

Extraordinary Escapes

Tropical destinations have long been a luxury travel staple, but here's some help if you're looking for an island getaway that offers more unique experiences than just the standard crystal-clear beach and infinity pool.

By Kelly Potts

Two high-end travel companies are putting new twists on classic beach vacations, even offering trips to locations that are known as the most private in the world, in order to turn your island getaway into a luxurious and unforgettable escape. From a tailored voyage inspired by the popular musical, *Hamilton*, to a journey to a remote location that only offers weekly flights, these are extraordinary island escapes designed for the most curious and thoughtful of travelers.

FRENCH POLYNESIA

Luxury travel companies Smithsonian Journeys and Brown + Hudson both agree that a journey to the islands of French Polynesia has much more to offer than just breathtaking beaches. "The beautiful blue weather, inviting islands and interesting history make it a destination that is truly magical," says Smithsonian Journeys' Vice President, Program Management, Karen Ledwin.

Tahiti and Bora Bora are just two stops on the Smithsonian Journeys' Voyage to French Polynesia, a 10- to 11-day trip aboard a 148-guest, four-masted sailing yacht. "Traveling by sailing ship is truly the best way to experience French Polynesia," says Ledwin. "Sailing aboard a small, four-masted yacht, along with learning about the culture and folklore of this amazing destination are aspects of this trip that every client will remember."

Guests can expect to roam the black-sand beaches of Tahiti, explore ancient stone temples in Huahine, and visit a vanilla plantation and black pearl farm on Taha'a during their cruise, which starts at \$7,795. "Our unique itinerary allows travelers to delve into the history of the area, as well as appreciate its natural beauty," says Ledwin. "And, of course, watching the most amazing sunset from the ship's deck is truly a sight to see!"

Chris Brunning, senior trip planner at Brown + Hudson, particularly enjoys two things about Tahiti: "its incredible beauty, but also the unexpected quirks." Those quirks are put at the forefront when clients explore the islands of French Polynesia through Brown + Hudson's services, with the chance to enjoy the unique beauty and rich culture of the location through once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

"We show clients a different side that visitors often miss," says Brunning, noting that clients can learn Polynesian dance, surf with champion Raimana van Bastolaer on board his boat, paddle by traditional canoe and learn how to fish in the native style, all before taking to the lagoon off Bora Bora, where they can encounter sharks, rays and turtles. Travelers also have the chance to enjoy a meal in a real family home in the valley with fresh ingredients from an organic plantation, or explore the interior of Moorea, with its hidden waterfalls and lush valleys.

Brunning recommends a 10- to 14-day trip to explore multiple islands in French



Billed as the "most private" private island experience on earth, Brunning notes that Gladden Island "elevates Central America/Caribbean to Maldives-style levels of luxury." He recommends combining your trip with mind-blowing archaeology in Guatemala, a mere helicopter flight away.

Polynesia. The destination, which they note is a perfect spot for honeymooners or families, will offer "sheer, jaw-dropping beauty, crystal clear waters, spectacular mountainous topography, rich culture and equally rich marine ecosystems."

PAPUA (NEW GUINEA/WEST PAPUA)

Looking to explore a new location that your friends have never been? Brunning recommends 10 to 14 days in Papua. He notes that this edgy, untamed location with indigenous tribes is ideal for "the most intrepid of explorers, and those who have been everywhere else."

Brown + Hudson notes that the unspoiled nature found throughout Papua gives travelers the unique chance to discover hundreds of species they have never

seen before — and even the possibility of finding some species that no one else has. Visitors will also encounter hundreds of distinct native societies deep in the jungle, all with unique languages and cultures.

The high-end travel company makes this destination even more appealing by offering the chance to chart new territory on the map, encounter cave-dwelling people, take part in traditional ceremonies and even experience wilderness survival training with a renowned explorer.

Brown + Hudson can enhance the trip by pairing you with local guides to take you down the Karawari River by outrigger canoes and arrange an award-winning filmmaker to accompany you throughout your journey in Papua to document all of your expeditions. →

PHOTOS COURTESY BROWN + HUDSON



Papua New Guinea



"You're in one of the least explored regions on the planet and can pretty well count on being the first outsider to experience many places," Brown + Hudson says of Papua New Guinea.



Papua New Guinea

PHOTO COURTESY BROWN + HUDSON



St. Lucia is just one location guests will visit on Smithsonian Journeys' Hamilton's Caribbean cruise, offering the chance to soak in mineral-rich mud baths or tour the island's iconic Piton mountains, Gros and Petit Piton.

PHOTO COURTESY SMITHSONIAN JOURNEYS



Gladden Island

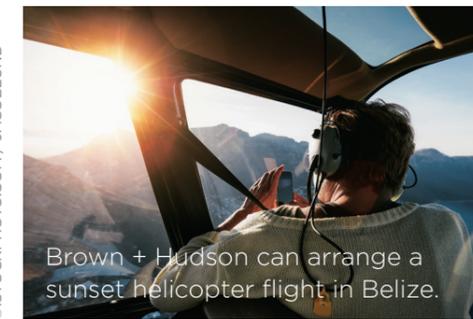
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Cocos Island

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Brown + Hudson can arrange a sunset helicopter flight in Belize.

HAMILTON'S CARIBBEAN

Inspired by the popular musical *Hamilton*, Smithsonian Journey's Caribbean cruise gives guests the chance to explore Alexander Hamilton's early life in Nevis with a Hamilton expert accompanying the journey. "Our Caribbean cruise is a long-standing favorite with our guests," says Ledwin. "Guests have the opportunity to explore Hamilton's childhood home, which is now the Nevis House of Assembly and a history museum."

The eight-day trip from Barbados to Antigua takes place aboard the 68-guest Sea Cloud, a ship that was once owned by Heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post, which features historical details and modern amenities. Ledwin notes that the ship is an experience in itself, and many travelers decide to join the cruise because of the opportunity to board the legendary Sea Cloud.

In addition to learning all about Hamilton's connection to this destination, guests can also enjoy the top sites on

each island visited during the cruise. "We offer opportunities for guests to pursue individual interests, from joining an architectural walking tour in St. Eustatius to visiting the exotic gardens of Fort Napoleon on Guadeloupe," says Ledwin. "The ability to visit eight islands and gain insight into each destination's unique history and culture tends to be an eye-opening experience."

GLADDEN ISLAND, BELIZE

Described by Brunning as "the 'world's most private island' with no other guests in sight," Gladden Island is the ideal location for a true island getaway. Located on the widest section of the Belize Barrier Reef in the Caribbean Sea, Brunning says that this trip is ideal for honeymooners or beach bums, but recommends a stay of just four to five days due to the islands tiny size and sense of isolation.

Gladden Island is home to just one elegant villa, with staff residing on a sep-

arate smaller island, giving guests the opportunity to freely explore and enjoy the incredible views — what Brunning refers to as the island's 50 shades of blue. He notes that visitors will enjoy "a true Castaway-style experience."

"Guests can explore the world's second largest barrier reef, sky dive into the Great Blue Hole, or simply do nothing," Brunning says. Brown + Hudson notes that the Great Blue Hole, a giant sinkhole in the ocean floor, is the perfect location for diving among Caribbean reef sharks and Midnight Parrotfish. After a day on the water, Brown + Hudson can arrange a helicopter flight to watch the sun set over all of the islands of the Belize Barrier Reef before heading back to your own private island.

ST. HELENA, BRITISH OVERSEAS TERRITORY

Known as the location of Napoleon Bonaparte's exile and death, the British Overseas Territory of St. Helena was one

of the most isolated and inaccessible islands on the planet until just last year when regular commercial flights to and from the island began.

Brunning recommends a stay of at least a week since flights are only available once weekly from South Africa, unless, he jokes, you'd prefer to swim home. This newfound accessibility is precisely why he recommends a journey to St. Helena.

The remote island offers many things to do during your week-long stay. Brunning says that visitors can combine the trip with a flying safari on Namibia's Skeleton Coast, enjoy deep sea game fishing, diving in 'The Galapagos of the Atlantic,' trace Napoleon's footsteps, explore the volcanic landscape and soak up the quasi-British culture with a local character on your journey.

COCOS ISLAND, COSTA RICA

Located off the shore of Costa Rica, Brunning refers to Cocos Island as "one of the best places in the world to dive with

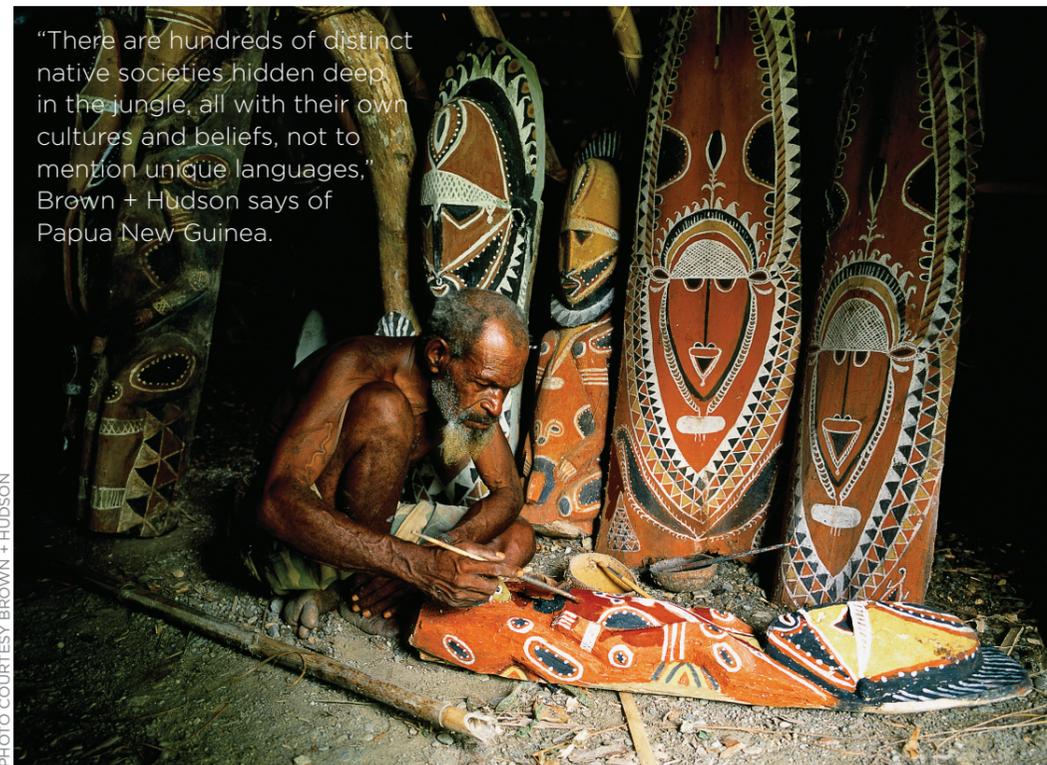


PHOTO COURTESY BROWN + HUDSON

"There are hundreds of distinct native societies hidden deep in the jungle, all with their own cultures and beliefs, not to mention unique languages," Brown + Hudson says of Papua New Guinea.

marine 'big game,'" noting that it's like an ocean safari. This little-known, remote island, a designated National Park only inhabited by park rangers, is a great location for adventurous souls and divers.

While on the island, guests can "pilot their own private submersible, get involved in marine conservation projects like fighting the illegal shark fin trade, or enjoy surfing

incredible off-shore breaks," Brunning says, noting that a few days in this location is sufficient to experience all it has to offer.

In addition to all of the adventures available, Brunning notes that his personal favorite thing about Cocos Island is the world underneath the surface. "You can snorkel with manta rays, whale sharks and even orcas," he says.