

# Venice and Barcelona too crowded? Try these instead

Europe's top cities are starting to limit tourists. Tom Chesshyre picks five quieter alternatives

Venice is bursting at the seams with visitors: each year more than three million tourists flock to the small city. When the big cruise ships pull into La Serenissima it's certainly not so serene on St Mark's Square. Last year locals held an anti-tourism protest, with 2,000 people taking to the streets demanding action, and this week the city's mayor announced a series of measures to reduce the strain, including restricting access on the busy Strada Nuova, leading to Rialto Bridge and St Mark's. Similar protests have been held in Barcelona, where the Arran group last year slashed tyres of rental bikes and a tour bus. It's no wonder when you consider that the Catalan city attracted 32 million tourists in 2017, far outnumbering its 1.6 million residents. Tourists are also crowding into Prague, many on rowdy stag parties organised by companies such as Pissup.com, prompting Mark Baker, author of Lonely Planet's guide to Prague and the Czech Republic, to say

that tourism in the city has reached "critical mass". Amsterdam is yet another victim of its own success. About 14 million people visit the city each year — so many that local tourist chiefs have begun a campaign to encourage people not to go to main sights such as the Museum Quarter at the same time. Webcams showing queues at the Van Gogh Museum have been introduced, and visitors are being advised to take canal boat trips in the morning (most tourists like to go in the afternoon). Dubrovnik in Croatia has dreamt up another plan. Last summer the mayor, after receiving a UNESCO warning that it could lose its world heritage status, announced a scheme that could cap tourist numbers at 4,000 a day from next year. It's no coincidence that "overtourism" was added to the *Collins English Dictionary* this year, referring to the dreadful overcrowding at honeypot destinations. So what's the answer? Perhaps it's time to avoid the hoards taking selfies and try somewhere different. Here are our suggestions.

**Swap Venice for Trieste's great canal**  
Venice obviously has the edge when it comes to canals, but Trieste has its own picturesque Canal Grande, plus a rich history with more than enough interest



All quiet on the Canal Grande in Trieste



Overcrowded Venice

for a few days away. The charming city has drawn all sorts of writers over the years, from James Joyce to Sigmund Freud and Jan Morris. The latter loved the city's "prickly grace" despite believing that it "offers no unforgettable landmark, no universally familiar melody, no unmistakable cuisine". We disagree. Trieste, a port city 20 minutes from Venice, tucked away on a slither of northwest Italy surrounded by Slovenia, has plenty to see and do — and the food is great (especially at the fine-dining Chimera di Bacco, chimeradibacco.com). After taking in the statue of Joyce and wandering along the banks of the Canal Grande, head to Piazza Unita d'Italia, a huge square believed to have been modelled on St Mark's — some consider it more impressive.

Also check out the fine modern art at Museo Revoltella, the 19th-century palazzo of Pasquale Revoltella, as well as the marvellous San Giusto Cathedral, the 19th-century Miramare Castle and the city's Roman remains. The Museum of History and Art is a treasure trove of Egyptian and Roman artefacts. **Where to stay** B&B doubles are from €140 (£122) at the ornate, Art Nouveau-style Palace Suite hotel, near Piazza Unita d'Italia, and has slick rooms (palacesuite.com) **How to get there** Ryanair has return flights between Stanstead and Trieste from £65 (ryanair.com)

**Swap Prague for Bratislava's old city**  
When Czechoslovakia broke up in January 1993, tourism in Prague, in the Czech Republic, really took off, with visitors flocking to see its baroque architecture. Meanwhile Bratislava, in

Slovakia, has been overlooked. Yet this is a vibrant city with lively nightlife, as well as a pretty old town with ancient squares. Check out the marvellous medieval Old Town Hall and the imposing Bratislava Castle, originally from the 9th century, but rebuilt in a Renaissance style in the 1960s after a fire. A great way to get your bearings is to go to the New Bridge, across the River Danube — it has a modernist restaurant and viewing platform shaped like a UFO (referred to locally as "ew-fo"). Do not miss out on the intriguing Museum of Clocks. Another highlight is a visit to one of the city's many microbreweries, which invariably come with a pub attached. Time your visit to coincide with a performance at the Slovak National Theatre, where ballet performances are held, or catch a concert by the Slovak Philharmonic orchestra (for details see visitbratislava.com). **Where to stay** B&B doubles cost from €128 at Marrol's Boutique Hotel, which is near the theatre and St Martin's Cathedral, and has comfortable, elegantly decorated rooms (www.hotelmarrrols.sk) **How to get there** Ryanair has return flights between Stanstead and Bratislava from £46 (ryanair.com)

**Swap Dubrovnik for Kotor's culture**  
Lord Byron called Dubrovnik the "pearl of the Adriatic", and since the end of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia in 2001, the city has been flooded by tourists. Now it's time to give gorgeous Kotor in Montenegro a try instead. The fortified city — with walls from the 12th century — has UNESCO world heritage status. And there can still be a sleepy feel in its little lanes, even at the height of summer (when cruise ships are not calling by),

with ancient churches and hidden squares to explore. The highlight is the Cathedral of St Tryphon, which also dates from the 12th century, although the frontage was destroyed in a 1667 earthquake, when the baroque bell towers were added. There's also the excellent Montenegro Maritime Museum, with its ancient logbooks and telescopes, plus the rather peculiar Museum of Cats with its collection of feline-themed memorabilia. Most visitors take a boat trip across the Bay of Kotor to see the lovely island with the church of Our Lady of the Rocks, with its baroque art and small museum. There are also beaches to explore close to the ancient city. **Where to stay** B&B doubles cost from €87 at the super-cool, nine-room Hotel Hippocampus (i-escape.com) **How to get there** Montenegro Airlines has return flights between Gatwick and Tivat, close to Kotor, from about £350 this summer (skyscanner.net)

**Swap Barcelona for Zaragoza's architecture**  
Those seeking to avoid the awful overcrowding on Las Ramblas, the pedestrianised main street in Barcelona, should consider a trip to Zaragoza, in the Aragon region. Swap Gaudí's Sagrada Família for the fantastic Cathedral-Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar, completed in 1754. Tradition has it that St James was preaching by the River Ebro here when he was visited



Zaragoza

by Mary, who gave him a column of jasmine and told him to build a church. It's long been a place of pilgrimage. There's also the marvellous Aljaferia Palace, an ancient Moorish castle with beautiful gardens, as well as the huge main square, with smaller squares on the little streets running off it. On some of these, outdoor dancing is organised in the evenings. Zaragoza is a place to let your hair down, with lots of nightclubs that keep going into the early hours. It's also a great city for walkers and cyclists, with good trails along the Ebro. And be sure to visit the Museo Pablo Gargallo, dedicated to the works of the great Aragonese sculptor (1881-1934). **Where to stay** B&B doubles cost from €82 at Hotel NH Collection

Gran Hotel de Zaragoza (nh-hotels.com) **How to get there** Ryanair has return flights between Stanstead and Zaragoza from £35 (ryanair.com)

**Swap Amsterdam for the Hague's waterways**  
The Hague, home of the Dutch parliament, has its very own canals and boat rides, which make a lovely way to while away a couple of hours on a sunny day. It's also home to one of the Netherlands' best galleries, the superb Mauritshuis, a palace-turned-art museum with more than 800 works from the 17th and 18th centuries. Highlights include Vermeer's *Girl with the Pearl Earring* and Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*. Visit the poignant Peace Palace, which opened in 1913, and take a look at *Panorama Mesdag*, Europe's biggest circular painting, created in the mid-19th century by Hendrik Willem Mesdag. For families, there's also Madurodam, an excellent attraction with miniature replicas of the country's main sights. Petrolheads will enjoy the Louwman Museum, with its historic cars and motorbikes. **Where to stay** B&B doubles cost from €279 at the elegant, traditional and stylish Hotel Des Indes (hoteldesindestehague.com) **How to get there** Eurostar has returns between St Pancras and The Hague via Rotterdam from £80; the journey takes a little over three hours at its fastest (eurostar.com)



The Hague



For that extra special ingredient.



# Fly free in Business Class\*

on our

## Vietnam & Cambodia Luxury River Cruises.

**So much is included:**

- Excursions & local experiences
- The finest accommodation
- All tipping and port charges
- Business Class return flights\*
- On board dining & drinks†
- Private home-to-airport transfers\*

**Vietnam & Cambodia Highlights**

15 days from £4,790\* per person

Departures from 30 Aug. to 6 Dec. 2018

Explore ancient tean sites and undiscovered gems.



All aboard our luxurious modern river ship.



See, hear and feel what life is like in Vietnam and Cambodia, on an APT Luxury River Cruise. Witness daily life in remote villages, best accessed by river. Learn from our hand selected local guides as they passionately recount their own personal insights of each region. And enjoy a level of personal service refined over 90 years of family ownership.

Delight in every detail. That's **The APT Difference.**

For a free brochure, more details, and to book:

**0800 046 7724**

www.aptouring.co.uk/mekong

Or see your travel agent.

UNFORGETTABLE RIVER CRUISES

\*Prices are per person, twin share and include saving where applicable. Valid on new bookings made from 1 March 2018 or until sold out. Offer includes free return Business Class flights and taxes from London Heathrow on Vietnam Airlines. Valid on 30 Aug. to 6 Dec. 2018 departures in Cat. A and above only. Limited number of offers available, once sold out, alternative offer may apply. All internal flights will be in Economy Class. Flights must be booked by APT. All offers are subject to availability of airline and booking class at the time of booking. Once class is sold out, surcharges apply. Air prices and taxes are subject to change and can only be confirmed once your deposit has been received. Price based on travel in A cabin on 30 Aug. 2018. †Complimentary home-to-airport transfers are available within a 75 driven mile radius of selected UK departure airports and must be requested at the time of booking. No cash alternative available. ‡Complimentary beverages exclude French Champagne, premium spirits and selected wines. A non-refundable deposit of £400 per person is required within seven days of booking confirmation. See website for details. UK1168