

Your Year In Travel Spring

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Out of this world

It may be a gloomy time of the year, but with a full holiday allocation at your fingertips it's time to think about this year's big trips.

Sarah Marshall gives a seasonal rundown on where to go in 2012

MYANMAR, BURMA

Curious travellers have always had Myanmar (Burma) on their radar, but up until now the political situation has kept most visitors away. Following the release of pro-democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and her subsequent seal of approval for tourism, however, tour operators predict this predominantly Buddhist south-east Asian country will be the place to go in 2012. Highlights include cruises along the Irrawaddy river and

visits to picturesque pagodas, enchanting monasteries and forgotten hill stations. But the biggest allure is a country largely untouched by the outside world, with only 9,000 hotel beds available.

■ *Travel Indochina offers a nine-day Highlights Of Burma escorted group tour from £1,045 per person, including accommodation and domestic flights. International flights are extra. Visit travelindochina.co.uk or call 01865 268 940*

MASHPI LODGE, ECUADOR

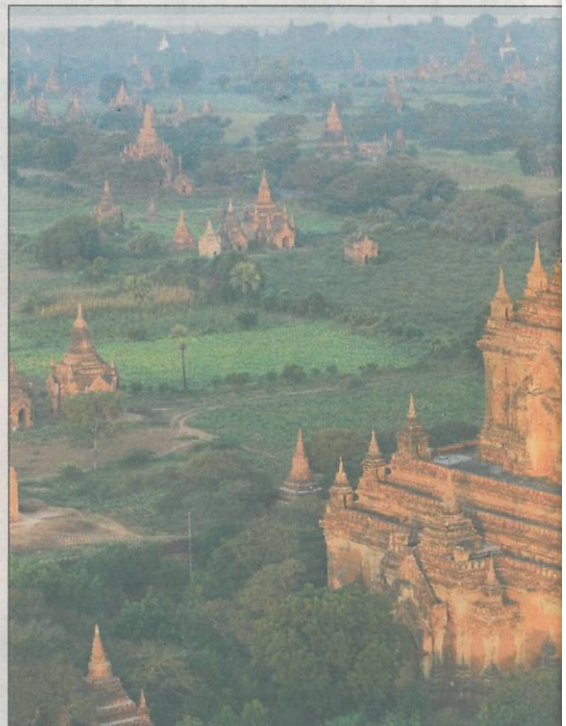
The Galapagos Islands need no introduction, but in the past few years the focus has been steadily shifting towards mainland Ecuador. Last year, restored colonial house Casa Gangotena opened up as a boutique hotel in capital city Quito, and in April this year, sister property Mashpi Lodge is set to open its doors in the Ecuadorian Andes. Situated just two-and-a-half hours from Quito, the rainforest reserve allows visitors on a tight itinerary a chance to toe-dip into Ecuador's bio-diverse jungle. Up to 500 different species of birds swoop past the wall-to-ceiling windows of the lodge, perched 3,116ft above sea level. Explore trails with a naturalist, bathe in waterfalls or learn about local life in a farmhouse supported by the lodge.

■ *Cox & Kings offers a five-night stay at Casa Gangotena and Mashpi Lodge (full-board) from £1,985 per person, including flights and transfers.*

Visit coxandkings.co.uk or call 0207 873 5000



Forest retreat: Mashpi Lodge will open in the Ecuadorian Andes in April



PALAIS NAMASKAR, MARRAKECH

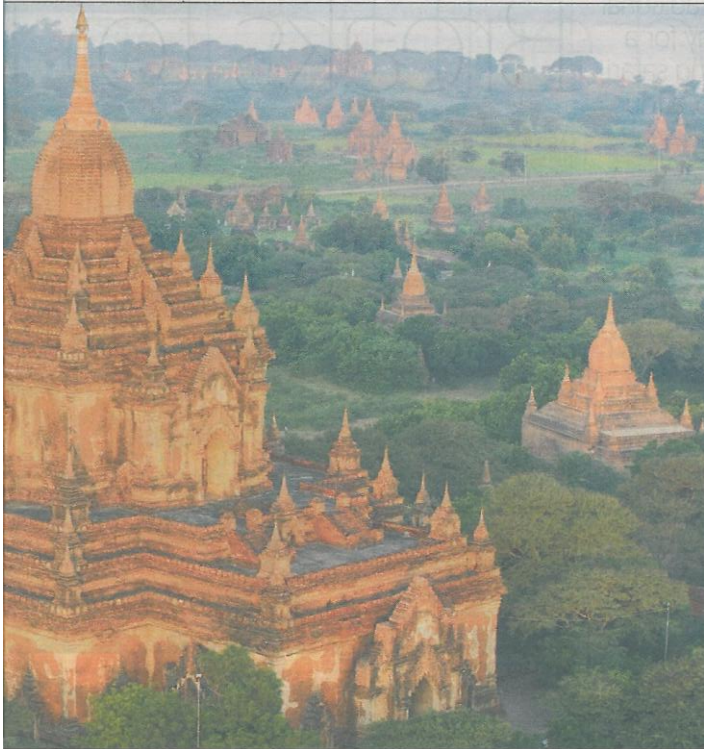
Marrakech continues to grow in popularity, with a flurry of new hotel openings. The most exciting is the latest property in the Oetker Collection (Le Bristol, Paris and Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc). Comprising 41 suites, villas and palaces, the lavish resort, set between the Atlas Mountains and Djebilet Hills, will fling

open its doors in April. Away from the madness of the Medina, the idea is for guests to relax either in the ILA-stocked spa, where the focus is on spiritual and physical healing, or in the surrounding Balinese-inspired gardens.

■ *Superior doubles start from €390 per night, including breakfast. Visit oetkerhotels.com*

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Spring Your Year In Travel



AYERS ROCK, AUSTRALIA

Getting airborne is all too easy these days. Follow in the footsteps of Phileas Fogg by exploring the skies in a balloon. Enjoy a bird's eye view of natural wonder Ayers Rock in March when, for the first time, hot air balloons will take flight over the Patji region, just outside Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park. Covering an area previously accessible only to visitors with special permits, the flights have been launched in co-operation with the Aboriginal Anangu owners of the park. Take off at dawn for a 30-minute journey, then relax with a light bush breakfast.

New frontiers: Burma is tipped to be one of the places to go in 2012. A must-see are the eye-catching pagodas

■ Balloon flights are operated by *Outback Ballooning* and cost AU\$450 (approx £294) per person. Visit outbackballooning.com.au

SONG SAA, CAMBODIA

There are plenty of 'couples only' resorts in the world, but few actual land masses with room only for two. Nicknamed Song Saa by locals, meaning The Sweethearts, two pristine islands in Cambodia's unspoilt Koh Rong archipelago are set to welcome love-struck tourists, quite aptly, from February 14. The new, luxurious 27-villa Song Saa resort is spread across both islands,

which are connected by a footbridge crossing waters filled with seahorses and exotic fish. Each thatch-roof villa will have a private pool and uninterrupted sunrise or sunset views. The virgin rainforests and sparkling white beaches present seductively unchartered territories. ■ *Original Travel* offers a seven-night all-inclusive stay at Song Saa from £4,395 per person, including flights (offer valid Feb-May 2012). Visit originaltravel.co.uk or call 0207 978 7333.

UYUNI SALT FLATS, BOLIVIA

One of the poorest countries in South America, Bolivia fascinates adventurous travellers. But you don't necessarily need to go trekking with a backpack, and it's now possible to visit the famous Salt Flats in a more quirky form of transport. From April, visitors can camp overnight in a vintage US airstream caravan specially adapted to conditions on the White Sea of Salt. The campers, with bedroom, living area, bathroom and hot shower, will be towed by a Jeep, while an additional truck will be used as a kitchen and restaurant.

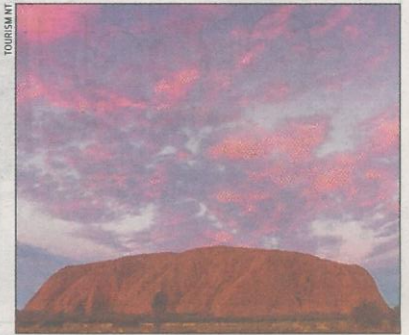
■ *Exsus* offers a ten-night package from £3,995 per person (based on min four travelling) including flights. Visit exsus.com or call 0207 337 9010

VIETNAM

Opportunities for visiting Indochina have opened up thanks to the launch of a new direct flight route from London to Vietnam (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City) with Vietnam Airlines. Shaving seven hours off the flight time, visitors can now travel in greater comfort with increased possibility for 'power break' stays. Worth a visit is the Unesco World Heritage town Hoi An, while you can have a suit made for pittance by a tailor in Ho Chi Minh City.

■ *Vietnam Airlines* currently offers an online deal of £427 return including taxes (conditions apply). Visit vietnamairlines.com

■ *WEXAS Travel* offers a nine-night Saigon and Luxury Mekong itinerary, from £2,925 per person (based on two sharing) including flights, accommodation and a cruise on colonial cruiser, *The Jahan*. Visit wexas.com or call 0845 643 6568



Hot spots: (from top) from March you will be able to see Ayers Rock from a hot air balloon; the Song Saa resort is situated on two pristine islands in Cambodia's Koh Rong archipelago; World Heritage town Hoi An in Vietnam