

■ FUJIAN TULOOU, CHENGQILOU, CHINA

Speak to your neighbours much? You'd struggle to be standoffish in a *tulou*, one of the earthen roundhouses that are home to huge clans in Fujian province, southeast China. Built between the 12th and 20th centuries by Hakka tribespeople, thousands of them dot the countryside. Most are private, but the public are allowed to nose around the 'King of Tulou' (pictured). It's one of the largest of its kind: 300 people live within its 300-year-old, Unesco-listed walls, making egg noodle soup in the ground-floor kitchens, gossiping across the balconies of the upper-floor living quarters, honouring marriages – and deaths – in the ancestral hall. In recent years, many youngsters have upped sticks and moved out to the big cities. But, as they soon discover when they need to borrow a cup of rice, there's no place like home. *Mandarin Journeys* (00 86 152 2190 4200, www.mandarinjourneys.com) has a four-day *Fujian Unveiled* package, with a visit to the 'King of Tulou', from £1,280pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow, transfers, guides and transportation.

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■ DUBOVICA BEACH, HVAR, CROATIA

The most privileged, pampered Russian oligarch would kill for this view – yet the Muscovite yacht owners who flock to the island of Hvar rarely stray from the busy main harbour. Fortunately, that leaves Dubovica Beach, just 8km along the coast, to a smattering of in-the-know sunbathers. Barely a stone on the white shingle has changed since an aristocratic family built a summerhouse on the crescent-shaped bay 300 years ago. A tiny hamlet sprang up around it, and now the perfume of pine trees mingles with the aroma of grilled shellfish drifting from the beachfront restaurant. Even in high summer, there's little to disturb the calm, except the lap of the waves and the occasional swimmer splashing in the clear shallows. All that, and plenty of space to spread out – which is priceless, even if you're a millionaire.

Balkan Holidays (0845 130 1114, www.balkanholidays.co.uk) has seven nights in Hvar from £493pp, B&B, including flights from Gatwick and transfers. Take a water taxi from Hvar harbour for less than £10pp, one way; or hire a speedboat from Hvar Boat Rent (00 385 91 174 1028, www.hvarboatrent.com; £32 a day for up to five people).

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PIAZZA DUOMO, MILAN

Sunrise casts coral hues over the jumble of roofs, domes and spires in Italy's fashion capital. Saints perch precariously on rose-marble pillars, keeping watch over Milan's great cathedral, the Duomo. To reach their lofty heights, you need to climb an endless circling stairway within, following in the footsteps of ancient pilgrims. (Alternatively, you could take a short cut to grace via the lift.) Catch your breath as you reach the rooftop terraces and the city unfolds beneath you. Tiny figures crisscross the Piazza – style-conscious Milanese, trinket-touting street vendors and awestruck tourists. Laughter, hawkers and traffic are all muted from up here, 45m above the city – but wafting on the morning breeze is the rich, roasty scent of espresso, rising from the cafes scattered in the streets below. Shift your gaze upward, past the pinnacles and their saints, and look to the skies. You might be in the centre of the boisterous capital of Lombardy, but here, high above the material world, you'll feel as if you're in heaven.

City Break 1 (020 8518 9704, www.citybreak1.co.uk) has three nights in a four-star hotel in Milan from £228pp, B&B, including flights from Luton. Access to the Duomo's rooftop terraces (www.duomomilano.it) starts at £5.50.

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■ LAKE BUTTERMERE, CUMBRIA

Tranquil Lake Buttermere, 2km long, shimmers like a silk scarf in midsummer, a painter's palette of blues and greens. Beyond the sheep-nibbled meadows that edge the water, streams cascade down a craggy panorama of mountains and fells. Spread out in the northwest corner of the Lake District, it is one of the region's great beauties. You can actually hear the silence on a languid two-hour stroll along the stone path that follows the shoreline – barely a whisper is carried over the still waters, the only disturbance the swooshing of wings as kestrels and crows wheel overhead. Following in the footsteps of the famous fell-walker Alfred Wainwright, take the higher-level trail through the rocky swathes and swoops of the Buttermere Ridge. To cap it all, lean in for an up-close view of Sour Milk Gill waterfall as it tumbles down, animating the flanks of Red Pike fell with silvery threads.

Buttermere is 90 minutes by bus from Penrith station; change at Keswick (0871 200 2233, www.stagecoachbus.com; £10). Stay at Dalegarth Guest House (017687 70233, www.dalegarthguesthouse.co.uk), by the waterfront, with doubles from £65, B&B.

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