

WHERE TO TRAVEL IN 2019

The human touch and personalised itineraries: “warm luxury” is next year’s hot trend.

Story • FIONA CARRUTHERS

For Qantas chief executive Alan Joyce, 2019 will be the year he makes it to Machu Picchu, the Andes and Santiago. Mr & Mrs Smith’s co-founder, London-based Tamara Lohan, intends to use her downtime next year to “discover the quieter corners of Europe” – such as the rocky little Italian island of Pantelleria, situated between Sicily and Tunisia, which “whispers of North Africa” and is where Giorgio Armani has a villa. Texas-based Virtuoso co-founder and CEO Matthew Upchurch, his wife Jessica and their two boys will kick off the new year with three weeks in Africa. They’ll be giving back as much as taking a holiday, via the Canadian ME to WE program at Bogani Camp in Kenya, and volunteering at a local school. “We’ll also enjoy Wilderness Safaris and Singita camps in Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa, learning more about Singita’s 100-year sustainability plan,” says Upchurch.

As 2019 fast approaches, the experts are sorting their travel calendars. And along with exotic destinations, highly personalised custom-made itineraries continue to trend.

“Our guests arrive for four or five days and they want 12 restaurants booked for dinner, so they can choose as they go,” says the general manager at the fabled Ritz Paris Hotel,

Christian Boyens. “Half of the bookings will be cancelled and incur a fee, but they want choice, not just what’s available that day.” It’s not only a reservation; exact tables and pre-ordered wines are also booked.

In this vein, Ashleigh Ellis, from Adelaide high-end booking agent The Tailor, says clients aren’t interested in what she terms “cold luxury”. The crystal glasses, the high thread-count sheets, the reflexology treatments and the vintage shiraz aren’t enough on their own; they require a human touch, like sitting on the beach, feet in the sand, with the owners of Haggerstone Island Resort, a private island 600 kilometres north of Cairns, near the tip of Cape York. “The personal touches are what makes Haggerstone so deserving of the five-star experience label,” says Ellis. “Like sitting by the fire as fresh-caught crayfish cook in a pan, while hosts Roy and Anna Turner explain how they set out back in 1985 to build this dream resort.”

Over the next few pages, *The AFR Magazine* has done the hard yards for you, approaching experts and travel hot-list compilers to tip the best places for Australians to travel in 2019, based on ease of access, currency value, new product and zeitgeist appeal. Happy mind travels, and bon voyage.



HOTTEST COUNTRY

Sri Lanka

Plucking a country from the 195 or so on offer to name as the destination for any given year is a challenge, to put it mildly. Of its many lists, Lonely Planet’s all-important “Top 10 Countries” to visit in 2019 is led by Sri Lanka. And it’s our pick too.

This island nation in the Indian Ocean has it all, from white-sand beaches framed by swaying palms to the hilly tea country inland; from Dutch colonial buildings to Buddhist ruins, including the 5th-century citadel Sigiriya, which forms part of the famed cultural triangle. It’s even got cricket.

Sri Lanka has emerged from a tough run. In 2004, more than 30,000 people died after the Boxing Day tsunami struck the country’s east and south coasts. Its people also suffered through a 25-year civil war that started in 1983, during which it’s estimated up to 100,000 people were killed.

Since the ethnic-religious turmoil ended in May 2009, Sri Lanka has become one of the world’s fastest-expanding economies, with GDP growth this year of 4.8 per cent, driven by its key industries – tourism, tea exports, apparel and textiles, and rice production.

“Sri Lanka is now what Bali was 20 years ago,” says Lonely Planet’s Melbourne-based director of sales and marketing, Chris Zeiher. “We’ve had Sri Lanka on our lists before, but this is its first time at number one. That nomination is a combination

of things, but mainly because the country is having an ‘X factor’ moment.” Sri Lanka comes in at number three on Virtuoso’s list of Top Emerging Destinations, behind Japan and Iceland. “Sri Lanka has been on people’s radars for a while now, especially Australians, as it’s long been considered excellent value and is only about 13 or so hours of flying time,” says Zeiher.

A number of the big luxury brands are well-established there now, including at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle resort and Amanwella. Mr & Mrs Smith list 29 luxury hotels in Sri Lanka: most of them little

one-off boutique places, full of charm and character, but, blissfully, also equipped with most mod cons. Of course, no visit to Sri Lanka is complete without breezing through the 1864 Galle Face Hotel on Colombo’s waterfront, which recently underwent a two-year refurbishment. Dust off your white linen.

Next year, Harding Boutique Hotels – run by Sri Lankan-Australian entrepreneur Paul Harding – is scheduled to open a six-suite, architect-designed luxury hotel in Ahangama, a 30-minute drive from Fort Galle in the south.

Improved roads and better infrastructure in recent years have made it easier to get around, though you’ll still want to beware of the kamikaze bus drivers. Step back in time and book a first-class rail ticket from Colombo to Fort Galle for 340 Sri Lankan rupees (about \$2.65). Many of the trains date to the early 20th century; they still do paper tickets, and you can wrestle down the windows to enjoy the blast of salty air as you rattle south from the capital, following the coastline.

No wonder the number of Australians travelling to Sri Lanka has increased fourfold over the past decade: about 110,000 of us headed there in the 12 months to August 2018, according to ABS figures. As a result, Lonely Planet’s guidebook to Sri Lanka has leapfrogged ahead of Vietnam and Italy to become its second-biggest seller behind Japan.

The most popular way for Australians to get there remains a one-stop hop, flying via Singapore, Bangkok or Malaysia, then on to Colombo. SriLankan Airlines now flies Melbourne to Colombo direct. Zeiher points out that tying in a side trip to the Maldives has never looked better, with more competition out of Singapore into the Maldives’ Velana International Airport. In the Maldives, try Soneva Jani and also Niyama Private Islands. Maldives ranks number four on Lonely Planet’s 2019 Best Value Destinations list.



Opposite: Beachside in Sri Lanka. Top: Nine Arch Bridge just outside the town of Ella. Above: Pool overlooking tea country at the Dunkeld Bungalow.

GETTY



MOST ANTICIPATED NEW HOTELS

Singapore Raffles

Elizabeth Taylor, W. Somerset Maugham, Ava Gardner, Rudyard Kipling and Karl Lagerfeld: they can't all be wrong. As the adage goes, "When visiting Raffles, be sure to see Singapore." Having been closed since December 2017, the 130-year-old hotel is now nearing the completion of its most extensive renovation since 1994. "We might be famous, but we still have to stay relevant," says the hotel's

general manager Christian Westbeld. The main components of the renovation include a new VIP day spa six times the size of the old one, a refurbished roof pool, a lobby with streamlined check-in and state-of-the-art hotel rooms. "Don't worry, we've kept the signature brass switches," Westbeld quips, "but you'll now find whisper-quiet airconditioning, blackout shades, fully renovated bathrooms and new soft

furnishings when we re-open."

The hotel's suites will also be larger, with more living space and kitchenettes, plus there will also be a new Raffles residence block. The re-opening is scheduled for mid 2019.

To deliver you to Raffles Singapore in greater style, Qantas will next year unveil a new first-class lounge at Changi Airport, and also upgrade its business lounge.

Singapore Airlines continues to increase capacity ex Australia and will add a direct service out of Singapore to Seattle in 2019, making it the airline's fourth non-stop route into the United States.

Other anticipated global capital city hotel openings next year include more of American entrepreneur Ian Schrager's buzzy Edition hotels (done in partnership with Marriott), in Singapore, West Hollywood and Reykjavik. A new Rosewood hotel will soon open in Hong Kong's Victoria Dockside arts and culture district. Spread across 43 floors, it has 413 rooms with harbour views. Also scheduled to open in December is Leading Hotels of the World's The Ru.Ma Hotel and Residences, a new urban haven in the heart of Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur. Meanwhile, across the ditch, Accor has just opened the edgy, 130-room luxury SO/ Auckland Hotel in the city's downtown Britomart district.



Above: Singapore's Raffles Hotel reopens next year. *Far left:* The re-imagined Long Bar at Raffles. *Left:* Hong Kong views from the Rosewood Hotel.

CLOSE TO HOME

The Lindis, New Zealand's South Island

The Red Centre is the only Australian destination to make any of Lonely Planet's key lists this year, coming in fourth place for Top 10 Regions. It's something of a continuation on a theme, given the popularity of Uluru over the past few years, particularly around the Field of Light installation, now extended until the end of 2020. To cater for increased interest, Qantas has put on two new routes into Uluru from Adelaide and Darwin. If your wallet is up for it, Longitude 131° is hard to go past here, but don't neglect the Deluxe Rock View rooms at the recently refurbished Desert Gardens Hotel.

At Queensland's Whitsundays, the yoga-and-day-spa-rich Elysian Retreat on Long Island opens on December 20, offering more options in this part of paradise. Nearby, Daydream Island reopens next April following an \$86 million repair job after being hit by Cyclone Debbie in March 2017.

Swim travel tourism is thriving and Sydney-based oceanswimsafaris.com is operating its first mainland-Australia safari next May. Oceanswims founders Paul Ellercamp and Suanne Hunt have been leading swim adventures since 2012, with itineraries in Tonga, Fiji, New Zealand's Coromandel Peninsula, Indonesia, San Sebastian and the Costa Brava in Spain.

The eight-day "Great Barrier Reef 1770" safari covers relatively unexplored parts of the lower Great Barrier Reef, such as Lady Elliot Island and Lady Musgrave Island, as well as the best of the Discovery Coast, around Agnes Water and Town of 1770. May 25, 2019 marks the 149th anniversary of Captain Cook landing at Town of 1770, which the locals believe is also the first time Cook set foot on Australian soil.

In 2019, Oceanswimsafaris is expanding its offering to French Polynesia (Moorea) and to the Philippines (Dumaguete). The regular Sulawesi safari is becoming a dive/swim adventure in response to the number of swimmers who also scuba dive. Northern Sulawesi, where the trip is based, is at the centre of the greatest marine diversity in the Indo-Pacific region.



Above: Swim travel tourism makes for a cool change. *Below:* The Lindis lodge in the expanse of the Ahuriri Valley. *Left:* One of the suites in The Lindis.

But let's jump across the Tasman to our top pick – New Zealand's latest luxury lodge, The Lindis, which opened on November 1 in the Ahuriri Valley, North Otago. Costing more than \$NZ15 million (\$14 million) to build, the lodge is spectacularly subtle, including a roof that mimics the surrounding undulating terrain, helping to create a soothing sense of belonging.

The main lodge has five suites, while the second stage of construction – due for

completion in 2019 – will comprise a three-suite extension, plus individual glass pods built for astro-tourism. Located on the 2428-hectare Ben Avon Station, surrounded by conservation parks, mountains and beech forest, there's not much out there to impede your view of the night sky.

The Lindis Group also has Chalet New Zermatt in Queenstown and the Paroa Bay Winery, which specialises in sustainable wines near the Bay of Islands. Make mine a pinot.





WHERE TO CRUISE

Scenic Eclipse - Top of the World, across the Arctic Circle

Maybe it's because we live in a land girt by sea, but cruising is the one thing Australians never seem to tire of – even if the market has softened over the past few years from spectacular double-digit annual growth to strong growth hovering around 5 per cent over the past 12 months. Smaller ship expeditions to destinations like the Galapagos, Antarctica and the Kimberley remain the sweet spot for sophisticated travellers. With all-inclusive Michelin-star-quality food and champagne, plus day-spa heaven at sea and plenty of toys on board to help you discover every inch of the shoreline, things have come a long way since the Love Boat.

A number of impressive polar-class luxury expedition ships are already on offer, operated by the likes of Silversea and Ponant, while the game-changing Scenic Eclipse discovery yacht is scheduled to launch in April 2019.

Founded in 1986 by Glen Moroney from

Newcastle, NSW, Scenic specialises in river cruising, mainly in Europe. Scenic Eclipse is a bold new foray for the company. Painted black, the discovery yacht will cater for just 228 guests, with a staff/guest ratio of 1:1.

“It’s next-level luxury,” says Scenic’s Sydney-based communications manager,



Top: Launching in April 2019, the Scenic Eclipse comes with two helicopters onboard. *Above:* Cruising the Arctic offers the chance to see its unique wildlife.

Mandy Dwyer. “One of the best aspects will be the cuisine, with nine dining options (restaurants, bars and the like), overseen by chefs of all nationalities – Portuguese, Japanese, French – who will each specialise in their national dishes. You’d have to eat three meals a day for 10 weeks straight in order to experience every dish on board.”

With two helicopters, a fleet of Zodiacs plus kayaks, and a seven-seater submarine that dives to 300 metres, Scenic Eclipse will do James Bond proud when it starts sailing.

The itineraries are predictably exotic, to the likes of Cuba and Chile, but sailings are fast filling up for 2019. Our pick is the 11-day Oslo to Oslo round trip, dubbed the “ultimate Arctic experience”, with endless summer days at sea exploring the Svalbard archipelago on the lookout for polar bears, seals, wolverines and whales. Three separate sailings depart next year across June and July, priced from \$18,495 per person.

Also new next year is Uniworld’s S.S. Bon

Voyage, due to launch in April in France. Bon Voyage is the brand’s 2006-built River Royale reimagined after a multi-million dollar makeover, including installing a swimming pool and refurbishing all suites, and could be described as a waterborne Palace of Versailles. Bon Voyage will sail the Dordogne and Garonne rivers, departing from Bordeaux.

Stuck for a Christmas gift for that special person who has cruised everywhere? Take a look at Ponant and *National Geographic’s* 12-day west Africa trip, departing from Praia, the capital of Cape Verde, in October 2019 to sail the Bijagós archipelago aboard Le Dumont-d’Urville, which has a cosy 92 staterooms and suites. “It’s the ultimate ‘where to next’ itinerary,” says Ponant’s Asia-Pacific commercial director Deb Corbett. “If you’re looking to impress your friends who have travelled everywhere before you, book this: I guarantee they won’t have sailed the Bijagós.”



OFF THE INSTAGRAM TRACK

Nihi Sumba



Above: Nihi Sumba’s private beach features some of the world’s best left-hand breaks. *Left:* The pool of the Mendka Villa and the beach beyond. *Right:* Kaboku sushi bar.

2.5 kilometre private beach that’s home to one of the world’s best left-hand surf breaks, known as “Occy’s Left” after Australian surfer Mark Occhilupo, while horse lovers are indulged by sunset canters along the beach atop feisty local ponies.

The Australian Financial Review Magazine was among the first clutch of media to discover Nihi Sumba in late 2014, when Burch was on site and had only recently purchased it in a nod to the fact he and Tory’s three teenage sons love surfing. Nihi Sumba has since won a number of awards, including *Travel + Leisure* magazine’s Best Hotel in the World (2016 and 2017). “If you need time out, go here,” says recent visitor and keen surfer Jeremy Goring, of London’s famed Goring hotelier family. “The resort, the beach, the surf, the island – it’s all spectacular.”

At Nihi Sumba, a new al fresco sushi bar named Kaboku (Sumbanese for fish) has opened to complement the main open-air restaurant and pool bar. An infinity lap pool, beachside day spa, and slow walks through the surrounding villages, rice paddies and lush jungle elevate this dramatic cliffside resort even closer to heaven. (FYI you can get a phone signal, but we guarantee after 24 hours the phone will be relegated to the back of the wardrobe of your airy villa.)

Keep an eye out for Nihi Sumba’s deals that “match” the Australian dollar to their US-dollar quoted rates, meaning the \$US795 entry-level nightly rate will be adjusted to \$A795 for stays through to March 31, 2019 (excluding high season from December 16 to January 7).

Another one for your radar in this neck of the woods is the Legian Sire Lombok, which is set to open in 2019. Elsewhere in Asia, new branded resorts include Alila Villas Koh Russey in south-west Cambodia’s Koh Rong archipelago, and Anantara Quy Nhon Villas in Central Vietnam. If Fiji is more your thing, try Kokomo Private Island, built by Australian property developer Lang Walker, just 2.5 minutes south of Suva by chopper. It opened in March 2017, and with 21 beachfront villas and five luxury residences, there’s something for everyone. ●

