



40

Travel 2016 | Special

TUESDAY 8 SEPTEMBER 2016 | EVENING STANDARD

Hip highlights for the year ahead

According to travel industry experts, September is the best time to book a holiday, staving off end of summer blues. Here **Sarah Marshall** recommends what's hot in the next 12 months

Stratford-upon-Avon, England

Still regarded as one of the world's greatest poets and playwrights, Shakespeare's legacy will be celebrated next year on the 400th anniversary of his death.

Most activity will focus on his home town, where several new exhibitions and attractions are due to open. Although his original house at New Place was demolished in 1759, after owner Reverend Francis Gastrell grew tired of visiting Shakespeare enthusiasts, a new heritage landmark on the site where 26 of the Bard's plays were written is due to be unveiled.

Following a major renovation, King Edward VI school will also open Shakespeare's Schoolroom and Guildhall to the public on 23 April, Shakespeare's birthday. The young writer was educated in the 15th-century building and it was here that he enjoyed his first taste of professional theatre.

On the same day, the RSC will be staging a special collaboration with the BBC at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, hosted by David Tennant. ■ **Jacobean-style country pile** The Welcombe Hotel are offering a Shakespearian staycation package from £185pp, including an overnight stay in a four poster bedroom with breakfast and a Midsummer Night's Dream-inspired afternoon tea (menzieshotels.co.uk).

Nepal

Offering some of the world's most scenic treks, this Himalayan mountain paradise was left paralysed earlier this year after two devastating earthquakes struck the region.

A major international aid effort is helping communities rebuild their lives and many are eager to welcome back tourists who provide much-needed income. The FCO has

deemed it safe to visit a large proportion of the country, and operators are hopeful the remaining travel bans will be lifted this month.

When the green light is finally given, tourists are being urged to spend their money in a part of the world where its value will be truly felt. Adventure travel company Exodus, which have a long history of working in Nepal and have been working hard on the ground to provide shelter and funds to local people in need, are now operating more than 50 per cent of their Nepal itineraries and are confident that Everest and other mountain regions are now safe and stable.

Exodus is currently taking bookings to the area, and if the FCO fails to alter advisories before customers depart they will offer refunds or an opportunity to rebook.

■ **The 17-day Everest Base Camp Trek** costs from £1,999 including flights (exodus.co.uk).

San Sebastian, Spain

Some of the world's top culinary talents can be found in this northern Basque city, which has also been named the European Capital of Culture 2016.

Black Tomato can arrange a tailor-made introduction to the region, with accommodation at the grand Maria Cristina Hotel. Discover the Pintxos route with a local chef, sampling pintxos (inset, similar to tapas) at bars lining the Old Town, then delve into fine dining with a meal at the three Michelin star Arzak, where menu highlights include ice cream chocolates presented in a bird cage.

Spend the following days visiting San Telmo Museum, housed in a 16th-century convent, and take a boat to Isla Santa Clara to relax on the beach.

■ **The seven-night package**, which also includes stays in Rioja and Bilbao, costs from £2,120pp, including flights and transfers (blacktomato.com; 020 7426 9888).

Iceland

Smoking volcanoes, crashing waterfalls and vast ice caps have made this Nordic country a favourite with sci-fi film crews. Scenes from Star Wars: Episode VII, due for release this December, were shot here and are likely to ignite even more interest in the alien landscapes.

British Airways has just launched new direct flights to capital Reykjavik, and Thomson will be introducing new package holidays from 24 January. A Golden Circle tour will visit the spurting Geysir hot springs, thundering Gullfoss waterfall and Thingvellir National Park, where two tectonic plates meet, while a second package will focus on the Northern Lights.

■ **Prices start from £499pp for three nights' accommodation and flights** (thomson.co.uk).

■ **Second time visitors and adventure seekers** should consider Epic Tomato's new three-night survival skills trip to Eyjafjallajökull volcano and the remote Midgard region, including a helicopter tour above mountains and geothermal fissures, with a chance to go snow-kiting, ice fishing and learning how to dig a snow cave shelter. From £2,320pp, all inclusive (epictomato.com).

Costa Rica

Although covering just 0.3 per cent of the Earth's surface, this small Central American country contains nearly 6 per cent of the world's biodiversity. Sloths, hummingbirds, red-eyed tree frogs and the rare and elegant resplendent quetzal birds are all residents and can frequently be seen on wildlife tours through areas such as the cloud forests of Monteverde and swamps of Tortuguero National Park. Adventure tourism is also taking off in the country, with walking trails, rafting and zipwires mainly concentrated around the town of La Fortuna and the Arenal volcano.

Getting to Costa Rica has always been a long-winded process, but the launch of new direct flights from the UK will slash the journey time by a third. From November this year Thomson will operate a Dreamliner service, and from 4 May 2016 British Airways will also begin flying into capital San Jose.



■ **The Ultimate Travel Company** offer a comprehensive introduction to the country in comfortable accommodation. The two-week tailor-made Turtles and Toucans tour visits the Caño Negro Wildlife Reserve, Arenal, Tortuguero, the cloud forests of the San Gerardo de Dota Valley and the beach at Golfo Dulce, and costs from £3,975 including hotels, activities, most meals and direct BA flights (theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk).

Peru

Inca ruins, world-class gastronomy and a colourful indigenous culture make Peru one of the most popular destinations in South America. From 4 May, travellers will be able to fly non-stop from London to Lima with British Airways, meaning the number of visitors is likely to explode.

The country's coastal capital, sandwiched between the Andes and the Pacific Ocean, boasts some of the continent's best restaurants; try Central Restaurante where Virgilio Martinez (also responsible for London restaurants Lima and Lima Floral) has devised a tasting menu with ingredients drawn from different altitudes in Peru.

Shrouded in mist, high in the jungle-clad mountains, Inca citadel Machu Picchu is undoubtedly the country's greatest asset, and can be reached by train or on along the challenging Inca trail. But the opening of high-end properties such as Inkaterre's new Hacienda

Urubamba has persuaded a growing number of people to spend time and acclimatize to the altitude in the beautiful Sacred Valley.

■ **Journey Latin America** offer the Inca Heartland tour visiting Cusco, Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley from £2,149pp, including direct BA flights (journeylatinamerica.co.uk).

Great Barrier Reef, Australia

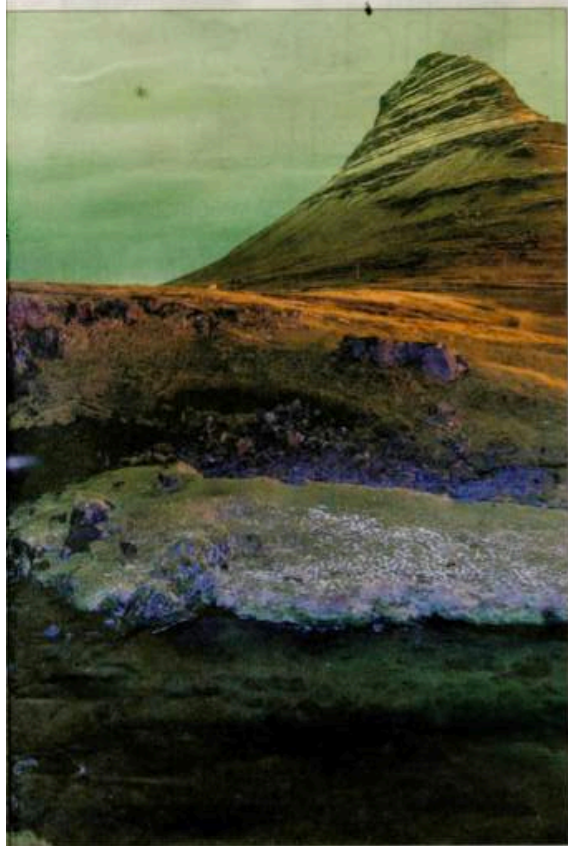
Described by David Attenborough as "the most exciting natural history museum of his life", the world's largest coral reef system will dazzle viewers when the naturalist's new three-part BBC documentary is screened in January next year.

Attenborough returns to Queensland 60 years after his first visit and discovers that despite destruction caused by hurricanes and pollution the reef is still a wonder to behold and more in need of protection than ever before.

There are many ways to explore the coral and marine life first-hand, including snorkelling, scuba diving, helmet diving (for those who don't want to get their hair wet) or spending a night on a floating pontoon. Base yourself at Hamilton Island, off the coast of Queensland, where a range of activities can be booked.

Sleep under the stars on Hardy Reef with a Reefsleeper cruise on a floating pontoon, with options to do both day and night diving. (From £194pp hamiltonisland.com.au).





■ Austravel offer an eight-day trip to North Queensland including flights from £1,549pp (austravel.com).

Iran

The FCO's decision to relax advice for travel to Iran has spurred operators to reinstate many existing tours along with adding new itineraries. Travel insurance will now be easier for tourists to obtain and trips are likely to run to a reliable schedule.

Ancient ruins, striking architecture and the warmth and friendliness of the Iranian people are cited as key reasons for booking a trip to the country formerly known as Persia in 2016. BBC world

affairs editor John Simpson has already praised the destination as being an excellent place to holiday.

Those who want to see Iran before the crowds descend are being urged to travel now. Exodus offers a 15-day journey through the country, exploring its ancient, Zoroastrian, early-Islamic, Islamic and modern culture. Travellers will be guided through mountains, desert and troglodyte villages.

■ The trip costs from £2,749 with flights. Exodus also offer a rare opportunity to summit Mount Damavand, the highest mountain in Asia west of the Hindu Kush, from £2,499 for nine days with flights (exodus.co.uk).



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Clockwise from main: Iceland's Kirkjufell mountain; sunny Stratford-upon-Avon; Tortuguero National Park, Costa Rica; Annapurna base camp, Nepal

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