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## Beach: Bathing by numbers

A holiday to satisfy a culture vulture and a beach bum? Not easy. But then Jaime Gill discovered Croatia

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The Polo set ... Korcula town beach, Croatia. Photograph: Alamy

Take one Geordie, who loves spending his holidays slowly parboiling in factor 8 by the sea. Take one long-distance Lisbonite boyfriend, who can do that almost all year and prefers a frenzied week of sightseeing and activity. Put them together to decide their first summer holiday and what do you get? Well, let's gloss over the inglorious argument and move on to the glorious compromise: Croatia.

With its convulsive past and rugged coastline - a thousand islands spraying from it like a meteor trail - Dalmatia offers a dizzying combination of history and sun-drenched beaches. Rocky beaches, true, but with unrivalled settings. Take Bacvice Bay (beach 1) just 10 minutes' walk from Ana and Miki's Guesthouse, ideally located in Split's charming, higgledy-piggledy sidestreets.

Yes, there are other beaches where you can stretch out in golden, bonewarming heat and swim in sea that feels as gentle as spring sunshine on the back of your neck. There may even be bars with the same strange geometric architecture, delicious mojitos and captivating views as Bacvicebar. But there's nowhere else you can spend a lazy afternoon watching a unique sport, picigin, the peculiar and almost indescribable combination of waterpolo and pingpong invented here.

Beach 2 was just four hours away by Jadrolinija's dawn ferry, winding gorgeously through that meteor tail, to the island of Korcula. Though it markets itself as the birthplace of Marco Polo, Korcula Town would do just as well to emphasise its nearby coves, from where the gentlest of swims unveils a jaw-dropping view of uncannily well-preserved medieval walls and fearsome forts. One of which doubles as a spectacular cocktail lounge, Massimo, reached by a terrifyingly rickety stepladder, though well worth it for the panoramic Adriatic sunsets.

Beach 3 lay underneath Odisej, the only hotel on the island of Mljet, population 1,100. It's one of Croatia's most verdant national parks and where, according to legend, Odysseus lay bewitched for seven years (just ask hotel concierge, Antun, who doubles as the island's published historian). Sip a cocktail at the bar, then dip into the crystalline, body temperature waters and you'll wonder why Odysseus went back to frumpy Penelope.

By fluke we saved the best till last - Apartment St Jakov, run by the gracious Jelka and her extraordinarily welcoming family. It is perfectly situated between Dubrovnik and the

deserted, densely forested island of Lokrum with its craggy, whisper-silent, private inlets (beaches 4 and 5).

Lazing on Belvedere beach (6), with its vibrant bars, gregarious locals, heart-jolting watersports and sublime view of Dubrovnik, you'd never guess the whole stretch of visible coast had been bombed just 17 years before. The only clues are the shelled ruins of the hotel directly above. But perhaps this is Croatia's secret: it knows how to wear its tumultuous past closely, but lightly. And did I mention the beaches? Next year's row will be about how to top this.

**Jaime Gill** from London has won a trip to Damascus with Black Tomato.

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## Hot tropics

### Costa Rica

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The beach near La Cusinga Lodge, Costa Rica

La Cusinga Lodge, sandwiched between the vaulting canopy trees of the Marino Ballena national park and the vast, coral-rich Pacific coastline, is carved out of a beautiful, unspoilt chunk of tropical forest. It is one of several rainforest ecolodges in the Zona Sur, a landscape punctuated by beaches, rugged mountains and multicoloured flora and fauna, and features seven hydro or solar-powered cabins, made of wood from the lodge's sustainable teak plantation.

We head out on a gentle trek through the surrounding forest with a local guide, who points out flashes of bright feathers and a mere glimpse of the elusive Baird's tapir. We spend the afternoon on a bright white beach; the only other visitors are hundreds of tiny white crabs which disappear into punctures in the wet sand as our feet approach. It is a far cry from the surfer and property developer-heavy Pacific beaches further north.

The lodge has lent us a pair of bodyboards so we paddle out to catch the odd wave, scouring the trees for sloths as we're whisked into shore.

The dining area is outside, overlooking the national park. Papaya and casado (literally "married person"), a plate of fish, salad and red and white beans, are washed down with, a cool long drink of fruit and ice blended with milk or water. Everything has been caught or grown on site.

As we fall asleep, howler monkeys let out throaty laughs just inches from our window. There isn't a human sound to be heard.

**Jonathan Lee, Westbury, Wiltshire**

• La Cusinga Lodge (+5062 770-2549; [lacusingalodge.com](http://lacusingalodge.com))

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## Like a Rolling Stone

### Miami

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If you enjoy being woken up by the insistent "oms" of your naked record-industry neighbour and his barely legal girlfriend then Miami Beach is the place for you.

Florida is the place Americans go to retire. The Standard, a boutique hotel-cum-spa by Andre Balazs, tucked away on the causeway that links to the mainland, is where you retire to if you're a Rolling Stone. It's set in gardens complete with totem pole, Roman waterfall hot tub and a saltwater pool overlooking the bay; locals drop by on their yachts to make use of the spa facilities at the Centre for Integral Living (what it's integral to is anyone's guess), or ingest a tiger prawn or two in the outdoor restaurant. Pool-side is the ideal people-watching spot, where you'd be hard pushed to find a bigger age gap between the sexes.

You need a devil-may-care attitude and a crate of St Tropez not to feel self-conscious in Miami Beach, but at the Standard there's no such thing as judgmental. If you can afford to be there you've earned it and the cabana boys dispense towels and sunbeds on a first-come-first-served basis to everyone regardless of how many entries in the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame they have.

The hotel is a five-minute drive to South Beach (SoBe) but after a day or two in the seclusion of the Standard, the boardwalk seems hectic and we miss the constant smell of cedar and the echo of ambient whale music. Miami nightlife is infamous, but it's not immediately apparent where "the scene" actually is. Many clubs are attached to the hotels on Collins Avenue and Washington Avenue and, surprisingly for the city that hosts the Ultra Music Festival, the overwhelming genre is "lounge". One of the latest clubs to open is called Heathrow Lounge - who says the Americans don't do irony?

**Liz Stephens, London**

• The Standard (+305 673-1717; [standardhotels.com/miami](http://standardhotels.com/miami)).

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## Something blue

### Croatia

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My fiancée put his foot down when he found me on the pavement outside the church, trying to estimate the trajectory of confetti in a south-westerly breeze. Organising our wedding, I had become a bridezilla and he was concerned for my nuptial health. I was prescribed sun, sea and an embargo on mobile phones, and taken on holiday to the Croatian island of Kolocep, where neither of the two shops stocked bridal magazines.

It was thirty minutes by speedboat from Dubrovnik, and as we approached the main bay of Donje Celò, with its rocky vistas and calm blue waters, I forgot all about the vicar's lisp and his inability to pronounce my name. We checked in to the only hotel on the island, and for the next four days enjoyed the heat and sunshine. After breakfast of pastries and coffee my fiancée would retire to the shade of our balcony while I loped down to the pool to baste myself like a chicken in 30C heat. It was a peaceful area bar the occasional invasion of kids, who triggered the inevitable concerns about wedding budgets and how much a toddler was likely to eat.

Thankfully, young families weren't inclined to walk a mile across the island's saddle to Gornje Celò, for lunch at the island's best konoba (a family run inn). If the sound of crashing waves and the smell of lemon groves and thyme weren't enough to calm the soul then a litre of rosé and local gurnard served with garlicky chips always did the trick.

By day five, I was still waking at 3am and attempting to draft a speech for the groom, but I'd resigned myself to being a fat yet happy bride.

**Hannah Begbie, London**

• Hotel Villas Kolocep (+385 20 757 025; [kolocep.com](http://kolocep.com)).

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## Greek charm

### Corfu

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I was given a set of nail polishes when I was 11. In varying shades of pink, they were named after exotic island destinations: Corfu, Corsica and Capri. "Corfu" was the pinkest and prettiest of them all and in my mind became synonymous with glamour.

Flash forward and I'm finally going. Two friends and I hire a villa on secluded Kaminaki beach where there are only a handful of properties, two sleepy tavernas, a tiny general store and a few elderly couples and families sheltering under sun umbrellas. We were desperate to avoid the more touristy parts of Corfu but maybe went overboard in our search for quiet.

Our routine of morning swims and days spent reading and chatting by the pool makes the week fly by, but by Thursday, cabin - or perhaps cove - fever kicks in so we dine at the Taverna Agni up the coast, whose staff collect us by speedboat. We're greeted on the steps of the taverna by George, an adroit 20-something flirt. We should know better

than to fall for the clichéd charms of a Greek waiter but he's such a sweetie that we agree to return on Saturday night.

We do, and get tipsy over dinner then pile into speedboats with a couple of other patrons and George. At a beach bar down the coast we contribute in our own small way to the drunken party scene we were so sniffy about back home. Oops.

Next day, we reluctantly snake up the steep road away from Kaminaki. Suntanned and happy, I think I've proven the merit in my method of choosing holiday destinations. Corsica and Capri are calling ...

**Bridget Beale, London**

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## Return ticket

### Goa

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"Never go back" is usually good advice for anyone nostalgic for idyllic holiday spots visited long ago. But desperately needed R&R and an indecently cheap last-minute break have returned me to Goa, where I spent the winters 20 years ago.

A motorcycle taxi takes me to Anjuna to revisit old haunts. I'm disappointed to find the beach front crowded with bars and stalls. The Shore Bar, where everyone would congregate at sunset for chillums and trance music has been renamed Sunset. None of my old cronies are there and I feel bereft and old. My old house is derelict and unused now that Anjuna is packed with hotels.

Walking back over the headland, my spirits lift; there are lizards, cashew-nut trees and colourful birds. There's a crashing sound in the bush and a hanuman langur lopes across the path, stopping to stare at me. Sea eagles soar and dolphins break the ocean's surface as the setting sun glows red.

In the noisy chaos of Calangute, the beach seems remarkably free of hassling vendors but I miss the cows stealing my fruit. I move to the southern end, where a maze of quiet lanes contains small family guesthouses. Victor and Lourdes, a Christian couple, run Vilo Villa - the kitchen is closed (there are no other guests) but they happily open up the best room for me and offer a huge discount. It's time for evening mass, and the little church is packed, the congregation overflowing into the square outside. The mass, in Konkani, sounds beautiful.

On my last night, sitting on the balcony listening to the surf and watching huge bats swoop past the full moon, I reflect that I've learnt another lesson in that way India has of teaching you. I've chilled, exercised and eaten well in a beautiful place with lovely people. No, you can't go back, but if you are prepared to grow and change, you might find yourself going forward.

**Bob Williams, London**

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## Big fat wedding

### Greece

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We were welcomed to the undeveloped island of Kythera with handshakes and kisses. It was an effusive greeting, but this was no ordinary beach holiday - it had a Greek/Scottish wedding as its highlight.

In the hamlet of Avlemonas, white tavernas clustered round a sparkling blue cove, a casual visitor might have been surprised by the number of red-faced Scots chatting at the tables.

The celebrations kicked off with a moonlit barbecue at Kaladi, a beach dramatically framed by rock stacks, and so the wedding day began by slumbering off a hangover in the shade. Occasionally we scuttled over scorching sand to snorkel in clear sea.

Those brave enough to wear thick kilts under the Greek sun provoked incredulous looks as we climbed into the minibus for the journey up the steep hill to where a white church

bathed in the peachy light of the sinking sun. An island idyll was spread out below us, a scent of wild thyme filled the air, and the kilted groom waited for his Greek bride.

Flurries of rice and glasses of sweet liqueur marked the end of the ceremony. When the party arrived back in Avlemonas it proceeded down the only street to the applause of all the Saturday night diners. It struck me that I felt like I was in a movie and that's what all weddings strive to do - make the participants feel like they are stars for the day.

**Simon Stronach, Edinburgh**

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## Texas seashore

### USA



Road to armadillo... Arkansas wildlife refuge, Texas

My expectations of Texan beaches were not high. Blackened sand, derricks looming through the haze and the occasional passing oil tanker didn't sound like the makings of a relaxing weekend at the seaside.

I won't pretend that it wasn't a bit like that, but between the refineries, smokestacks and pylons lie little patches of unspoilt Gulf Coast where alligators lurk in swampy splendour.

Padre Island National Seashore, 65 miles of sandy barrier beaches and dunes, forms a white streak between the salty Laguna Madre and the Gulf of Mexico. Cruising along the island's only road, we made for the Malaquite visitor centre, a tranquil spot to catch some sun and take a dip. Tranquil, that is, until a Portuguese man of war came floating out of the water and settled on the sand, gently heaving and glistening in the sun. These electric blue creatures are common the length of Padre Island, and not to be trifled with. The beaches are still eminently swimmable; you just need to keep your wits about you.

Heading north, there's another wildlife hotspot: Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, which bursts with all manner of wild beasts, including an armadillo that shuffled across the road ahead of us, and several endangered sea turtles. From tankers to turtles, Texas is truly surprising.

**Evelyn Owen, Birmingham**

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## Say cheese

### Sicily



Rescued... the Riserva dello Zingaro, Sicily

As I drove across Sicily down the A29 from Palermo to Trapani in 40C heat, Luke begged me to pull over and improvise a shower with a bottle of San Pellegrino. Refreshed, we scrutinised the map. The Riserva dello Zingaro was our destination; a traffic-free nature reserve in one of the few areas of Sicily that have been spared development. Work had already started on a coastal road through it in the 1970s when environmentalists began campaigning for its conservation. Then a persuasive press campaign in 1981 awakened public sensibilities to the precious jewel that was about to be destroyed. The Riserva dello Zingaro became a ward of the state forestry commission.

We were about to continue on our way when a white van pulled up, flanking our car and effectively preventing us from moving. Having lived in Sicily for several years, I'm not easily given to fantasies about concrete boots and horses' heads, but we were in the

middle of nowhere, isolated. Three sets of eyes burned into us from behind dark glasses. I maintained what I hoped was an intimidating gaze. Finally, the driver of the van spoke, gruffly.

"Volete assaggiare dei formaggi?" I suppressed a smile, my adrenaline levels plummeted, and I assured him that, no thank you, we wouldn't like any cheese, we'd just eaten.

Stopping off at the little supermarket a mile or two down the road, I checked over my shoulder before ordering two of what must be the world's tastiest sandwiches, packed with layer upon layer of mozzarella and Parma ham. When we arrived, we left our car at the top of the hill. Sixteen square kilometres of unspoiled coastline unfolded before us as we trekked down amid wild grasses and caper plants towards the San Vito lo Capo peninsula: stark, volcanic rock and crystalline waters rendered turquoise by the blazing sun.

Wading into the cool, clear sea, someone waved to me. I raised a sheepish hand to the cheese seller, and made a mental note to hide my sandwiches.

**Hellen Norman, Cambridge**

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## Monkeying around

### Kenya

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It's 7am. The lagoon is a mirror, perfectly reflecting the sun rising over the Indian Ocean. The white, palm-fringed beach stretches out of sight and I shift contentedly in my hammock. I have woken up to this view every morning for two weeks.

Suddenly the peace is shattered by a loud scream. It's another dawn raid. I sit bolt upright. Seconds later I spot them; shadowy figures dropping out of the trees and running towards the tents, emitting ear-piercing shrieks. In an instant they are among us, looting and plundering.

I flop back into my hammock. Every day my reverie has been destroyed by this troop of monkeys tearing around the campsite, causing havoc, stealing food, banging pots and jumping on tents. They've lost any of the endearing qualities I thought they possessed on our first meeting.

Monkeys aside, Tiwi Beach (south of Mombassa) is inarguably relaxing. At Twiga Lodge, a campsite on the least developed part of the beach, you can set up a tent for only a few pounds a night, or sleep in a hammock. It's basic but there's a great atmosphere, and fantastic snorkelling in several large rock pools nearby.

Kisite Marine Park makes an easy day trip by boat, with crystal water, pristine coral and multicoloured fish.

The monkeys may give me a rude awakening, showering twigs on to my face from the trees above, but with a long day of eating, drinking and sunbathing ahead of me, I think I can probably live with it.

**Ewan McCowen, Edinburgh**

• Twiga Lodge, Tiwi beach ([twigalodge.com](http://twigalodge.com)).

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