

FINANCIAL TIMES

how to spend it

JULY 4 2009



LUCIA VAN DER POST'S GREAT BIG AFRICAN ADVENTURE

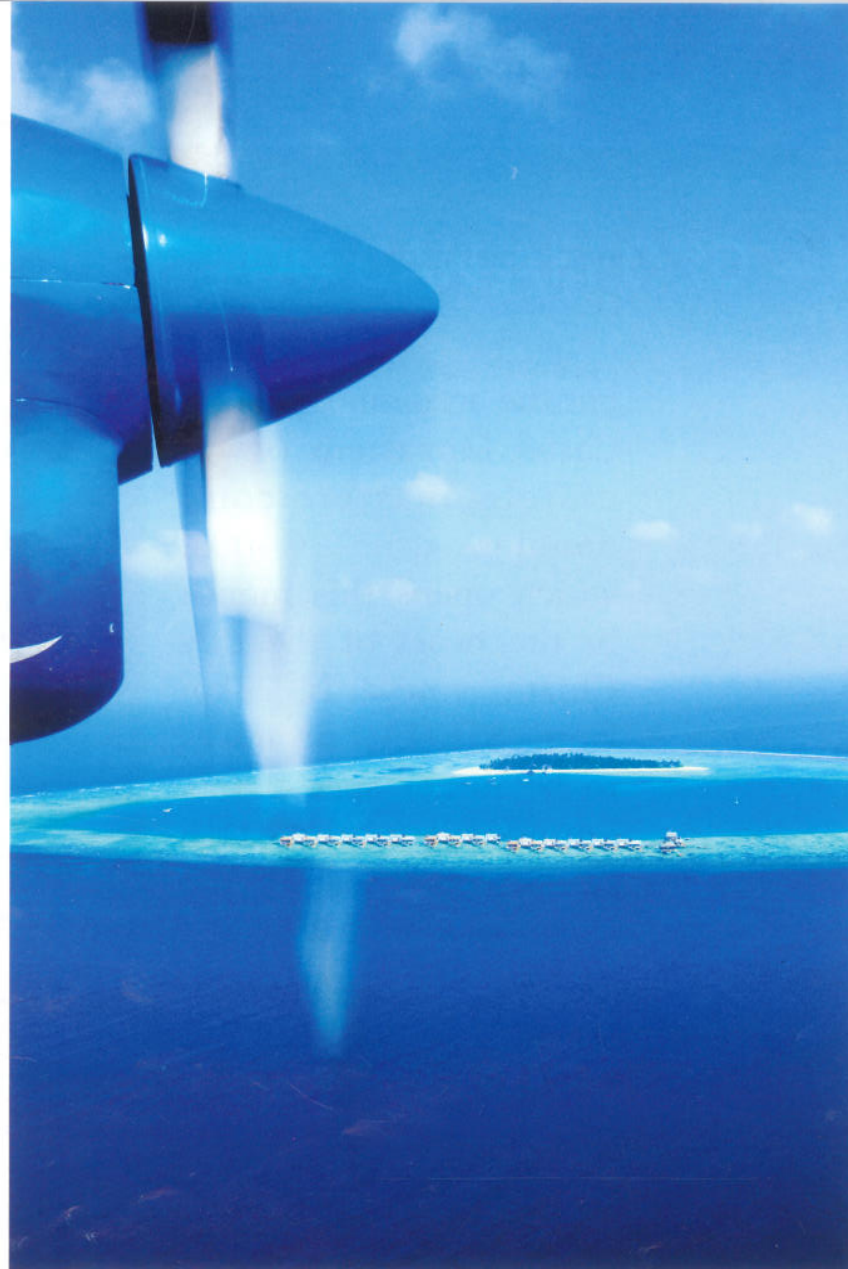
travelista

Frequent flyer Claire Wrathall **fast-tracks international intelligence on where to be and what to see.**

In Gary Shteyngart's terrific satirical novel *Absurdistan*, a hotel general manager confesses that he deliberately writes its literature in pidgin English because it charms guests. So it may be that Le Caméléon (www.lecameleonhotel.com; doubles from \$226), the first upscale boutique hotel to open on **COSTA RICA'S** fabled Caribbean coast, hired a slick US advertising agency to position it as somewhere to "whim you on a voyage" by offering "an entirely new notion of vogue vacationing in an eco-trendy site, which will become your favourite place away from home". Either way, the hotel is appealing for anyone weary of the chintzy florals so many Costa Rican hoteliers opt to furnish their hotels with. Here the 23 rooms and suites are modern, minimalist and bright white, while its location between the beach and the rainforest (hence the "jungle massage deck"), close to the small town of Puerto Viejo and 10km from the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge, makes it more alluring still.

Tasteful aesthetics also abound at the Chiawa Camp (www.chiawa.com) in **ZAMBIA**, which has celebrated its 20th anniversary with a wholesale refurbishment. A pioneer of tourism in the Lower Zambezi National Park, where it is one of the few places to offer waterborne safaris using custom-built motorised pontoons, its set-up is not so different from the one at Kenya's Mara Plains. It's now a place of spacious, insect-proof, teak-floored tents that stand on wooden decks and have split-level decks at the front and en-suite bathrooms complete with ball-and-claw slipper

baths. Audley Travel (www.audleytravel.com) offers a nine-night package from £4,741. For those who prefer proximity to nature of a more piscine kind, Angsana Velavaru (www.angsana.com; doubles from \$325) in the **MALDIVES** is not just the first hotel I've come across to have its own "marine lab", which organises coral planting, reef cleaning and marine biology classes, but the first resort in the archipelago with 34 spacious freestanding floating villas. They're anchored 1km offshore, close to the island of Angsana Velavaru in the South Nilandhe Atoll, and each has a hammock suspended over the water. Tropical Locations (www.tropical-locations.com) is offering seven nights from £2,089 >>



Above: Angsana Velavaru in the Maldives has 34 freestanding villas. Below: enjoy the man-made beach at the The Grove in Chandler's Cross.



Above: contemporary white chic presides at Le Caméléon on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast.



« per person including flights and transfers.

Not as exotic, perhaps, but the accommodation at Castel Monastero (www.castelmonastero.com; doubles from €400), which opens this month in the heart of the tidy Chianti vineyards, 23km from SIENA, promises to be rather special too. Founded in the 11th century and seat of the

Chigi Saracini family, Monastero dell'Ombrone was a tiny hilltop village crowned with a castle. Now the entire hamlet has become a hotel operated by the same company as the Forte Village on Sardinia, with its little houses converted into 76 rooms and suites, and its grandest mansion now a standalone villa. The cellars of its castello are now a restaurant, one of several which will be operated under the aegis of Gordon Ramsay.

Further south, in PUGLIA'S Itria Valley on the edge of the rugged seaside town of Polignano a Mare, another new hotel is just out of its soft opening. Borgobianco Resort and Spa (www.borgobianco.it; doubles from €245) is an elegant, privately owned 48-room property with restful white-on-white interiors. It's a 10-minute bike ride (along a cycle path) from the rocky coast, where a private beach has been created. In the meantime, there's also a seawater swimming pool, as well as a secondary indoor one in the Decléor spa.

For an odder kind of bucket-and-spade experience, The Grove Golf & Spa Resort – the English country house hotel 20 miles north-west of central London at CHANDLER'S CROSS in Hertfordshire – has installed an inland beach in its 300-acre park by importing 500 tonnes of sand, on which there are not just sun loungers and parasols but a beach-volleyball court and a sandcastle-building area for children.

Finally, for a weekend break that promises to be both musically and visually stimulating, the Austrian city of BREGENZ on the shores of Lake Constance offers two compelling attractions. First there's a retrospective of work by the sculptor Antony Gormley at its Kunsthhaus (www.kunsthhaus-bregenz.at; July 12 to October 4), to be followed next year by his installation called *Horizon Field*, in which 100 life-size cast-iron statues modelled on the artist will be arranged in a tract of dramatic alpine landscape. Then on July 22 the annual lakeside opera festival starts (www.bregenzerfestspiele.com; till August 23) – the one that features in the Bond film *Quantum of Solace* – with *Aida* being performed on its extraordinary floating stage. ♦



Above: the indoor pool and Decléor spa at Borgobianco Resort in Puglia. Below: formerly a hilltop village, Castel Monastero in Siena is now a 76-room hotel.



Above: the pioneering Chiawa Camp in Zambia celebrates its 20th anniversary. Below: Antony Gormley's *Critical Mass II* on show at Kunsthhaus in Bregenz, Austria.



YVES BRESSON/ANTONY GORMLEY, COURTESY OF GALERIE THADDEUS ROPAC (PARIS/SALZBURG) AND WHITE CUBE (LONDON).

