WORLD’S BEST UNSPOILED BEACHES

FROM SUN-KISSED SANDS TO GORGEOUS SNORKELING COVES, WE’VE GOT YOUR PERFECT BEACH
MOOREA, FRENCH POLYNESIA

One of the most remote places on earth is an authentic tropical paradise

WHY GO NOW: The spirit of Polynesia beats fiercely in the heart of Moorea’s people. In the Society Islands, you can immerse yourself in local culture while exploring pristine beaches, healthy coral reefs, and lush mountain terrain perfect for hiking and ATV adventures. The cuisine—a fusion of Polynesian and French influences—is delectable. Don’t miss Lilikoi Garden Café, where you dine in the owner’s front yard surrounded by coconut groves. The best beaches are Teavora and Temae on the island’s east coast. Be sure to bring your camera to capture the awe-inspiring views of neighboring Tahiti.

WHERE TO STAY: Hilton Moorea Lagoon Resort & Spa and InterContinental Moorea Resort & Spa are the two top resorts on the island. Both offer quintessential over-the-water bungalows as well as accommodations on the beach and in fragrant garden settings. For about half the price of a resort, stay at Fare Miti, an intimate 10-bungalow property on Moorea’s west coast with two bungalows right on the beach.

WHEN TO GO: The dry season from May through October (when temperatures range from the low 70s to low 80s) is the best time to visit French Polynesia.

KAUAI, HAWAII

Snorkeling, diving, and close encounters with Hawaiian monk seals

WHY GO NOW: Affectionately known as the Garden Island, Kauai beckons with its quiet, back-to-nature charms. In a world where so many wide-open spaces have been replaced by concrete buildings and shopping malls, this Hawaiian island still stuns with its incredible Napali Coast, Waimea Canyon (the “Grand Canyon of Hawaii”), picture-perfect Hanalei Bay, and sun-kissed Poipu Beach Park. Go to Poipu, on the South Shore, for good snorkeling and a chance encounter with Kauai’s endangered monk seals who call the beach home. A visit to the nearby Spouting Horn blowhole is always a treat.

WHERE TO STAY: The Grand Hyatt Kauai Resort and Spa is a favorite with families and couples due to its incredible lagoon-like pool complex that features a lava rock–lined lazy river, 150-foot waterslide, and several waterfalls. For something a bit cozier (just two rooms and two suites), try the Kauai Beach Inn B&B near Poipu Beach, where a delicious, hearty breakfast is included in the nightly rate.

WHEN TO GO: You won’t be disappointed no matter when you visit Kauai, but June through October presents perfect beach weather with daytime temperatures of 75 to 80 degrees.
CULEBRA, PUERTO RICO
The perfect warm-weather getaway, especially for East Coasters

**WHY GO NOW:** Look to this Caribbean island when you seek that perfect beach with beautiful white sand, good swimming and diving, and a spot to go fishing. You’ll find all of that, plus mangrove forests, rough-hewn cliffs, and bird sanctuaries in the archipelago of Culebra, a short ferry or commuter plane ride away from mainland Puerto Rico. Don’t miss the white coral sands and crystal-clear waters at Playa Flamenco. This popular wildlife-reserve beach provides chair and umbrella rentals, daily food vendors, and spectacular snorkeling.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Culebra has a range of accommodations, but budget-minded travelers often end up at Mamacita’s guesthouse.

**WHEN TO GO:** Beach lovers visit the island from November through March. Sailors favor the summer months.

ESPLANOLA ISLAND, ECUADOR
Commune with seals and sea lions and meet the famous blue-footed boobies

**WHY GO NOW:** Regulations regarding the number of visitors to the Galapagos Islands are tightening in order to protect its biodiverse ecosystem. Visit now before it gets harder to find a berth on a yacht or a room at an inn. While the beaches—like those on Espanola Island—are exquisite, visitors come here to see the wildlife that isn’t in the least bit afraid of interacting with humans. One of the oldest islands in the archipelago, Espanola is truly off the beaten path and a terrific place to meet giant tortoises, sea lions, lava lizards, marine iguanas, waved albatross, blue-footed boobies, and spotted eagle rays.

**WHERE TO STAY:** The best way to see this island—and all of the Galapagos—is by yacht or cruise ship. Celebrity Xpedition is generally the most affordable, while Lindblad Expeditions is an excellent choice for nature-lovers and photographers. Those seeking a luxury sailing should book a cabin on Silversea sailing.

**WHEN TO GO:** There are two peak seasons in the Galapagos: June through September and December through January. It can be nice to visit in the less crowded off season, even if you do encounter a bit of rain or colder waters.
ZAKYNTHOS, GREECE

Citrus and olive groves, spring flowers, and a shipwreck—all in one trip

**WHY GO NOW:** Greece’s Ionian Islands have been drawing tourists for decades and Zakynthos, the third largest in the region, is especially popular because it’s easy to arrive by ferry or plane. The Bay of Laganas is an environmental success story: In the 1980s, pollution threatened the nesting grounds of the native loggerhead sea turtles, but with the proper protections the area has rebounded to draw tourists each June to see female turtles come ashore to bury their eggs. The island is especially beautiful in springtime when citrus and olive groves look their best and flowers of all kinds bloom everywhere. The can’t-miss beach here is Navagio, also known as Shipwreck Beach after a cigarette-smuggling ship wrecked here in 1983 (you can still see its rusted hull on shore). Stunning limestone cliffs—a favorite of base jumpers—cradle the white sand cove with gorgeous turquoise waters lapping at its shores.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Families appreciate the Porta del mar Beach Villas near Psarou Beach for its privacy, amenities, and warm welcome from the owners. For luxury accommodations in Tsilivi, you can’t go wrong with the five-star Lesante Luxury Hotel & Spa.

**WHEN TO GO:** While most travelers visit Zakynthos from June to August, we prefer visiting in March, April, or May, when the flowers are in bloom and crowds are light. Being there over Easter is also a special treat.

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SANIBEL ISLAND, FLORIDA

Experience the charm of old Florida and bring back multicolored seashells

**WHY GO NOW:** Cross the causeway from the mainland to Sanibel Island on Florida’s Gulf Coast and you go back in time. This is a place where the close-knit community protects the flora and fauna for the next generation. Instead of high-rises and chain restaurants, you’ll find miles of unspoiled beaches strewn with gorgeous multicolored seashells. J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge is a birdwatcher’s dream, where sightings of double-crested cormorants, great blue heron, ospreys, roseate spoonbill, and snowy egrets are common. Watch for alligators, manatees, and marsh rabbits; we’ve even see bobcats here. There’s no better place to be at sunrise or sunset than Lighthouse Beach on the East End; it’s the perfect place to spot dolphins and fill a pail with Sanibel’s dainty shells.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Get into the spirit of old Florida and stay in a sparse but comfy cottage directly on the beach, like Mitchell’s Sand Castles or Castaways. If you need more amenities, book a one-, two-, or three-bedroom beachfront stay at Sundial Beach Resort & Spa or a suite at Casa Ybel Resort.

**WHEN TO GO:** Most people will tell you to visit in the winter months, but we happen to love Sanibel in the fall, when migratory birds stop by and stay for the holidays.
GALICIA, SPAIN

The magnificent Beach of the Cathedrals wows with natural arches and caves

**WHY GO NOW:** Spain’s economic downturn has translated into bargains for travelers who may have steered clear of expensive European vacations in the past. The Galicia region in the northwest of the country is especially interesting for places like Ribadeo. From there it’s an easy trek to Catedrais Beach (“Beach of the Cathedrals”). Get a tide chart to visit this inspiring destination and go at low tide when its natural arches and caves are most prominent.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Stay in Ribadeo at the lovingly restored Casona de Lazurtegui inn or at Hotel Rolle, an 18th-century townhouse with modern interiors in the heart of the historic district.

**WHEN TO GO:** Summer months.

FRASER ISLAND, AUSTRALIA

Off-the-grid rain forests, mangroves, lakes, and windswept beaches

**WHY GO NOW:** If you’ve been to Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane, try something new on your next visit to Australia: Fraser Island in Queensland. This World Heritage Site—the earth’s largest sand island—ranks right up there alongside the Great Barrier Reef. Here you’ll find more than 100 freshwater lakes, soaring cliffs, thousand-year-old trees, rain forests, mangroves, and miles and miles of white sand beaches. It’s also a prime whale-watching destination.

**WHERE TO STAY:** The main resort on the island, Kingfisher Bay is a Fodor’s Choice hotel where accommodations range from luxury to rustic.

**WHEN TO GO:** Visit from July through October to go whale-watching and enjoy the beach.
KO PHI PHI ISLANDS, THAILAND

Where dramatic limestone mountain cliffs cascade into a turquoise sea

WHY GO NOW: Move over Bangkok. The Krabi province of Thailand is the new “it” destination in Southeast Asia and backpackers, families, and honeymooners are all flocking to the Phi Phi Islands for the stunning limestone outcroppings and islands. The largest of them, Ko Phi Phi Don, can be reached by ferry from Phuket or the mainland. Crowds are descending, so now’s the time to visit before development further changes the serene landscape. If you can, get to uninhabited Ko Phi Phi Lae and visit Maya Bay for the day. It’s an excellent base for diving or simply sunbathing on the beach.

WHERE TO STAY: The family-friendly Holiday Inn Phi Phi Island is not only affordable, but located on one of the best stretches of sand on Ko Phi Phi Don. The remote Outrigger Phi Phi Island Resort and Spa gets a thumbs-up for its thatched-roof bungalows and beautiful, private beach.

WHEN TO GO: There are two schools of thought when it comes to visiting here, and both work: Go during the rainy season from May through December when it’s cooler but damp, or visit from January through April when temperatures soar but it’s dry.

TULUM, MEXICO

Yoga beach retreats and quiet reflection by stunning Mayan ruins

WHY GO NOW: Located on the southern tip of Riviera Maya, a 75-mile drive south of Cancun, Tulum has long attracted idealistic bohemians looking to meditate on the seven-mile stretch of beach and reflect in the peaceful Sian Ka’an biosphere reserve, or at any of the Mayan ruins that give this ancient port city its character. While this place is still generally off the grid—hotels run on generators and wind power—it’s getting trendier with fashionistas and intellects heading here for an eco-conscious and sustainable vacation.

WHERE TO STAY: Tulum’s longtime hippie vibe may be waning, but it’s still a very spiritual place and that’s perhaps why the concept of the yoga retreat has entrenched itself here. Check out Amansala, which offers extensive yoga programs as well as the popular Bikini Bootcamp. Maya Tulum Resort and Yoga Shala Tulum are also favorites while the upscale Be Tulum can arrange for private yoga instruction.

WHEN TO GO: Everyone escaping cold-weather climates visits Tulum during its high season from November through April. Savvy travelers, however, prefer the shoulder season months of May, July, and August when crowds are light and hotel rates are low.
Written by Andrea M. Rotondo

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Tropical sunset at Moorea, French Polynesia