

6



MINOS BEACH ART HOTEL CRETE, GREECE

There are few places better to soothe a frazzled urban soul than poolside at Crete's tranquil Minos Beach Art Hotel. Nestled between the whitewashed towns of Agios Nikolaos and Elounda, the low-rise, 1961-built idyll is surrounded by pines and framed by the turquoise Mirabello Bay, its fragrant, contemporary art-filled gardens constituting an eclectic outdoor art gallery. It is hardly surprising that Walt Disney himself chose to holiday here.

Offering 15 room categories, the design is one of clean lines, pendant lighting, fluttering voile curtains and rustic basketry. Boutique bungalows boast sun-dappled private terraces so close to the shore that you can dip your toes while sunbathing. Inside, airy interiors are fitted with a state-of-the-art lighting and AV system, while bathrooms have walk-in rainforest showers.

When it comes to dining, there is no need to stray very far. Take ambrosial breakfasts alfresco at the main restaurant, Bacchus (whose slow-cooked pork at dinner, incidentally is the stuff of Greek legend), lunch at Terpsis (think whole grilled fish, succulent souvlaki, *keftedes* and baklava) and, at least once

during your stay, dine at La Boullabaisse, renowned since the Seventies for its refined Mediterranean plates. Later, the softly lit fire pit – and an array of quality craft cocktails – beckon.

If you can tear yourself away from the hotel, the surrounding area has much to offer: the Cretan Olive Oil Farm for insight into production techniques ancient and modern, a clutch of high-end diving schools, and the hauntingly beautiful Spinalonga island, made famous by Victoria Hislop's best-selling 2007 novel *The Island*. JA. Doubles from £230. minosbeach.com



BEAVERBROOK LEATHERHEAD, SURREY

Grand country mansions are as common in Surrey as cucumber sandwiches are at afternoon tea. But glorious buttermilk-coloured country pads that acted as a command centre for Winston Churchill during the Second World War are, indeed, a rare gem. Owned by the late media mogul Lord Beaverbrook, high-profile guests to have prowled its 140ha grounds includes Elizabeth Taylor, the Kennedys and Rudyard Kipling – all of whom have one of 18 rooms in the main house named after them. Naturally, the residence pays tribute to its storied past, but with interiors by Nicola Harding (of gourmet bolthole The Rose fame), it is also bang on trend. Add to that a Japanese dining room serving arguably the best black cod in the UK, sizzling hunks of Wagyu beef, and super-fresh sashimi, and you've got a modern country pile worth making the journey for. There's only one way to end such an epic feast: nightcaps in the decadent Parrot Bar, accompanied by twinkling jazz from the gramophone. Flapper dress, optional. FRM. Doubles from £293. beaverbrook.co.uk

Words by Julie Alpine; Fleur Rollet-Manus; Mark Sansom
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Gourmet bolthole

The Swan, Axford-under-Wychwood

A honey-hued Cotswolds darling near Chipping Norton, this 16th-century coaching inn steals the show for its modern take on pub grub. It starts with fresh bread – sourdough and rye – with three homemade churns: horseradish and dripping butter, goat's butter with lardons and a fiery *gochujang* spread, and a fine blend embedded with pieces of pork scratching, large flakes of Maldon salt and truffle sauce.

Up next are six plump kingfisher prawns swimming in *nduja* and garlic butter, followed by a thick, blushing bavette steak and a hearty homemade chicken and leek pie with buttery mash. An interval featuring locally distilled Garden Tiger G&Ts garnished with orange slices acts as a palate cleanser, before an indulgent pool of molten Jaffa Cake chocolate pudding topped with candied pistachios and creamy pistachio gelato.

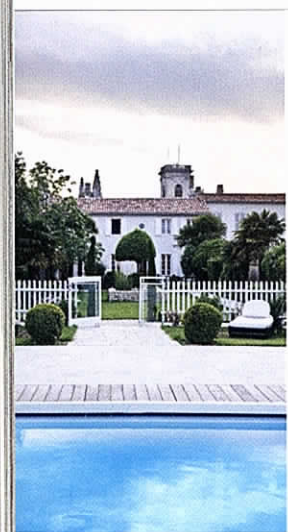
Afterwards, near-perfect negronis are whisked up to our snug room – an ideal postprandial sign-off. In the morning, if you can tear yourself from the grand bathtub – filled with lavender-scented 100 Acre bubbles – a breakfast of house-smoked salmon and scrambled duck egg is a doozy. It only opened in May, but we predict big things for this eight-room bolthole. FRM. Doubles from £90. countrycreatures.com



Places to stay

This month, we find joy in an unspoilt corner of a winning Cotswolds inn, join the jet set in Rome

Crete, escape to a serene French hideaway, fall for and make like aristocracy in a grand Surrey mansion



VILLA CLARISSÉ ÎLE DE RÉ, FRANCE

It is a singularly chic municipal edict that denotes that all shutters and doors on the Île de Ré – an idyllic 85 sq km island off France's west coast – must be painted in one of 16 permitted shades. Against a palette spanning dove grey to moss green via duck-egg blue, the sublime Villa Clarisse blends in seamlessly. Accommodation comprises five suites and four rooms, with minimalist design throughout. Subtle lighting, lime-washed walls and elegant furniture create a peaceful haven, while outside, a heated pool awaits. Breakfast on flaky croissants and fresh fruit, perfectly poached eggs and smoky bacon, attended to by the delightful staff, then lunch at big sister Hotel de Toiras, a stone's throw away, on the Saint-Martin-en-Ré harbourfront. Here, chef Antonio Sanna delivers a gourmet French menu rich in fresh local produce. Just don't be surprised if, on your return back to Blighty, you feel the need for a spot of repainting. JA. Doubles from £225. villa-clarisse.com



HOTEL DE RUSSIE ROME, ITALY

Rome wasn't built in a day; perfection takes time – case in point, this 19th-century hotel. Gracing Centro Storico with its palatial proportions, the peach facade has matured with age, achieving a gravitas that charms the best-heeled Romans to frequent its Olga Polizzi interiors. Airy suites bathe in soft sunlight, while a compact spa offers cool luxury. But it's the verdant courtyard – beloved by Picasso – that makes this the eighth wonder of Rome. MS. Doubles from £770. roccofortehotels.com

