

This week's dream: a Vietnamese idyll with a dark past

Thanks to Vietnam's booming population and breakneck pace of development, touring the country can be hectic. But travellers in search of a more peaceful escape can always head for the "travelling" beaches and rainforests of the Con Dao archipelago, says Iain Stewart in *The Daily Telegraph*. Situated 150 miles south of the mainland – a short flight from Ho Chi Minh City – it was once "hell on earth" for thousands of prisoners confined in a jail there by French colonists and the American military. But today its 16 idyllic islets are "blissfully tranquil", and protected as part of a national park that's home to dugongs (sea cows) and rare turtles.

There's only one road, one petrol station and two traffic lights on the main island, Con Son, and the other 15 are uninhabited. The capital is a "pocket-sized" town with "litter-free" streets lined with French-era villas, and a dozen or so hotels and guesthouses. There's also a "no-nonsense" port, Ben Dam, where sailors sell giant durian fruit from the decks of



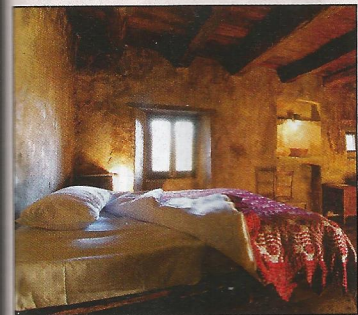
Con Son Island: "blissfully tranquil"

their boats. The disused Phu Hail jail lies nearby. Built in 1862, it later housed 20,000 prisoners, chained together naked in rows. Some were kept in "tiger cages" – tiny, open-roofed enclosures where they were beaten and dusted with lime and water (which burns the skin) – until 1970, when a *Life* magazine report provoked an international outcry.

Beautiful hiking routes lead up into the island's rainforested mountains, where long-tailed macaques play among the fruit trees of an abandoned plantation. Or you can take boat trips to neighbouring islands; at night, park rangers ferry people to Bay Canh, where green turtles nest. And though

the best stretch of sand on Con Son itself is dominated by a resort, there are many other "sublime" beaches, bookended by forested promontories and hemmed in by "kaleidoscopic" coral reefs. *Scott Dunn* (020-8682 5060, www.scottdunn.com) has a two-week Vietnam trip, incl. Con Dao, from £3,355pp incl. flights.

Hotel of the week



Sextantio Albergo Diffuso, Abruzzo, Italy

A "tight cluster of stone houses" in the wild region of Abruzzo, the fortified hamlet of Santo Stefano feels as old as time itself. Today, one third of it is an *albergo diffuso* (a hotel spread across several buildings) – and it's a "mystical and thrilling" place to stay, says Condé Nast Traveller. Owner Daniele Kihlgren spent five years and millions of euros on the conversion. Rooms combine ancient stone floors with designer lighting, "sleek" rain showers and Philippe Starck loos; Abruzzese cuisine cooked by villagers using local ingredients is served in a candle-lit central hall.

Doubles from £85pn. 00 39 0862 899112, www.sextantio.it/santo-stefano.

Getting the flavour of...

A city break in Azerbaijan

It was once a "Soviet backwater"; now, it's an "oil-rich Dubai wannabe". But Baku's historical treasures survive, says Juliet Rix in *The Times* – making the Azerbaijani capital a rewarding place to spend a weekend. Perched beside the Caspian Sea, its old town is partly fringed by crenellated, 12th century walls. Within lies the "now spartan" palace of its medieval rulers, the Shirvanshahs, who grew rich thanks to the city's position on the Silk Road. And beyond lie boulevards of Belle Epoque mansions built by the barons of Baku's first oil rush, such as the Rockefellers and Rothschilds. Other attractions include a museum of carpets shaped like a rolled rug; and the nearby 17th century Ateshgah, or Fire Temple, originally a Zoroastrian religious site. *British Airways* (0844-493 0758, www.ba.com) has a three-night trip from £899, incl. flights.

Lapland village life

For a taste of local life in Swedish Lapland, head to Vuollerim, says Anthony Gardner in *The Sunday Telegraph*. There's plenty to see near this "supremely picturesque" riverside village on the Arctic Circle, such as the luxurious Treehotel; and a few miles away is the town of Jokkmokk, where the Ájtte Museum displays the "exquisite" craftwork of the region's indigenous Sami herders. There's much to do outdoors, too, including

husky sledding, ice fishing and horse-drawn skiing. But the village also goes a step further in welcoming visitors, with an Ice Lantern Festival each February (participants are shown how to carve their own) and "house-jumping dinners", in which each course is served in a different home – a great opportunity to get to know locals and their traditions. *Lapland Vuollerim* (www.laplandvuollerim.se) and *Best Served* (www.best-served.co.uk) can help arrange trips.

Mexico's enchanted island

Getting there is a hassle – two bumpy hours in a taxi and 13km by ferry from Cancún – but for beach-lovers and nature-lovers alike, Mexico's Isla Holbox is a revelation, says Claire Wrathall in the FT. This 40km-long, 2km-wide island was first settled by pirates in the 19th century, and is still little-developed, with no tarred roads and just one small town. There are a few hotels (including the superb Casa Las Tortugas), some fine restaurants (notably Rosa Mexicana) and a single, "stunning" beach that stretches halfway around the coast. Some visitors come just to laze on that, but there's plenty more to do – kayaking, riding, diving; there's also dazzling wildlife to spot, including pumas, jaguars and whale sharks, which visit in summer. *Casa Las Tortugas* (www.holboxcasalastortugas.com) has doubles from \$115pn.

Last-minute offers from top travel companies

India grand tour

Go off the beaten track during a unique, luxury 15-day tour of Rajasthan and Kerala, with prices from £3,450 b&cb, incl. flights and transfers. 01666-23205, www.clareinskip.net. Depart in Feb and Mar.

Wonderful Whitby

Coral Cottage (sleeps 4), is just a short stroll from the harbour, shops and cafés, and a 3-night stay costs from £239 until 5 April. 01947-600700, www.yorkshireholidaycottages.co.uk.

Florence & Rome in autumn

A 2-night stay at the Ars Hotel, Rome; a train trip to Florence; and a 2-night stay at the Embassy Hotel – prices from £229pp b&cb incl. flights. 020-8174 0129, www.citrus-holidays.co.uk. Dep Sep-Oct.

Valentine's for the family

Beach Hill Cottage is a chic, 2-bed cottage near Mumbles, Wales, with plenty of books & toys for the kids. Prices from £489 for a 3-night stay from 14 Feb. 020-3603 1160, www.babyfriendlyboltholes.co.uk.