

Top Ten Vacation Islands in the World

TRAVEL TIPS

Johanna Read, Leaf Group Updated August 10, 2018



Top Ten [Vacation](#) Islands in the World (Photo:)

When thinking of a vacation, many people dream of a tropical island complete with cerulean blue waters, a white sandy beach and some shade-providing palm trees rustling in a slight breeze. But with all the places in the world, how do you choose the best islands to visit? It's hard to go wrong on any of the islands in the Caribbean, but you have choices farther afield too. Your personal preferences for what you like to do on vacation – snorkel off the beach? Surf? Dine well? Learn about local cultures? See wildlife? All these options – and more – will dictate the best island for you.

TIP

1. Can't decide which island to see? Taking a cruise gives you a sampling of several, so you can research which islands suit you best to go back to for a longer vacation. Princess Cruises, known for its food, sails all over the world. The small ships of Windstar Cruises – three of them sailing yachts – visit smaller, less-developed islands, like Thailand's Koh Kut and Isla Parida in Panama, which the big cruise ships can't reach.

Enjoy Tranquility and Wildlife on the Private Islas Secas in Panama

About 20 miles off the Pacific coast of Panama, in the Gulf of Chiriqui, you'll find a wildlife haven in the 14-island archipelago called Islas Secas.

Thriving in the Islas Secas' vibrant ecosystem are 750 species of fish and 128 different plant species, making it ideal for the wildlife lover. Visitors have a chance of spotting eagle rays, manta rays, green olive ridley and loggerhead sea turtles, bottlenose dolphins and even the gentle giant whale shark, not to mention too many colorful tropical fish to count. Between June and September, the mating season of humpback whales, Islas Secas has humpbacks from both the southern and northern hemispheres passing by. In the air and trees of the archipelago are over 50 types of birds, including peregrine falcons, frigates and the brightly colored Rufous-tailed hummingbird. The UNESCO-designated Coiba National Marine Park, home to a number of threatened and endemic species, is nearby too.

Staying at Islas Secas is the ultimate in tranquility as only 18 guests may stay at the Islas Secas Reserve and Lounge at a time. The eco-friendly property is completely powered by natural energy. Guests are housed in one of four locations featuring one-, two- or four-bedroom casitas complete with plunge pools and a complimentary mini-bar of drinks and snacks. Panamanian Chef Alex Hey Rojas, who was a Top Chef Panama participant, creates Panamanian cuisine featuring seasonal produce and local fish, while Canadian chef Katie bakes desserts and breads, makes ice creams, and even cures and smokes her own bacon and fish. Dine in Isla Secas' open-air restaurant or on the beach. An adventure concierge makes sure each guest has the experiences he or she wants, whether it's seeing blowholes and caves along the protected coastline or surfing some of Central America's best waves at nearby Morro Negro.

TIP

1. Stop in Panama City on the way to or from Islas Secas to admire the Panama Canal, the city's incredible skyscrapers and enjoy more Panamanian food. Stay at The Bristol Panama for luxury downtown or The Santa Maria near the airport.

Perfect for the Eco-Minded: Bawah Reserve, a New Private Island Near Singapore

Thirteen private beaches. Three private lagoons. One bat cave. Six islets in a private archipelago. Thirty-five luxury suites. This is the pristine paradise of Bawah Reserve.

An 80-minute seaplane flight from Singapore, Bawah Reserve was created to protect Indonesia's Anambas archipelago from dynamite fishing. The archipelago is now a protected marine conservation area. Bawah Reserve's suites were designed sustainably by Singaporean architect Sim Boon Yang to protect the flora and avoid erosion. The resort runs ecologically, too, so this is one of the best islands in the world to visit if you want to protect the planet. Bawah Reserve has solar-powered boats, harvests rainwater, cleans non-potable water through a reverse-osmosis treatment plant, and grows its own papaya, pineapple, lemongrass and more. You can even pack light because Bawah Reserve will provide reef-safe sunscreen, organic toothpaste and do your laundry using ocean-friendly detergent.

Bawah Reserve opened in January 2018, and visitors to the hotel's six pretty islands can indulge in outdoor adventures and relaxed luxury to their hearts' content. Guests can snorkel and scuba dive in the South China Sea, or even get their scuba diving license here. Those who want to admire the green islands without getting wet can do it from a kayak or standup paddleboard or by hiking through the rainforest to see butterflies, birds, wild orchids and a 500-year-old Keruing tree. Or, just close your eyes and relax in the Aura Spa with unlimited massages and facials.

The Exclusivity of a Private Island That Caters to Celebrities: Coco Privé in the Maldives

If you want a truly bespoke private island experience, you'd be hard pressed to find something better than Coco Privé. This secluded Indian Ocean island is 35 minutes by private yacht from the Maldives' Malé International Airport. Your experience in Coco Privé is tailored to your specifications. The entire island is for you and 11 of your besties, or feel free to enjoy the luxury all by yourself. Coco Privé is geared for just a dozen guests, split into one master residence and five different guest villas, all designed by architect Guz Wilkinson.

Your stay at Coco Privé will be designed exactly how you want it. Feel like spending the day beneath the waves admiring the resident sea turtles with the in-house marine biologist? Want to sit by the 130-foot-long pool and have your butler deliver a fresh cocktail before your last drink's ice cubes melt? Curious to learn how to cook Maldivian food with your personal chef? Want to go big game fishing? Or, are unlimited spa treatments more your thing? No problem: Coco Privé delivers.

Three Islands in One: The Tri-Islands of Grenada, Carriacou and Petite Martinique

Known as one of the most beautiful islands in the world, the Caribbean island nation of Grenada is actually made up of three main islands. They sit just south of the Caribbean's hurricane belt, which means large storms are unlikely. Grenada is, therefore, one of the best Caribbean islands to visit, not only any time of the year, but during the Caribbean hurricane season, which begins June 1 and ends November 30.

In addition to waterfalls, crater lakes and rainforests, Grenada boasts one of the world's most-famous beaches – Grand Anse Beach – plus 45 others. Grand Anse's two miles of powdery sand beckon beach lovers to dip their toes in the clear blue water or to settle down for a nap in the shade of one of its palm trees. There are plenty of hotels, restaurants and shops near this stretch of beach just outside the capital city of St. George's. Be sure to look for dishes and products made with nutmeg – it's particularly good in ice cream. Grenada is the "spice isle," after all, and cloves, cinnamon, ginger, vanilla and nutmeg are all grown here.

Just a 30-minute flight away is the island of Carriacou, known as the Land of Reefs. It's a slow-paced, laid-back kind of place, except when it's festival time, such as during the August Carriacou Regatta and the Carriacou Maroon and String Band Music Festival in April. Even quieter is the island of Petite Martinique, where you can experience the more traditional Caribbean of yesteryear, complete with uncrowded beaches.

TIP

1. Consider Puerto Rico as a great Caribbean island option too. While this United States territory suffered considerable damage during 2017's Hurricane Maria, much of the island's tourist infrastructure has been rebuilt. Puerto Rico is open for travelers, and it welcomes tourist dollars to help further rebuild the island and ensure protection from future storms. Puerto Rico is known for its cultural heritage, pretty towns and natural splendor, and it has a burgeoning farm-to-table sustainable food scene. Add Puerto Rico to your list of best Caribbean islands and visit soon.

A Closer-to-Home Over-Water Bungalow Off Cayo Espanto in Belize

Many people dream of an island [vacation](#) where they can stay in an over-the-water bungalow, but they worry about the travel distance to Tahiti, where the first hotel with rooms on stilts above the reef was created in 1967. For a closer over-water bungalow island experience, try Cayo Espanto's Casa Ventanas bungalow instead, off the coast of Belize.

Rather than taking a flight to French Polynesia, it takes just two hours to fly to Belize City from Houston. Follow that with a puddle jump to Ambergris Caye and a seven-minute boat ride to the paradise of Cayo Espanto, which means "Spirit Island." Or, feel free to take a helicopter if you prefer.

If you love the underwater world but want some luxury and privacy topside too, Cayo Espanto is the perfect spot for you. The 4-acre private island is three miles off the 174-mile-long Caribbean coast of Belize, near San Pedro, which makes it easy to get to, but still private and secluded. Cayo Espanto is ideal for exploring the world's second-largest barrier reef and for bonefishing, bird-watching on neighboring protected islands, or for visiting the Mayan ruins on Belize's mainland.

Stay in Casa Espanto's 1,100-square-foot over-water bungalow surrounded by the turquoise sea, or, if you'd prefer a sandy beach at your feet, choose one of the six villas directly on the island. You'll have to work hard at seeing another guest while you enjoy your beach and plunge pool.

TIP

1. See another part of Belize after your island adventure. Stay at San Ignacio Resort Hotel for a luxury jungle experience near the charming town of San Ignacio and within walking distance of the Mayan site of Cahal Pech.

The Perfect Island for Watersports and Traditional Culture: Roatán, Honduras

Above the sea, it's called the island of Roatán. Underwater, it's the Mesoamerican Reef, the Western Hemisphere's largest coral reef. Roatán, part of Honduras' Bay Islands, is known as a friendly and unpretentious tropical paradise.

Scuba divers and snorkelers delight at the animal and plant life thriving in Roatán's clear waters. If they're lucky, they'll even spot the largest fish in the sea, the gentle whale shark. Ecotourism thrives here, and the reefs are protected in the Roatán Marine Park. When water lovers want to get back on dry land, the beaches and activities of Roatán provide plenty of options. Want to spot parrots in the bird sanctuary? Go horseback riding on the beach? See monkeys in Gumbalimba Park? Tour the mangroves? Golf 18 holes? Shop for vanilla in the local market? You can do it all. Be sure to leave time for a trip to Little French Key, a private island with an animal rescue center just off Roatán's south shore.

Roatán also boasts the thriving traditional culture of the Garifuna people, the largest ethnic group in Honduras. Visitors can learn about Garifuna language, history, culture and traditions as well as sample the labor-intensive Garifuna cuisine, which features coconut and green bananas in most of its dishes.

The Unique Wildlife of Ecuador's Galapagos Islands

Want to take amazing photographs of wildlife? The Galapagos Islands, 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, are the ideal islands for you. These UNESCO World Heritage islands are home to blue-footed boobies, flightless cormorants, lava lizards, colorful land iguanas and marine iguanas that look as if they're from a black-and-white monster movie (don't worry; they move slowly and mostly ignore humans). Grab a snorkel and jump in the water, and you'll have sea lions, penguins and turtles swimming right next to you.

While you can explore Galapagos' 13 major and six smaller islands with a land-based stay, you'll see and learn so much more if you take a cruise. There are only four islands that allow hotels, and you'll want to visit several islands

to see Darwin's theory of evolution displayed before your eyes. A cruise is the ideal way to see the Galapagos, as you'll travel between islands overnight and wake up each day to a new and unique place to explore. Those who value flexibility, individuality and small groups, freedom, adventure, ease and comfort will love UnCruise, a unique cruise line with boutique yachts and small expedition vessels that provide uncommon adventures. Their Galapagos cruise is aboard the 24-cabined La Pinta, which features a 1.7-to-1 guest-to-crew ratio, extremely knowledgeable staff, and several ways to admire Galapagos' stunning island and sea views: through floor-to-ceiling windows in your cabin and the lounge, from the outdoor Sky Bar or from the on-deck hot tub. Have your camera at the ready.

Discover a Hidden Beach at Mexico's Galapagos

Off the coast of Riviera Nayarit and Puerto Vallarta in the Pacific Ocean are a small group of protected islands inhabited only by animals, including several thousand birds. Befitting their nickname as the "Galapagos of Mexico," the blue-footed booby lives on the Marietas. On a day trip from Riviera Nayarit or Puerto Vallarta, visitors can snorkel and scuba dive as well as see the unique Playa del Amor (Lovers Beach), also known as Hidden Beach.

It's important to time the trip perfectly with the tides. You'll also need a wristband to access the area, plus a guide or specific directions, because Hidden Beach is invisible unless you know where to look. To get there, swim or kayak through a tunnel, which goes from the Pacific Ocean into the interior of the island. At low tide, there's just 6 feet of headroom above the surface of the water. Inside the island, you'll find a beach surrounded by curved walls, almost like a cave without its roof or a cenote, more commonly found in Mexico's province of Quintana Roo on the Yucatan peninsula.

You can't sleep overnight on these UNESCO-designated islands. Instead, stay an hour's boat ride away in Puerto Vallarta at the Hilton Puerto Vallarta (including their adults-only Hacienda section) or in the historic village of San Blas in Nuevo Vallarta.

TIP

1. Other uninhabited Mexican islands with lots of wildlife include Isla Espiritu Santo and the Los Islotes islets, near the laid-back town of La Paz on the Baja peninsula. On the way to this UNESCO-protected biosphere reserve, you can often see blue-footed boobies, whale sharks, turtles, rays, dolphins and whales. When you arrive, dive in the water to snorkel with tropical fish and the friendly sea lions who will swim over to check you out.

Over 300 Islands in the Turks and Caicos

Eight main islands and about 300 smaller islands make up the Turks and Caicos, a British Overseas Territory in the Lucayan Archipelago. Technically in the Atlantic Ocean, the Turks and Caicos exhibit what's best of the Caribbean islands. The islands boast 350 days of sun per year, making them a clear contender for the best islands in the world for [vacation](#). Turks and Caicos is famous for powdery white sand beaches, sophisticated dining and shopping, and a wide variety of water- and land-based activities. Plan your trip for a few days after the full moon when you can take a glowworm cruise and see a bioluminescent phenomenon, thanks to the mating dance of glowworms offshore.

Stay on famous Grace Bay Beach. Choose between The Regent Grand's Bianca Sands luxury oceanfront suites with the nearby entertainment center or the Ocean Club Resorts, which has suites with kitchens and three restaurants. It's a short walk to Potcake Place, a dog shelter that welcomes guests who want to play with their rescue dogs.

Surreal Explorations on Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands

You'll feel like you're in the land of the giants as you explore The Baths, on the north shore of Virgin Gorda, one of the British Virgin Islands (also known as the BVIs). It looks as if a giant tossed a bunch of granite boulders – some 40 feet in diameter – onto the beach and on top of each other. Human-sized visitors can explore the 7-acre area by climbing ladders, wading through small bath-like pools, crawling through grottoes and tunnels, and snorkeling with tropical fish. The Baths are within Devil's Bay National Park and can be visited from shore or from a boat moored nearby.

While you can stay onshore, you'll see more of the British Virgin Islands if you explore by ship. Windstar's Star Pride cruises here, and its Wind Surf sails to Virgin Gorda. G Adventures takes just eight passengers aboard its catamaran to explore the nooks and crannies of the BVIs.

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