

HELLO, sunshine

Escape the chill for some budget-friendly winter sun, says Aby Dunsby

If the thought of settling down for another cold, grey, vitamin-D deprived winter doesn't appeal, clients need only hop on a plane to chase the sunshine.

Being on a shoestring budget shouldn't put them off. In fact, more operators are offering yearly price-cut deals that have even transformed luxury destinations into affordable and attainable holiday options.

Examples include Dubai, which offers the best winter value in mid-November, according to Gold Medal, and Barbados, which Thomson is selling for as little as £865 for a week in December.

Clients willing to catch some rays shouldn't discount long-haul destinations such as Antigua and Thailand, whose growing number of all-inclusive hotels often slash prices to compete for business in winter months. Thomson, which has seen a 350% increase

in long-haul customers over the past 10 years, confirmed healthy bookings for Cape Verde, Kenya and Cuba this year, and strong demand for Jamaica and the UAE.

Plenty of short-haul destinations also offer great value too, including the sun-splashed Canary Islands and The Gambia, meaning clients don't have to go far for their winter sun unless they really want to.

▶ CLOSE TO HOME

It's forever summer in the Canary Islands, with temperatures

“Tenerife has been attracting a new market as no hotels can be built unless they are five-star

averaging 20C in our chilly winter months. The islands have long been popular with Brits thanks to their winning combination of dramatic scenery, excellent food

and drink, good selection of affordable hotels and relatively short flight time of between four and five hours.

The islands all offer something unique: while Tenerife's many resorts and Thai-themed aquatic attraction Siam Park make it popular with families, the snow-white and inky black sand beaches of Fuerteventura are a great choice for laid-back couples, and La Palma's rugged landscape of coastline and thick forest lends itself well to walkers and cyclists.

Lauren Ross, Europe product and commercial manager for Simply Luxury, says Tenerife is selling particularly well this year. “Tenerife has always been popular in the winter due to the great year-round weather but in recent years it has been attracting a new market, as no new hotels can be built there unless they are five-star,” she



FAST FACT
Red Sea Holidays has added the Canary Islands to its range this year

SAMPLE PRODUCT

Red Sea Holidays offers seven nights' B&B at Green Field Apartments in Playa del Ingles, Gran Canaria, from £340, departing December 13 and based on two sharing, including flights and transfers. redseaholidays.co.uk

The Goa Experience has 14 nights' B&B at The Santana Beach Resort, including flights from Manchester and shared transfers, from £779, departing December 5. goaexperience.co.uk

→ says. "This means many of the three and four-star properties in Tenerife are having a lot invested in them so they are of a higher standard."

Ross recommends clients travel between mid-January and March for the cheapest fares and accommodation prices, opting for half-board or all-inclusive to keep costs down once in resort.

Those who are fans of tapas, sangria and culture should also consider mainland Spain, where temperatures in the south reach a mild 16C in December. Trafalgar's Spanish Wonder trip explores the country with visits to Madrid, Seville and Barcelona, and highlights including a traditional dinner on a ranch in the Andalucian countryside near the white-washed village of Gerida. Prices start from £1,040 for eight nights.

For clients longing for serious heat, suggest they take a trip to The Gambia, which boasts almost uninterrupted sunshine from November until June, and average temperatures of 30C. The Gambia Experience reports a high number of repeat visitors, while its array of family-friendly beachfront hotels and all-inclusives make it popular for those with kids in tow.

Product manager Karen Durham



The Gambia is affectionately nicknamed 'the smiling coast' as the friendly locals give visitors a warm welcome

says: "Being outside the eurozone means The Gambia offers fantastic value for money, and it's just a six-hour flight away and in the same time zone so there's no jet lag. The Gambia is affectionately nicknamed 'the smiling coast' as the friendly locals give visitors a warm welcome."

TROPICAL FLAVOURS

The Caribbean is a perennial winter-sun favourite, offering stunning beaches, top-notch food and warm, relaxed hospitality. Barbados and Jamaica are proving especially popular for various operators this year, while Rebecca Evans, senior marketing executive at Funway Holidays, reports that the Dominican Republic remains its best-seller when it comes to value-for-money winter sun.

Katherine Hobbs, product manager at Caribtours, recommends Mexico

for its value. "Airlines are really driving down the cost of flights to Mexico as there are so many a week. With plenty of all-inclusive hotels to choose from, there are often great offers and savings from the resorts too," she says.

Hobbs adds that couples looking for an adult-only escape should consider Secrets Akumal Riviera Maya, which is new in the Caribtours 2017 Caribbean collection. Akumal means 'place of turtles' in the Mayan language, and the resort is aptly named as the area is home to one of the largest populations of green sea turtles in Mexico and offers clients plenty of opportunities to snorkel with them.

Opting for all-inclusive accommodation in the Caribbean will help clients keep costs to a minimum, and with many resorts set on dazzling beaches, they won't have to leave the resort unless they want to. Elite Island Resorts recommends Jolly Beach in Antigua, which offers complimentary perks including a kids' club, gym and exercise classes and water sports. Prices start from £979 for a week on selected dates in November and December with Gold Medal.

For clients wanting to combine sun, sea and sand with sightseeing and jaunts to historic cities, a great option is Cuba, which is becoming



MEXICO:
Secrets
Akumal
Riviera Maya





CUBA:
Havana

→ increasingly popular now that relations between the US and the Caribbean island are improving. It's a relatively new destination for Gold Medal, but has already attracted a spike in winter-sun bookings.

Ashley Pilkington, the operator's USA and Caribbean assistant product manager, says: "Cuba is perfect for those after a holiday on a shoestring, with plenty of budget accommodation, a huge variety of entertainment, and plenty to see and do along with a choice of low-cost activities."

November through to March offers cooler temperatures and is considered to be peak season, and with availability at a premium, suggest clients book well in advance to secure the best deals.

With its popularity growing, Cuba will inevitably become more expensive, so opting for a group tour is an ideal way for clients to control costs since all accommodation and ground transport is included. Intrepid Travel offers a Cuba Sailing Adventure, moving from Havana around the Canarreos Peninsula (from £1,320), or for more active clients there's an eight-day Cycle Cuba trip (from £940).

▶ FAR-FLUNG SUN

Famed for its picture-perfect coastline and impeccable cuisine, Thailand continues to offer outstanding value in winter as a variety of airlines fly to Bangkok from the UK, keeping flight fares competitive, plus even high-end hotels are affordable and the general cost of living is very low.

Ensure clients pick their destination wisely, as the wet season is different on the east and west coasts - west is best in November and early December, while the east coast experiences heavy rainfall from September to December. Those travelling to the north of Thailand between November and February will also be blessed with dry weather.

The popularity of The Land of Smiles is also due to its versatility: for backpackers, there's the vibrancy of Bangkok and blissful, lesser-known beaches such as Chaweng in Koh Samui; for adventurers, there are countless opportunities for cliff jumping, tubing, bamboo rafting and zip lining in Khao Sok National Park and around Chiang Mai; and for culture-seekers, there's The Golden Triangle, and the myriad





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WINTER SUN ON A BUDGET DESTINATIONS

→ and ancient ruins of northern Thailand.

Explorers should consider Intrepid's eight-day Northern Thailand trip, which travels from Bangkok to Sukhothai, Lampang and Chiang Mai (from £531). The trip keeps costs down by offering authentic experiences including one night in homestay accommodation, and travel by overnight sleeper train from Chiang Mai to Bangkok.

Clients with a penchant for luxury will get more for their money here, and opting for all-inclusive will bag the best deals. Examples include Southsea Grand Khao Lak near Khao Lak-Lam Ru National Park, which Thomson is offering from £723 for



Bali offers excellent diving in the north, ancient monuments in east and west, and surfing in the south

a week; and Bandara Resort & Spa in Koh Samui, which Kuoni is selling at £738 for seven nights.

Equally paradisiacal is Bali, where temperatures averaging a balmy 27C in December allow clients to spend the festive season working on their tan on sun-blessed beaches and swapping their Christmas turkey for fragrant Indonesian cuisine.

Apart from beachside lazing, the tropical island offers excellent diving in the north, luscious rice fields, ancient monuments in the east and west, and surfing in the windswept south.

Younger clients looking to explore Bali and make new friends in the

process can opt for Contiki's eight-day Bali Island Hopper, whose itinerary features swimming with turtles in Gili Trawangan, scenic sunsets in Senggigi, local shopping in Seminyak, the opportunity to sign up for a day's diving course near Gili Trawangan and surf lessons in Senggigi. Prices start from £489 for a week.

Gorgeous Goa has perfect temperatures over our cold season, with dry, sunny and hot weather from November to February, without the humidity of its summer season.

It's a long flight to the Indian resort, but the upside is that local prices are low, as are the general holiday costs.

Katie Bushnell, product manager for The Goa Experience, says clients can keep costs down by eating at one of the many excellent beach shacks located along sublime stretches of coastline. They offer great food, and an average meal and a beer will set clients back around a fiver. She also recommends staying somewhere central, such as the touristy northern town of Candolim, to avoid having to pay for taxis or public transport.

THAILAND:
Trekking in
the north



PICTURES: INTREPID TRAVEL; SECRETS RESORTS & SPAS; JOHN RIDDLE; CARIBTOURS; CARLOS BOLANOS



Beaches