

The Sunday Times

January 14, 2007

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Suspension by David Patrick Williams: I really liked this image because it reminded me of when I was a kid and summer was a time to take chances and expand your horizons

The top 20 beach holidays

Whether you want surf, sunbathing or scenery, Mark Hodson has found your perfect stretch of sand

Close your eyes and think of your best ever summer holiday.

What do you see? We'd bet our last bottle of Fanta there's a beach in there somewhere. Maybe a bucket and spade, or a freshly waxed surfboard, perhaps a couple of sun beds and a bottle of nicely chilled rosé.

Whatever your idea of the perfect beach, you'll find it here. We've scoured the coastlines of Europe and the UK to find 20 of the best beach holidays. So what on earth are you waiting for?

The water's gorgeous. Last one in's a sissy!

Unless stated, all prices are per person for a week in May/August, including flights from a London airport. For regional departure options, contact the tour operator

1 TROPEA, CALABRIA

Like a fractured metatarsal on the foot of Italy, the Tropea promontory juts out into the turquoise Tyrrhenian Sea, its superb white-sand beaches shielded by high cliffs. The town of Tropea pulls off a rare trick by managing to be both fashionable and unspoilt, a maze of steep narrow streets, Renaissance churches and yellow-stone palazzi.

The pick of the hotels is Porto Pargos, a converted villa with beamed ceilings, a colonnaded terrace and a private beach. There are just 18 rooms, and it has two pools, a tennis court and a bowling green. The price is £861/£1,134, half-board, excluding flights and car hire, with Real Holidays (020 7359 3938, www.realholidays.co.uk). Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com) flies from Stansted to Lamezia, 38 miles away.

2 BENIRRAS, IBIZA

Benirras, in the north of Ibiza, is about as far as you can get from the fevered fleshpots of San Antonio.

Here, at the end of a long and winding mountain road, lies a perfect slice of sand, bookmarked by cliffs and overlooking a deep, calm bay.

In the 1960s, Benirras became infamous as the scene of drug-fuelled orgies.

Today, it attracts a stylish mix of young Spaniards, Italians and Swedes, though the hippie vibe remains; each day, the mellow sunset is hailed by a chorus of bongo-players.

Benirras has been protected from hotel developers, but there are several upmarket villas nearby, including one owned by a DJ, which has six bedrooms, a private pool, a music room and a sundeck.

It costs £1,813/£3,860 per week, excluding flights, with Holiday-Rentals.co.uk (www.holiday-rentals.co.uk/67780). Airlines flying to Ibiza include EasyJet (www.easyjet.com), Jet2 (0871 226 1737, www.jet2.com) and Monarch Scheduled (0870 040 5040, www.flymonarch.com)

3 ILE DE RE, FRANCE

A holiday on the Ile de Ré, a narrow, sun-bleached island connected to the west coast of France by a long road bridge, feels like a return to a less hurried, more innocent age. It's an island of sand dunes and sunflowers, pine forests and poppy fields, vineyards and fishing villages, all connected by 60 miles of cycle paths.

Just about everyone on the island gets around by bike, with smaller children pulled along in two-wheeled trailers. After long days paddling in the sea and building sandcastles, you can pedal to one of many friendly harbourside cafes and scoff platefuls of fresh oysters and mussels.

Do as the French do and rent a house. In the village of La Flotte, a three-bedroom cottage for up to six people costs a total of £795/£1,582, including car-ferry crossings, with VFB Holidays (01452 716 831, www.vfbholidays.co.uk)

4 CIRALI, TURKEY