

Travel

Travel writers' discoveries – and disappointments – of 2025

From a riverboat adventure in Amazonia to an ancient Welsh castle (via pickpockets in Barcelona and a chewy beef tartare…)

FT contributors

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Dar Sinclair, Tangier, Morocco

For the past five years, I've belonged to an online book club focused on travel writing. We're a group of nine, hailing from England, Maine, Naples, Rome and Rabat. Once a year, we meet in person. This October, it was the turn of our Moroccan friend to host; they booked a house for a long weekend in Tangier.

Dar Sinclair, built for English owners in 1926 (and still in the same family) is a dazzling white villa set against Tangier's cloudless azure skies. The grounds fall away into a magical three-acre garden bursting with palm fronds, agapanthus blues and whirring dragonflies. Pathways thread through corridors of papyrus, seed heads like quivering starbursts, to a secret swimming pool. A hidden terrace becomes a candlelit oasis for evening feasts.



Outside space for relaxation at Dar Sinclair



The brightly coloured interior

Inside the house, a Bohemian ambush of colours — rose pinks, butter yellows, arsenic greens. Various half-familiar faces glance back from faded photographs, with past guests including Tennessee Williams, the American playwright, and authors Paul Bowles and Mohammed M'Rabet. Staff can rustle up coffees, cocktails and tagines, even a masseuse, who works little miracles with a dandelion puff of a poodle at her feet. It's a house for artists. Or, to steal a line from Nigerian author and art critic Emmanuel Iduma (I'm advocating *A Stranger's Pose* for our next book club read), a home for travellers armed with "a suitcase and a soul".

Dar Sinclair sleeps 14 and costs from €4,200 a week. Book via Instagram: @Dar.Sinclair

Disappointment: The desert town of Jaisalmer in Rajasthan. I went back after 34 years, and it was devastating. In my 18-year-old's diary, I describe the golden sandstone walls, the Jain temples and desert silences — my favourite town on a six-month Indian journey. This time, albeit in peak season, I couldn't escape the ramparts quickly enough. I felt myself panic-attacking, the 12th-century fort a prisoner of its booming 21st-century popularity.

The Anakonda riverboat © Estudio La Comarca

Visiting members of the Secoya community at their village close to the Peruvian border © Estudio La Comarca

A tower above the canopy belonging to the Añangu community and used by Anakonda guests to spot wildlife

Riverboats are romantic creatures. I had come from Quito, high in the Andes, to the Rio Napo in Ecuadorean Amazonia to sail downstream for a week on the good ship Anakonda. We were heading to places Amazonian travellers dream about, to the remote borders of Peru where the conquistador Francisco de Orellana, trapped in these forests, had gone mad.

The Anakonda had the air of a Mississippi riverboat, minus the moustachioed linen-suited gamblers. With 18 air-conditioned cabins, it had good food, a smart bar, a small pampering spa, and a hammock in the bow for those with a taste for traditional Amazonian travel. On the first morning I found my favourite perch: in the wheelhouse with the helmsman, drinking in the unfolding panorama of the forested banks, waiting on the promise of the next bend.

Days were spent with a guide in the depths of the great forests, following trails to a cascade of scarlet macaws feeding on a clay lick, to a canopy tower to watch spider monkeys dancing through the treetops, on a night walk where insects and birds were theatrically lit in the beam of a torch.

We visited Kichwa villages along the banks, to hear how they are trying to sustain both the forests and their communities. We camped for a night beside the Rio Aguarico to meet a chief of the indigenous Cofán tribe, resplendent in feathers and strings of beads. "If travellers can bring benefit to the peoples of this river," said the boat's owner, Raúl García, "we can help them preserve these magnificent forests."

Stanley Stewart was a guest of Steppes Travel (steppestravel.com), which offers a week on the Anakonda, full-board and including transfers and internal flights from Quito to Coca, from £5,145

Disappointment: It sounded fun. The treehouse at Alta Sanctuary was billed as a luxury experience in Peruvian Amazonia, on the remote Rio Las Piedras. But it seemed the only luxury element was the price tag — sleeping two, it starts at $1,490 a night. The bathroom barely functioned, the mosquito nets collapsed as you climbed under them, and there was nowhere to put your clothes except the floor.

Mass MoCA's industrial architecture is a spectacular setting for avant-garde art © Douglas Mason

'Perfectly Clear (Ganzfeld)' by James Turrell © James Turrell/Florian Holzherr

What began as a gentle meander down scenic roads through autumnal foliage transformed into a brilliantly intense two days of art immersion when we visited Mass MoCA and The Clark, both large-scale but contrasting galleries in the Berkshires, in north-west Massachusetts.

I'd heard of Mass MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art) but expected a modest room or two of modern art. Instead we found a hulking complex of vast factory halls, now ambitiously redeveloped and housing work by some of the most exciting artists working today. We'd allowed an hour or two, but immediately cancelled the rest of our plans so we could spend the whole day there, and even then we didn't manage to give everything its due.

The building's industrial architecture and monumental scale offer an incredible setting for avant-garde art, and I underwent what can only be described as a transcendent experience in James Turrell's light installation "Perfectly Clear (Ganzfeld)". We bitterly regretted not booking into The Porches Inn, a boutique hotel occupying a row of houses opposite the gallery and boasting a four-season pool and sauna.

The Clark, a research institute and museum 8km to the west, has a very different flavour: a sleek, almost sculptural campus housing art from the Renaissance to the early 20th century in serene style. It's especially known for its collection of French Impressionists. Both institutions are popular among city types from Boston and New York, but less well-known to international travellers — and are so close together and complementary as to present a perfect, logistically elegant weekend trip for art lovers.

Entry to Mass MoCA (massmoca.org) costs $25; The Clark (clarkart.edu) costs $22. Doubles at The Porches Inn (porches.com) start from about $200 per night

Disappointment: During a difficult summer, I was looking forward to an escapist evening of balmy delights at an alfresco performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the Glasgow Botanic Gardens. But, alas, I should have guessed that my visions of a mystical Mediterranean forest would prove difficult to realise in the west of Scotland in July. Of course, the heavens opened and the night was a washout — far, far too wet even for umbrellas and mackintoshes. The Bard in the Botanics festival also offers indoor performances in the Kibble Palace glasshouse — a 19th-century marvel — but the local regulars were far more practical than us and those shows had sold out well in advance. We'll play it safe next year.

See bardinthebotanics.co.uk for tickets

The Dunskey Estate covers 800 hectares, southwest of Stranraer

The estate gardens, including its maze

An old greenhouse on the estate

Back in May, when I wound down the coast from Glasgow to Galloway, this little-visited part of the country was on the brink of being cast into the spotlight as Scotland's third National Park. The farmers, at least, weren't happy and protest banners were lashed to gates by the road. We were heading for its farthest tip, the Rhins of Galloway, a remote hammerhead peninsula that juts out towards Northern Ireland.

There, the Dunskey Estate rambles over 800 hectares just outside the pastel-painted village of Portpatrick and, like many a Scottish estate these days, has been doing up lodges across its land as holiday rentals. We stayed in what had once been part of the stable block, my children's beds slotted into former stalls. The whole place felt like ours alone to roam: woods filled with waist-high ferns and fairy glens, a maze to get lost in, rowing boats to take out on still lochs.

Footpaths cut through the trees to two empty beaches, and beyond to the ruins of old Dunskey Castle, and to Portpatrick for rounds of putting on the green by the harbour (pop money through the honesty slot in the shed). Venture further to climb the lighthouse at Scotland's southernmost point, the Mull of Galloway, and walk the coast path around the jagged cliffs, where we saw more sheep than people.

Shortly after our trip, Galloway's National Park proposal was scrapped. And, for now at least, this beautiful, far-out corner will remain just as wildly overlooked.

Cottages sleeping two from £145 per night, minimum three-night stay; dunskey.com

Disappointment: Reports of artificial intelligence taking over as a travel assistant seem overstated. As usual, come August we piled into the car and headed off to France. As usual, I spent the first day in the passenger seat filing final deadlines from the motorways and neglected my designated role as pit-stop picker. Instead, my husband, who believes AI can do anything, asked ChatGPT where to go for lunch between Lille and Dijon. It picked a restaurant in Châlons-en-Champagne — "4.8 on Google," he said. In the real world, it was wedged between CBD shops and neon doughnut cafés. The staff looked confused, the beef tartare was slightly chewy, and the real kicker: it didn't even serve champagne.

Tantric carvings on the facade of Parshvanatha Temple at Khajuraho © Getty Images

The Panna Tiger Reserve © Getty Images/500px Prime

Part of the Khajuraho complex of monuments and temples © Getty Images

It's a place whose storyline rhymes with Angkor Wat's: a vast temple complex, built by a mighty dynasty at the apex of Hindu pre-eminence. The dynasty's primacy wanes, the decades pass, the temples are subsumed in the jungle — until one mid-19th-century day some Europeans, slashing through strangling vines, "discover" them in all their mystery and spectacle.

The Khajuraho Group of Monuments — located in the town of the same name in northern Madhya Pradesh — has long been recognised for the exemplary Nagara-style architecture and superb sculptural ornamentation of its 20 or so surviving temples. Built between about 950 and 1050, their facades are carved with thousands of representations of men and women, birds and beasts, demons and mythical creatures. And gods: particularly myriad avatars of Shiva and Vishnu, occasionally depicted in impressively acrobatic (and extremely explicit) physical union with their consorts — the famous Tantric carvings that gave the Bengal sapper captain TS Burt a serious case of pearl-clutching when he came upon them in 1838. In both their narratives and their artistic virtuosity they are mesmerising: not-quite-identical human or anthropomorphic forms spilling earthward from steep spires in not-quite-repeated sequences, over and over.

Mesmerising, but not a surprise: the temples' fame precedes them (in my case, back to an Indian art survey course at university). The revelation at Khajuraho was the Panna Tiger Reserve, a conservation success story a half-hour's drive out of town. The reserve was established in 1994, but by 2011 a nationwide poaching crisis had reduced the population on its near-1,600 sq km to almost zero. A handful of cats were introduced from other reserves to turn things around, and current estimates put the population at more than 90.

Within 20 minutes of driving through the gates, we came across a huge old male sauntering down the soft-sand road. We tracked a young female called P-151 for a spell (her pugmarks were almost as big as my face) before being distracted by the exceptional birding: flycatchers, rollers, herons, eagles, shikras. Fat crocodiles sunned on the banks of the Ken river; dozens of langurs hung their long tails down from high branches.

Two nice fillips that will probably help seal Khajuraho's place on the 2026 destination list: IndiGo now has several flights daily to its airport from Delhi and Varanasi; and Rajgarh, a stunning 17th-century palace on a hill just outside town, has just been remade by Oberoi as a very elegant 65-room hotel.

Maria Shollenbarger was a guest of Banyan Tours (banyantours.com); it offers private Khajuraho itineraries including three nights at Oberoi Rajgarh Palace with guided temple visits, a tiger safari and flights from Delhi from $2,150 per person, based on two sharing

Disappointment: "It's like Restoration Hardware did a 'Tuscany' collection, and they bought the whole thing," was how I described Collegio alla Querce to a Florentine friend — who, all too aware of the encroaching Disney-fication of his city, barely smiled. To great fanfare, California-grown Auberge Resorts launched this 83-room hotel in a converted boys' school — their first in Europe — in April. There are a few lovely suites, some nice food and a warm staff, but the spaces generally felt ablated of almost every trace of patina. Picture perfection, at the expense of some of its soul: a disappointment of (sorry, homeland) the most American kind.

The train carriages being transported across the Strait of Messina by ferry © Alamy

The marina at Mergellina, near Naples, with Mount Vesuvius in the background © Getty Images

A street in Palermo, leading to the cathedral © Getty Images

The European sleeper-train renaissance is an awkward marriage, pairing a nostalgic passion for stately, slow travel with today's wham-bam high-speed rail. Left to their own continent-crushing devices, most sleepers would barrel into their terminus at the deeply uncivilised crack of dawn, and only avoid doing so by fudging the timetable with a prolonged small-hours halt en route.

But as my wife and I discovered this spring, there is nothing contrived about the gloriously unreconstructed Palermo-Rome overnight service. This is a proper old-school trundler, covering around 1,000km in 14 hours on a track laid down in the 19th century, with the refreshing vibe of a real working train.

Our two-berth cabin, adapted from a 1970s couchette compartment, kept it real with bunks and a ladder, but came furnished with a sink, crisply laundered bedding and bottled water. There's no dining car — we bought wine and paninis at a corner shop by Palermo station — and no showers. Our carriage, bookended by spotless toilets, was shared with modest picnic-packing business travellers, who gave every impression that they were here because €55 (the extraordinarily good-value single fare) was cheaper than a hotel. And this one came with beguiling ride-by views of the moon-dappled Med, plus a thrilling piece of transportational theatre that now stands alone in European passenger rail travel.

Just after midnight, amid much gentle shunting, every carriage on our train was loaded on to the lower deck of a ferry and eased across the Strait of Messina. At the mainland dock the process was reversed. Breathless with boyish excitement, I was still awake when we skirted the palm-fringed, dawn-tinged lower slopes of Vesuvius and, an hour later, when the gracious attendant passed two paper cups of superlative espresso through our door.

Singles in a four-berth sleeper cost from €55, in a two-berth from about €90; see trenitalia.com

Disappointment: Tourists shouldn't really complain about other tourists, but since my last visit seven or eight years ago, Rome has reached saturation point. The Papal Jubilee can't have helped, but my wife and I found the entire historic centre a shuffling, log-jammed nightmare. Having previously just wandered into places such as the Pantheon, it was dispiriting in the extreme to behold snaking queues that presented an unthinkable wait. The crowds at the Trevi Fountain were concertinaed between belt barriers like a very bad day at airport security, chivvied by megaphone not to tarry when they finally had their selfie moment at the front.

In the end we took refuge in the Keats-Shelley House at the foot of the Spanish Steps, sitting shell-shocked and knackered on a terrace waiting in vain for the multilingual tide below to recede. It's sad to say, but I don't think I'll go there again.

Zebras in the Abelana Game Reserve in south-east Limpopo © Tristan Dicks

The pool and terrace at Abelana's lodge look out over the Selati river

A bedroom in the riverside lodge

Across the Lowveld we drove, in search of 48 hours of respite from the emotional rigours of recent months. The "celebration of life" had gone as well as these things can. But having lost their mum way too early, my wife and South Africa-based sister-in-law were now also contending with their own parting: our flight back to London was imminent.

It was trailing this complex assortment of baggage that we arrived at Abelana, in south-east Limpopo, in the under-explored hinterland of Kruger National Park: 15,000 hectares of bush framed by towering skies that glowed wildfire red at dusk. At its solitary, riverside lodge — all statement lamps and enveloping alcoves of caramel leather — we sat out late into the night, toasting and reminiscing as the crackling boma illuminated the boughs of the giant sycamore fig. At dawn we joined game drives to witness the stirrings of a stark, desiccated world braced for the first rains of summer.

Elegantly skittish impala, a martial eagle silhouetted on its dead knobthorn perch, the brief thrash of a croc or twitching satellite-dish ears of a submerged hippo. We marvelled at the impossibly delicate colours of the malachite kingfisher and at the monitor lizard that crossed our path with a disdainful lack of urgency, an interloper from prehistory. And we found ourselves drawn to the reserve's revered baobab: the trunk as broad as a Springboks pre-match huddle, yet smooth to the touch and with the sheen of glazed pottery — a living being thought to be as old as the dawn of Christianity.

Everywhere lay reminders of the resilience, and ephemerality, of life. It was a remarkable find — and inexpressibly cathartic.

Abelana (abelanagamereserve.com) offers stays in its tented safari camp from R3,800 (£167) per person per night or from R12,900 in its riverside lodge, both full-board

Disappointment: Its reputation precedes it, of course. But to witness the almost comical ubiquity of petty criminality while in transit through Barcelona recently was a resounding lowlight. Three times in 25 minutes, a yelp of anguish and a commotion signalled a pavement pickpocketing or bag theft. Conspicuously laden, I sought refuge in a café and watched in my periphery as two men — seemingly engaged in a Faginian version of grandmother's footsteps — inched closer to me and my laptop every time I resumed typing. The barista shouted some words of caution to me, pointing at the two men. Undeterred, they simply continued to watch me from behind their unread newspapers. Brazen, predatory and profoundly depressing.

The ruins of Castell y Bere, in the south of Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park © Daniel Alford

Wales, it's often said, is the country with the most castles per square mile in the world. At a rough count, I've been to about 60 of them. From the front door of my mother's house on Anglesey I can see the octagonal towers of Caernarfon. At university I revised on the lawns beneath the grim Gothic ramparts of Cardiff Castle. So it came as a small surprise to happen across a Welsh castle I had never been to before, and which, moreover, was among the most poetic and beautiful of them all.

Castell y Bere lies in a green valley in southern Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park, enclosed by the foothills of Cader Idris. It is in a state of advanced ruin: its stonework slumped, its stairways dropping into thin air. There is no entrance booth — only a kissing gate — and no visitors the late autumn day I visited, but for sheep munching under the North Tower.

Castell y Bere belongs to the less appreciated club of Welsh-built castles in Wales. It was first constructed by Llywelyn the Great in the 1220s to guard the southern frontier of Gwynedd, but was abandoned a mere seven decades later. Far more than subsequent, more muscular English-built castles (such as Harlech, Caernarfon or Beaumaris), it seems a structure in accord with its landscape. Its masonry rises almost imperceptibly from mossy crags, its battlements encircled by oakwoods, the trees conspiring to hide Llywelyn's old stronghold from the eyes of passing motorists.

Mine was not an original discovery, of course. But it did feel liberating exploring a castle without interactive exhibits, gift shops or fanfare of any kind. And instead being free to imagine sentries, horseback messengers, fireside figures muttering of foreign armies approaching from the east.

Entrance is free; for details see cadw.gov.wales

Disappointment: I loved a spring trip to the Isles of Scilly, but one island in particular, the privately owned Tresco, left me feeling somewhat cold. The comings and goings of golf buggies, the immaculately kept gardens, the uniformity of the seaside cottages — it all felt more like an upmarket resort than a real, living island.

Rue Champeau in Troyes © Alamy

Troyes Cathedral © Bridgeman Images

A half-timbered building in Troyes © Jean-Louis Le Hingrat/Naturimages

Once I'd committed to joining the loose convoy of ski families who drive from the UK to the Alps rather than pay eye-watering prices for the joys of a rammed Geneva airport in the Easter school holidays, the next decision was where to stop on the way. I had assumed that my family of four would bed down in some nondescript French motorway hotel, and that the pay-off for the two-day slog would be the chance to ignore baggage restrictions and sample the full range of LU biscuits at a series of pleasant *aires de service*.

Instead, we followed a recommendation and rolled into Troyes in an Easter heatwave. The medieval town sits in the Champagne region, at the end of the A26 "Autoroute des Anglais", which starts in Calais — and about halfway into our 1,000km drive from London to the Trois Vallées. To our delight, it was really rather nice.

Arriving in time to explore before dinner, we checked into our (still nondescript) hotel and then strolled along the Canal des Trévois, past Gothic churches into the old town. My kids gambolled across a square towards a carousel before we lost ourselves in alleys between 16th-century half-timbered houses in pastel shades leaning at improbable angles.

We found a sunny table outside a crêperie in search of something palatable for our children (no *andouillette de Troyes*, an offal sausage, for them). My wife and I were so taken by our unexpected pre-holiday break that we ordered a glass of local fizz, and set about determining which among the ambling Brits about us were travelling in the other direction, based on the appearance of dodgy suntans.

For details of accommodation and attractions see troyeslachampagne.com

Disappointment: While on assignment last June, I stayed for a night in Manchester's Britannia hotel. Promisingly situated in a grand former textiles warehouse on Portland Street, in the 1980s it had been compared to the Ritz. The FT once described its "stunning decor and spectacularly elegant, gold-leafed flying staircases".

Well, let's just say it has fallen on hard times. As I read in a more recent piece in this newspaper about its controversial owner, the Britannia is now notorious for its rodent interlopers and an outbreak of the legionella bacteria. On the plus side, rooms go for as little as £30 a night, not including breakfast, which I wouldn't have stayed for anyway.

The pool at The Farm, Eleuthera © Ana Lui Photography

At one of The Farm’s rustic rooms © Ana Lui Photography

The Farm's 203 plant beds provide much of the food © Ana Lui Photography

It seems odd to wake up in the Bahamas and not see the sea. In February, I stayed at The Farm, a new boutique hotel on the wild outer island of Eleuthera, emerging from my perfectly proportioned cabin to gaze out over 203 raised plant-beds that filled the morning air with scent. Then I walked between rosemary, watermelon and star fruit to an ice-blue pool, serenaded by a mockingbird.

It belongs to Bahamian Ben Simmons and his Irish wife Charlie, who have built this new 12-room property close to a spring where pirates once collected fresh water. It's a few minutes walk through a wood from another 12-room inn they have, the Other Side, which opened in 2016, and across a bay from star-studded Harbour Island, the famous rustic getaway where free range chickens amble across the gardens of $25mn holiday homes.

Such property prices mean it's still quite rare for Bahamians to own high-end hotels on their islands, so Ben, whose brother runs the primary school, provides a fairly unique, direct line into the islands' hugely courteous culture. He's taken advantage of an Eleuthera law that allows those whose family history runs back to the 18th century to make use of common land, so long as they look after it.

The Farm feels like a retreat. Much of the menu is drawn from those raised beds. The eggs — served with tomato, rocket pesto and garden greens — come from the family flock. And on Sundays a table for 60 is laid out, where fish and grits are served for family, locals and visitors. Afterwards, the sea is all of five minutes' walk away.

Ruaridh Nicoll was a guest of The Farm (littleislandhotels.com); doubles cost from B$500 (£378)

Disappointment: The price of the laundry service in good hotels is infuriating. There have been places this last year where I've felt I could buy a new shirt for what's being charged to clean one. Clearly hoteliers hate doing it — many boutique hotels such as the Lime Tree in London's Belgravia don't even offer the service anymore — but it's kind of crucial for those of us who are on the road for more than a week. I hear you cry: "Wash your own socks!" I do, but then — somewhat understandably — I've been told off for hanging wet clothes on the balcony. Laundry should be part of the deal, like breakfast. Oh . . .

Prambanan in the early-morning mist © Getty Images/iStockphoto

The entrance to the Shiva temple at Prambanan © Getty Images

Stone carvings in the temple © Getty Images/iStockphoto

Last summer I realised a long-held ambition to see Borobudur, the monumental Buddhist temple, 40km north-west of Yogyakarta on the Indonesian island of Java. With its nine levels, 72 stupas and thousands of metres of narrative frieze, it is a place of wonder and worth the three flights from London. But it's a rushed experience: to prevent the site from being overwhelmed by tourists, you're allowed just an hour on the temple itself. (Your wristband is scanned as you enter and leave to deter overstaying.) It is nothing like enough.

Next day, we headed to Prambanan, the second-largest Hindu complex in south-east Asia. More or less contemporaneous with Borobudur but abandoned less than a century after its completion around 850 and then devastated by a succession of earthquakes, it has been under restoration on and off since 1918. And even if the towering structures at its heart — dedicated to Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu and the mythical animals on which they rode — now appear broadly intact and can be entered, the better to appreciate their architects' sophisticated play of light and shadow, it still has the air of a ruin. Thousands of its dark volcanic stones lie in piles on the ground. It is a powerfully affecting sight.

As at Borobudur, it's the exquisitely carved bas-reliefs that really fascinate. Based on the Ramayana and Bhagavata Purana, they can be read like story boards (it helped that we had an excellent guide), and we were absorbed for hours, tearing ourselves away only because there is a neighbouring, even older Buddhist sanctuary, Sewu, an 800-metre walk away within the same complex.

So don't miss Borobudur but schedule a day at Prambanan too. It claims to get two million visitors a year, but my hunch is that most come for the Ramayana Ballet, a telling of the epic through Javanese dance and gamelan, that also takes place on the site, several evenings per week. During the day, even on a public holiday in June, we had parts of this powerfully atmospheric site to ourselves and encountered few other Europeans. I wish we could have stayed till sunset.

Tickets cost about £20 on the door, or book via borobudurpark.com

Disappointment: I had high hopes of Jewel, the "tranquil retreat" in Singapore's Changi airport that promises the world's tallest indoor waterfall. But the reality has all the charm of a shopping mall, admittedly one with a 40-metre water feature. It's nothing like as impressive as the Wonderfall, airside in the same airport's Terminal 2, a 14-metre by 17-metre LED screen showing a crashing Niagara-like cascade. A virtual waterfall, it turns out, can be more spectacular than a wet one.

Villefranche-sur-Mer's harbour © Alamy

Rue Baron de Brès in the old town © Alamy

The coastline of Villefranche-sur-Mer © Getty Images/Mint Images RF

To try to find a tourist-free restaurant on the French Riviera in spring is a lesson in foolhardiness. Waiters prowl the streets waving laminated menus and tables crowd the cobbles. But up a backstreet in the town of Villefranche-sur-Mer, I finally succeeded.

It was mid-May and I was interrailing with my children aged eight and six. For all the glamour and glitz of the French Riviera the one thing in short supply is quiet, golden-sand beaches. Nice is pebbled and hard underfoot; Cannes, while sandy near the Plage de la Bocca, is rammed from April onwards. So it was with great care that I trawled the coastline, settling on the beach at Villefranche-sur-Mer with its hip-height clear water and silky sand.

After a long morning of scooping up hermit crabs and swimming, the girls were starving so off we went, around the bay and up the steps into the old town. Spotting a green awning over lemon walls, we walked halfway up Rue du Poilu to find La Grignotière, where a single waitress was wiping down wooden tables. Jovial with children — always a good sign — she led us into a terracotta-tiled dining room with no more than a handful of local diners wearing pince-nez glasses and drinking Bandol rosé.

It wasn't long before she served me a saffron-scented bouillabaisse so thick and rich I could almost bite the broth. Bobbing with pink shrimp tails and plump mussels, it was tastier than any I'd tried in Marseille, the dish's original home. Eschewing the *ravioli aux champignons* and *gnocchis à la Daube Provençale*, my six-year-old was soon rubbing raw garlic cloves on crisp baguette and dunking it into her fish soup, spooning on spicy yellow *rouille* and scattering wisps of Gruyère. My elder daughter twirled a nest of *spaghetti vongole*, flecked with spring onion, snips of tomato and butter-drenched clams, with all three of us cracking into the *Îles flottantes* to finish. Family-run, with unusually warm and welcoming staff, it's worth seeking out — followed by an afternoon flop on the beach.

La Grignotière, 3 Rue du Poilu, Villefranche-sur-Mer

Disappointment: Having travelled on most of Europe's night trains over the past three years, I'm becoming immune to their nostalgic charms, and turning into a nitpicker. Austria's state railways have pioneered the renaissance of sleeper services on the continent with their Nightjet service which operates 20 routes. Back in December 2023 they launched a new-generation Nightjet with high-spec Siemens carriages and capsule-style mini cabins for enhanced privacy, lockers operated by key cards, wider berths and en suite facilities.

But what they still haven't got right is the bedding: the pillow is as flat as a postage stamp and just as square. On a recent journey from Vienna to Rome my head was lower than my neck when I lay on it, and I eventually got so fed up I bundled up my coat and shoved it underneath. The blankets are not much better. "Dream now. Enjoy tomorrow", it says on the red fleecy cover. Well I would love to, but it's so thin and insufficient that next time I'm going to pack an extra silk sleeping bag to ensure my sweet dreams.

The facade of a Registan madrassa in Samarkand © Getty Images

Shah-i-Zinda madrassa, Samarkand © Getty Images

A terrace at the Zarafshon Parkside Hotel © Julie Mayfeng

Uzbekistan is unquestionably the most involving place I've seen in years. Not just for the Silk Road splendours you'd expect: blue-tiled mosques and craftily restored madrassas, filled with faces that are Persian and Mongolian and Russian and Tibetan all at once. But more in unexpected ways: the impeccable service, the graciousness and innocence on every side, the self-contained quiet and sense of order.

Right at the heart of Samarkand, surrounded by leafy boulevards thronged with students (all in white shirts and black trousers), I found myself at the Zarafshon Parkside Hotel. At first glance, it had some of the white-pillared extravagance of a Turkish love-hotel — and its gardens' coloured fountains, ornamental pools and pavilions were popular with wedding parties and their video crews. But inside were spotless white bathrooms, delightful service in perfect English, black-gloved waiters and food so reliably good that I chose to take seven straight meals in the hotel. My room had a huge terrace and a minibar filled with free Mars bars.

Uzbekistan disarmed at every turn, and we enjoyed the friendly efficiency of the Lotte City Palace hotel in Tashkent, the elegant Alexia in Bukhara, the celebrated Orient Star (set within a madrassa) in Khiva. But the Zarafshon was the stylish surprise.

Double rooms at the Zarafshon Parkside Hotel (zarafshonparkside.com) cost from about €80 per night

Disappointment: Nobody wants to be an old fogey moaning, "You should have seen Bali/Goa/Kyoto way back when." Over five trips to the Indonesian island between 1984 and 2007, I always reminded myself that people had been decrying the loss of paradise here since the 1920s. On returning to Ubud this autumn, however, I was shocked: the worst traffic (along one-lane rural roads) I have ever seen, an infrastructure collapsing under the weight of its visitors, barely an Indonesian face to be seen at times. Too many of us colonise an Eden and it begins to look like a global shopping mall.

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