

## This week's dream: a Caribbean island that time forgot

Few corners of the Caribbean are as "tranquil" and unspoiled as the Colombian island of Providencia, says Aaron Millar in *The Independent* on Sunday. Lying 140 miles east of Nicaragua, this tiny volcanic outpost was first settled by English Puritans in 1630. Despite subsequent Spanish rule, it remains English-speaking, with a culture similar to those of its Anglophone neighbours. Unlike them, however, it has no "vast resorts" or "fancy restaurants", and receives only 15,000 visitors a year.

That's partly owing to its relative inaccessibility: flights are from Bogotá, via the island of San Andrés, 60 miles south. Many visitors come to dive on the 20-mile barrier reef along Providencia's eastern flank, which is one of the "best-conserved" in the world and was declared a Unesco Seaflower Biosphere Reserve in 2000. But there are pristine natural glories on land too, including mangrove swamps, "jungle-kissed" beaches and a forested, 1,000ft peak. A floating



A starfish near the island of San Andrés

300ft walkway leads to the car-free islet of Santa Catalina, where Sir Henry Morgan, the "notorious" Welsh buccaneer who terrorised Spanish galleons and ports in the late 17th century, once had his base. There, iguanas bask on rusting canon on top of the ruins of Fort Warwick, a British stronghold of the period.

A 14-room "luxury boutique hotel", Deep Blue, has recently opened in the village of Maracaibo; but Providencia's other accommodation is simple. There are a few small restaurants serving "delicious" seafood, and little nightlife beyond Roland's Beach Bar, where "the whole island congregates" for rum and reggae-fuelled parties when the moon's

out. It's this lack of frills that makes Providencia "a real idyll", with little to do but dive, fish, hike or laze in hammocks with "the sound of the ocean" in one's ears. *Journey Latin America* (020-8747 8315, [www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk](http://www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk)) has an 11-day Colombia tour, incl. Providencia, from £2,930pp, incl. flights.

### Hotel of the week



#### Explorers Club, Franschhoek, South Africa

As South Africa's gastronomic capital, the leafy old town of Franschhoek has plenty of fine hotels. But for families or larger groups, the Explorers Club is the perfect place to stay, says Laura Holt in *The Independent*. The biggest of four self-catering houses here designed by "adventurer and antiques expert" Jo Sinfield, it sleeps up to ten in impeccably "stylish" rooms, with white wooden ceilings and eclectic décor (including vintage wall maps and "recycled furniture"). The large living area opens along one wall onto a long swimming pool, beside which there's an outdoor wall braai (grill).

From £415pn. 00 27 72 464 1240; [www.explorersclub.co.za](http://www.explorersclub.co.za)

### Getting the flavour of...

#### Flourishing Fukuoka

The city of Fukuoka offers "a little of everything you might ask of Japan", says Jon Wilks in *The Guardian* – from ancient temples, Zen gardens and "craft-loving communities" to "hi-tech gadgetry" and excellent food. Perched on the north coast of the southern island of Honshu, it has attracted a "rich, cosmopolitan" population thanks to its proximity to mainland Asia – but its "imposing" new shopping malls have not destroyed its charm. Don't miss the suburb of Dazaifu, which has 1,000-year-old temples and a grand new museum of history; Oyafuko-dori ("Delinquents' Street"), dotted with traditional bars and nightclubs famous for spawning a national rock craze – *Mentai* – in the early 1980s; nor the *yatai* stalls beside the Naka river, known throughout Japan for their *tonkotsu* ramen noodle soup. *KLM now flies daily from London to Fukuoka via Amsterdam, from £550 return.*

#### Oslo's island of art

There are two "compelling" reasons to visit Oslo this year, says Claire Wrathall in the FT – the rash of exhibitions celebrating the 150th anniversary of Edvard Munch's birth, and the "near-complete" transformation of the little island of Tjuvholmen. A "grim industrial enclave" only a decade ago, this city-centre redoubt is now home to "modish" shops, restaurants, galleries and a 90m-high

observation tower that offers views across the city, its fjord and 40-odd islands. The development is centred on the new Astrup Fearnley Museum, which houses a major contemporary art collection, and the museum's sculpture garden leads down to a gently shelving shingle beach, where it's safe to swim in the "chill blue-black waters" of the fjord in summer. *The Thief Hotel* ([www.thethief.com/en](http://www.thethief.com/en)) offers rooms from £215.

#### A poet's wild corner of Wales

The poet R.S. Thomas "despised tourism" and there aren't any memorials to him on the Llyn Peninsula, where he lived until his death in 2000. But you might find a deeper connection with his work in this rugged corner of north Wales, says Chris Moss in *The Daily Telegraph*: it still "stirs the mystical in people", as it did in him. Admirers of Thomas's work should visit the village of Aberdaron, where he was vicar, and Sarn-y-Plas, the "cave-cum-cottage" where he and his wife Elsi – "a hermit couple" – retired in 1978. Of more general interest are Plas yn Rhiw, a "fine 17th century manor house" once owned by his patrons, the Keating sisters; and the wild places he loved, including Bardsey Island and the Whistling Sands of Porth O'er. *Edge of Wales Walk* (01758-760652, [www.edgeofwaleswalk.co.uk](http://www.edgeofwaleswalk.co.uk)) organises accommodation and baggage transfer for walkers.

### Last-minute UK offers from top travel companies

#### Cornish beach break

A 20% discount is offered on both 3 and 7-night breaks in a stylish house (sleeps 8) above Carbis Bay. £435 for 3 nights; £800 for 7. 07970-969160, [www.nautique-stives.co.uk](http://www.nautique-stives.co.uk). Select dates from 29 April.

#### Wordsworth Lakeland

Set in riverside gardens with mountain views, the 4-star Wordsworth Hotel offers dinner and b&b for £159 per night. 01539-435592, [www.fihotels.com](http://www.fihotels.com). Book by 26 April: until end of June.

#### John o'Groats wildlife

Experience the wonders of the local wildlife and scenery during a 2-week stay at Natural Retreats John o'Groats (sleeps 6) from £1,077. 0843-636 4625, [www.naturalretreats.com](http://www.naturalretreats.com). Arrive 7 May.

#### Yurts in the Peak District

Join the Peak District Walking Festival (26 Apr-12 May) with a 4-night, midweek stay in a luxury yurt in the Staffordshire Moorlands. Prices from £295 incl. walking guide. [www.greentraveller.co.uk](http://www.greentraveller.co.uk).