



TOUR DE FORCE

What's your dream destination this year? Don't go anywhere until you read our ultimate travel guide for 2014. **Angelina Villa-Clarke** unearths the latest openings, most happening places and untapped exotic islands waiting to be discovered



Marrakech

Luxury offerings close to Morocco's bohemian city are upping their game for 2014. Just opened at the sumptuous Selman hotel is the Espace Vitalité Chenot spa (selman-marrakech.com).

Adding to the palatial surrounds, all designed by Jacques Garcia, the exclusive spa offers Henri Chenot's signature biontology, which considers each client's wellness as a whole. It also boasts four hydrotherapy rooms, an oversized hammam and two pools.

Located in the greenery of the Palmeraie of Marrakech, is the new five-star Tigmiza Hotel (tigmiza-hotels.co.uk). Guests can stay in a choice of Kasbah suites, hidden pavilions in the bamboo grove or gorgeous villas with their own pools and gardens in Le Village. From its vegetable garden to its terrace with views over the city, its flamboyant cinema to in-house boutique, each area has been immaculately designed to ooze character and charm.

For the ultimate party stay at Ezzahra (ezzahra-morocco.com), a private mansion for up to 16 guests. The staffed house comes complete with a chef, chauffeur and beauty therapists, meaning you can indulge in as many treatments as you'd like during your stay, while the in-house concierge has the hottest insider tips.

Lastly, 22km south west of Marrakech is the new opening from Grace Hotels, due to open in February. Grace Marrakech (gracehotels.com) is found in 15 hectares of Moroccan countryside and comes with its own farmstead with olive trees, vegetable gardens and horse stables. The ideal rural escape, it is made up of 18 suites and lofts, a traditional farm kitchen, library, outdoor heated pool and spa, all with a stylish North African design ethos.



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Cambodia

With one of the most idyllic settings in the world, Song Saa Private Island is the ultimate castaway retreat (songsaa.com). The only top-end resort in the Koh Rong islands in Cambodia, it won't be long before this largely undiscovered area is on everyone's must-see list. Found off the coast of Sihanoukville, the resort offers eco-luxe villas with outdoor showers, an Ila spa and an overwater restaurant offering experimental Khmer dishes. Owned by Brit couple, Rory and Melita Hunter, Song Saa offers a glamorous green sensibility with meticulously thought-out details. Many of the interiors have been created from local or recycled materials – from driftwood columns to fishing boats used as wall

art, in-room toiletries are by Aesop and the Champagne bar is just the spot to watch the sun go down. The resort is also being recognised as a pioneering new model for sustainability, at the luxury end, with the owners launching a separate organisation, the Song Saa Foundation, to focus on conservation and work with local communities (songsaafoundation.org). For a once-in-a-lifetime experience, book into one of the healing retreats based around Buddhist philosophy. Guests can experience a mix of ancient healing practices, such as chakra alignment, reiki, ayurveda, yoga, guided meditations, as well as specially prepared spa cuisine and nurturing activities. Go before everyone else does.





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The British Virgin Islands

Pristine, unspoiled and stunningly beautiful, the British Virgin Islands have always been the port of call for a mix of travel connoisseurs. Yacht owners set off for the hidden bays and tranquil waters while jetsetters are lured to one of the blissful private island resorts. Forget Barbados, St Barts and Mustique – as lovely as they are – there’s a frisson of excitement happening in the waters of the BVIs this year.

Ever since Rockefeller founded the eco-conscious Little Dix Bay (littledixbay.com) back in the 1960s – putting the island or Virgin Gorda on the map – the hotel has been a hotspot for the world’s glitterati. Now owned by the ultra-slick Rosewood Group, it is gearing up for a year of 50th anniversary celebrations, which include new yoga and fitness retreats in the cliff-top spa and five seafront super suites. Interestingly, instead of increasing its inventory, as most hotel brands do, Rosewood has taken the view that less is more. It has carved the spacious suites out of 10 smaller versions, in order to offer a heightened experience to fewer guests.

Meanwhile on the eastern tip of Virgin Gorda, Oil Nut Bay (oilnutbay.com) is a new luxury development offering glorious villas to purchase and suites to rent, one of which has been designed by Fendi Casa. It also boasts the state-of-the-art YCCS Marina, the only superyacht marina in the BVIs.

Of course, you can’t think of the Virgin Islands without Richard Branson coming to mind. This year also saw the reopening of The Great House, on the infamous Necker Island, which Branson owns (neckerisland.virgin.com). The two-year renovation came after a fire razed the sprawling family mansion to the ground. Keeping its Balinese theme, it’s full of the top-end details you’d expect a multi-millionaire’s house to have: from rooftop Jacuzzis to eight-foot sofas with stunning sea views. Gourmet chefs, a spa, pool pavilion and an additional six private houses add to the mix. But it’s really the stunning location and panoramic views that give Necker Island its true buzz. But this type of exclusivity comes at a price: the whole island can be hired on an all-inclusive basis from £40,000 per night for up to 30 guests.



Spain

Culinary tourism was the buzzword of 2013 and our appetite for a foodie fix shows no sign of waning. Spain is still our go-to place to fill our stomachs. San Sebastián, of course, is known for its superlative tapas and fine restaurant offerings. Head to Astoria 7 (astoria7hotel.com), a boutique hotel converted from a former cinema, to sample its tailor-made gastro tours. Guests can choose from pintxos tastings in the old quarter, shopping for ingredients with a chef followed by a masterclass in Basque cuisine, and wine trips into the Rioja region.

Having knocked the crown off Noma, as the world's best restaurant, El Celler de Can Roca in Girona (cellercanroca.com) has put the Medieval Costa Brava town firmly in the spotlight with food connoisseurs. Base yourself at the design-led PGA Catalunya Resort (pgacatalunya.com) 15 minutes away, and you'll be perfectly situated to feast at the 22 Michelin-starred restaurants that can be found in a 50km radius. Made up of open-plan villas offering state-of-the-art living, the resort offers a renowned concierge service as well as two of the world's best golf courses. You can even get a private dinner cooked by in-house chefs in your own villa. However, you can't stay here and not explore some of the world's best eateries in Girona. Make sure you visit Jordi Roca's incredible ice-cream parlour Rocambolesc (rocambolesc.com) and Massana (restaurantmassana.com), a stand-out Michelin-starred restaurant.

Persia

There's something terribly old-fashioned and romantic about a classic rail journey. Factor in undiscovered ancient lands, windswept landscapes and historical landmarks and you'll experience a truly epic trip – one in which the journey is just as fantastic as the destination. Book your passage on Wexas Travel's Jewels of Persia itinerary, and you'll have the chance of doing just that. Travelling from the banks of the Danube to the shores of the Bosphorus, this unique journey on board the luxurious Danube Express takes in destinations that are rarely experienced by the Western visitor. Taking you through Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, before entering Persia, this is the first and only private European train to be allowed to enter Iran. The 15-day voyage is just the ticket to find your inner pioneering spirit.

(wexas.com)



Central and South America

While many will be clamouring to get tickets to Rio this year for the World Cup, our tip for non-football fans is to head north to the just-opened Butterfly House Bahia (butterflyhousebahia.com). The boutique retreat, in the untapped region of the Maraú Peninsula, northern Brazil, has just eight thatched villas set in tropical gardens, a palm-ensconced swimming pool and a restaurant. Sprinkled with antique French ceramics, homespun Moroccan rugs and whimsical Indian *objets d'art*, each villa has its own distinct look, accentuated by an impressive collection of Brazilian modern art. Also opening its doors in Panama is a new Waldorf Astoria, the first for the brand in Latin America. The hotel is just steps away from Calle Uruguay – the heart of the city's entertainment area – and offers lavish rooms, four restaurants and a spa with a gold mosaic-tiled swimming pool. Perfect for discovering a new city with a Latino beat (waldorfasteriapanama.com).

Design aficionados with a penchant for wine should head to the new Endémico (designhotels.com) in the heart of Baja California, Mexico. Situated in the village of Valle de Guadalupe, just a 90-minute drive from San Diego, California. The region is also known as *el otro México* (the other Mexico), being neither a part of California, and unlike much of Mexico. The area is also known as Mexico's premier wine-growing region and, with its old fishing and mission towns, offers an interesting blend of modern and traditional Mexico. Owned by Grupo Habita, the rustic but chic hotel is made up of 20 stand alone cabins, designed to blend into the natural surroundings. Traditional clay fireplaces allow guests to sit under a blanket of stars and sip regional wines while being warmed by a roaring fire.



China

The tourism industry in China is one of the most buoyant in the world with many top hotel brands opening their doors across the vast country to a growing affluent market. Our pick of the bunch includes the new Four Seasons Hotel Shenzhen, found in the vibrant city of Shenzhen, a UNESCO City of Design, and home to an exciting art scene (*fourseasons.com*). Expect pan-Asian cuisine at the hotel's Foo restaurant, gadget-filled rooms with views over the city and ultra-modern interiors.

Meanwhile, over in Hong Kong is the new Mira Moon, part of the Design Hotels crop (*designhotels.com*). Located in the upcoming and quirky area of Wan Chai, the hotel has been designed by Wanders & Woo, under the creative direction of Marcel Wanders. The sleek hotel uses Chinese motifs and icons throughout, such as the peony, the moon and jade rabbit, against a rich red and lacquered white colour palette. Smart technology includes in-room Air Play music systems and pre-installed apps on iPad minis, to access hotel services and the city's latest hotspots. Sure to be a destination in its own right is the hotel's 50-seat restaurant Super Giant, which serves Chinese-Spanish fusion tapas in a fanciful setting.



CLASSIC CITIES

Putting the classic European city trip back on our radar for 2014, are these stellar openings

Hotelier Adrian Zecha's new Venetian venture Aman Canal Grande (*amanresorts.com*) sees him pit his pared-back style against the grand surroundings of a 16th-century Venetian palazzo. Modern B&B Italia furniture is found against gilded cherubs and ornate wallpapers, while guests can lie in bed and gaze up to original 18th-century frescoed ceilings painted by master artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. Full of delicious surprises, such as secret gardens and a unique Thai-Italian menu in the upper salon restaurant, this gives an unexpected and delightful perspective on Venice.

Meanwhile, making its mark in Saint Petersburg is the utterly glamorous Four Seasons Hotel Lion Palace (*fourseasons.com*). Years of meticulous restoration has seen the historic Lion Palace, next to Saint Isaac's Cathedral and immortalised in an Alexander Pushkin poem – be transformed into an impressive hotel. Returned to its former glory, the formidable entrance sets the scene and makes way for elegant interiors, period details, a chi chi vodka and Champagne bar and a luxury spa, found in the hotel's original courtyard.

Finally, The Thief in Oslo (*thethief.com*) is making its name as one of Europe's leading art hotels. Oslo's first waterfront hotel, in the rejuvenated Tjuvholmen area, it boasts an impressive collection of contemporary art handpicked by a renowned curator; Warhol's *Ladies and Gentlemen* and works by Fiona Banner and Tony Cragg are just a few. Adding to the avant-garde spirit is furniture designed by up-and-coming Norwegian designers, video art on demand and smart phones to be used as room keys. New for 2014 is the hotel's own series of collaborations – one of which is with Mags from pop band A-ha. Remember him? He has designed an inventive suite for the hotel, which goes by the name Apparattjik, after the supergroup he formed with Coldplay bassist Guy Berryman.