



Stay in a villa in Sri Lanka - Departures - Travel.

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1,063 words

11 November 2000

The Times

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English

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Jill Crawshaw has the best holiday suggestions.

WORLDWIDE Journeys & Expeditions (020-7386 4646) has increased the number of family friendly holiday villas it is offering in Sri Lanka. In the peaceful south of the island, the villas come with staff and cooks who teach holidaymakers to prepare local specialities.

Cloughton, a villa at Dikwella set in five acres, has a swimming pool overlooking the sea, and can accommodate a family of up to six. It costs #400 a night to rent on a full-board basis.

Sun House, which once belonged to a Scottish nutmeg merchant, can be rented as a whole house for 12, or by the room. It has its own pool and is near Unawatuna, one of the island's

most dreamy beaches. The

price of a room for two is #100 per night, B&B.

Sri Lanka villas are also offered by Western & Oriental (020-7313 6611) and Abercrombie & Kent (0845-070 0617).

SPANISH GOLD

SMALL cities can provide the ideal winter weekend, and Spain has a clutch of hidden gems. The Iberian specialist Mundi Color (020-7828 6021) has introduced a wide selection for this winter; for example, a two-night weekend exploring Salamanca, the Oxford of Spain, which is crammed with historic treasures. This costs #342-#422 for flights to Madrid, B&B and car hire.

A similar break in Toledo, which still looks like a backcloth for an El Greco masterpiece, costs #314-#394; in dramatically situated Cuenca, best known for its casas colgadas or hanging houses, you can expect to pay #320-#416.

If your experience of Malaga is confined to its crowded airport, give the lively city itself a chance. Not only does it sport a sandy beach right in the centre and some excellent seafood restaurants and tapas bars, but there's more than enough sightseeing to occupy a weekend.

Don't miss the ancient Muslim Alcazaba Fortress, the sombre 16th-century cathedral, and the interesting old quarter where Pablo Picasso was born at 15 Plaza de la Merced. A new Picasso Museum is due to open in Malaga next spring exhibiting 182 art pieces donated by his family. Two-night Malaga breaks are #276-#388.

IF you're jaded with turkey and stuffing, learn how to cook a vegetarian Christmas feast on residential cookery weekends (December 8-10 and 15-17) at the Ashburton Holistic Centre (01364 652784), on the edge of Dartmoor in Devon.

Menus include roasted sesame vegetables with balsamic vinegar and mushroom stroganov, mincemeat, and Christmas pudding prepared under the supervision of an expert veggie chef, Stella West-

Harling, and then take home.

The cost is #175 for full board, all ingredients and cookbook.

SURE BET FOR SUN

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WHATEVER so-called winter sunshine brochures may claim, guaranteed sunshine in December in the Med is a myth - even in southerly Cyprus, Turkey and Tunisia.

Nearest bet for the guaranteed sizzling stuff - and 32 degrees temperature - must be The Gambia, six hours away, and on the same time zone as us, so there's no jetlag.

For the sun-starved, The Gambia Experience (023-8073 0888) is offering luxury long weekends at #599 leaving Gatwick on December 1, 8 and 15. The price includes return premium class flights, and four nights' B&B in the grade-five Kairaba Hotel.

HOLIDAYMAKERS who are adventurous, fit, competent swimmers and can come up with #2,500 plus #400 for flights to South America, can play pioneer on **Encounter Overland's** (020-7370 6845) four-week Amazon expedition leaving on January 21.

The recce follows largely uncharted territory, mainly by river from Quito in Ecuador to Iquitos in Peru, via the border at Nuevo Rocafuerte that was opened only a few months ago. Transport is by raft (through challenging class 4 and 4-plus rapids), jungle longboat and dugout canoe, the guides are local Huaorani Indian villagers, the temperature hot and humid.

Creature comforts and contact with the outside world are a low priority. If the trip works out, it will feature in future **Encounter** programmes.

The price covers all land transport and accommodation - mainly camping - along with meals and guides.

MAKE TRACKS HERE

FANS of Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, first published in 1906 (Jenny Agutter starred as the daughter Bobby in the original television series, and again as the mother in the recent version), can follow a new Edith Nesbit Literary Trail in Derbyshire. It's described and mapped in a new 18-page booklet *The Nesbit Connection*, price #1 and available from New Mills Library (01663 743603).

Many devotees believe that Nesbit set her famous novel around Strines station and the railway line which still exists between Marple and New Mills.

She no doubt gained her inspiration on visits to her relatives who lived close to Three Chimneys Cottage - the name of the house that the children went to live in on the moors above the railway. As well as the house itself, you can still see the High Peak's locks, canal and aqueduct.

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FIRST-HAND HISTORY

IF TOMORROW'S Remembrance Day ceremonies strike a chord, you might be interested in two new trips from Holts Tours (01304 612248).

War Underground (May 19-22) studies trench warfare in the First World War. Simon Jones, a television presenter, will explain the importance of mining and other engineering skills which the British used on July 1, 1916, in the First Battle of the Somme and at Vimy Ridge. Holts' tour, with visits to Vauquois, the Somme battlefield, Vimy Ridge and Ypres, costs #480 for coach travel, accommodation and most meals.

In the Second World War, the Bomber Command's aim was to destroy Germany's economy and for the aircrew to survive 30 missions - they suffered more than 50,000 dead. A "Bomber Boys" tour (April 27-30), priced at #397, includes cemeteries, airfields and other evocative sites.

The price of #397 covers coach travel plus half-board accommodation and includes visits to the RAF College, Cranwell and the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight at RAF Coningsby. Base camp is the Petwood Hotel in Woodhall Spa, the wartime mess of 617 Squadron (The Dambusters).

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Document t000000020010817dwbb00zvp