

May 25, 2003

Cover story: Europe's top 20 beaches: 11-20

AGUA AMARGA, Spain

Where? Within the Cabo de Gata Natural Park, in the Andalusian province of Almeria.

Why? Because this is how all beach resorts should be — low-rise and relaxed, with a smattering of bars, restaurants and hotels fronting a clean white-sand beach.

Where to stay: simple rooms right on the beach can be had at the Hostal Restaurante La Palmera (Calle Aguada; 00 34-950 138208; doubles from £30). Ask for a sea view.

Where to eat: also right on the beach is the Bar Restaurante Playa (950 138227; main courses £4-£10), which serves possibly the largest portion of grilled calamari you'll ever eat.

Don't miss: walking in the magnificently desolate sun-bleached landscapes of the Cabo de Gata Natural Park.

Getting there: Agua Amarga is about 30 miles from Almeria airport. There are summer charter flights from seven UK airports; try Avro (0870 458 2841, www.avro.co.uk), which has fares from £119.

Jonathan Cox

PALOMBAGGIA, Corsica

Where?

On the southeast coast.

Why? Backed by low-rise dunes and shaded by umbrella pines, this long arc of white sand and turquoise water is as gorgeous as the best of the South Seas, but 20 hours closer to home.

Where to stay: the family-friendly two-star Hotel San Giovanni (00 33 4-95 70 22 25, www.hotel-san-giovanni.com), 15 minutes from the beach, has a heated pool, tennis and a six-acre garden.

Where to eat: there's a terrific beach restaurant, Tamariccui (04 95 70 49 89), with log-cabin looks, a teak deck and wooden furniture. Mains from £10.

Don't miss: Tam Tam Watersports at Santa Giulia, which offers everything from kite-surfing to diving.

Getting there: Figari airport, 30 minutes away, is served by charter flights from Gatwick, Stansted and Manchester. Charter Flight Centre (020 7854 8434, www.charterflights.co.uk) has fares from £169.

David Wickers

KOUKOUNARIES, Greece

Where? In the southwest corner of the island of Skiathos.

Why? Arguably the most beautiful beach in all Greece, this half-mile crescent of gently shelving sand backs onto the Koukounaries pine forest — which means it smells good, too. It's reassuringly popular with Greek holidaymakers, but not overcrowded.

Where to stay: Travel a la Carte (01635 863030, www.travelalacarte.co.uk) has the lovely two-bedroom Villa Maria, on a pine-covered hillside behind the beach; from £389pp for a week, based on four sharing, including flights from Gatwick and transfers.

Where to eat: follow the mouthwatering smell of spit-roasted lamb and grilled octopus from the three beachfront tavernas.

Don't miss: a walk though the forest to the bird and wildlife reserve around Strofilia Lake. Getting there: Air 2000 (www.air2000.co.uk) has flights to Skiathos from Gatwick and Manchester; from about £250.

Lizzie Enfield

SILVI MARINA, Italy

Where? In Abruzzo, on the Adriatic coast.

Why? Silvi Marina looks typically Italian, with neat rows of sun loungers and umbrellas laid out across fine yellow sand. The sea is calm and clear — ideal for an early-morning swim — and the front is lined with pines and oleanders. But the big reason for flopping here is the charming, family-run Mion Hotel, a perfect base for exploring Abruzzo's Renaissance churches, medieval villages, lakes and mountains.

Where to stay: the four-star Mion (00 39-085935 0935; doubles from £67, half-board).

Where to eat: the hotel's restaurant is excellent, as is La Casina Rosa (085 828 9744), in San Pellegrino. Local specialities include guazzetto, a spicy fish soup.

Don't miss: the evening passeggiata. Wear your best shoes.

Getting there: Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com) flies from Stansted to Pescara, a 25-minute drive from Silvi Marina; from £40.

Mark Hodson

PLANOS, Greece

Where? In Lakka, on the island of Paxos.

Why? For possibly the best rock-swimming in the Med. This is an island blessed with no airport and only one halfway sandy beach, so those of us who wash up here are of necessity immune to the tyranny of sand. Planos "beach", behind Lakka's lighthouse, has high dives, rock arches both under and over the waves, deep channels, water that fizzes like Alka-Seltzer when the sea is up and coves you can only reach by swimming or by boat.

Where to stay: Planos Holidays (01373 814200, www.planos.co.uk) has two weeks in a village studio from £575pp, based on two sharing and including flights from Gatwick.

Where to eat: La Rosa di Paxos (00 30 2662 031471) has two lovely terraces overlooking the water; mains from £10.

Don't miss: this may be a turn-off for many, but the locals — and I — love the multifunction activity of diving for urchins. A knife, some olive oil, bread and a lemon are thus essential beach gear, and the idea of making the water safer for others while acquiring the makings of a feast on the rocks seems endlessly wonderful.

Getting there: there are charter flights to Corfu from 14 UK airports. Britannia Airways (0800 000747, www.britanniadirect.com) has flights from Birmingham, Gatwick and Manchester; from £154. Daily hydrofoils to Paxos take an hour.

Mark Ottaway

OXWICH BAY, Wales

Where? The Gower Peninsula.

Why? Apart from six busy weeks in summer, Oxwich Bay is a tranquil nature reserve: the magnificent expanse of sand belongs to you and the birds. This is an adult's beach — by which I mean it has emotion. It's bleak enough to contemplate the end of an unhappy love affair; intimate enough to consummate the start of another.

Where to stay and eat: room 17 at the Oxwich Bay Hotel (01792 390329; doubles £86, B&B, on weekends) has picture windows offering uninterrupted views across the bay without the need to budge from your bed. Catherine Zeta-Jones is a fan of the hotel's chef, Chris Keenan. Try his honey-glazed Welsh lamb chop with cracked pepper and blueberry sauce for dinner (£10.95), or cockles and laver bread for breakfast.

Don't miss: a short climb up off the sand. The cove is overlooked by the medieval Penrice Castle and St Illtyd's Church, stuccoed with moss and stalked by crows. Flapping lazily from the gravestones, they are pure Edgar Allan Poe. Getting there: follow the A4118 from Swansea.

Jennifer Cox

SALECCIA, Corsica

Where? On the north coast.

Why? Saleccia is an idyllic stretch of pristine beach backed by its own desert, the Désert des Agriates. The sand is soft gold, the water crystal, and even in July and August, when boats run over from St Florent, the beach is never crowded.

Where to stay: there is a camp site on the edge of the Desert des Agriates, but most people stay in St Florent. See Plage du Loto, above, for accommodation.

Where to eat: picnicking is the only option at the beach.

Don't miss: the last boat back to St Florent. It is a long walk, and the mosquitoes are merciless at sunset.

Getting there: see Plage du Loto, above.

Anthony Sattin

SWEETWATER, Greece

Where? Between Loutro and Hora Sfakion on the southwest coast of Crete, about 40 miles from Chania.

Why? Sweetwater is a hippieish, laid-back beach where you can go either clothed or nude, as you wish. It's only accessible by boat or on foot — about an hour from Loutro on the coast path — so there are rarely crowds, and it is backed by a spectacular cliff of dramatic anticlines and synclines (rock bends and curves). Best of all, under the stones at the back of the beach are springs of sweet water — hence the name.

Where to stay: the Blue House, in Loutro (00 30 2825 091127; doubles from £25), is friendly and comfortable.

Where to eat: plenty of places in Loutro; Sweetwater Beach has a minuscule taverna serving simple Cretan barbecues.

Don't miss: the lovely walk along the coast path, looking up into the sweeping skirts of the White Mountains.

Getting there: Thomas Cook (0870 750 0316, www.thomascook.com) has charter flights to Chania with JMC Air from Gatwick and Manchester; from £189.

Christopher Somerville

PORTALS VELLS, Majorca

Where? On the south coast, about 15 miles from Palma.

Why? Beyond the ruined resorts of Magaluf and Palma Nova, at the end of a lonely country road, Portals Vells is a tiny cove of fine sand swathed in pine trees. The beach dissolves into clear blue shallows, making it ideal for toddlers.

Where to stay: there are no hotels nearby. Illetas is the most attractive of the resorts within striking distance. The best hotel is the family-run Bon Sol (00 34 971 402111; doubles from £122), where Errol Flynn stayed in the 1950s.

Where to eat: the beach's cafe serves Majorcan specialities such as cap roig (scorpion fish).

Don't miss: the sun loungers. Arrive early to rent one.

Getting there: there are direct flights to Palma from 13 UK airports. BMI Baby (0870 264 2229, www.bmibaby.com) flies from Cardiff, East Midlands and Manchester; from £50. **Mark Hodson**

VOIDOKILIA, Greece

Where? In the southwest Peloponnese.

Why? The name means "cow's belly": not very elegant, but this perfectly round bay really does look like the postcards — a polished disc of turquoise stamped into the rocky coastline. Shallow, sheltered and safe for kids.

Where to stay: Villa Zoe, in the nearby village of Gialova (book through Sunvil Greece: 020 8568 4499, www.sunvil.co.uk) is a family-run pension; one week from £446pp, B&B, including flights from Gatwick.

Where to eat: a taverna next door to Villa Zoe serves traditional Greek food.

Don't miss: a nose about in the dunes. It's the only place in Europe where, if you're lucky, you'll find lurid green African chameleons.

Getting there: Kalamata airport is 25 miles away. Air 2000 (0870 240 1402, www.air2000.co.uk) has charter flights from Gatwick and Manchester; from £239. **William Gray**