

Special Advertising Feature

# WARM WEATHER GETAWAYS



Amazing ocean views and warm weather can be found on the island of Kauai. ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

## The first nip of fall and already the beach is on everyone’s mind

By Barbara A. Noe

As we start to anticipate icy winds roaring from the north, and flames crackling in fireplaces to ward off the chill, all minds turn to the distant memory of the warming summer sun. The good news is, even in the dark, cold heart of winter, plenty of destinations around the world beckon with balmy temperatures, sugary sands and frou-frou umbrella drinks. Here are some of the best.

### SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA: OCEAN BOUND

In this sunny seaside city, where winter temperatures average 60 degrees, January may be too chilly for an ocean dip, at least without a wetsuit, but the weather’s always ideal for a beach stroll. You have your choice, from family friendly (Coronado) to dog friendly (Ocean Beach and Del Mar’s Dog

Beach) to surfer (Black’s and Swami’s) to nude (Black’s). No matter the temperature, 1,200-acre Balboa Park — aka the Smithsonian of the West — beckons with more than 85 attractions including 15 museums, flower-filled gardens, the Tony Award-winning Old Globe Theatre, and the world-famous zoo. Head to the 16-block historic Gaslamp Quarter for

sidewalk restaurants, trendy boutiques and a sizzling nightlife, or Old Town for a touch of the city’s earliest Spanish and Mexican heritage, with historic adobes, Plaza del Pasado’s enclave of *tiendas* (shops), and, if you’re lucky, a mariachi-serenaded fiesta. As the sun sets over the Pacific, seek out a front-row seat at the famous, turn-of-the-20th-century Hotel del Coronado, with its whimsical red roofs perched above one of the nation’s most gorgeous beaches. Or even more romantic: the stunning Sunset Cliffs on Point Loma’s west side, where a trail leads to your choice of secluded spots.

### PHOENIX, ARIZONA: PERENNIAL GOLF

There are many reasons to visit the sun-blessed city of Phoenix, including sunrise hikes on Camelback Mountain, exquisite Native American art at the Heard Museum, some of the nation’s most celebrated spas, and — above all — year-round golf. Arizona has more golf courses per capita than any other state west of the Mississippi, with Phoenix’s Valley of the Sun harboring some of the best. Here you’ll find the ASU Karsten Golf Course, where NCAA champions train; Gold Canyon Golf Resort, often referred to as Arizona’s best public course, with fabulous views of the Superstition Mountains; and Arizona Biltmore Country Club, the granddaddy of Phoenix golf clubs, frequented by movie stars and politicians. Be sure to reserve your tee time well in advance.

### THE CARIBBEAN: LOCAL FAVORITE

An obvious choice is the Caribbean, the fêted nirvana of sugar-white sands, swaying palms and fish-rich coral reefs, all set against a score of calypso, reggae and soca music. Here, where winter-time temperatures rarely dip below 70 degrees, most Americans can hop on a plane in the morning and be on the beach before sunset. Among the best are Shoal Bay on Anguilla; Dickenson Bay on Antigua; Barbados’s Gold Coast; and Seven Mile Beach on Grand Cayman. Fronting Seven Mile Beach in the heart of Grand Cayman is the Westin Casuarina Resort & Spa.

It’s a beachcomber’s paradise with a dive center, wave runners and private cabanas for the lounge set. For something beyond the beach, luxuriate on chic and cultured St. Barthélemy in the French West Indies (aka St. Barts); its capital city of Gustavia resembles a glitzy Côte d’Azur village. Or splurge (low season rates are upwards of \$500 per night) at the all-inclusive resort of Biras Creek in the British Virgin Islands. The lush 140 acres on the tip of Virgin Gorda accommodates only 60 guests, making them feel like they’re on a private island — one that happens to have all the services and amenities associated with a high-end resort.

### COSTA RICA: SUSTAINABLE SOJOURN

Rising in popularity are tropical eco-destinations such as Costa Rica. A 20-minute drive from San Jose International Airport transports you to the central valley’s fecund coffee- and orange-growing plantations, some of which are also home to resorts that take full advantage of their natural surroundings. At Xandari, guests are invited to plant native trees during their stay, stroll through its botanical gardens, hike to the 70-foot-high waterfall, and learn more about the harvesting and processing of coffee, which is still grown on the property and served at its restaurant. Visitors can see a volcano — Poás and Irazu are nearby — or drive to the palm-fringed Pacific and Caribbean coasts, which are a mere 90 minutes away. For birders, the Costa Rica Bird Route recently opened in the country’s northeast, where you’d be lucky to spy one of the world’s last remaining great green macaws.

### MAZATLÁN: PEARL OF THE PACIFIC

Within 10 miles of the Pacific coast, Mazatlán is gaining some mid-winter buzz, with its perennial sunshine, gold sand beaches and recently resurrected Centro Histórico, an artsy quarter with galleries and sidewalk cafés. Take leisurely walks along the Malecón, the seafront street that stretches from the Golden Zone all the way to Old Town, or play beachfront golf at Estrella del Mar, designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr. and rated one of the best golf courses in the country. Estella del Mar is also home to Mexico’s largest private sea turtle sanctuary; tours of the preserve are free to those staying at the resort. Need more to do? Try deep-sea fishing for marlin or sailfish, or simply watch the sun set languorously over the ocean from a rooftop terrace. And if you’re thinking of a mid-winter getaway, Mazatlán celebrates one of Mexico’s oldest — and most vibrant — Carnival festivals, albeit more sedate than Rio or New Orleans. In 2012, it takes place February 16 to 21.

### BAHIA: BRAZIL’S RIVIERA

Setting your sights a bit farther brings you to super-trendy, beachside Bahia in northeast Brazil, where the sun shines nearly every day. Chic new hotels, buzzy restaurants and a vibrant party scene lure the jet-set crowd to this 560-mile stretch of glittering, white-sand beaches; those in-the-know hit Itapororoca, Trancoso, and Itacaré. Everywhere, the region’s African-Brazilian heritage is apparent, in its distinctive cuisine as well as in the bongo beat of *capoeira*, a dance-and-martial-arts fusion that locals take to town plazas at night. Join in after learning a few key moves at one of several classes you can take in the state capital, Salvador da Bahia.



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ARGENTINA: MOUNTAIN HIGH

In the shadow of the soaring, snowcapped Andes in northwestern Argentina, where the sun shines 330 days a year, the friendly city of Salta shows off well-preserved colonial architecture along cobbled streets. On its main square, dominated by the 1882 rococo, pink-and-white confection of a cathedral, keep an eye out for rainbow lorikeets. South of town, explore Quebrada de las Conchas (Gorge of the Shells), a magical, Grand Canyon-esque realm of wildly eroded scenery in burnished hues of deep red and orange, en route to the high-altitude wine hub of Cafayate. In town, pick among a dozen or so family-run, welcoming bodegas to taste Torrontés, a fruity white grape that thrives in the area, as well as a nice selection of reds. You'll notice the wines' enhanced color and complex aroma, a result of the high level of antioxidants that come from being grown at more than 5,500 feet above sea level. Spend the night at Cafayate Wine Resort, a lovely adobe lodge a few miles outside of town with vineyards edging right up to its doorstep; or at the Spanish Colonial-style Patios de Cafayate, next to El Esteco winery, with a spa featuring Torrontés baths and Malbec massages.

NAPLES: MEDITERRANEAN JEWEL

Meridiana Airlines now offers direct flights from JFK to Naples, Italy, making this sun-drenched city — the birthplace of pizza — an easy-to-reach antidote to winter blues. Over the past decade, Naples has launched an urban renaissance, and its glorious artistic and architectural heritage is being buffed and polished in an attempt to recapture its onetime moniker of “Italy’s most beautiful crown.” Toss in its stunning backdrop of the Bay of Naples, with the isle of Capri and the Amalfi Coast hovering in romantic, violet-blue silhouette, along with a seafood-based cuisine and sparkling local white wines, and you’ve got a recipe for magnificence. Highlights include the hilltop Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, which rivals the Prada and the Met with its boundless rooms of Caravaggios, Goyas, El Grecos, and Michelangelos; and the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, where all of Pompeii’s best finds are on display. The adventurous can hike Mount Vesuvius, the infamous (and still active) volcano that buried Pompeii in 79 A.D. Or take a 40-minute hydrofoil ride to the glitterati playground of Capri to explore the famous Blue Grotto, shop along cobblestone streets

### WARM-WEATHER PACKING

Don't let the hot sun fool you. When Dawn Sicco, director of marketing for Samsonite, travels to Grand Cayman — her family's favorite warm-weather destination — she always packs a sweater or pashmina; long flights can get chilly, as can air-conditioning in hotels and shops.

If you're bringing a laptop, carry a lightweight, yet fully cushioned backpack such as the Samsonite Techtonic backpack with shock absorption to protect the computer from impact. It also has an internal organization system for separate storage of cords and other items, which can come in handy.

Biodegradable sunscreen that lacks the harmful ingredients that are destroying the world's coral reefs are not only environmentally sensitive, they are becoming mandatory — particularly in Mexico, where traditional sunscreens are confiscated on many water, scuba diving or snorkeling tours.

Sicco also suggests women bring comfortable ballet flats (which feel like glorified socks). Waterproof shoes are good for exploring mountainous or jungle terrain while water shoes work great on shell-strewn and rocky beaches.

and sip white wine on a sun-drenched terrace.

KAUAI: OCEAN OASIS

While any of the Hawaiian Islands will more than suffice, there’s something especially magical and mystical about Kauai, the Garden Isle. Perhaps it’s the fact that the real Bali Hai is located on the north shore, along with some of the island’s most inspired resorts, such as the Westin Princeville, which rests on a cliff 200 feet above the Pacific Ocean. The Na Pali coast on the northwest shore is legendary for its steep, corrugated, velvety green ridges and hidden valleys. The arduous Kalalau Trail snakes along its 11-mile length, but is best left for the truly adventurous; for a small taste of paradise, walk the first two miles from its trailhead at Kee Beach, taking in striking sea views at every twist and turn. Or hop aboard a helicopter tour of Waimea Canyon, which Mark Twain dubbed the “Grand Canyon of the Pacific;” kayak up the Wailua River to a secret waterfall; golf at Kauai Lagoons designed by Jack Nicklaus; take surf lessons at Poipu; or simply lie on the beach. You’ve got plenty of world-class ones from which to choose — coastal expert Dr. Stephen P.

Leatherman has lauded several Kauai beaches as the nation’s best through the years; most recently, in 2009, the honors went to Hanalei Bay, an aqua jewel with brilliant white sand backed by waterfalls.

PHILIPPINES: LAST FRONTIER

If you have the time, continue across the Pacific to the Philippines. The isle of Boracay, a 45-minute flight from capital Manila, is a hands-down favorite, with its powdery white sands, dive-friendly coral reefs, kite-surfing, fancy resorts and happy hours with seaside pig roasts and fire-eating shows; plans are currently underway to develop this crown jewel into the next Phuket. Palawan, a realm of 1,780 islands and islets surrounded by a coral shelf, is a tad more difficult to get to, making it that much more desirable. Pristine nature is the name-of-the-game in this “last frontier,” where Bacuit Bay showcases more than 800 species of fish and 400 species of coral, and in the Honda Bay Islands there’s little to do but watch pellucid blue waves crash against the empty shore.

At the end of the day, wherever you are, kick back in your chaise lounge, taking in the warming sun and perhaps sipping a fruity concoction, and congratulate yourself for conducting the greatest winter magic act possible: Replacing white snow with white sand.

KOH LIPE, THAILAND: LITTLE-KNOWN DIVE

Rapidly emerging as the next talked-about tropical paradise, this little beach-fringed isle in the southern Andaman Sea is accessible only by boat. But it’s worth the hassle to revel in warm, turquoise waters and unspoiled reefs where some 25 percent of the world’s tropical fish species dwell, with fabulous diving in and around Adang Archipelago. Head to Pattaya Beach for relative civilization, where you can dine by candlelight on the sand; or more peaceful Sunrise Beach, inhabited by a community of sea gypsies. Other activities include kayaking, day trips to nearby isles and little else but unwinding on the beach. Pooh’s Bar in the middle of the island draws evening crowds with live music, while chic Castaway Beach Resort on Sunrise Beach, with wooden, Thai-style bungalows, some with al fresco hammocks, is a best-bet place to stay.

Barbara A. Noe is a travel editor and writer whose stories have appeared in the Los Angeles Times, Boston Globe, London Telegraph and National Geographic Traveler.

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