

# THE 25 COOLEST PLACES ON EARTH

It's been said there's no cure for what ails you like travel. Not so if you wind up squished with a million boorish tourists at postcard stands, which is ever so often. Next time the travel bug bites, check out *Arena's* 25 coolest destinations. Not exactly backpacker bucolic, but far enough from the madding crowd.

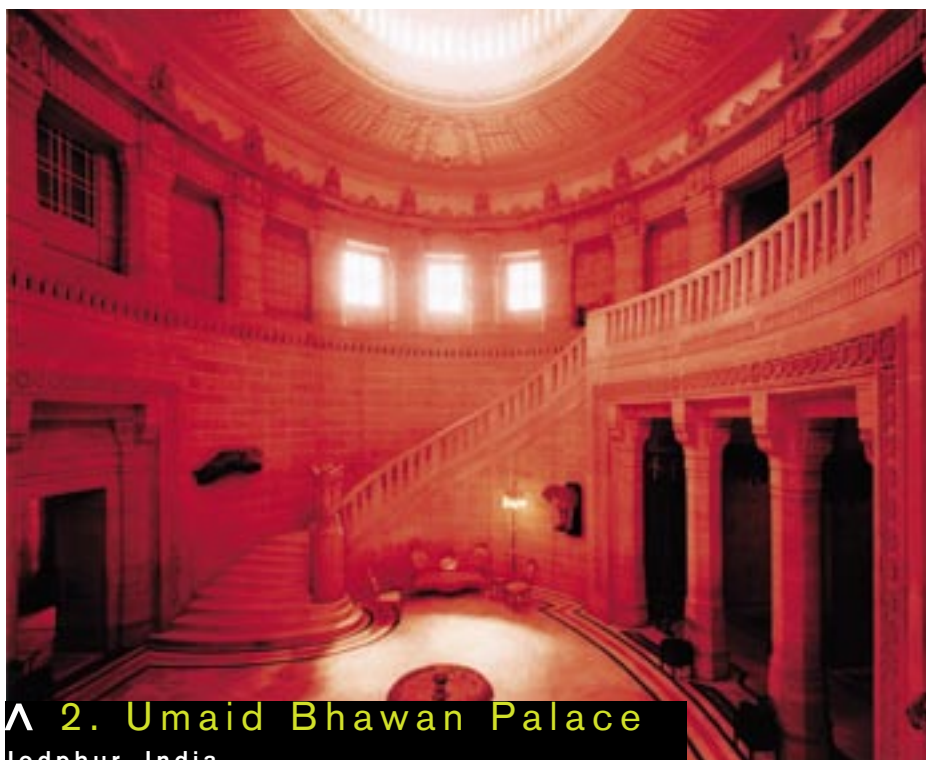
Words **KATIE BOWMAN & JINESH LALWANI**

## > 1. Commune Great Wall, Beijing, China

Until last year, this was the sort of hotel only Bond villains could stay in – 12 innovative villas, each designed by a different Asian architect, costing upwards of £800 (\$2,400) a night. To picture them, imagine the Jetsons and the Flintstones designing each other's houses, with ancient stone fireplaces next to ultra-modern glass walls and steel stairwells. But now Kempinski has opened a design hotel on site (still avant-garde) with more realistic rates. Pack a smoking jacket.

**Double rooms from £73 (\$219)**  
**(86-10)8118-1888; [kempinski.com](http://kempinski.com)**





## ^ 2. Umaid Bhawan Palace Jodhpur, India

The Great Gatsby would have loved a few high-end piss-ups here. Built in the 1930s by good-time boy Maharaja Umaid Singh, part of the palace is now a hotel. Whatever part you want to play (Lothario, poacher, or drunk), there's a space for you: The Trophy Room with taxidermied leopards and boar; the Art Deco billiards room; the velvet-walled smoking parlour; and Pillars – a terrace bar overlooking Maharaja Singh's immaculate lawn, where his fleet of classic cars are still on display.

**For booking details, log on to [www.tajhotels.com](http://www.tajhotels.com)**



## ^ 3. Osho Meditation Resort 17 Koregaon Park, Pune, India

More Ritz than religious commune, Osho's meditation *ashram* is 40 acres of lush gardens, marble pathways and spiritual Zen. Don the signature maroon robes and spin in Sufi-inspired meditative trances in the breathtaking pyramid auditorium, or simply bask in the tranquility of the lagoon-like pool.

**Doubles at 3,800 rupees (\$133), (91-20)6601-9999; [osho.com](http://osho.com)**



## ^ 4. Icebergs 1 Notts Ave, Bondi, Sydney, Australia

Proof that a bar can be fashionable *and* friendly. Icebergs is teeming with spectacular blonde honeys, but it doesn't have the haughty don't-even-think-about-looking-at-me atmosphere. The location is phenomenal – built into the rock on a cliff overlooking Bondi Beach – and the best time to go is New Year's Day, when they throw a bikini party.

**(61-29)365-9000; [www.idrb.com](http://www.idrb.com)**



## ^ 5. Sumahan Kuleli Cadessi No 51, Çengelköy, Istanbul, Turkey

That location is key is not lost on the owners of this former distillery-now-beautifully-restored-hotel. Each of its 20 rooms looks out onto the Bosphorus, the azure straits bisecting Turkey's Eastern and Western spheres. Owners-designers Mark and Nedret Butler contrast steel against brick and wood (in a nod to the building's Ottoman heritage), and had modern interiors installed. The hotel-owned launch also whisks guests to and from Katabas (on the European side) and Çengelköy (Sumahan's adjoining city), where Byzantine churches and Ottoman mosques await travellers.

**Doubles from US\$220 (\$335), (90-216-422-8000; [sumahan.com](http://sumahan.com))**

## 6. The Clubhouse

**74 Promenade Des Sonnaillies,  
Chamonix, France**

This is what happens when Jonathan Downey, owner of too-cool London members' bar Milk & Honey, gets his hands on a ski lodge in the Alps: Rainforest showers, plasma TVs, XBoxes and killer cocktails.

**Three nights from £401 (\$1,203), (33-45-090-9656); [clubhouse.fr](http://clubhouse.fr)**





## ^ 7. Virgin Clubhouse

**Terminal 3, Heathrow Airport, London, UK**

If you've ever wondered whether spending all that cash on a first-class plane ticket is worth it, fly Virgin. For starters, your Upper Class ticket includes a limo transfer, so a chauffeur will pick you up from your home and another driver will be waiting for you once you're back. This means a drive-in check-in: No queues, no stampedes, no sullen, suspicious check-in staff seating you between Pavarotti and a violently teething baby. Then it's onwards and upwards to The Clubhouse. There's a Cowshed Spa (yes, that means a free back-wax before you set off for Brazil) and Bumble And Bumble hair salon (free haircut, too). There's a sushi bar, concierge, library, pool room, pinball machine, PlayStation, poker table, cocktail bar, rooftop terrace, love seats, cable TV, champagne on tap and so on. All this free stuff isn't lost on the rich, either – frequent flyers are known to come to The Clubhouse up to eight hours before take-off so they can enjoy a massage, G&T aperitif, five-course dinner and to catch the game on Sky Sports.

**Virgin Atlantic has Upper Class return fares from £1,218 (\$3,654) from London to Dubai (44-870-380-2007; virginatlantic.com)**



## ^ 8. Tonsai Bay

**Railay, Krabi, Thailand**

With no cars, no bars and accessible only by boat, Tonsai Bay is a Luddite's fantasy. The quietest of the four main areas of Railay, all you're likely to do at Tonsai is marvel at the limestone cliffs (or climb them), get some colour while kayaking, snorkelling and jungle trekking. Also worth a visit is the nearby Phra Nang shrine, with its multitude of carved phalluses, offered up to the eponymous fertility goddess. Unlike tourist trap Phi Phi, Tonsai's the closest thing to being marooned on an island – just leave that BlackBerry at home.

**By boat, 30 mins from Chao Fa pier in Krabi. Tiger Airways flies to Krabi.**

## > 9. Bilbao Airport

**Bilbao, Spain**

Santiago Calatrava is an architect with a heart. As designer of some of the world's slickest buildings – Valencia's City Of Arts And Sciences and the new transit hub at the World Trade Center site – he still managed to think of blubbing friends and family when he dreamt up Bilbao Airport's Arrivals Hall. Nicknamed "The Dove", because of its two wing-like terminals, the airport has a spectacular viewing gallery above the baggage hall so that friends can wave at their arriving loved ones. The rest of the site is just as sleek, with an amazing white Perspex bar and chairs in sculpted neon plastic. At around 6pm, the bar fills with Spanish air hostesses indulging in a quick one before their last flight of the day.

**Double rooms from £76 (\$228) at Miro Hotel (34-90-211-7777; mirohotelbilbao.com)**



## ^ 10. Blue Lagoon

**240 Grindavík, Iceland**

Not Brooke Shields-inhabited but as gob-smackingly beautiful, this volcanic spa thaws freezing bodies with its geothermally heated waters. The water's silica-algae-and-mineral composition has treated psoriasis and eczema in the in-house clinic, so we reckon dermatologists in Iceland must be few and far between. And don't worry if little Bobby takes a leak in the lagoon – the water replenishes itself every 40 hours.

**Entry to the spa is ISK\$1,400 per adult (\$32). Doubles from ISK\$12,200 (\$277) at the Blue Lagoon Clinic, (354-420-8800; bluelagoon.com)**





## Λ 12. Cloud 9

### Grand Hyatt, Shanghai, China

Just because it's a tourist staple, that doesn't mean it's not cool. You will never see a more incredible urban view with a *mojito* in your hand. On the 87th floor of the Jin Mao Tower (making this the highest hotel bar in the world), you can see the fluoro-futuristic scrapers of Pudong and the 1930s glamour of the business district.

(86-21-5049-1234; [shanghai.grand.hyatt.com](http://shanghai.grand.hyatt.com))

## V 11. Machine

12 Salamanca Sq,  
Hobart, Tasmania

For the flashpackers among you, here's a laundromat that's also been rated one of Australia's best restaurants. Machine serves up gourmet burgers and 1950s-style milkshakes to sun-kissed Aussies who sit at the laminex bar, watching their smalls dry. (61-36)224-9922



## 13. Ksar Char Bagh

### Palmgrove, Marrakech

As hotel transfers go, Ksar Char Bagh's is the slickest – an old black cab imported from London that cruises through the streets of Marrakech, making residents do bizarre things like fall off their bikes. Then there's the hotel: A staggering recreation of a 16th-century *kasbah* with only 12 *harim* suites that'll make you catch your breath. (21-22-432-9244; [ksarcharbagh.com](http://ksarcharbagh.com))



## 14. Mister Cartoon

### Tattoo Parlour

Top secret, Los Angeles

So sought after is this tattoo artist that he won't even give out the address of his downtown LA studio – he'll only divulge if you book a sitting. It's his basic black-line designs that got him noticed, influenced by the tattoos prison inmates give each other owing to lack of coloured ink. Everybody loves him: Beyoncé, Kanye West and Dr Dre are all clients.

[mistercartoon.com](http://mistercartoon.com)

## Λ 15. Baby Milo

### Harajuku, Tokyo, Japan

Baby Milo is the Japanese label beloved of types like Pharrell Williams and you'll find the shop one block behind Prada in Harajuku. It looks like your average hyper-trendy store, before you take the disco stairwell to the first floor. Then there are the trainers circulating round the shop like sushi on a conveyor belt. Masamichi Katayama of Wonder Wall Inc is the designer behind it all. Head also for his Ice Cream Store, stocking Pharrell's own label, where you pick out T-shirts like flavours at an American-style ice-cream parlour. Shopping as it's meant to be.

(81-35)474-0204; [bape.com](http://bape.com) ▶





## ◀ 16. Parker Palm Springs

**4200 Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs, California**

The Parker is one of the most beautifully pristine hotels in the world. But behind the maximum-glam facade is a sleazier (and much sexier) story: This is where Brad and Angelina were busted for extra-marital bed-sports and where Robert Downey Jr was arrested for possession of cocaine and Valium. Skinny dipping is commonplace, and the spa therapists approve wholeheartedly of post-massage cocktails (none of that "drink water for 24 hours" tedium here). Think of the Parker as the Lindsay Lohan of hotels: Flawless by day, insatiable by night, up the next morning ready to start all over again.

It's located in the desert about 161 km east of Los Angeles and it started as a vice-den back in the '20s and '30s for movie stars who were "on call" and weren't allowed to be further than two hours from their studio. The "who gives a f\*\*k?" atmosphere stuck and soon the Rat Pack rolled into town, Elvis shackled up and Bob Hope built his legendary "party house" here (27 bathrooms, two bedrooms). Now what's left is the modernist architecture, within which hoteliers are building 21st-century pleasure palaces.

**Double rooms from £165 (\$495), (17-60-770-5000; [theparkerpalmsprings.com](http://theparkerpalmsprings.com))**

## V 17. Celux

**Omotesando, 5-7-5 Jingumae  
Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan**

Located on the uppermost floors of the Louis Vuitton building, Celux makes elitism and luxury seem like dysphemisms for the shopping experience it offers. Shelled off from the *prêt-à-porter*-browsing masses downstairs, Celux members are privy to limited release Kris van Assche loafers, Maharishi parkas and designer furnishings of the LVMH brand umbrella. Toast purchases with fellow fashion *cognoscenti* at the Celux Lounge *après* splurge, and enjoy swooping views of the Monogram-togged (and thus unworthy) denizens below. Membership criteria remains (deliberately, we suspect) elusive.

**Joining fee of ¥215,000 (\$2,761), annual renewal fee of ¥26,250 (\$337), (81-03-5410-8231; [celux.com](http://celux.com))**



## 18. Blinde Kuh

**Mühlebachstrasse 148, 8008  
Zürich, Switzerland**

Meaning "blind cow", and derived from the Swiss saying "dunkel wie in eine Kuh", meaning dark as a bovine's insides (don't ask), this converted church is the place to be (un)seen if you've got a cow of a date. Diners form a conga line and are guided towards a pitch-dark room, where Kuh's largely visually impaired or blind wait staff serve up continental grub. The novel concept has since spawned other "blind dining" setups in Cologne and Paris. Some enjoy the attenuated sensory experience. We'd probably just fart, or swap the vegan's main with a juicy steak, just for giggles.

**Approximately CHR\$85 (\$106) per head for a three-course meal. Menu changes weekly. (41-0-1-421-5050; [blindekuh.de](http://blindekuh.de))**

## 19. Three on the Bund

**3 Zhong Shan Dong Yi Road,  
Shanghai, China**

In Shanghai to broker that billion-dollar equities contract? Head to Jean Georges for contemporary French, or lap up *haute cuisine* at Laris (think Rainbow Room), and a waterfront view of the Pudong business district at one go. Then pamper your *nouveau-riche* self with Armani threads, Evian Spa treatments or browse paintings at the Shanghai Gallery of Art, all in this seven-storey complex on the corner of the Bund and Guangdong. Pricey, but worth every *renminbi*.

**(86-21-6323-3355, [threeonthebund.com](http://threeonthebund.com))**



## ^ 20. The One Hotel Angkor

**The Passage, Old Market  
Area, Siem Reap, Cambodia**

Hermits, take heart: This Siem Reap enclave has just one suite. Traipse from the room – flat screen, Wi-Fi, iBook & iPod equipped, naturally – to your private rooftop terrace, replete with dining area and sunken jacuzzi. Then summon the chef to whip up a gourmet meal or have an oil massage done. Socialising at the café downstairs and nearby Old Market optional.

**Doubles from US\$250 (\$381) (855-012)755-311; [theonehotelangkor.com](http://theonehotelangkor.com)**



## > 21. Gulmarg Golf Course

### Gulmarg, Kashmir

Meaning "flower meadow" in Persian, Gulmarg has undulating fairways, flower meadows, snow-encrusted streams, and – at 2,650m above sea level – the planet's highest 18-hole golf course. Located 57km from Pakistan's capital Srinagar, and an hour's flight from Delhi, the turf here's cotton soft, and the beautiful cottage clubhouse is fit for even the von Trapps. Hole your birdies there from April to November, after which the course doubles as a ski run. Temporary golf memberships available. Pine Place Resort is a two-minute walk from the course

**Deluxe room inclusive of three meals at US\$99 (\$150), (91-22-2404-2211; pineplace@nivalink.com)**



## < 22. La Casa del Habano

### Quinta Avenida y Calle 16, Miramar, Havana, Cuba

Looking like a cross between a Third-World airport lounge and Castro's front room, this is easily the coolest smoking salon in the world. Walk through the humidor – stocking Romeo y Julieta Churchills and Cohiba Siglo V – to the room at the back. Here, you can smoke with either a shot of rum or take your Montecristo nextdoor to El Ranchon restaurant. [lacasadelhabano.cu](http://lacasadelhabano.cu)

## 24. Yazdani Bakery & Restaurant

### 11/11-A, Cawasji Patel Street, Fort, Mumbai, India

This baking institution, almost a century old, lures customers old-school style: Get a whiff of the aroma of yeast – say *focaccia* or olive bread – rising from its wood-fired stoves, and you're hooked. Meherwan Zend, Yazdani's very merry Iranian owner, personally serves up the freshest *brun* with butter and *chai* in all Mumbai. Amazingly, dough is still hand kneaded at the back. The pared-down setup, with chalkboard slogans like "Eat finger biscuits, cure your cough", also has *mava* cakes and zesty lemon tarts. As to claims of being the cheapest bakery on the planet? The *pav*, or bread roll, costs one rupee (three cents).

**(91 22-87-0739)**

## V 23. Isla Mujeres

### Cancun, Mexico

It's a toughie when you stumble across an island like Isla Mujeres, because you want to tell your mates, while not wanting anybody else to know. All you have to do is fly to tourist hell Cancun, hail a cab to the port and take the boat to Isla Mujeres (about \$12), where you can enjoy a sandy paradise island – with not an English accent to be heard.

**Double room from £115 (\$345) at Hotel Secreto, (52-99-8877-1039; hotelsecreto.com)**



## < 25. The Queens Arms

### Corton Denham, Somerset

For dedicated drinkers who have conscience enough not to drink and drive comes The Queens Arms – a pub with rooms. A perfect day would go something like this: Bloody Mary at the bar at 11am, pork pie and pint by the fire for lunch, and roast partridge with a bottle of Barolo for dinner. Oh yeah, and the rooms are nice, too.

**Double rooms from £75 (\$225) (44-01963-220317; thequeensarms.com)**