

# Dream BIG

The world's finest new hotels may be far-flung but they make up for it in fabulousness, as ANGELINA VILLA-CLARKE discovers. From Oman to the Maldives, you can discover a new destination and, perhaps, a new you. It's time to check in to the true meaning of escapism

## 1 UNWIND IN PARADISE THANDA ISLAND, TANZANIA

For the ultimate in escapism, go off-grid in the most glamorous way possible by checking in to the tiny gem that is Thanda Island.

Found in southern Tanzania's Shungi Mbili Island Marine Reserve, the private island escape has been ten years in the making – and it shows.

The five-bedroom villa accommodates ten adults and has a dramatic glass-rim swimming pool (it's like taking a dip in a fish tank) and oversized indoor aquarium. The all-white rooms are brightened with pops of colour – the dining chairs are covered in traditional Ankara prints, there's pretty floral fabric on armchairs and vibrant throws adorning beds (you'll want to take it all home with you). Add in a Steinway grand piano, cigar humidior, fine wine collection and copper beach baths and you have the quintessential beach retreat.

As well as spending time pondering life on the picture-perfect shores (some of the best you'll ever see) there's big game fishing, diving in the nearby marine park, kayaking and turtle spotting to while away the hours. The island even has its own private coral reef for Instagram-ready snorkelling opportunities, and the more adventurous can catch sight of the whale sharks that congregate south of the island from October to February.

Owned by Swedish philanthropists – Christin and Dan Olofsson – their Scandinavian design touch is remarkable throughout. But it's the marine research, conservation and local community projects that they have committed to which will really leave an impression on you. More than paradise, this is truly soul-stirring stuff.

*Thanda Island, from US\$10,000 per night (approx. £7,048) for exclusive use. Includes boat transfers, all activities and all dining, thanda island.com*



## 2 EXPLORE NEW HEIGHTS ANANTARA AL JABAL AL AKHDAR RESORT, OMAN

Luxury hotels in many Middle Eastern countries may call to mind opulence, glitz and grand surroundings. But without scrimping on luxury, the new Anantara property, which opened in July, is doing hospitality its own way.

A two-hour drive from Muscat airport, the hotel looks as rugged and wild as it gets. Set in the Saiq Plateau on Oman's Green Mountain, Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar is perched some 2,000 metres above sea level on the curving rim of a great canyon, making it the highest five-star resort in the Middle East and one of the highest in the world.

The ethos is to take guests out of themselves for a while by offering a cultured insight into the destination's rich heritage, and this being the Middle East, there are plenty of authentic indulgences on tap too. Once you've got your breath back from viewing expansive skies above and canyon and mountain peaks spread below, you'll be able to kick back in your room or villa.

Each has bespoke Omani furniture, with the design as a whole echoing a traditional Middle Eastern look; wooden trellis panels, pretty fretwork lighting and inlaid chests are mix-matched with fine linens and pared-back furniture, which calls to mind a Mid-Century influence.

Meanwhile, a colour palette of rusts, oranges and creams ramps up the tastefulness.

Similar to mini-spas, the bathrooms are uber-luxe, with top-of-the-range Amouage products, private terraces and rain showers. Checked in to a villa? Then you'll also have your own butler, walk-in dressing areas and infinity pool.

From mountaintop yoga at sunrise to stargazing, archery and quad biking, inspiration can be found everywhere here. The hotel's Friday night market, set in a picturesque courtyard with a blazing fire pit, showcases local village artisans, while activities on offer include trips to heritage attractions such as remote, ancient cities and – for the thrill seekers – the chance to abseil down a sheer cliff drop-off.

Back at the resort, six restaurants and lounges offer a mix of culinary treats, including dining on a platform that juts out over the canyon. The Anantara Spa, meanwhile, is perfect for bringing you back down to earth with its ancient hammam rituals, outdoor relaxation areas and lose-yourself treatments. You can even go for a dip in the cliff-edge infinity pool. Hair-raising moments guaranteed. *Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort, from £340 per night on a B&B basis, [jabal-akhdar.anantara.com](http://jabal-akhdar.anantara.com)*



## 3 SLEEP UNDER THE STARS LOISABA LODGE, KENYA

Want to get back to nature? Then head to the new Loisaba Lodge in Kenya's Laikipia Plains before everyone else hears about it. Just opened at the end of May, the tented camp is located in a vast 56,000-acre private wildlife conservancy. With verdant valleys, endless red plains, views of snow-capped Mount Kenya and the Ewaso Nyiro River, the mix of terrain means it is teeming with wildlife and the camp is home to elephants, wild dogs, zebra and lions. Loisaba Lodge offers those once-in-a-lifetime experiences we all lust after.

It's intimate and small, so if you have enough friends and family, gather them all up and hire the whole camp of 12 tents. On offer is a combination of ensuite tents, family tents and one family residence, plus a main lounge, dining room and striking infinity swimming pool. The decor throughout is funky safari-chic: think classic leather tub chairs, African print accessories and cow-hide footstools, while tents are spacious with wood flooring, natural textiles and open-plan bathrooms. Roll up the sides for views to die for.

For something extra special, the nearby Loisaba 'star beds' are an African adventure in themselves; overlooking a large waterhole, with resident hippo and elephant, these innovative rooms are perched on a raised open wooden platform with open-air bathrooms and guests are hosted by traditional Samburu and Laikipia Maasai warriors. And if that doesn't sound exceptional enough, each room



comes complete with a roll-out, handcrafted four-poster bed so guests can drift off to sleep under the star-studded African night sky.

Activities at Loisaba Lodge range from game drives to guided bush walks with Samburu guides, to horse and camel safaris and lion tracking, all with conservation as a key focus. It's safari – but not as you know it.

*Loisaba Tented Camp, available through Aardvark Safaris, from £410 per person, per night, [aardvarksafaris.co.uk](http://aardvarksafaris.co.uk)*

## 4 EMBRACE YOUR INNER CHILD SONEVA JANI, MALDIVES

If you're looking for more from your beach holiday, then look no further than Soneva Jani in the Maldives, due to open this October.

Meaning 'wisdom' in Sanskrit, this new property from the ultra-glam Soneva Group is guaranteed to bring you the headspace you need in order to fully recharge your batteries.

Found on the island of Medhufaru, which is part of an uninhabited five-island cluster in the Noonu Atoll, this is all about getting away from it all. With just 24 over-water villas and one island villa stretching across 5km, it is one of the lowest-density resorts in the world, meaning you are unlikely to have to make small talk with strangers at breakfast.

The devil is in the detail here – each master bedroom roof, for instance, slides back at the press of a button so you can sleep under the stars, while open-air bathrooms feature lagoon access so you can have one last dip in the aquamarine ocean before you shower. There are over-water swing seats, walk-in mini-bars complete with a wine cellar

selection and roof terrace dining rooms for eating à deux. A must? Bag one of the villas that has its own slide that will swoosh you from the top floor straight into the lagoon. Definitely not just for kids.

From the experimental tasting room to dining in an observatory (each table has a screen with the view from the in-house telescope), there's a host of inventive restaurants to take your pick from. There are even separate cheese, chocolate, ice cream and charcuterie rooms to cater for all manner of cravings.

The resort also boasts the first 'silent outdoor cinema' in the Maldives, with guests given Bluetooth earphones to watch the movies so as not to disturb the wildlife in the area.

Of course, the impossibly turquoise Indian Ocean gives the wow factor. Dive into the pristine waters and expect to come face to face with turtles, rays and occasional dolphins. Soak it up – it's the ultimate castaway experience.

*Soneva Jani, from £1,290 per night for a water villa, which includes a range of treats during your stay, soneva.com*



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## 5 FIND YOUR ZEN AMANEMU, JAPAN

There's always a frisson of excitement among travel aficionados when a new Aman hotel opens. Earlier this year, the second Japanese outpost from the group threw open its doors and, according to Aman junkies, it's the standout property of hotelier Adrian Zecha's collection.

Located some 180 miles south of Aman's first Japanese bolthole in Tokyo, it's found in the idyllic Ise-Shima National Park. The resort taps into the Japanese custom of holidaying in simple, rural ryokan inns – the country's traditional bathing retreats – and makes the most of its position on the shores of Ago Bay – famous for its pearl industry and hot springs.

Those looking for a zen moment will be perfectly at home here. Everything is light, airy and ethereal, with designers Kerry Hill Architects adopting a classic Japanese aesthetic across the 24 suites and four 'haute' villas; a colour palette of cream and taupe is juxtaposed with dark-wood, custom-made furniture, accentuated with accents of Kumiko Japanese art. Bathrooms give true meaning to the term 'private sanctuary' and the 'quiet' design harnesses Japan's cultural rituals around bathing. There are charcoal-coloured stone tiles and minimal accessories, with feature windows looking out on to private gardens.

Outside, the serenity continues. Sunken stone terraces link the suites and villas with the

restaurant and bar, while a 33-metre freshwater infinity pool looks out across the bay. Maple and cherry trees give a natural richness to soften the stark lines.

Dining here is also a calming, nourishing act. Based around the Japanese 'izakaya' style of informal sharing, dishes feature local produce – think lobster, abalone, delicate fruits and Wagyu beef. You don't even have to tax your mind as to what to choose, because the team of 12 chefs conjure up a multitude of daily changing plates to match guests' tastes.

As with any Aman resort, the highlight is the spa – this one is a moody, architectural space. Taking a holistic approach – by offering a combination of treatments, relaxation, movement and nutrition – you can truly zone out. Its focus is the central onsen for communal bathing, with water sourced from the nearby natural hot springs.

Well-being activities include yoga and hiking, but Kumano Kodo pilgrimage walks are a must – you'll pass tinkling streams, waterfall-laced mountains and cypress forests to reach stunning, sacred shrines. Go, get lost and find yourself again. ☯

*Amanemu, from £568 per room per night, subject to 13 per cent service charge and eight per cent tax, room only, amanemu.com*