end up snapping more photos than expected.
- ✓ If you're at the fiesta at night, carry a torch; traversing the grounds (and finding your car) may prove difficult.
- ✓ Dress warmly – pre-dawn conditions can be chilly.

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#### GETTING THERE

Dijon's airport is 6 km (4 miles) south of the city with international connections from Paris. The TGV train service takes 1 hour 30 minutes to get from Paris to Gare-de Dijon-Ville, with a stop at Montbard.

#### GETTING AROUND

Apart from travelling by canal, the main towns in the region are linked by bus. Car hire is available in larger towns for day trips. Excursions are often provided with cruise packages.

#### WEATHER

In November, the average temperature is 9°C and it can become quite cold in the evenings.

#### ACCOMMODATION

Crewed B&B and gîtes barges cost around £675 per person per week.

Smaller canal boats are available for self-drive holidays, with no licence needed, from around £945 for a four-berth boat per week.

Charters, including meals and often excursions, cost from £1,700–3,375 per person per week.

"Hotel Canal Barges" take up to 20 passengers for around £1,200 per person for six nights.

See [www.holidaysafloat.co.uk](http://www.holidaysafloat.co.uk) for the above.

#### EATING OUT

Dijon vies with Lyon for the title of gastronomic capital of France. Le Pré aux Clercs in Dijon is about as good as it gets, around £55.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.burgundy-canal.com](http://www.burgundy-canal.com)  
[www.burgundy-tourism.com](http://www.burgundy-tourism.com)



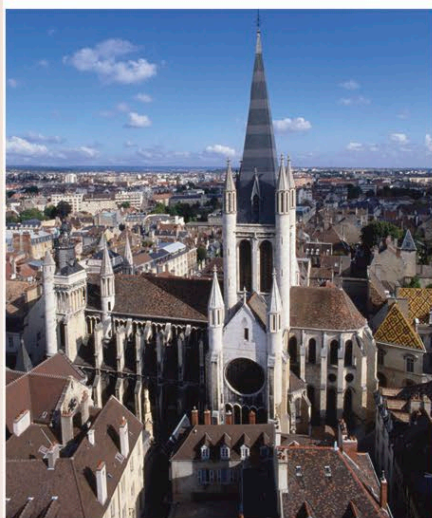
### The Canals of Burgundy

Completed in 1832, the Canal de Bourgogne is 242 km (150 miles) long and has 209 locks with an average of 1.3 km (1 mile) between each. From Lock No 1 at Escommes at the southern Saône end, the canal climbs 299 m (980 ft) to Pouilly-en-Auxois past Dijon. After which it continues towards Migennes and the Yonne. As the Yonne eventually meets the Seine, which flows through Paris to the English Channel, the canal provides a direct link between the waterways of the north and south of the country.

# AUTUMNAL RIVER CRUISE

**B**RIMMING WITH GOOD FOOD AND FINE WINE, Burgundy is the heartiest region of France. In November the hunting season is underway, mushrooms are being gathered and the grape harvest is being celebrated among the renowned Côte d'Or vineyards – it's a good time for a remarkable journey. The way to travel is by canal boat or barge, unhurried transports along the 242-km (150-mile) *Canal de Bourgogne*, the Burgundy Canal. This waterway cuts through the heart of the countryside allowing you to sample its bountiful delights as you go – from picnics to gourmet meals.

Whether you choose to splash out on a traditional barge with a crew, perhaps with full gourmet dining, or potter alone in a small pleasure craft, you can dictate your own pace, gliding through picturesque villages, with lock-keepers, homes, canal workers' cottages and other fascinating vestiges of water-borne life. At this time of year the oak and maple forests will be glowing like burnished gold, and the vine leaves will be taking on their ruddy autumn mantle.





Step off the barge to admire the villages, and appreciate their cafés; stretch your legs in the autumnal countryside, hire a bike for half a day or try your hand at fishing – licences are easily obtainable from local stores. Not far from the canal are châteaux that show just how rich Burgundy once was: it once ruled the continent from the Netherlands to Provence and its hefty red wine was drunk in all the royal courts of Europe. There are number of fine churches and abbeys, too, as this was the heartland of the Cistercian order.

Dijon, the region’s capital, lies at the southern end of the canal – its famous mustard is made with the juice of unripe grapes. Among other delights of the table you will find hearty *boeuf bourguignon* from Charolais cattle, *coq au vin* from Bresse chicken fed on maize and whey, *escargots à la bourguignonne*, and wild mushrooms, newly gathered. As for the wines – Chablis, Côtes de Nuits and Côtes de Beaune – they are all divine. The annual charity wine auction in the medieval jewel, the Hôtel Dieu in Beaune with its multi-coloured glazed roof tiles, gives you a great opportunity to sample the delights of your winning bid in a perfect Burgundian setting.



**Main:** Latricières-Chambertin Vineyard  
**Left panel (top to bottom):** Dijon with the church of Notre Dame; chapterhouse in the Abbaye de Fontenay; Hôtel Dieu in Beaune  
**Above (top to bottom):** Burgundy canal; bottles of Domaine Laroche; Moutarde Maille shop in Dijon  
**Below:** Olive stall in Beaune market



Above: Bidders crowd the cellars at the Beaune charity wine auction

CANAL DIARY

Look out for local harvest festivals – November sees Dijon put on its annual International Gastronomic Fair at the Palais des Expositions and Beaune its Charity Wine Auction. Some smaller museums and châteaux may be closed for the season and Dijon’s museums are closed on Tuesdays.

One Week on the Waterways

Arrive in Dijon and travel up to Sens to start your cruise. But first explore this ancient town, centred around St Etienne, the oldest of France’s great Gothic cathedrals. Its treasury, one of the largest in the country, is part of the Museum of Fine Arts.

Start your cruise gently, Tonnerre makes a pleasant stop, with good shops, cafés and restaurants. A curiosity that draws visitors is Fosse Dionne, a mystic spring. Tonnerre’s Hôtel-Dieu was founded in 1293. This is one of the few places that you will see vineyards beside the canal.

Montbard lies half way along the canal and it provides a hopping off point for several fine sites in the vicinity: the Renaissance Château d’Ancy-le-Franc (closes mid-November), the beautiful Romanesque Basilique Ste-Madeleine Vézelay and Abbaye de Fontenay, the oldest surviving Cistercian foundation in France. Hire a car to see them all in a day.

Travel down to Beaune, the wine capital of Burgundy, to visit the wine museum in the 16th-century Hôtel des Ducs de Bourgogne and the beautiful Hôtel Dieu, for the annual charity wine auction each November.

Dijon is a high spot of the journey and needs time to explore. Start by looking down on the medieval town from the top of the Philippe le Bon Tower. Visit Gustave Eiffel’s covered market and lunch in the Bistrot des Halles. Shops along Rue de la Liberté include the Maille mustard store at no. 32 and the antiques quarter lies behind Notre Dame.

Dos and Don’ts

- ✓ Hire a Segway from the main tourist office in Dijon – a fun way to get around.
- ✗ Don’t drink and drive; always have a designated driver when going on wine tours.
- ✓ Do buy some of the famous Dijon mustard when in the town, it makes a great gift.

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**GETTING THERE**

Sydney is in New South Wales, on Australia's southeast coast. International and domestic flights arrive into Sydney Airport, 9 km (6 miles) from the city centre.

**GETTING AROUND**

The city has an excellent network of buses, light rail and ferries – a travel pass lets you combine all three. Taxis are also cheap.

**WEATHER**

Warm weather is virtually guaranteed in December, with average temperatures of 24–26°C.

**ACCOMMODATION**

High Cross Park Lodge Hotel, a cosy hotel just 5 minutes from the city centre; doubles from £35; [www.sydneylodges.com](http://www.sydneylodges.com)

Kirketon Boutique Hotel provides stylish accommodation in Darlinghurst; doubles from £105; [www.kirketon.com.au](http://www.kirketon.com.au)

Pier One Sydney Harbour has an enviable harbour position and great views from every room; doubles from £245; [www.pieronesydneyharbour.com.au](http://www.pieronesydneyharbour.com.au)

**EATING OUT**

Sydney offers world-class dining, with a lot of Asian-Pacific influences. Head to Chinatown for an inexpensive but good meal (mains from around £5). Push the boat out for great views and a fantastic three-course meal at Modern Australia on Circular Quay (around £40).

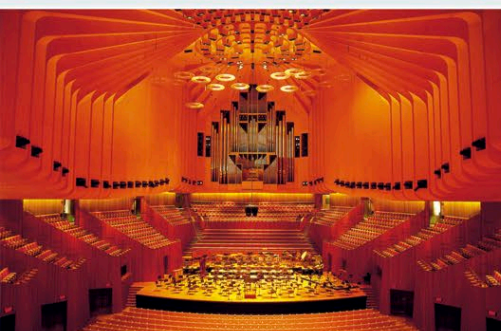
**FURTHER INFORMATION**

[www.sydney.com](http://www.sydney.com)

The bridge literally explodes in flames as the best fireworks display in the world lights up the sky with an eyeball-searing intensity.



**Above:** The futuristic-looking monorail near Darling Harbour  
**Inset:** Koala in the trees at Taronga Zoo

**Sydney Opera House**

One of the architectural wonders of the world, Australia's iconic structure was designed by Danish architect Jørn Utzon and completed in 1973. The expressionistic building comprises five theatres in a series of precast concrete shells shaped like upturned orange segments. The main concert hall features a 10,000-pipe organ. More than one million white granite tiles cover the gleaming exterior, while the interior is made of local hardwoods and pink granite. One-hour guided tours are offered, as are longer backstage tours.

# NEW YEAR DOWN UNDER

WITH ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST RECOGNIZABLE SKYLINES, Sydney is a beautiful city: set around a sparkling harbour graced by the Sydney Harbour Bridge and famous Opera House, its multi-peaked roof evocative of a ship in full sail. A cultural and postmodern metropolis, this has become one of the best places to enjoy New Year's Eve. On the big day, as the light slowly fades, the harbour fills up with twinkling, bobbing boats. The night's iconic image takes place at midnight, when the bridge literally explodes in flames as the best fireworks display in the world lights up the sky with an eyeball-searing intensity. A curtain of liquid fire drops 50 metres (164 ft) from the bridge to the water, while volleys of rockets release layer-upon-layer of coloured sheets of flame, a psychedelic starburst of colour. When it finishes, it's as though someone has turned the lights out, and the spectators go wild. There's no more Australian way to celebrate than with a barbeque and a few "tinnies" (cans of beer) – head to one of





**Above:** A vibrant Aboriginal bark painting; Sydney Aquarium's Open Ocean display  
**Main:** Sydney Harbour Bridge bursts with colour on New Year's Eve  
**Below:** Dining alfresco on Circular Quay



**Above:** Young surfers taking part in a surf carnival on Bondi Beach

SYDNEY DIARY

Australia's "Harbour City" is the country's party capital and New Year is the biggest party there is (although the camp and colourful Mardi Gras comes close). A week will give you plenty of time to explore the city's sights. Consider extending your visit with a trip up the sunny Queensland coast.

A Week in the Harbour City

Orientate yourself with a morning city tour by open-air bus. Spend a leisurely afternoon on a walking tour of The Rocks or visit the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Enjoy a leisurely scenic harbour cruise. Back on land, take it easy in preparation for the night's festivities. There's a warm-up display of fireworks at 9pm (for the youngsters) but the spectacular climax is at midnight and the party goes on until dawn.

Head to Bondi Beach, where real party animals can sleep off the night before. If you have the energy, try your hand at surfing – a number of local surf schools run full- and half-day lessons.

Join an excursion to the Hunter Valley. Tour the wineries for tastings and gourmet food – particularly of note are the Rothbury Estate, Lindemans and McWilliams Mount Pleasant Winery.

See the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Australian Museum or Sydney Aquarium. After a café lunch, tour Sydney Opera House, explore bustling Chinatown, or take the ferry from Circular Quay to Taronga Zoo.

For some fresh air and great scenery, explore the nearby Blue Mountains. See the Three Sisters, take the Scenic Skyway ride over the mountains from Katoomba and explore the Jenolan Caves.

Spend your last day relaxing in the beautiful Royal Botanic Gardens before heading to Darling Harbour for some fantastic shopping.

Dos and Don'ts

- ✓ Buy a two-, three- or seven-day adult or child Smartcard granting free admission to most attractions.
- ✗ Don't forget your zinc oxide! ZnO absorbs ultraviolet rays. A dollop on the nose is *de rigueur* for lazing on Bondi Beach.
- ✓ Heed the flags at the beaches – a red flag indicates no swimming. Dangerous rip tides and high surf are the most common dangers; sharks are another.

the official viewpoints as the unofficial ones, while usually very lively and entertaining, can get a little rowdy. For those who can, the parties go on till dawn – and beyond.

The next day, before the rest of the city wakes, the serious surfers line up across beautiful Bondi Beach, straddling their boards and waiting for the perfect wave. Each big wave's arrival is signalled by a burst of frantic activity, followed by the successful few riding the spinning blue tube of water effortlessly into shore. It's worth trying once, and even if you do no more than fall off spectacularly while gulping down seawater, the chances are you'll have also tasted the excitement.

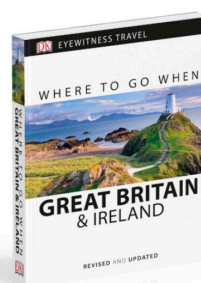
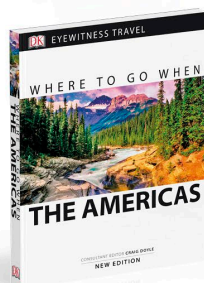
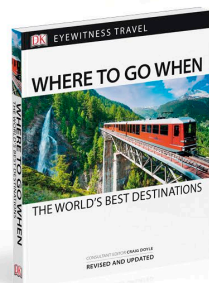
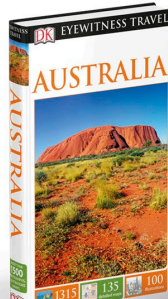
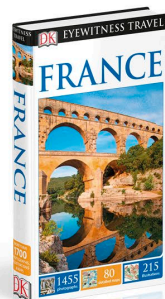
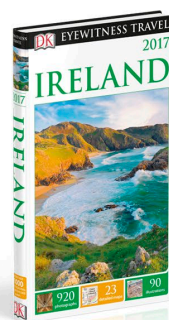
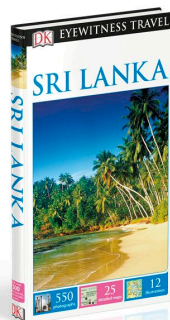
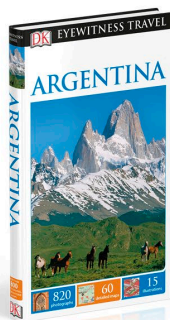
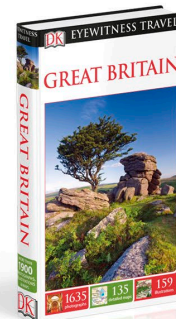
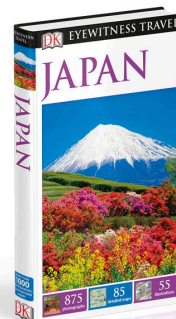
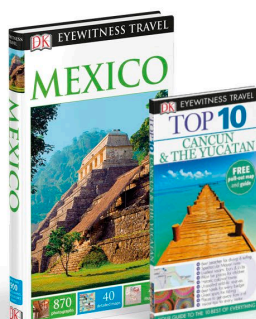
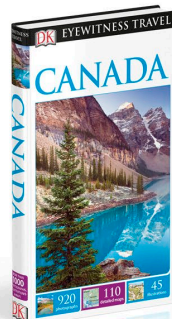
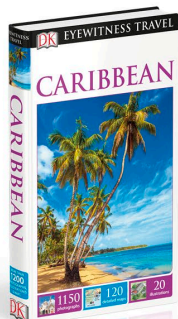
Sydney was founded in 1788, but the area's Aboriginal history goes back 40,000 years – trace this in the Australia Museum, before exploring the city's infamous convict past at the Museum of Sydney. The best way to see the city is on foot, which allows you to get a real feel for its vibrancy and character, especially at this time of year. Most travellers begin at The Rocks, the pedestrian-friendly site of Australia's first English settlement, now bursting with museums, art galleries, hip fashion boutiques, historic pubs and delightful restaurants with the obligatory harbour view.





# EYEWITNESS TRAVEL

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