



HOLIDAYS DON'T COME MUCH CLASSIER THAN RENTING YOUR OWN ISLAND – AND YOU DON'T NEED TO BE A MILLIONAIRE OR A BOND VILLAIN TO AFFORD IT. **PHILIP WATSON** INVESTIGATES

SPLENDID ISOLATION

I BLAME URSULA ANDRESS and *Dr No*. If it hadn't been for that white bikini, those giant seashells, that golden beach and, most of all, Crab Key Island itself – the million-dollar nerve centre from which Bond's enemy plots to take over the world – then maybe none of us would have enduring fantasies about hiding away on our own private island.

Sure, before Bond, we'd known about Robinson Crusoe, Dr Moreau, Napoleon and *Desert Island Discs*. But *Dr No*'s lair, with its sleek interior, luxurious quarters and first-class food and service, made owning an island about as cool as it was possible to imagine – even if it did get blown to pieces at the end of the film.

Since then, all we've really heard about is Richard Branson. The Virgin magnate bought the beautiful, unspoilt Caribbean

island of Necker in 1981, built a series of vulgar and incongruous Balinese-style houses on it, and has rented out the place to the super-rich and mega-famous (and T'Pau) for up to £130,000 a week. Two of the cottages are called "Bali Hi" and "Bali Lo". The glossy brochure guarantees, between pictures of bedrooms captioned with "suite dreams are made of this", that the place is "the height of good taste". Best left to the corporate-incentive market, I say.

There are alternatives, however, and not all of them involve selling your granny. While it's true that, if you have the odd million or 10, there are still islands available to buy – recently Posh and Becks were said to have their eye on the £4.5m Osea Island off the coast of Essex – over the past few years more and more private

hideaways have become available as holiday rentals. Specialist agencies and websites have sprung up offering surprisingly good deals, especially if you can get a group together and split the cost.

So here's an *Esquire* Top 10 compiled from perhaps 50 or more private islands to which us mere mortals now have access. And remember, these are *not* private island resorts, however lavish, that you have to share with other guests, however few. Nor are they islands that you can only visit if, as increasingly seems the case, you are on a cruise liner that has bought the retreat for the sole use of its passengers. These are private islands that you and your friends can rent exclusively and do with what you will. I just hope you don't run into Tom Hanks or that nice Ben from Taransay. 📍

"These are private islands that you can rent exclusively and do with what you will"



SEABIRD ISLAND USA

Accessed from Miami along the spectacular overseas highway, one of the world's great drives, this 10-acre island has an Old Florida-style house, with spacious decks and porches, high ceilings and spiral staircases. There are two double rooms and four bunk beds. Activities include snorkelling, fishing and sailing your own boat, and there is a private beach and bird sanctuary. The buzzing nightlife of Key West is an hour's drive away.

Sleeps: 4 adults, 4 children. Staff: 1. From £2,700 (£670pp). Enquiries: Vladi Island Travel (00 49 40 33 89 89; www.vladi.de)



CAYO ESPANTO BELIZE

This chic hideaway's five wooden cabanas each have their own pier, seafront plunge pool, open-air shower and hammocks on the veranda. There are white-sand beaches, coral reefs and views out to the Caribbean. The staff, which includes four butlers and three chefs, can organise massages, scuba diving, fly fishing, motor launches, tours of Mayan ruins – even mariachi bands.

Sleeps: 14. Staff: 12. £34,000 per week, all-inclusive, except wine and spirits (£2,428pp). Enquiries: Private World (020 7723 5599)



ANONYME ISLAND SEYCHELLES

As close to a paradise island as you're likely to find, this is a seven-acre Indian Ocean retreat just off the coast of Mahé, the main island of the Seychelles. There are three beachfront chalets and a main house, each in a modern Creole style and supplied with its own butler. Surrounding the houses are beaches, orange groves, mango forests, palm trees and huge prehistoric volcanic boulders; there is also a pool and tennis court. Golf, watersports and casinos are available on Mahé.

Sleeps: 8-14. Staff: 8. £30,000 per week, including breakfast (£2,143 per person). Enquiries: Private World (020 7723 5599)

Deserted islands

All this could be yours, if only for a week. *This page, from top:* Cayo Espanto, Belize; Baron Island, Spain; Taprobane Island, Sri Lanka.

Opposite page, Isola Galli, Italy

ILE CHANTEMESLE FRANCE

Just 50km from the centre of Paris, this picturesque river island has a charming, Tudor-style villa with big fireplaces and a large veranda. The house is set in parkland and orchards, with a tennis court and a swimming pool. This is Impressionist country: Monet's garden at Giverny is close by. Perfect in spring or autumn. *Sleeps: 12. Staff: 4. £2,000-£4,000 per week (£166-333pp). Enquiries: Vladi Island Travel (00 49 40 33 89 89; www.vladi.de)*

HORSE ISLAND IRELAND

Just off the coast of County Cork, this is perfect for those looking for something a little more wild. The three large stone houses have peat-burning fires, Jacuzzis, saunas and beds in the shape of fishing boats. There is also, perched on a cliff, a replica of the ship in which Columbus discovered America (perfect for overnight stays for two). The island has jagged cliffs, Celtic ruins, waterfalls and sandy bays. *Sleeps: 12. Staff: 2. £3,400 per week (£283pp). Enquiries: Vladi Island Travel (00 49 40 33 89 89; www.vladi.de)*

BARON ISLAND SPAIN

One of four volcanic islets in a lagoon off the coast of Costa Blanca, this 22-acre island was once a royal hunting reserve. There is a four-storey hilltop watchtower, designed as a folly by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1950, as well as three small cottages. Staff will cook and organise trips; there are two motorboats, watersports, a yacht and a tennis court. The golf courses and casinos of La Manga lie nearby. About as secluded as the Med can be. *Sleeps: 12-14. Staff: 4. £5,600 per week, including meals (from £400pp). Enquiries: International Chapters (020 7722 0722; www.villa-rentals.com)*

TAPROBANE ISLAND SRI LANKA

You can wade across to this tiny, rocky island at low tide – at other times, staff will transport you by sedan chair. Once there, you'll discover a hexagonal Twenties villa in extravagant tropical gardens. The house has a cool, colonial feel, with high ceilings and tiled floors. By day, swim in the infinity pool or watch elephant polo matches on the beach; at night, enjoy fine meals on the veranda. *Sleeps: 8. Staff: 6. £4,500 per week (£563 pp). Enquiries: Western & Oriental (020 7313 6600; www.westernoriental.com)*

ILHA DO PICO BRAZIL

A lush tropical island off the Brazilian coast, between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, that has white-sand beaches, forests, almond trees and a rocky peak. There are two simple yet comfortable villas. Dolphins are often spotted swimming past; a schooner is available for trips to other islands and the historic colonial city of Paraty. *Sleeps: 12. Staff: 2. From £40pp per day (min four guests). Enquiries: Private Islands Online (www.privateislandsonline.com)*

EILAN SHONA HOUSE SCOTLAND

Part of Private World's ex-directory portfolio – properties so exclusive that they are not even in its brochure – Eilan Shona lies off the west coast of Scotland, 50km from Fort William. It is rugged, rolling and windswept, and has a spacious, three-storey Victorian house with four-poster beds, log fires and a snooker room, as well as a tennis court, canoes and a boat. Excellent meals, mostly of local seafood and vegetables grown on the island. *Sleeps: 12 adults, 4 children. Staff: 4. From £10,000 per week for up to 10 guests, including food (£1,000pp), then pro rata for extra guests. Enquiries: Private World (020 7723 5599)*

ISOLA GALLI ITALY

There are more expensive islands to rent, but this is the most stylish. Once owned by Rudolf Nureyev, this rocky retreat off the Amalfi coast has a main villa, modernised by Le Corbusier in the Twenties, with five bedrooms, a gym, terraced garden and views to Capri and the Lattari mountains. Fine Italian food is served. There is even an 11th-century Saracen tower and a 38ft yacht for trips to stunning Positano and Ravello. *Sleeps: 10. Staff: 8. From £38,000 per week, all-inclusive (£3,800pp). Enquiries: Vladi Island Travel (00 49 40 33 89 89; www.vladi.de)*

