

offer this winter, as recommended by top travel writers

Holidays in the winter sun

Stepping back in time in Southeast Asia

Squeezed between three economic tigers – Vietnam, Thailand, China – Laos is developing fast, but it remains Southeast Asia’s most unspoilt and “laid-back” country, says David Whitley in *National Geographic Traveller*. The capital, Vientiane, is a “languorous” little city of crumbling French colonial mansions, bougainvillea-bedecked gardens and steaming noodle stalls; and Luang Prabang, Laos’s greatest gem, is more “demure” still, with its “orderly” handicrafts markets, lovingly restored old cafés and 32 gold-roofed temples. Across dramatic mountains to the east lies the Plain of Jars, Southeast Asia’s Stonehenge, a rolling landscape studded with thousands of giant stone vessels made roughly 2,000 years ago, perhaps to hold cremated remains. And around the Bolaven Plateau in the far south there are natural wonders including towering waterfalls and ancient Khmer sites such as the majestic thousand-year-old temple of Wat Phu, built into the side of a mountain beside the Mekong River. *Ampersand* (020-7289 6100, www.ampersandtravel.com) has a 17-night trip from £2,795pp, incl. flights.



A Gallic gem in South India

Few corners of southern India are as charming and eccentric as the coastal town of Pondicherry, says Will Hide in the *Daily Mail*. South of Chennai, it was a French colony until 1954, and still has a Gallic air, with patisseries selling madeleines, a statue of Joan of Arc beside the cathedral and a dusty square near the sea where men play pétanque. Then, in contrast to the “quiet” French Quarter, there is the “raucous” Tamil section, which is as “fun and full of life” as anywhere in the region. A good mix of French and Tamil restaurants make Pondicherry a great place to stop off after a visit to the surrounding state, with its ancient temples and historic hill stations. Also nearby is the “experimental township” of Auroville, founded in 1968 by “The Mother”, a French woman who wanted to “realise human unity”. *TransIndus* (020-8566 3739, www.transindus.com) has a six-night trip from £1,448pp incl. flights.

A pristine Brazilian island paradise

With its towering black rock formations, dense rainforests, ravishing beaches and rich undersea life, the Atlantic archipelago of Fernando de Noronha is among Brazil’s greatest natural jewels, says Natalie Paris in *The Daily Telegraph*. Situated 172 miles off the mainland – a short flight from the cities of Recife and Natal – it is an important breeding ground for turtles, sharks and dolphins, and is a protected marine park. Only one of its 21 islands is inhabited, and even there visitor numbers are restricted, a daily tax is imposed and prices are high, because everything is imported. But there are some “handsome” restaurants and luxurious hotels, and the archipelago is now as popular with honeymooners as with wildlife-lovers. Still, most of the time you’ll see “no one but the odd surfer” on its wild, desolate beaches, some of which are reached via long trails through the forest. Equally

attractive are the dive sites – though the islands’ huge pods of spinner dolphins, with their spectacular corkscrewing leaps, are best observed from a boat. *Dehouche* (0871-284 7770, www.dehouche.com) has three nights in Olinda and four in Fernando de Noronha from £2,776pp incl. flights.



Self-sufficient Seychelles

Denis Island, Seychelles

The outer islands of the Seychelles “seem to have been designed to put the human heart at peace” – and Denis Island is no exception, says Tim Ecott in the *FT*. Set in a dazzling blue sea 30 minutes by plane from Mahé, the archipelago’s capital, this private island resort “delivers the desert-island fantasy” to perfection, with “talcum-soft” beaches, forests where rare birds nest and a native population of giant tortoises. Its 23 large cottages have recently been redesigned and offer the “now requisite” charms of outdoor showers, muslin-curtained daybeds and so on. Far more unusual is the farm hidden away in the far corner of the island, home to 60 cattle and much other flora and fauna besides – thanks to which the resort is almost self-sufficient and serves some of the freshest food in the Seychelles.



Cottages sleeping two from €848 a night (00 248 428 8963, www.denisland.com).