THE TIMES

Travel

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'I fell asleep listening to hyenas' laughs reverberating in the moonlit valley'

Lisa Grainger on safari in northern Zimbabwe

GETTY IMAGES, LIDIJA LELIC



The Amalfi coast, Italy

Late sun: where to go in Europe

Seek out the last of the sunshine with James Stewart's pick of the trips — from walking the Amalfi coast to a city break in Seville

A few years ago I went to southern Greece in late November. That hadn't been the plan — I'd wanted to go in October but, well, work, life... You know how it is. I arrived fearing the worst, but drifted happily around towns where hoteliers had time to chat. Jumpers came out only in the evenings. Winter sun traditionally means the Canary Islands, the Azores or Madeira. Yet I've taken hugely enjoyable winter trips in southern Croatia, the Algarve, the Balearics, Crete and Sicily. And it seems I'm not the only one. Under the snappy title "Global warming to reshuffle Europe's tourism demand", a report by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre in August noted that 9 per cent of travellers had shifted Mediterranean holiday season to late autumn, when temperatures (and prices) were more friendly. It's no coincidence that Tui will fly to Crete until mid-November this year (it was late October last) and now offers southern Turkey all year round.

From November to early March southern Europe reinvents itself. Historic towns empty and hotel prices plummet. Visiting destinations synonymous with overtourism, such as Mallorca and Dubrovnik, feels like time travel. For walkers and cyclists, temperatures in the mid-teens don't come any better.



Villa Nai, Croatia

Sure, many resort hotels close — which is why most in this list are urban — but you're coming for authenticity: to admire destinations without the hard-sell hustle or jostle of tour groups, to eat in restaurants that are open because they're popular with residents. It might be cloudy — so what? No one moans about occasional dull days during a Nordic summer. In fact, maybe we should reframe southern European winter breaks as coolcations. Actually, given how popular they've been this year, let's not.

Great trips next page

Spain

Chill out on the Costa de la Luz

It tells you all you need to know about the shifting seasons that the Madreselva hotel opens for its first winter after a short November refresh. It's in Los Caños de Meca on the Costa de la Luz, the surfy, laidback Andalusia of blinding light that Seville residents adore for winter short breaks. Quiet on weekdays, Los Caños de Meca has a gentle buzz at weekends. For vibes, the Madreselva is a perfect fit. It's a friendly 18-room hacienda wrapped around a pool, the beach is over the road, and Vejer de la Frontera and Cadiz are less than 30 minutes away. Not convinced? Check the price. Perfecto.

Details Three nights' B&B for two from £191 (califavejer.com). Fly to Seville

A Murcia five-star stay

When I lived in Barcelona a Spanish friend had a thing against Murcia. When pressed she admitted it was the accent. For the rest of us the city may be the last best bit of Spain: 300 days' sunshine (they don't call this Costa Calida, the Warm Coast, for nothing), beaches 30 minutes away, a historic core, no tourism hustle — and now its first five-star hotel. The Palacio San Juan, which opened in September, occupies an 18th-century palace that has been nicely zhuzhed with soft-modernist decor. There's also Murcia's market-garden cuisine in a restaurant led by the chef Juanlu Fernández, plus views of gods on the Royal Heaven terrace.

Details Room-only doubles from £214 (barcelo.com). Fly to Murcia

An Ibiza Town parador

For once the contractor was blameless when the Parador de Ibiza opened 18 years late in March. Everywhere workmen dug in this castle of Ibiza Town an archaeological wonder appeared: a Phoenician temple here, Moorish walls there. So while the newest £40m stay of Spain's Paradores group is a sophisticated spa number of modern Mediterranean rustic-chic, it's also an ad hoc archaeological museum. Winter, when Ibiza returns to itself, is the time to visit. Residents sun themselves like cats outside the cafés of Ibiza Town. Almond blossom paints the inland hills pink and white from February. Seascapes shimmer everywhere.

Details B&B doubles from £178 (paradores.es). Fly to Ibiza

Seville in style

If you need to ask "Why winter?" regarding Seville, you haven't been paying attention. Melt in mid-summer's 40C or amble around the Alcazar in high-teens temperatures? It's a no-brainer in a city best discovered on foot. If you usually go for history and romance, book Serras Sevilla. The hotel opened in late September in the historic Casa Alvaro Davila. It underwent a three-year £327m restoration, with Andalusian interiors in 43 rooms, hand-glazed ceramic headboards and fringed curtains that soften the light. While this is all impressive, you'll probably be gawping at images of the roof terrace — a pool, a cocktail bar, a restaurant and views of the cathedral make it the real selling point.

Details B&B doubles from £313 (serrassevilla.com). Fly to Seville



Bolnuevo beach, Murcia, Spain



Vila Vita Parc hotel, Algarve, Portugal



Serras Sevilla hotel, Seville, Spain

Costa Blanca on foot

Have you heard of the Marina Alta? It's a mountainous backwater behind the Costa Blanca where farming hamlets cascade down slopes, and orchards spread across valleys and woodlands cloak hills — so not like Benidorm at all. Locals have tied their region together with waymarked paths, which makes it ideal for a moderately challenging, self-guided multiday hike with On Foot Holidays that's best in winter. It begins at Castell de Castells and ends at the sea. Between them on a route east is the remote Benimaurell village and the Catedral de Senderismo gorge — the "Cathedral of Hiking". Expect five to six hours' walking daily plus family B&B stays on the Marina Alta trip with On Foot Holidays.

Details Seven nights' full board from £1,365pp (onfootholidays.co.uk). Fly to Alicante

Winter in Mallorca

Cast your mind back to July and you may recall mass protests about overtourism in Mallorca. You may also remember that almost two million tourists had arrived that month. In January there were 244,000. That's why Voyageurs du Monde (the new name for Original Travel) has a new luxury winter Mallorca break. Split between Palma and Ses Salinas, it schedules little — your itinerary lists only a tour of Palma and the swooping drive to a finca hotel at Ses Salinas. Instead there are suggestions for Serra de Tramuntana hikes and private tours of a Soller orangerie. I'd recommend Es Trenc beach. I'll bet it's empty.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,450pp, including flights and car hire (originaltravel.co.uk)

A creative Sierra Nevada getaway

Hikers and bikers enthuse about the beauty of the Sierra Nevada off-season. So why hurry? At Casa Ana in the Alpujarras winter is a season to slow down and try a creative writing or painting retreat, including a new mixed-media painting course. A small group are led by the professional artist Annabel Keatley. The former farmhouse feels like a communal home, from the rustic decor in private en suites of chestnut beams and terracotta floors to the homecooked meals in the Moorish garden. The problem may be the surrounding walks and villages: distraction lies everywhere in the beauty of the surroundings.

Details Six nights' full board from £1,208pp (casa-ana.com). Fly to Malaga

Tennis camp in Marbella

Rafa Nadal was pretty good at tennis. You might be too after a stay at Marbella's Don Carlos. The Costa del Sol hotel opened Spain's first Rafa Nadal Tennis Center in May — just when it was getting too hot to play. Go now and you'll be thwacking balls across seven clay courts in friendly temperatures. You'll book padel courts and coaching from Nadal-approved coaches for one to six-day programmes (from £94 a day). Most of all, you'll enjoy one of the region's original grande dame stays, renovated last year. If it's good enough for Antonio Banderas and Sean Connery, it's good enough for you.

Details B&B doubles from £220 (doncarlosresort.com). Fly to Malaga (originaltravel.co.uk)

Cycling in Andalusia

Here's a trip to work off the Christmas pudding. While everyone else braces for New Year's Eve, you'll be pistoning around the *pueblos blancos* of Andalusia — six days' guided road cycling on backroads from Pizarra via Ronda, covering an average of 40 miles daily on a group tour with Saddle Skeddadle starting on December 28. Day four is the grinder: a punchy 1,515m ascent over Puerto de las Palomas en route to Grazalema. Yet the rewards are scenery of New World scale, small family hotels and celebratory dinners among like-minded enthusiasts. No Spain, no gain. Anyway, all luggage is transferred. The trip is also available as a self-guided tour until the end of November.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £2,195pp, including flights, transfers and lunches (skedaddle.com)

Spot lynx on a wildlife holiday

The wooded highlands of the Andujar Natural Park within the Sierra Morena are a last redoubt for the endangered Iberian lynx. Naturalists estimate its population in the area at about 80 adults, plus around 35 cubs a year. Nocturnal in hot seasons, they become active during winter days and almost brazen during mating season from December to February. Even if you don't see one, this bespoke five-day private trip with Wildlife Worldwide offers a chance to explore one of Spain's quieter corners with an expert guide. Wild boar, deer and others are in the forests. Griffon vultures plus rare black vultures and Spanish imperial eagles soar above.

Details Five nights' full board from £2,395pp, including flights and transfers (wildlifeworldwide.com)



Don Carlos hotel, Marbella, Spain

Portugal

Winter Atlantic waves

Winter is when North Atlantic storms pump swell onto Europe's seaboard. The good vibes surf and yoga operator Soul & Surf has launched a base in a former farmhouse near Burgau at Portugal's tip. Instant music. Not only are the seas warm — 17-20C in December — but the location almost guarantees a wave, whether it's powerful breaks on horizon-pushing western beaches or beginner-friendly ones in the sheltered south. Get the most from a stay on a six-day Surf Progression Week: lessons, video analysis, board and wetsuit provided, and not one mention of "goofy".

Details Five nights' B&B, including lunches, from £466pp (soulandsurf.com). Fly to Faro

Wellness on the Algarve

I suspect more of us could get behind the "new year, new you," mantra of spa folk if the new us emerged from spas like this Algarve job. In Alporchinhos, Vila Vita Spa by Sisley Paris in the five-star Vila Vita Parc hotel was named Portugal's best spa at the Global Spa awards in late September. I don't have the space to enumerate its many massages, meditations, therapies, treatments, detoxes and fitness programmes, but all riches are covered. Oh, and there's a new Pilates studio. The hotel itself isn't too shabby either: 245 rooms; a dozen restaurants and bars, from two Michelin-star venues to pizzerias; six pools plus Tromoços beach; and 54 acres of subtropical greenery.

Details B&B doubles from £267 (vilavitaparc.com). Fly to Faro

A beach bargain on the Algarve

If you can find a cheaper five-star winter sun break in the Algarve, I want you as my travel agent. Every gripe about the proximity of the beachfront Grande Real Santa Eulalia Resort & Hotel Spa to Albufeira — a big busy resort three miles away but quiet in winter, with lovely beaches on the doorstep — and every moan about cabin luggage-only or it being self-catering seems peevish when a package costs less than 50 quid a day. The apartments are chic and in muted creamy colours, and there are four outdoor pools, a Thalasso spa, and pizza, sushi and steak restaurants. The catch? The deal is available only to members of Rory's Travel Club England, but membership costs a tenner annually and can be cancelled at any time.

Details Four nights' self-catering from £385pp, including flights (rorysdreamticketengland.com)



Palermo cathedral, Sicily, Italy