

Top 5 hot spots for

Now that Christmas is over, it's time to plan some new adventures. **SARAH MARSHALL**

suggests five of the coolest destinations for the year ahead

1 BEST FOR SAFARI BOTSWANA

EXCELLENT wildlife sightings, a commitment to conservation and a good range of luxury accommodation options make Botswana a top safari destination.

On September 30, the country will celebrate 50 years of independence, prompting Lonely Planet to declare it the number one destination to visit in 2016. Discover the Okavango Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, from the comfort of the newly renovated 12-tent Belmond Eagle Island Lodge, where activities include game drives and boat trips through the ever-changing waterways.

The Okavango's unusual topography has resulted in various animal adaptations, such as swimming lions. Stay at private concession Duba Plains, where film-makers Dereck and Beverly Joubert famously documented the resident pride who hunt buffalo in broad daylight.

Botswana also has one of the highest populations of endangered wild dog and Belmond's Khwai River Lodge, on the border of the Moremi Wildlife Reserve, is currently a good place to track them.

■ Africa specialist, The Ultimate Travel

Company (www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk; 020 3051 8098) tailor-make a one-week luxury safari from £7,515 a head, with three nights at Duba Plains, followed by two nights at Khwai River Lodge and two nights at Eagle Island River Lodge. Includes meals, activities, transfers and flights from London.

2 BEST FOR SCENERY UTAH, USA

THIS year, America's National Park service celebrates its 100th anniversary, providing a good excuse to visit some of the country's most pristine and protected areas.

The state of Utah is home to a 'Mighty 5' parks, and with Delta's new daily direct flight from Heathrow to Salt Lake City operating from May 2 (from £754 return), it's even easier to reach.

Marvel at the wind-sculpted sandstone structures in Arches National Park, explore the towering hoodoos in Bryce Canyon, or discover a 100-mile warp in the Earth's crust at Capitol Reef.

After dark, the sightseeing continues at several designated International Dark Sky Parks. Photograph the Milky Way above the famous Mesa Arch landform in

Canyonlands, or wander through ancient Puebloan ruins at the Natural Bridges National Monument.

During the winter season, Utah is

a favourite destination for skiers and snowboarders. The recently opened Cherry Peak Resort, near Logan in northern Utah, features three triple chairlifts and a 1.25mile run.

■ Visit www.visitutah.com

3 BEST FOR FOODIES SAN SEBASTIAN, SPAIN

AS the European Capital of Culture 2016, this city in northern Spain will host a series of talks, exhibitions and events throughout the year. (See dss2016.eu/en/ for a full programme.) But the main draw continues to be the fantastic range of restaurants and bars available, many of which regularly appear in The World's Best 50 Restaurants list.

Spend a weekend sampling some

of the 200 pinxto bars in the Old Town, serving the Basque version of tapas, or incorporate the city into a wider itinerary.

Pura Aventura (www.pura-aventura.com) is running a new 10-night Basque Foodie Adventure, visiting producers and sampling products from the coast to the highlands.

Among the many highlights are a visit to millennia-old salt pans, where harvesters collect salt for Michelin-starred chefs, a pintxo making class in Pamplona, and a visit to the hallowed San Sebastian supper club, the Gastronomic Society.

■ Prices start from £1,995 a head (two sharing) including several meals, guides and excursions. Flights to Bilbao are extra.

4 BEST FOR WILDLIFE INDIA

THE cinema release of Disney's The Jungle Book in April will put the spotlight on India and its most famous animal resident, the Bengal tiger.

These highly endangered creature are notoriously difficult to spot, but Exodus (exodus.co.uk) will be

giving it their best shot on a 16-day escorted Land of the Tiger tour exploring classic Kipling country, with various departures between October and April.

Bengal tiger safaris are a key focus of the trip, with considerable time spent in three of the key national parks – Pench, Kanha and Bandhavgarh.

The trip costs from £2,429 per

person (based on two sharing), including accommodation, most meals, guides, 15 game drives and flights.

Rudyard Kipling set his classic novel in the region now known as Madhya Pradesh, which is home to dense jungles.

Village Ways (villageways.com) offers a 10-night trip through the area, following in the footsteps of 19th century travel pioneer James Forsyth. Visit the teak forest of the Satpura tiger reserve, the hill station of Pachmarhi and stay in Sakata in the migratory corridor between Pench and Kanha tiger reserves.

■ The trip costs from £1,352 each (based on two sharing), including full-board accommodation and activities. Flights are extra.

5 BEST FOR ADVENTURE PERU

PERU has always been a bestseller in South America, and bookings are

set to soar once more when British Airways launches a new direct flight from Gatwick to Lima on May 4, from £561 return.

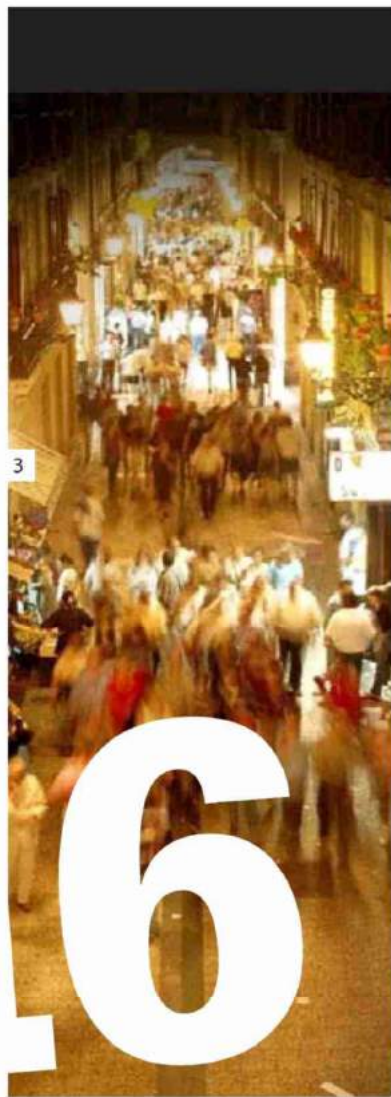
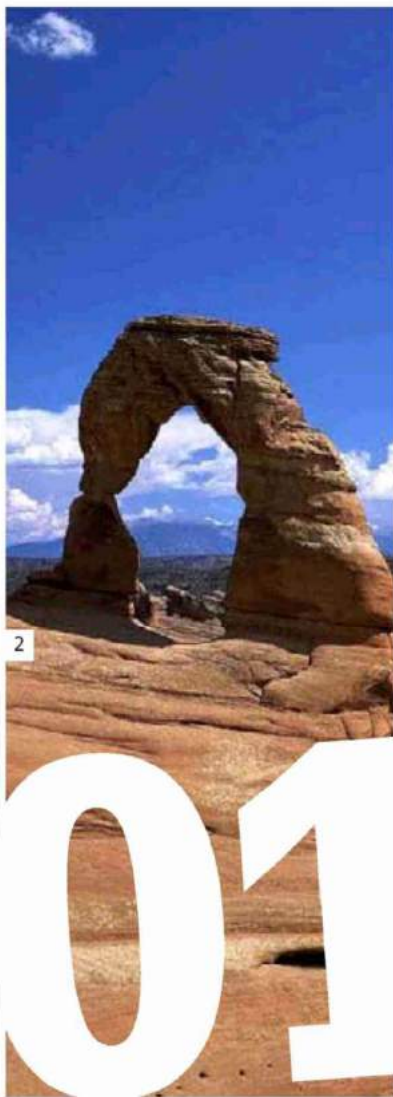
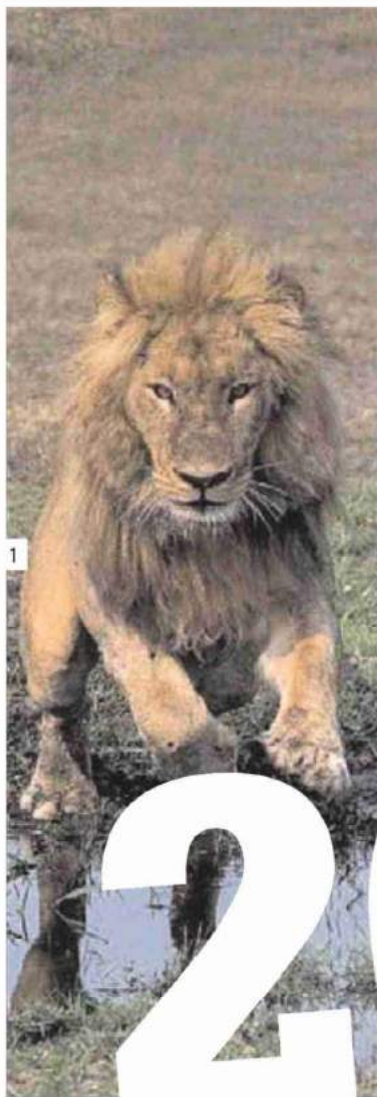
Capital city Lima has a lively gourmet scene and boasts some of the continent's top restaurants; experiment with flavours at award winning Central (www.centralrestaurant.com.pe/en/), where the menu is based on ingredients foraged from Peru's different altitudes, or sample national dish ceviche – raw fish cured in citrus juice – at lunch-only restaurant Chez Wong (facebook.com/ChezJavierWong).

Inca citadel Machu Picchu is undoubtedly one of Peru's highlights, with passes for the popular Inca Trail

selling out months in advance.

Tourists now have more comfortable options for a stay in the Sacred Valley, allowing them time to acclimatise to higher altitudes and enjoy the scenery. Last year, Inkaterra opened the Hacienda Urubamba and in August Explora will launch new property Valle Sagrado on the site of an ancient corn plantation. Both can be reached by road from Cusco.

■ The Ultimate Travel Company (theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk; 020 3051 8098) offers a 10-day private Highlights Of Peru tour visiting Lima, Cusco and the Sacred Valley from £3,125 per person, saving £1,540 per couple if booked by February 29. Includes direct BA flights from London.



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