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travel

THE WINTER ISSUE

The best chalets, coolest resorts, wildest adventures, and the jolliest Santa (or a suntan, if you insist) in our 32 page special

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22 travel WINTER SPECIAL

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ENOUGH SNOW ALREADY!

If your idea of a winter trip involves leaving the mittens at home, **Chris Haslam** knows the best deals under the shimmering sun

Do you like your water warm, blue and liquid instead of cold, white and solid? Would you rather loaf on a beach than shiver on a slope? Prefer a surfboard to a snowboard? If you've answered "yes" to any of the above, you're probably in urgent need of a hammock, a straw hat and a daiquiri. We've found the most tempting winter sun breaks on offer, with prices starting as low as £527.

Unless stated, prices are for dates between December and March — excluding Christmas and New Year — and include flights from London, transfers and accommodation on a B&B basis

LESS THAN £1,000

The specialist tour operator Just Tobago (01373 814234, justtobago.co.uk) is always a reliable source of cheap Caribbean sunshine, and when I told them you were a bit short, they suggested the Toucan Inn at Crown Point, Tobago — a simple, friendly tropical hideaway with a great bar, a pool and Store Bay beach 10 minutes down the road. The price starts at £695.

If you would rather something right on the beach, Hayes & Jarvis (0871 664 0246, hayesandjarvis.com) has a week, all-inclusive, spent spreadeagled on the dazzling white sands of Mexico's Mayan Riviera, at the snappily named Viva Wyndham Maya, in the Playacar resort. It's big

— 480 rooms — and it's popular with Americans, but at £799, including free watersports, dance classes and unlimited margaritas, who's complaining?

You won't find many Americans in Cuba, where Captivating Cuba (08444 129917, captivatingcuba.com) offers the more adventurous type a week in El Castillo, an old Spanish fort partly converted into a hotel, in Baracoa, in the east of the island. The tour operator's blurb boasts that the locally loved Playa Nibujon "has no tourist facilities whatsoever". Marvellous. The price is £855.

If you can stretch to a grand, Tropical Sky (0870 907 9600, tropicalsky.co.uk) offers a week, all-inclusive, at Almond Smugglers Cove, in St Lucia, a sprawling family-friendly resort with five pools, four restaurants, a kids' club and free watersports. The price is £999.

The boho alternative for that kind of money is a week at the funky Jakes, on Treasure Beach, Jamaica. There's not an awful lot to do here apart from swimming, drinking and loafing, so if you need to work up a sweat, you'll have to use your imagination. The price is £999, booked through Virgin Hip Hotels (0844 573 2460, vhhphotek.co.uk).

Prefer your sun with added culture? Voyages Jules Verne (0845 166 7035, viv.com) offers a seven-night stay in the open-air museum that is ancient Thebes, now known as Luxor. Located at the bottom end of the Corniche, the Hotel Iberotel Luxor

overlooks the Nile and is within walking distance of sites such as the Temple of Luxor, the Precinct of Amun-Re and the Temple of Karnak. The cost is £527.

In Sri Lanka — emerging as this season's tropical hot spot — Fleewinter (020 7112 0019, fleewinter.com) has a week on the beach at the Talalla Retreat, near Tangalla, on the island's southern tip. Simple, serene and with the emphasis on good local food, Talalla's best-kept secret is its gorgeous beach. There are free yoga classes and the hotel welcomes surfers, offering equipment and transfers to local breaks. The price starts at £915.

UP TO £1,599

You know the phrase "getting away from it all"? There's a spot in Sri Lanka that takes the concept to the extreme. You drive north from Colombo (everyone else drives south). After a couple of hours, you hang a left for the Kalpiya Peninsula. At the end of a sandy track lies Alankuda. The accommodation is a mix of grand villas in huge private gardens and mud-walled cabanas with spectacular outdoor showers. There's a pool, a boat in which to go whale-spotting, and that's it. There are no menus — you eat whatever the chef has cooked — and the bar is a cool box full of gin, tonic and cold beer. A week in November starts at £1,290 with Real Holidays (020 7359 3938, reallholidays.co.uk).

Stiff off the beaten track, £1,349 will buy you 10 nights at the Red Coconut Beach Resort on the tropical island of Boracay, in the Philippines. Why Boracay? First, because its white sand beach is regularly voted the best on earth, and second, because your hotel is bang in the middle of that beach.

Book it with Faraway Holidays (01249 467163, farawayholidays.co.uk) and a two-night stay in Hong Kong's Harbour Plaza hotel will be thrown in. If you'd prefer a shorter haul, try Egypt. Bailey Robinson (01488 689700, baileyrobinson.com) has seven nights for the price of six at the Four Seasons Resort in Sharm el Sheikh. It's hot, and the hotel remains aloof from its neighbours. The price starts at £1,210.

Or try Mauritius. Luxury Holidays Direct (020 8774 7297, luxuryholidaysdirect.com) is offering seven nights' half-board accommodation in a junior suite at the super-posh Beau Rivage from £1,319. Otherwise try the brand-new Trou aux Biches, just down the road, which opens in November and is promising to "raise the bar for accommodation on the island". Beachcomber Tours (01483 445 685, beachcombertours.co.uk) will sell you a week's half-board in a junior suite from £1,745, but avoid January and February, when it rains.

Conversely, those months are the best time to visit Mafia Island, the smallest and least visited of Tanzania's main spice islands. You know the drill here: wake up, pinch yourself, swim, eat, snooze, eat, drink, swim, sleep, and repeat. Specialist Tanzania (020 7193 2461, specialisttanzania.com) offers eight days of barefoot luxury at the Kinasi Lodge from £1,599.

UP TO £4,500

I know you're loaded, but everybody likes a bargain, so grab an early booking discount at Antigua's Carlisle Bay, the design beacon that changed the dreary Caribbean scene. Expect Asian-style serenity wrapped in Frette linen, and service that arrives before you thought you needed it. Book by

November 30 and Bailey Robinson (01488 689700, baileyrobinson.com) will knock £495 off the price of a week, starting at £2,605.

Private island? Try Jumby Bay, just off Antigua's northeast coast, which reopened this year after a £18m refurbishment. Gone is the old shoddiness, and in its place there's a spa, new suites, the Verandah restaurant and a bistro overlooking an ocean-front infinity pool. The price starts at £3,995 with ITC Classics (01244 355 527, itcclassics.co.uk).

Alternatively, Kuoni (01306 247008, kuoni.co.uk) has a week at Baros, a Maldives resort surrounded by a turquoise lagoon, encircled by white sand and only a 20-minute boat ride from Malé. The hotel is beside one of the best reefs in the archipelago, so diving and snorkelling are the big things. The price starts at £2,049.

If you're the type who needs private staff hovering in the background, you'll enjoy the Peter Island Resort and Spa, on the British Virgin Islands, where every room comes with a butler to mix your drinks, arrange your day and give you a cuddle if the thought of leaving the white sands, blue skies and cerulean seas for the grey streets of austerity Britain becomes too much to bear. ITC Classics (01244 355 527, itcclassics.co.uk) is offering seven nights from £2,415.

There are butlers, too, at the Alila Villas, a cluster of buildings, pools and gardens 300ft above the Indian Ocean, on a limestone cliff on Bali's Bukit Peninsula. As well as Jeeves, your villa comes with a private pool and birdcage-like cabana with mesmerising views. The only drawback is that the beach is 400 steep steps down, but you could always send the butler. The price is £4,330 for a week, booked with Ampersand Travel (020 7289 6100, ampersandtravel.com).