

# Travel

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**'It's like having your own water park, full of billionaires' toys, right on your doorstep'**

Aaron Millar is let loose on Panama's Islas Secas

## 30 epic family escapes

2 Yosemite National Park, California

Hole up in Devon, cruise the Med, take a California road trip or go on safari in South Africa. **Richard Mellor** has the best multigeneration trips

### 1 Luxury let in Kent

In Kent's handsome High Weald, a land of cream-tea cafes and oast houses, lies Ever After, a five-bedroom, half-timbered Tudor pile once home to the Mr Men author Roger Hargreaves. Your cherubs will be doing their best Mr Happy impressions after discovering the playhouse, putting green, hot tub and heated pool in the 57-acre garden. Inside, period features — inglenook fireplaces, diamond-pane windows — decorate an open-plan lounge. You are close to Hever Castle's history and maze, Spa Valley's steam trains and — good news for the property's one permitted pooch — many a woodland trail. **Details** Seven nights' self-catering for ten from £3,595, including a welcome hamper (ever-after.uniquehomestays.com)

### 2 California road trip

Motorhome journeys can encourage family bonding, while also making logistics easier; there's no need to unpack all the time or to force restaurants on fussy eaters. At 32ft long, Bon Voyage's biggest motorhome comfortably fits four adults and three children in bunks, and has a quality kitchen and TV. The US specialist's California itinerary stops at campsites, where it's easy to socialise and there are sights offering fun for all: San Francisco's aquarium and island prison, Napa's wineries and Yellowstone's Old Faithful Geyser, Yosemite's waterfalls and giant trees, and the beaches, striking vistas and marine wildlife of Highway 1. **Details** Nine nights' self-catering for seven from £1,799, including flights, motorhome hire and pre-booked campsites (bon-voyage.co.uk)

### 3 Spread out in Greece

Looking for a multigenerational break where everyone in the family can do their own thing? Then plump for Porto Sani, a new beachside extension of the upmarket Sani Resort in northern Greece's Halkidiki region. Along with a football academy and cookery courses, there are 25 restaurants — all covered by the full-board package — and pools for children. The spas and adults-only pool ought to suit frazzled parents and grandparents, as might the guided birdwatching and trips to the spectacular cliff monasteries of Meteora. The resort's stylish three-bedroom suites still have availability during the summer and ▶



**T**e'd been stranded for hours, but no one was complaining. Bento boxes of freshly caught sashimi, coolers of Veuve Clicquot, iced fruit and chocolate had been stashed like pirate treasure in picnic boxes under palm trees in the shade. In our own private bay, we spent the day snorkelling in crystal waters and kayaking. To be stranded on a deserted island is a hot, sweaty bore, to be pampered on one is the ultimate travel decadence.

That's what *Islas Secas* is all about. Spread across an archipelago of 14 islands in the Gulf of Chiriquí, 20 miles off the Pacific coast of Panama, and welcoming a maximum of 18 guests, this private island resort is the barefoot luxury equivalent of Spinal Tap's guitar amp. Most places are playing from 1-10; *Islas Secas* takes it to 11.

I had come with my family — Cameron, 11, Elise, 7, and my wife, Gillian — to spend five days living out our Robinson Crusoe fantasies. A-list style: bubbles and beach in the middle of nowhere.

The ethos here isn't just about spoiling guests. It's as much about preserving the ecosystem: the resort is entirely solar-powered, all of its food and water waste is recycled, and more than three-quarters of the land mass is, and will stay, untouched.

The design is in harmony with its verdant rainforest surroundings. Although the resort has been running for more than a decade, originally as a low-key fishing lodge, this year, after an extensive multi-million-dollar makeover funded by its American billionaire conservationist owner Louis Bacon, it has been reborn. The new look is as soothing as the ocean: everything is soft and natural, with wicker chairs of coral driftwood, sandy white sofas, coral paths, pastel drapes dyed in taupes and green dyes.

New too are the infinity pool, gazing across the arc of a wild blue bay; an outdoor spa where you can have stone massages surrounded by the filléto chorus of the jungle; and a panoramic restaurant and bar. Designed by renowned architect Simon Velez, known for his bamboo structures, and fashioned almost entirely out of the material, the Terrace is the heart of the resort: open-air vaulted ceilings lit up like an enormous ocean cathedral, shell-coloured beach sofas offering a sunset view, a colonial-style bar.

If the Terrace is the heart of the resort, the casitas, the Panamanian equivalent of small private villas, are its soul. At present there are four, but by March, three additional tented versions will be added for safari-style glamping under the stars. Spread out on headlands but hidden in forest, with open sides to catch the breeze and thatched indigenous-style roofs, each comes with an enormous wrap-around deck, plunge pool, and an outdoor lounge and dining area.

If you never left your room and simply looked at the view — the sun's silver splendour, the dark blue of high ocean, the translucent green of low tide (the tides at *Islas Secas* are enormous and change the complexion of the ocean every hour) — that would be enough. But we had other ideas.

The resort encompasses 30 square miles of land and sea, and the best way to see it is by boat. We circled the main island of *Isla Cavada*, where the hotel is located; found an enormous frigate-bird colony on *Isla Coco*, hundreds of giant wings twirling on the male like a lost Jurassic World; then dropped anchor by *Isla Barracuda* for some snorkelling. Don't let the name fool you: there are no sharp teeth here, just pure underwater bliss. Purple parrot fish, spiky yellow pufferfish, a stingray gliding beneath us, a black manna ray leaping out



## Luxury travel Castaway chic in a Panama eco-resort

Aaron Millar finds the ultimate in barefoot luxury on a cluster of private islands off the country's Pacific coast

The great thing about diving in Panama, our guide Gael says, "is that there's always a surprise." Ours was a green sea turtle, Elise's favourite animal and a regular inhabitant of these waters — she didn't stop smiling for the rest of the trip.

Then it got crazy. *Islas Secas* is all-inclusive, but not like you're used to on package deals to the Med. As well as bottomless bottles of bubbly, sushi on demand and some of the best wine we have drunk, restocked daily in our not-so-mini-bar, all the watersports are free too. And because there are so few guests, you can do what you want, when you want. It's like having your own water park, filled with billionaires' toys, right on your doorstep.

Cameron and I started with the Seabobs (part underwater jet ski, part dolphin, and thoroughly James Bond) then graduated to eFoils (motorised surfboards that hover 3ft above the water on a hydrofoil). For Marvel fans, and 11-year-old boys, it's as close to the Silver Surfer that you can get. "It's like flying," I shout across the waves to Cameron. "No," he says, "it is flying."

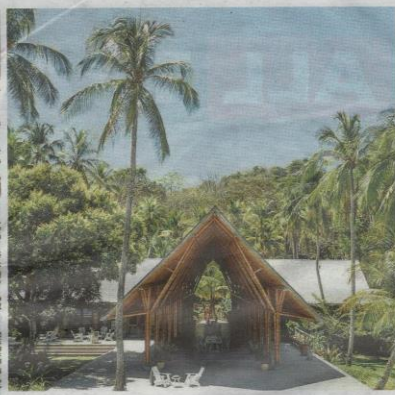
Snorkelling and diving are fully included, with dozens of sites scattered around the islands, suited to all levels, including novices (over ten) on their first dive. Farther afield, and for a small extra charge, is *Coiba National Park*, a former Panamanian Alcatraz (the island was a penal colony between 1919 and 2003, once

housing more than 3,000 of Panama's worst criminals) turned tropical island paradise with some of the best reefs in the region. There's also world-class sport fishing — we ate fresh, mahi-mahi, tuna and snapper caught by guests each night — as well as surfing, sailing and, if you come between July and October, whale watching right from the bar: breaching humpbacks just off the hotel bay served up with beachside meigas. That's my kind of marine safari.

Yet, for us, the biggest highlight was getting lost. After breakfast the next morning — fresh fruit and baked pastries served poolside at our casita — we hiked out of the back of the main *Isle* with the resident conservationist, Raf Jameson, to explore its four miles of unmarked trails. We found Tarzan vines, giant termite nests, and an enormous howler howling mist 60ft into the sky. Centuries ago

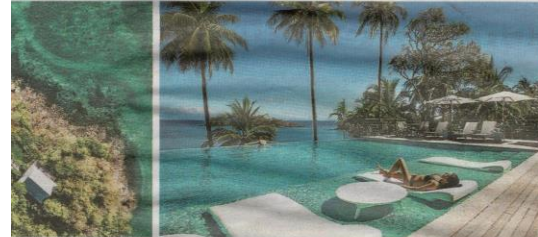


Main picture, a pool at Casita Sombras on *Islas Secas*. Right, the resort is lapped by dazzlingly clear waters



Need to know

Aaron Millar was a guest of Plan South America, which has a nine-day trip to Panama from £8,847pp, with one night at La Concordia in Panama City, four nights all-inclusive at *Islas Secas* and three nights at El Otro Lado, including transfers and flights (plansouthamerica.com)



indigenous people from the mainland used *Isla Cavada* as a ceremonial meeting place. As we hiked, Rob showed us 1,000-year-old fragments of pottery he had found on the island. The jet-black volcanic axe blades and jade pendants felt pleasantly heavy in our palms.

Then, after 30 minutes of traipsing through the forest, we saw it: a deserted stretch of soft sand and misty jungle on a rocky promontory separated from us by a slip of turquoise sea. And as we watched the sun slowly dip and haze across the horizon, the secret beach appeared: a sandy white beach where the tide had ebbed, waves crashing on both sides like an isthmus. Here, in the thick forests on the other side of the beach, is where most of the ancient ceremonial artefacts have been found, and a resonance of that old magic remains. It felt as though we had the whole world to ourselves, nothing but sea, sky, cham-

Top right, the cathedral-like Terrace, the hub of *Islas Secas*. Above, kick back by the infinity pool



pagne and ceviche. And, of course, a boat home after sunset. Rob had come prepared — this is *Islas Secas* after all.

Of course it was a wrench to leave, but we hadn't quite finished. Panama has two coasts — and the Caribbean was calling. After a brief stop in Panama City — where we stayed at La Concordia, a new boutique hotel in the old town featuring wrap-around corner suites, chic turn-of-the-century design, and a big rooftop DJ and tapas bar (a favourite of the locals) — we took a car 60 miles north to zoology Portobelo.

This tranquil, colourful port, once a centre of new world trade, has a swash-buckling piratical past, and our hotel had a front-row seat to that history. El Otro Lado (Spanish for "the other side") stands within thick tropical gardens a short boat ride across Portobelo Bay, a buccaneering hotspot. On this coast, the culture, history and ecosystem are completely different, more Caribbean than Central American, and the hotel is no exception: it features bold African colours, sculptures and paintings by local artists.

The hotel operates as a non-profit, with proceeds funding community art and music projects, and on our last night one of its proteges, Mama Ari's troupe of local kids, came to perform a traditional conga dance: girls in bright patchwork dresses and boys in masks beating drums, stamping feet, spinning and singing. Where *Islas Secas* soothes, El Otro Lado energises. Howler monkeys howled in the rainforest around us, enormous blue morpho butterflies drifted past, we found a sloth lazing in the canopy above us at breakfast.

San Fernando, a 260-year-old fort built to defend the town from pirate attack is a five-minute walk from the hotel. The Spaniards had their work cut out. It was here, in 1671, that every rum fan's favourite buccaneer, Henry Morgan, sailed in to plunder the town; here too, in 1596, Sir Francis Drake died, buried in Davy Jones's locker, his body never found. We wandered among the stone ramparts and scarred black cannons of the old fort, then hiked up to a barricade fortification at the top of the hill. From here, the whole landscape spread out before us — sparkling blue water, cloud-covered mountains, tall mist ships harboured in the bay.

Two coasts, two worlds. From castaways to pirates of the Caribbean, flying maenta rays to sleeping sloths. No, definitely not meats and transfers from Quito (aaronmillar is the host of the podcast *Armchair Explorer*

## 3 more stylish retreats

### Kasiya Papagayo Costa Rica

The focus of this new eco-lodge on the Papagayo peninsula, surrounded by 123 acres of jungle and ocean views, is on slowing down, detoxing from digital life and being at peace with nature. Each of the five tented suites, sustainably built with wrap-around hardwood decks, has been designed to have zero impact on the surrounding environment. The decor is natural but contemporary and thoughtful — designed to flow seamlessly into the forest surrounds. Snorkel in crystal waters, hike while spotting howler monkeys, or just spend the day lazing on one of Kasiya's three secluded beaches. Details Rooms accommodating two adults and a child from £419 a night, including activities, meals and transfers. Minimum four-night stay (kasiya.com)

### Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel Peru

Part luxury boutique hotel group, part NGO, Inkaterra has six Peruvian eco-retreats that fund a network of scientific research and conservation projects across the country, from Cusco to the Amazon. At the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel — Designed in the style of an Andean village, with terraced hills, waterfalls and adobe casitas — more than a million trees have been planted, helping to conserve the surrounding ecosystem and protect this wonder from dangerous mudslides during winter's heavy rains. You will also find hot springs, hiking trails and ancient Incan carvings near by. This is more than just a base to see the citadel — it's a destination in itself. Details Rooms for two from £191 (inkaterra.com)

### Mashpi Lodge Ecuador

Set in the heart of the Ecuadorian cloud forest, less than three hours from Quito, this strikingly modern boutique hotel helps to conserve one of the world's prime biodiversity hotspots through sustainable community development projects that reduce damaging farming practices, as well as through scientific research and forest preservation. A staggering 400 species of birds and innumerable varieties of rare orchids exist in this small region. Floor-to-ceiling windows fill every angle with jungle views, rainforest trails lead to waterfalls and hummingbird gardens — and there's even a "sky bike" on which you can pedal through the canopy. Details Rooms for two from £1,028 a night, including activities, meals and transfers from Quito (mashpilodge.com)