

This week's dream: a journey to the vast Sahara

Camping in the Sahara is "one of the world's last big adventures" – but you no longer have to be a crazed explorer or a Tuareg with a camel to do it, says Stanley Stewart in Condé Nast Traveller. A host of tour operators now offer trips there, some with "the kind of stylish elegance normally found on upmarket East African safaris". Go via Marrakech in Morocco and these days it needn't take longer than, say, a trip to upstate New York – yet the sight of the world's greatest desert still stirs the soul as deeply as it ever did.

From Marrakech, it is a spectacular drive over the Atlas Mountains, via the awe-inspiring Tizi n'Test pass and down through rocky canyons, to Ouarzazate.

Epics from *Lawrence of Arabia* to *Gladiator* have been shot around the town, which is the "film capital of North Africa" and the Moroccan gateway to the Sahara. Beyond lies the Dadès Valley, a "wilderness of volcanic rock and limestone pinnacles". Most visitors spend a night in the "delightful" oasis town of



The drive over the Atlas Mountains is spectacular

Skoura. With its date and olive groves, and orchards of almond and fig, it must have seemed "an earthly paradise" to the desert travellers of old. Towering above its "waves of greenery" are a dozen or more kasbahs, Morocco's equivalent of feudal castles – one of which, Dar Ahlam, is now one of the country's "most exclusive hotels", an "Arabian nights" fantasy of labyrinthine passageways and fountained courtyards.

Southwards lie the vast, gravelly plains of the hamada and, beyond them, the "fluid, wind-carved" shapes of the dunes, stretching into infinity – "smooth and inviting as freshly fallen snow", and wonderfully warm even in

the chilly air of night. The desert's vastness is "humbling", as is the grandeur of the starry firmament above, clearer and closer here than anywhere else on Earth. *The Ultimate Travel Company* (020-3582 9261, www.theultimatetravelcompany.com) has a five-day trip from £2,450pp, incl. flights.

Hotel of the week



Rajakkad, Tamil Nadu, India

An "exquisite" 18th century palace with just seven bedrooms set amid the forested Palani Hills of Tamil Nadu, Rajakkad is a haven of rare beauty and tranquility, says Susan Crewe in *House & Garden*. Here, at 1,000m up, the air is fresh, and "gentle breezes" play over the pools in the one-storey building's "shady" courtyards. All of the "pretty, comfortable and elegantly simple" rooms open onto the garden, but have (unreliable) Wi-Fi and no TVs. Meals are communal and "delicious", with homegrown ingredients; staff are "welcoming"; and there's wonderful walking country all around.

Doubles from £75, full board. 00 91 9487 444333, www.rajakkadestate.com.

Getting the flavour of...

Colombia's Caribbean jewel

Home to cavernous churches, cobbled streets and 18th century mansions with bougainvillea-draped balconies, Cartagena is the loveliest colonial port in South America – a Caribbean dream town to rival Havana, says Gaby Wood in *The Daily Telegraph*. In recent years, it has enjoyed a tourism boom and a cultural rebirth, with "vibrant" arts and music scenes, some fine bookshops and an annual overseas edition of the Hay literary festival. Be sure to walk the city's immense walls (built to keep out pirates), and to visit the spooky Palace of the Inquisition. Alternatively, there are fabulous beaches and coral reefs on the Islas del Rosario, a short boat trip away. *For further information, including hotels, holiday lets and tours, see www.ticartagena.com.*

Tracking polar bears on foot

Set in the Arctic tundra on the west shore of Hudson Bay, the Seal River Heritage Lodge claims to be the only place in the world where you can stalk polar bears in the wild – and the experience is as thrilling as it sounds, says Ian Belcher in *The Times*. A short hop in a small plane from Churchill, where thousands of tourists come to watch the animals from specially adapted buses, the lodge is "snuggly, all wood-fired stoves and squidgy sofas", but "Fort-Knox secure": bears often come to inspect at night, even

gnawing on door handles. Guests go out in Zodiac inflatables to see beluga whales, and on foot with heavily armed guides. The landscape "seethes with nature" (glorious wildflowers, bald eagles, wolves), and encounters with the bears – the world's biggest land predators – can be gratifyingly close. *Abercrombie & Kent* (0845-485 1147, www.abercrombiekent.co.uk) has an eight-day trip from £5,895pp, incl. flights.

Hadrian's city of eternal spring

An hour's drive south of Barcelona, the little-visited seaside city of Tarragona has "all the things we love about Mediterranean life" in abundance, says Paul Richardson in *the FT* – a near-perfect climate, great food and drink, real local culture". Described by the Emperor Hadrian in AD122 as "the city of eternal spring", it was the Roman capital of northern Spain, and splendid ancient ruins still punctuate its warren of medieval streets and "delightful" squares. There's also a glorious Catalan Gothic cathedral, and several fine modernist buildings. The city's restaurants – mostly small, "chef-driven" affairs – also score highly, making use of local ingredients and specialities (don't miss romesco, a "delicious" sauce made of almonds, hazelnuts, tomatoes and garlic). *The "basic but endearing" Hotel Plaça de la Font* (00 34 977 246 134, www.hotelpdelafont.com) has doubles from €55.

Last-minute offers from top travel companies

New York and Toronto

Spend 3 nights at NY's Milford Plaza, then 3 nights at the 4-star Eaton Chelsea Hotel, Toronto – prices from £599pp room only (with flights). 01293-735831, www.hayesandjarvis.co.uk. Depart 5 Feb.

5-star Marrakech

A 3-night break at the Kasbah le Mirage and spa hotel costs from £169pp b&cb, 2 sharing (incl. flights). 0800-088 7018 (quote: Ref: DLH-PRJAN10-RAK). For select dates until 17 March.

Kruger highlights

This 7-night, self-drive trip includes the Panorama Route, the Sabi Sands Reserve and Tzaneen. Prices from £1,351pp all incl., with flights and car hire. 020-7112 0019, www.fleewinter.co.uk. Until April.

Cornwall for couples

Old Lanwarnick, a luxury holiday hamlet, offers a 3-night stay in the Honey Pot, a 1-bed cottage, from £300, dogs welcome. 01503-221003, www.premiercottages.co.uk. Arrive 14 February.