

# COUNTRY LIFE®

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## It's time to dream



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The top 10 travel destinations for 2021  
 Why we will never forget Thomas Becket  
 Coming up roses: the easiest climbers to grow



# The top 10

From *grande dames* to brand new boltholes and everything in between, **COUNTRY LIFE** rounds up the hotels and villas that should be top of your wishlist in 2021

## Weekend break **Thyme, Southrop, England**

**M**ANY hotels delight—they do what they say on the box (or website)—but few surprise. Thyme, a village-style hotel in the Cotswolds, is one of those rare beasts: a hotel that looks like a normal hotel from the outside, but feels quite different on the inside, a place created with such passion and thought that you cannot help fall under its spell. I realised just how much I loved it during breakfast (served in a vast, vaulted barn, formerly for oxen): there was not a crushed, smashed or stuffed avocado—the breakfast food threatening world domination and deforestation—in sight. I was told that seasonal smashed pumpkin sometimes graces the menu and is always a great success.

Other idiosyncrasies include a spring-water swimming pool and the odd chicken inspecting the herb garden. The on-site shop



Every detail is considered at Thyme, from homemade vermouth to gorgeous gardens

is so successful that Thyme's own-brand silk homeware (the patterns are inspired by the extensive gardens) is now stocked in Liberty.

Talking of gardens: the courtyard space between the cookery school, aforementioned Ox Barn and Garden Rooms was designed by Bunny Guinness. I visited in September, when there was plenty of time to appreciate it: structural arches, arbours and hedges protecting more transient plants, such as gaura, verbena and wispy grasses. Beyond are the water meadows, an important conservation site for migratory reed warblers.

The bedrooms—no two are the same—are scattered across Thyme's various houses, cottages and barns. I stayed in the aptly named English Rose, on the ground floor of the Georgian house, next to the pool and spa. As well as freshly baked biscuits, I was greeted by a bottle of homemade vermouth, sitting suggestively next to an enormous rolltop bath. In the early morning light, the branches of a centuries-old cedar tree cast dappled shadows through large windows and over pink-hued walls, beckoning me outside. *RP From £245 per night (01367 850174; www.thyme.co.uk)*



## All inclusive **Jumby Bay, Antigua**

**T**HE oft-maligned term 'all-inclusive' means something entirely different at Jumby Bay. Here, on a 300-acre private island (a 15-minute journey from the airport), it means that if you let slip that you like a gin

and tonic, the staff will stock your complimentary minibar in minutes; if you need respite from the Caribbean sun, a friendly waiter bearing trays of fruit and ice-cream sandwiches is never far away. There's no need to leave the beach come the end of the day, either. Open-air film nights take place under the stars—Bogart and Bond are regulars.



No need is too small, whether it's your favourite cocktail or film, at Jumby Bay

Jumby Bay's new season marks the return of its Sailing Academy, which makes the most of the trade winds and can be customised for your stay. Sign up if you can tear yourself away from your room, which might be difficult if you're staying in Delphis, the most recent addition to the hotel's collection of 22 private residences (there are also 28 resort suites and 14 villas). *Beachside suites from \$2,100 (about £1,560) per night, based on two adults, including all meals, drinks, watersports and kids club (00 1 268 462 6000 or US toll-free 00 1 800 749 1802; www.oetkercollection.com)*

## New **The Falcon, Northamptonshire, England**

**N**ORTHAMPTONSHIRE is said to sport the largest number of country houses in the country per square mile and the county's most exciting new hotel is bang in the middle of Lord and Lady Northampton's Castle Ashby estate. A former 16th-century

coaching inn, it opened in October, following years of loving restoration. The interiors, with their earthy colour schemes, are cosy and calm; mid-century furniture sits alongside botanical wallpapers, soft Yeti chairs and striking artwork. Natural materials

make clear the connection to the great outdoors. There are 22 slick bedrooms—14 in farm cottages and eight in the hotel—with spacious bathrooms and rolltop baths. Top tip: book room five for its private terrace and its superb views.

Lady Northampton is a yoga teacher and psychotherapist, so wellbeing is a major focus. There are wonderful massages in one of the farm cottages, as well as yoga classes, meditations and high-intensity gym sessions on the lawn. Then there's biking in the Nene Valley, wild swimming, foraging, pottery classes and, of course, Castle Ashby's glorious gardens (designed by Capability Brown), with a spectacular arboretum, glassy lakes and towering orangery.

The restaurant, with its large sun-filled terrace, is all about British produce. Order the Cornish black-bream sashimi, Herdwick hogget and plum crumble. The new east wing, with full-height windows, is a stylish spot for cocktails and the Cellar Bar is brilliant for seeing out the night. *Harriet Compston From £120 on a B&B basis (01604 698005; www.thefalcon-castleashby.com)* ➤



Bathrooms offer unparalleled comfort—in the most stylish way—at The Falcon



### Villa The Beach House, Kassiope, Corfu

KASSIOPE has long been the place well-heeled Brits choose to holiday and it remains at the top of its game (especially slightly out of season). With holidays more precious than ever, there's no time for below-par experiences and Villa Collective looks after the finest Corfu rentals (as well as the

#### Ask the expert Henry Cookson, polar explorer and founder of Cookson Adventures

Since childhood, I've spent my summers in Corfu. If you want to mix it up a bit and are sporty, find an outfit that will take you out on a mountain bike from Pantokrator, the highest point on the island, through sleepy villages and past shepherds with flocks of sheep and goats. Stop in an abandoned village for lunch and continue all the way down to the coast for a dip. The other thing is paddleboarding, a tranquil way to explore the numerous coves, especially at dawn. Make sure to explore south of Corfu Town and visit the amazing palace Mon Repos, where The Duke of Edinburgh was born.



rest of Europe and Morocco). Each villa has its USP and the company, small and family run, will curate a perfect bespoke holiday.

I stayed at The Beach House, which sleeps eight, a short walk from Kassiope. Its setting is idyllic, on a quiet little stretch of pebbled beach with views to Albania. It's safe and has direct beach access—a winning choice for families. The sea beckoned us with welcoming October warmth—built up over the summer months—and sunrise paddle boarding became *de rigueur*, usually with no one else in sight.

I often feel villa interiors can come second to the exterior, because it's assumed you'll rarely spend time inside, but, at The Beach House, both have been given equal attention. Inside it's fresh—with a subtle beachy theme, designed by two local companies, Babis Koutsouris Construction and Areti Interiors.



### Inside and out, with views of an azure sea, villas on Corfu make for a perfect break

Beautiful, comfortable furniture and *objets d'art* complete the look. Outside, I loved the chic BBQ and vast pizza oven—Villa Collective can even arrange a cook, leaving you to enjoy the view of the water from the verandah.

You feel a million miles from the buzz of wider Corfu, yet it's pretty much on your doorstep. The team can book boats (drift in style to lunch) and restaurants—try Glyfa, half an hour away, for delicious Greek rosé and some of the best seafood on the island.

As I fell under its autumnal spell, it was, and still is, easy to understand why repeat business is so prolific in Corfu. *HL* From €6,400 per week (020-3950 1588; [www.villacollective.com](http://www.villacollective.com))

### Boutique Torel Palace, Lisbon, Portugal

EVEN Lisbon, awash as it is with faded decadence, all-but-endless sunshine and a seemingly intuitive desire to embrace the esoteric, only has one hotel that used to be a Catholic church—and is best reached by antiquated funicular. You'll be rewarded with staggering views: a tumble of sable and terracotta coloured rooftops lead down to the River Tagus, which is as beguiling in the sun-dappled heat of noon as it is at dusk, when the view winks like precious jewels.

In the wrong hands, Torel Palace could be a bit conceited or even self-consciously quirky. Luckily, the owners of the two turn-of-the-century houses (the second a former family residence) have resisted kitsch in favour of what might be best described as restrained bohemian. Think stucco ceilings, parquet floors, *azulejo* tiles and rooms named after Portuguese kings and queens.

The hardest decision you'll have to make is whether to head out to the pool for an early-evening bottle of Vinho Verde, stroll



The views from Torel Palace, once a Catholic church, are as grand as the hotel itself

through the surrounding Príncipe Real district for seafood or simply recline, only for a little while longer, in your luxurious room and gaze out over those rooftops that

cling to the hills, here at the far western edge of Europe. *Rob Crossan* From £127 for a double room (00 351 218 290 810; [www.torelpalace.com](http://www.torelpalace.com))

### Spa The Gilpin Hotel & Lake House, Windermere, England

HAVE you ever been somewhere, say a spa, looked around and thought, 'I would really like to live here', despite realising that living in a spa would be entirely impractical? Well, I bring glad tidings. I spent two days living in my very own private spa—one of the new Spa Suites at Gilpin Hotel & Lake House in the Lake District—and found it to be very practical indeed.

Having parked directly in front of the suite (no lugging bags here), I took in the bedroom, with its huge windows looking out over a private plunge pond; dining and lounge area with hanging fireplace, overlooking the stone-built hot tub; the 'bathroom' area, with enormous circular stone bath and cedar-wood double shower, which is open plan and makes you feel a bit of an exhibitionist, but is fine because the suite

is shielded by a stone wall. And, finally, the spa room, with sauna, steam room, infrared-light bed and automated Japanese massage chair. As the chair tipped me upside down, pummelling every body part simultaneously, I only had one complaint. It was a bit too sunny outside and I felt I'd be obliged to go out walking tomorrow.

Next morning, the rain was coming down sideways and my trip was complete. I did a dance, lit the fire and spent happy hours completing the Spa Suite Trail, which alternates little treats and drinks with treatments such as salt body scrubs and hair masks. By the time the nice lady came to give me a back massage, I was so relaxed that I forgot to be ticklish and kick her in the stomach.

I must confess that the only times I ventured outside were to eat at the Michelin-starred HRiSHi (predictably divine) and the pan-Asian Gilpin Spice (order the sweet-and-sour pork belly) and to feed the resident llamas and alpacas carrots (which I think qualifies as yomping). As I buckled my seat belt for the long drive home, my back was so tender from visits to the massage chair that I could barely sit properly. Reader, it was worth it. *VM*

*Spa Suites from £850 per night based on two sharing* (01539 488818; [www.thegilpin.co.uk](http://www.thegilpin.co.uk))



Even the hills of the Lake District will struggle to tempt you away from a private spa

## Snow Hotel Kristiania, Lech, Austria

THERE comes a time in a young man's life when he must concede that renting a chalet in the Alps and spending a week drinking himself half to death is no longer a suitable course of action. It is at this point, then, that he (I) must concede that in order to best compose himself (myself) for a week's skiing, a hotel might be better. It was January (remember January?) when the transformation happened to me, in Lech. Kristiania sits on the edge of town, with the white wilderness behind, the wood-clad exterior peering over the roofs below, commanding an elevated position befitting the social status of its owner/manager Gertrud Schneider, granddaughter of the great Hannes Schneider. Luxury is many things, but it's certainly being under the wing of Frau Schneider—when she says jump, the town says how high.

Kristiania is small, but perfect. The 29 rooms are beautifully decorated, idiosyncratic and characterful. Everything you need is taken care of, but nothing is over the top. Frau Schneider, who bustles around

tirelessly checking and re-checking everything, is the heart and soul of the operation, and her attention to detail permeates through the foundations and into the staff. People remember things here and they remember them quickly; before long, you won't have to order your breakfast, because they'll know what you want, and your favourite whisky will be waiting for you after dinner.

And dinner, oh dinner. The logistics of running a high-quality restaurant at altitude are probably not worth thinking about, but the tasting menu would rival anything at sea level. The plates are small, eccentric and delicious, and it would not be a wasted trip to travel to Lech, sack off the skiing, and simply gorge yourself.

But you shouldn't sack off the skiing. For those who crave the finest off-piste, you'll do well to beat what's on offer in Lech, with endless nooks and crannies of fresh snow around, and if you need a guide, Frau Schneider knows them all. Frau Schneider knows many things and, most of all, she knows how to run a hotel. *JF*

*Scott Dunn offers seven nights from £3,300 per person, based on two adults in a double*



**For the ultimate in a skiing hotel, you need the all-seeing eye of Gertrud Schneider**

*room on a full-board basis, including economy flights from the UK and private transfers (020-8682 5080; [www.scottdunn.com](http://www.scottdunn.com); 00 43 5583 25610; [www.kristiania.at](http://www.kristiania.at))*



## City Le Bristol, Paris, France

LAST September, when the gold and glass revolving doors at Le Bristol started to turn again, they revealed refurbished suites and a majestic replanting of the courtyard garden by Arabella Lennox-Boyd. 'I designed it for an all year round look,' she explains. 'It has lots of evergreen structure and topiary. I love the [English] countryside and believe in a lateral look. I think it makes people feel

happier, so I've broken up the structure with informality that blooms all year round.'

Lady Lennox-Boyd didn't draw inspiration from Paris itself, but from what she believed Paris needed—a foil to the cosmopolitan city outside the hotel walls. 'I wanted to design something that feels as if it belongs, but, at the same time, feels free.' Even before the interior refurbishment, Le Bristol was the first hotel in Paris to be awarded 'Palace' status and, although the design remains on the side of traditional, it echoes the city's



## The refurbished Le Bristol blends the best of English informality and Parisian style

own dual characteristics. 'It's immensely elegant and interesting,' says Lady Lennox-Boyd. 'It has kept a very intimate feeling and hasn't changed over all the years I've been going there. It has retained its character.'

As she points out: 'The French just have really good style.'

*From €1,500 per night (00 33 1 5343 4300; [www.oetkercollection.com](http://www.oetkercollection.com))* ➤



Cave-dwelling at its most stylish and comfortable: a tufa-stone bedroom at Sextantio

### Quirky Sextantio, Matera, Italy

**L**A *dolce vita* in all its understated glory—this breathtaking boutique hotel in southern Italy is a seductive collection of candlelit caves in one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. Once considered the ‘shame of Italy’ due to abject poverty—until the 1950s, the ancient Sassi quarters saw large families

living cheek-by-jowl with their animals in cave dwellings—Matera is currently enjoying a renaissance. In 1993, it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site and, in 2019, the European Capital of Culture. It’s come a long way since the stinging words of activist Carlo Levi, who described the conditions of the Sassi in his 1945 memoir ‘as a schoolboy’s idea of Dante’s *Inferno*’.

The ancient roots of this higgledy-piggledy part of the Basilicata region have

not gone unnoticed by filmmakers. Mel Gibson’s Biblical drama *The Passion of the Christ* saw it double as Jerusalem and the labyrinth of narrow limestone streets and alleyways provided the backdrop for Daniel Craig’s Aston Martin in the new Bond blockbuster, *No Time to Die*.

Charm and a cinematic allure linger in the honey-coloured tufa caves at Sextantio. Designed by architect Sir David Chipperfield, the decade-long restoration adopted a minimalist approach to respect the original features and local heritage. Seduction lies in the simplicity. There are 18 vast caves, including four suites and three sprawling executive suites, with wrought-iron room keys, antique furniture, handwoven bedspreads and deep stone drinking troughs as bathroom sinks. Technology is unobtrusive and luxury subtle: underfloor heating, bone-white Philippe Starck bathtubs, the occasional flickering fireplace.

Breakfast, served in a 13th-century church, is unforgettable. A locally sourced bonanza, it includes peppery artisan meats, creamy burrata, bruschetta, homemade focaccia and a selection of cakes. As the diffuse light of the day gives way to golden hour, order a punchy Negroni and make for the terrace, where a magnificent view of the Gravina Canyon awaits. This is troglodyte living at its romantic best. *Jonathan Whiley*  
From £129 per night (00 39 83 533 2744; [www.sextantio.it](http://www.sextantio.it))

### Private Amanruya, Bodrum, Turkey

**B**ODRUM is back and the best way to experience it is at Amanruya, an oasis of tranquillity located on its own stretch of this fabled Aegean coastline, away from the main, buzzy town. The Turkish port city has worked hard to shake off its unsophisticated reputation, a campaign that has paid off—it now feels much more reminiscent of its bohemian 1970s heyday.

Amanruya has had something of its own facelift: a refurbishment two years ago, the gloss of which can still be seen. Instead of bedrooms, there are 35 airy pavilions, each with a private pool and Mediterranean gardens. There’s a communal, Olympic-size swimming pool and a beach club, which can be reached by golf buggy or on foot, on paths framed by dusty olive trees and gnarled pines.

In this heady heat, the whole thing feels intensely evocative: the area’s Ancient Greek and Ottoman past is never far away. The staff can organise helicopter tours of nearby



At Amanruya, your wish to voyage across the sapphire seas can be instantly granted

UNESCO heritage sites, including ancient Ephesus, Priene, Miletus and Didyma, or you can take to the water in style aboard the

hotel’s own 40ft Vicem motor yacht. *From £760 per night, including breakfast (00 90 252 311 1212; [www.aman.com](http://www.aman.com))*