

ANDREW HARPER'S Hideaway Report[®]

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SINCE 1979

Traveling the world in search of truly enchanting places



Rosewood Little Dix Bay,
British Virgin Islands

Top 10 Winter Sun Destinations

The best seasonal travel options — from the islands of the Caribbean to the plains of East Africa

For those living in the northern half of the country — and 124 million of us are residents in the Northeast and the Midwest alone — the ability to exchange snow for white sand is one of life's most enduring pleasures. I lost count long ago of the times I've watched a dismal landscape accelerate through a rain-streaked window at JFK to be replaced a few hours later by lush green grass and breeze-ruffled palm trees. This winter, the pandemic has curtailed our choices, but it is still possible to escape the cold and the dark. Many countries

are trying their best to find ways to welcome us back. After researching the current requirements and restrictions, I have identified 10 areas of the world where, with a little planning and a modicum of inconvenience, it is possible to enjoy a blissful respite from winter. Of course, some risks still remain, but air travel is widely considered to be safe if all sensible precautions are observed. And on arrival you will be able to relax on your terrace, swim in the ocean, and eat outside in the warm-scented air of the tropics.

Hideaway Report editors travel anonymously and pay full rate for all lodging, meals and related expenses.

Since the launch of the Hideaway Report in 1979, featured hotels and restaurants have been selected on a completely independent basis.

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Pikaia Lodge, Santa Cruz, Galápagos Islands

to take full advantage of it. Families can have even more privacy at one of the residences on the property. Indeed, this resort, with its four swimming pools, two beaches and seaview golf course, could hardly be better suited to a family vacation. It's only about 45 minutes from the Four Seasons to the international airport at Liberia, from which it's possible to fly nonstop back to the United States.

Ecuador

For those in need of a brief retreat from the cares of the world, Ecuador is an ideal destination. This small country has a diversity of natural wonders that includes the Amazonian jungle, the temperate cloud forests of the Andean highlands and, of course, the Galápagos archipelago. In such places, contemporary worries seem far away. Currently, a COVID test must be taken 10 days prior to entering Ecuador — 96 hours before going to the Galápagos — and travelers are required to have a safe passage document and appropriate health insurance.

Most of the islands of the Galápagos remain unspoiled and uninhabited. Their situation allows an astonishing ecosystem to thrive, one that includes creatures as varied as sea lions, giant tortoises, marine iguanas and the only penguin species found in the tropics.

Many people tour the Galápagos on a cruise, but a hotel base is also an option. Most recently, I stayed at the 12-room Pikaia Lodge, a resort on the island of Santa Cruz, perched atop a hill amid 75 acres that have been replanted with 9,000 native trees. Seeing giant tortoises was a highlight of our explorations near the hotel, but the real fun was had aboard the property's yacht. We alighted on North Seymour Island, where red-orange Sally Lightfoot crabs skittered away across the black lava boulders and male blue-footed boobies danced. And nearby, we snorkeled in clear shallow water as playful sea lions swirled around us.

The 24-room Mashpi Lodge makes an excellent companion property to Pikaia, having a similarly contemporary style but an utterly different setting in a cloud forest about three and a half hours northwest of Quito. Mashpi's private 3,212-acre enclave is surrounded by a public reserve of 42,000 acres, part of one of the world's biodiversity hot spots. We spent one blissful morning beside feeders that attracted dozens of iridescent hummingbirds, and an afternoon on a hike to an exquisite waterfall. And from an observation tower, just after sunrise we could see the tops of nearby hills poking through the clouds below, like jungle islands in the sky.

French Polynesia

For nearly all of us, the past few months have been extremely stressful, so the prospect of a complete change of scene is even more alluring than usual. An eight-hour flight from Los Angeles, French Polynesia consists of 118 islands sprinkled across an area of ocean almost the size of continental Europe. Bora Bora, 50 minutes by plane from Tahiti, is the embodiment of the South Pacific fantasy, and the physical beauty of its lush mountainous landscape has to be seen to be believed. Every possible paradisiacal cliché has been written about the place and, incredibly, most of them are true.

Four Seasons Bora Bora, French Polynesia





Cheetah, zebra and wildebeest close to the Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya

Whenever I return and catch my first glimpse of the electric-turquoise water of the lagoon, I experience the same rush of exhilaration that I felt on my first visit back in the 1980s.

These days, my preferred resort is the Four Seasons Bora Bora, a property of 108 overwater bungalows and seven villas, set on a private *motu* (islet), all with panoramic views of the main island and 2,385-foot Mount Otemanu. An equally seductive alternative is provided by The Brando, a resort set on the private island of Tetiaroa, once owned by Marlon Brando, which lies a 20-minute flight north of Papeete. There, 35 one- to three-bedroom thatched beachfront villas come with private decks, plunge pools and outdoor tubs. **The Brando** is certainly not inexpensive, but it is one of those places that, if your budget permits, really are worth the considerable outlay. Aside from the luxurious accommodations and the delicious cuisine, for me much of the resort's appeal derives from its pristine natural surroundings. The snorkeling is astonishing, and for those who would like to learn more about the environment, tours are offered to nearby research stations.

From the onset of the COVID pandemic, the authorities in French Polynesia have been conspicuously keen to protect their tourist industry, and all quarantine measures have now been lifted. Travelers

must submit proof of an approved negative RT-PCR test carried out within three days prior to their international air departure. Currently, a self-test, provided by French Polynesia, must be taken four days after arrival.

Kenya

Flying all the way to East Africa during a pandemic may not seem like a very sensible idea, but in fact it is not quite as crazy as it sounds. For a start, there is now a nonstop 15-hour flight from New York to Nairobi on Kenya Airways, which means it is no longer necessary to change planes at a European hub and incur the inevitable health risks. The Kenyan authorities are also desperate to lure American travelers back to the country – the economy is heavily dependent on tourism – so U.S. citizens are not required to quarantine and must only show proof of a negative PCR-based test conducted within 96 hours of arrival. Safari companies now strive to make their clients' progress through Jomo Kenyatta International Airport as seamless as possible, and then immediately transfer them to a game park, well away from Nairobi and potential sources of infection. Much of the time on safari is spent in the fresh air, taking game drives aboard open-sided vehicles or going on escorted walks in the

bush. And of course it is usually possible to eat outside.

Wildlife areas, until recently synonymous with overtourism, are semi-deserted, and it is possible to see the majestic grasslands much as they were 30 years ago. In the Maasai Mara, I am particularly fond of Mara Plains Camp, an atmospheric property of just seven lavish tents set on raised decks and surrounded by the 35,000-acre Olare Motorogi Conservancy adjacent to the national reserve. Due to a constant source of water from the Mara River, this area has a huge population of animals year-round and the game viewing is seldom short of sensational. A contrasting experience is provided by Sirikoi, a sumptuous property of four tents, a two-bedroom cottage and a self-contained three-bedroom house, located in the Lewa Downs private conservancy, within sight of the 17,057-foot peak of Mount Kenya. Even in these unprecedented circumstances, an East African vacation is a viable option, and by going on safari you can also help to sustain conservation efforts and community development projects that have been severely disrupted by the abrupt loss of funding. **HR**

The information in this article was correct at the time it went to press. However, for the latest information, please go to [HideawayReport.com](https://www.HideawayReport.com).