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LIFESTYLE

Great escapes

Romantic, exciting, peaceful or sporting – everyone loves a magical long weekend. Here are a dozen destinations within easy reach by Eurostar or plane, all blessed with very special hotels *BY JULIAN ALLASON*

SNOW SPORTS AND SPAS

SWITZERLAND: Chalet RoyAlp Hôtel & Spa, Villars-sur-Ollon

For all their glamour, the great alpine resorts of St Moritz, Zermatt and Gstaad have never made ideal weekend destinations, as they take a whole day to reach by any means but private jet. The French-speaking Swiss have long harboured a secret ski resort of their own that has just got even better. Villars-sur-Ollon is a little over an hour's train ride from Geneva airport, making it possible to take to the slopes on the afternoon you arrive and on the morning you leave. Well-groomed pistes, efficient ski lifts and one of Switzerland's most exciting new hotel openings for a decade set the stage for *le weekend sportif*.

The launch of Chalet RoyAlp Hôtel & Spa brings new levels of sophistication and comfort to Swiss hospitality. The 63 guest rooms and suites and 30 apartments are spacious and command panoramic views of the surrounding mountains. All are equipped with state-of-the-art technology, and the apartments have wood-burning fires. The feeling is very much of being in a private chalet, but with access to all the facilities of a luxury hotel. Acclaimed chef Damien Molinié heads up the innovative Le Jardin des Alpes restaurant, and the hotel also has a wood-panelled *stubli* (cellar brasserie) with excellent traditional country dishes, notably cheese fondue.



FROM TOP Spectacular views across the valley from the RoyAlp; the hotel's large indoor pool with its roaring open fire

The RoyAlp has its own spacious and serene spa, with therapists adept at soothing aching ski-muscles and delivering facials using Pure Altitude products that will leave you glowing. As well as the usual sauna and hammam, there are multisensory showers and an ice fountain, and the large indoor pool even has an open fireplace. Forget struggling with your skis; the hotel has its own funicular stop and, in winter, you can ski right down to its door.

This being Switzerland, Villars has contrived to combine the unspoiled charm of a mountain village with boutiques carrying chic après-skiwear and some of the rarer watch designs. There are accomplished restaurants, with famous faces to be spotted enjoying regional dishes like *raclette*. This is also an area noted for the quality of its wines, some of the best of which are harvested from vineyards beneath the village. Long weekenders could do worse than return home with a bottle or two of the award-winning but hard-to-obtain Hedonix Chalais vintages. ►



CULTURE AND CLUBBING

GERMANY: Hotel de Rome and Soho House, Berlin

Can there be a more vibrant destination for a long weekend than Berlin? Half a century after the erection of “the Wall” divided the city, national reunification has invigorated it as Europe’s new capital of cool. The spirit of innovation in art, music and architecture is immediately visible in Norman Foster’s bold glass dome over the Reichstag parliament building – a must-see. Meanwhile, exceptional new hotels are bedding down in an ambience of edgy design, while the nightlife approaches the energy and legendary decadence of the 1930s captured in the writings of Christopher Isherwood. With English widely spoken and the impending introduction of Deutsche Bahn’s 200mph ICE train service from London, the German capital is becoming more accessible than ever.

What better introduction, then, than Soho House Berlin, with its clubby take on the zeitgeist. Set in a striking 1920s Bauhaus building in the central district of Mitte (now very much the city’s arts centre), it offers a historic past and a chilled-out present. Although a few of the 40 guest rooms are small and plain; the larger ones exude funky charm – hence the appeal to the visual arts and media crowd. Alongside the Cowshed spa and gym is a private cinema, while far above them is a rooftop bar with spectacular views and a heated pool. An inviting Mediterranean menu is offered in its restaurant, which is modishly furnished with metal tables and kitchen chairs but lit by chandeliers – the irony is not lost on the local membership. Macaroni cheese, a crisp house schnitzel and plum tarte tatin are dishes too popular to be dropped without



FROM TOP Rooftop view over Berlin; the Hotel de Rome’s grand Palm Court ballroom; the stylish rooftop bar and heated pool at Soho House Berlin

attracting complaint. For a heads-up on the city’s ever-changing club scene, consult reception, which is well-informed on such matters.

More chic is the Hotel de Rome, reinforcing Sir Rocco Forte’s reputation for creating original hotels in great locations, in this instance on Belbelplatz by the State Opera House. The Belle Époque building, formerly the Dresdener Bank headquarters, retains the magnificence of the era yet has been subtly updated to re-establish it as a contemporary point of assignment in the city – nowhere more so than at the hotel’s stylish Bebel Bar, scene of many a flirtation. Weekenders tired by fashion shopping will also enjoy the elegant Parioli restaurant with its authentically executed Roman cuisine. Much the same can be said of the 146 soothingly decorated guest rooms and suites, which provide a welcome antidote to the hustle outside.

Berlin may be evolving rapidly, but its dramatic past is on display, to be observed and understood. For those of us who crossed into East Germany at the heavily guarded Checkpoint Charlie during the Soviet era, the Mauermuseum offers an unsettling reminder of a grim period in the city’s history. For younger visitors, it provides an irresistible educational experience complete with uniformed “border guards.” A more romantic alternative is a stroll up Unter den Linden, the broad boulevard leading to the Brandenburg Gate, on a spring morning. From then until October, the city invites not just exploration but participation.



GO WILD IN THE COUNTRY

ESTONIA: Pädaste Manor, Muhu Island

For Muhu Island read Narnia. Remote but accessible, innocent of modern development yet possessed of contemporary comforts – and wreathed in Nordic myth. As the helicopter descends towards the ancient manor house, a brace of sea eagles circles above us in a flurry of disapproval.

From an altitude of 1,000ft, the outline of the 200sq km island is defined by the sparkling waters of the Baltic, clear enough even for endangered species like the perch-pike to thrive. Hunting, stalking and fishing are all on offer on the island and, in early spring, there's ice fishing too, although most guests are content to explore a vanishing way of life. The population of around 1,500 islanders is outnumbered by wildlife that teems untrammelled by human or mechanical interference. Where else would you find moose on the menu of a world-class restaurant, the only one of real standing outside of the country's medieval capital, Tallinn? Indeed, chef Peeter Pihel's Nordic island cuisine at Pädaste has created a new benchmark for Estonia and a revival of regional cooking with its fresh flavours and unfamiliar herbs.

Pädaste Manor is the restored ancestral home of one of Muhu's leading families; its current charismatic young owner represents the island in Estonia's parliament. For long-weekenders like Elton John, the choice of accommodation is between the privacy of the guest rooms and suites in the 14th-century manor house and peaceful carriage house, or the utter seclusion of the old farmhouse, a traditional thatched timber building that looks out over the salt marshes to the bay, yet is equipped with its own private cinema. The manor's style



FROM TOP A helicopter's-eye view of Pädaste Manor; one of manor's comfortable, spacious guest rooms; the sun deck offers stunning views of the marshes and bay

is authentically Hanseatic but overlaid with a contemporary sophistication and technology – a carefully programmed iPad is to be found in every guest room – to provide information on the manor and island, or just for browsing the internet. Yet the manor is just a bike ride through the juniper forest from a rural hamlet, marked out by a windmill, whose inhabitants still wear traditional dress on high days. Such isolation so close to home is hard to conceive, yet real enough for those content to enjoy each other's company – and is as magnificent in winter as it is in spring and summer.

A log cabin in the garden houses a small spa that offers treatments traditional to the region, like the hay bath or a goat-butter massage. Its addition is no afterthought, but an essential element in what one urban guest described as “an escape into sanity”. At Pädaste Manor, it is possible, even in just a few days, to reconnect with an all-but-vanished world in which nature rules. The body is refreshed by exercise, fresh air and inspirationally natural cooking, while the soul is restored by the island's silence and tranquil beauty.

To reach Pädaste Manor, you can take one of several daily flights from the UK to Tallinn and then drive through silent forest to the coast, where frequent ferry service makes the short crossing to Muhu Island. Private jets can land on adjoining Saaremaa Island. Or, you can do as we did and connect from Tallinn by helicopter, risking the wrath of the sea eagles.

ROMANTIC ESCAPE

SWEDEN: The Grand Hôtel and Hotel J, Stockholm

Who knew that Stockholm is not just a city but also an archipelago of no fewer than 30,000 islets, most with their own private cabins to escape to? That the white summer nights are so short there that you can go to dinner in sunshine and emerge to find a new day dawning? Or that the Swedish capital is as captivating in icy winter as in sunlit summer, when everyone takes to the water? Many other surprises await the long-weekender too, for Stockholm's glory is found not just in razor-sharp interior design, but in its majestic 18th-century architecture.

Where better, then, to stay than at the 137-year-old Grand Hôtel, which combines historic elegance with a new flair characterised by the cooking of acclaimed chef Matthias Dahlgren? A menu that includes traditional Swedish dishes reduced to their essential excellence has helped restore the Grand Hôtel to its position as one of the capital's great social hubs. As one guest put it, "If you want to encounter the most talented and beautiful people in town, drop in on Matthias." The cost, at least at lunchtime, is modest by Swedish standards. With smiling service and views of the Royal Palace, this is truly the place to conduct a romance. No wonder Garbo loved it and Nobel Prize winners are still billeted here.

The alternative, contemporary design-led approach can be experienced at Hotel J, a reasonably priced celebration of the classic J-Class yachts that contended for the America's Cup in the 1930s. Situated on Nacka Strand at the entrance to Stockholm harbour, the bare brick walls and patchwork quilts are reminiscent both of New England and the spare architecture of Sweden's northern coast. Dining at the Restaurant J brasserie on the water's edge is led by fresh seafood with clear Nordic flavours and enjoyed by a lively young crowd. It is a good place to acquire an entrée to Stockholm's vibrant party scene.

With most public buildings – historic and modern – now open to the public, and a glittering programme of exhibitions and concerts, Stockholm is a haven for romantics and those who love to explore. ■

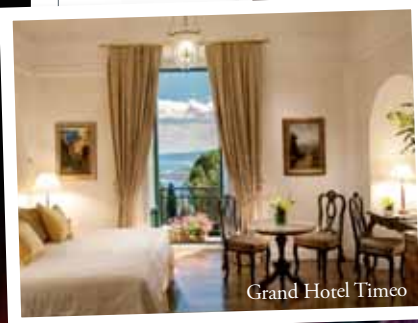
Julian Allason writes about luxury and adventure travel for the Financial Times and leading monthly magazines



FROM TOP The Carl Larsson Rummet banqueting room at the Grand Hôtel is modelled on a Venetian palazzo; the hotel's opulent Princess Lilian suite; waterside dining at the Restaurant J brasserie



Four Seasons Park Lane



Grand Hotel Timeo



L'Hotel

8 SENSATIONAL LONG WEEKENDS

1. SICILY: Grand Hotel Timeo, Taormina

Traditional hospitality with a flourish, overlooking Mount Etna and the serene bay of Taormina, which for two millennia has been the island's pleasure capital.

2. PARIS: L'Hotel, St-Germain-des-Prés

Boho Parisians' preferred hideaway for "le naughty weekend" has hardly altered since Oscar Wilde's stay. Left Bank mystique aplenty, with seductive cooking.

3. SARDINIA: Forte Village, Cagliari

Ineffably stylish Italian villa escape in a subtropical microclimate with a private beach, every sporting facility, thalassotherapy spa, and three chefs with Michelin stars.

4. ITALY: Villa Feltrinelli, Lake Garda

Immaculately polished Art Nouveau lakeshore gem with Michelin-starred cooking, private Riva speedboat, and elegant waterside swimming pool. Request Mussolini's suite.

5. CANARY ISLANDS: Abama Golf Resort & Spa, Tenerife

Out-of-season sunshine in spacious ultra-luxury enclave managed by Ritz-Carlton, with a small private beach, scenic 18-hole golf course and multi-Michelin-starred chef Martín Berasategui in charge of the restaurant.

6. LONDON: Four Seasons Park Lane, Hamilton Place, Mayfair

Exciting ground-up reinvention of the Mayfair classic, with sensational views of Hyde Park and Buckingham Palace, a serene spa and an outstanding restaurant.

7. HAMPSHIRE: Lime Wood, Lyndhurst

Embraced by the New Forest, this is a country house as it should be: laid-back and intimate. Enjoy chef Luke Holder's English cuisine with a light touch and relax in the amazing Herb House Spa.

8. EDINBURGH: The Glasshouse, 2 Greenside Place

A brilliant location, inspirational contemporary design and friendly young team administer a warm welcome to the Scottish capital. Large roof garden suitable for proposals and parties.