Quick-fix weekends
Paris, Rome, Barcelona & more... how to soak them up in just three days

Value For Money Awards
From flights to sights — 2018’s biggest bargains revealed

Maldives
Why let the honeymooners hog paradise? We know the 24 best resorts for everyone

Tanzania
Get thrillingly close with a Serengeti safari on foot

California
The hippest road trip in the west — all worked out

Japan
Take the path less travelled to its ancient heartland

Plus
Venice, Lisbon, Auckland — and how to save 48% on your hotel room (see p.34)
FLIGHTS
The only airline to fly direct to the Maldives from the UK is BA (ba.com) and this service is seasonal, from October to April. The flight from Gatwick takes 10 hours and costs from £672 return, although this can rise to more than £1,000 in December. Indirect flights can work out cheaper during the high season, and there are some interesting routes if you fancy a twin-centre trip.

INDEPENDENT OR PACKAGE?
As a rule, tour operators’ buying power in these paradise islands means you’ll nearly always get a better deal if you book a package. It is very hard to shop around and undercut the tour operator because flight options are limited and there tends to be only one resort per island, usually of the luxury variety. For instance, Kuoni (01306 747008, kuoni.co.uk) has seven nights in a beach villa with a hot tub at Kuramathi in April from £1,149 pp, with Sri Lankan flights from Heathrow. Booking independently, the same villa at the same resort at the same time of year along with the cheapest available flights (from Heathrow with Turkish Airlines) would cost £2,589 pp.

The exception to the rule is if you stay in a locally run hotel. There aren’t many, but they do exist on the few inhabited islands in the Maldives. Crystal Sands (crystalsands.mv; doubles from £116, half board), for instance, has simple sandy-coloured rooms and is one of a handful of small hotels on the island of Maafushi, which has a population of around 3,000. A bonus of staying on an inhabited isle is public transport: the ferry from the airport takes 15 minutes to get to Maafushi and costs pennies. But bear in mind that going local also means going alcohol-free and only wearing swimwear on the beach in the designated ‘bikiní’ area — it’s illegal to expose your skin in public on most of the island.

BUY BEFORE YOU FLY
For the best deal, try to pay for as much of your holiday as possible in advance. There’s no point in booking the B&B rate when you’ll have no choice but to pay for your other meals once you’re on the island — these resorts have a captive audience, so food and drink is notoriously expensive. For example, Turquoise (01494 678400, turquoiseholidays.co.uk) has a week at the Senses Lammu, from £3,299 pp, B&B, including flights. To upgrade to full board in advance costs an extra £71 per day — a bargain when you consider that a burger costs about £25 and the set menu in the fanciest restaurant costs £75 when you’re paying piece meal. Generally, tour operators would sooner offer an extra than a discount, so tell yours that you’re considering a similarly priced package offered by another travel company, but that they could persuade you to seal the deal by bumping up your meal plan or throwing in a spa treatment or some watersports.

CONSIDER THE TRANSFER
If it’s part of the dream to touchdown on that turquoise water in a tiny aeroplane, then by all means look for a resort that offers seaplane transfers. But beware: they cost more than the customary speedboat arrival — £70–£300 extra per person. Any resort that offers ‘free’ transfers is burying the cost elsewhere. Also, seaplanes are usually only offered by resorts that are a good distance from the airport, as your transfer is likely to be longer. Lastly, note that these aircraft have strict weight restrictions, so your suitcases might follow in a boat — pack swimsuits in your hand luggage to avoid hours of sitting by the pool in your woolen.

WHEN TO GO
As there is little to do in paradise when it rains, resist the bargain rates on offer over monsoon season (June and July). January to March is the safest bet weather-wise, with lots of sun, low humidity and good underwater visibility — naturally, it’s also the most expensive time of year. April and May usually have good weather, but there’s still a risk of storms. October and November tend to present the best compromise between price and chance of rain, and it’s also the best time to see whale sharks and manta rays. Time your trip carefully and you can make big savings. For instance, a week at lAld-Back Baros with Scott Dunn (020 3733 4841, scottdunn.com) costs from £2,800 pp in high season (December to April), but only £1,700 pp in low season (May to November) — both prices include flights and transfers.

SEAPLANE SAVVY
Be aware that seaplane timetables are irregular. Their route depends on which hotels need them when, and you won’t know your flight time (unless you rent privately) until the last minute. You might take the seaplane to Malé at 9am, even if you don’t fly home until 10pm.

FURTHER INFORMATION
See visitmaldives.com.
Lily Beach Resort & Spa

Who'll love it: Design mavens who lust after Prada but can only afford Zara.

Why? It's all-inclusive — always a bonus in a destination where a small bottle of water can cost five quid — with a cosmopolitan edginess (see its novel hammocks on floating platforms) that makes it perfect for young urban escapees. (Decor in the 131 villas goes for airbrushed-international over indigenous, too.) There's even a complimentary minibar — always a thrill. Dining is, essentially, impressive, with seven excellent restaurants and bars to grace your way through, among them a teppanyaki counter. Most meals are taken in the vast airy Lily Maa buffet restaurant, but as it has live cooking stations, 80 wine labels and a chocolate fountain, who's complaining?

What else? There are a handful of lovely family villas, a small play area, a tiny dedicated family pool and free kids' club. Surprisingly, given Lily Beach's youthful clientele and DJ sessions, the bars are tumblerweeded-quiet by 10pm, so there's no danger of being kept awake by revellers. The Zen ethos starts to feel a tad sterile in the spa, but the therapists are faultless.

Who won't love it: Beach lovers. There's only a strip of sand fringing the island and it's lined with loungers; a let-down if you're after that castaway dream.

Travel tip: The lagoon villas look out over stone sea defences — a view that takes the edge off paradise somehow.

££ Tropical Sky (01342 331799, tropicalsky.co.uk) has a week from £2,799pp, all-inclusive; lilybeachmaldives.com.

Kuramathi

Who'll love it: Parents who need plenty to keep pre-teens occupied so they get to read a book for the first time in years.

Why? With 360 rooms and 900-plus staff, this is no dinky desert-island idyll — but that works in families' favour. They get plenty of space, with exotic gardens, as well as a kilometre of white sandbank where offspring can run riot. Of course, there's a first-rate kids' club and family pool, and over-8s can try windsurfing or sailing. Families should target the 33 wooden beach villas, with hot tubs, open-air bathrooms and four-posters for mum and dad, or the 35 new minimalist two-bedroom beach duplexes with sea views from your bed.

What else? With so many guests, some regimentation is inevitable, with staff sticklers for timing when it comes to activities. All guests are on full board and assigned a table at one of three buffet restaurants. To dine at the other two or the nine à la carte restaurants, book ahead. But the 'organised-fun' feel is a small price to pay when you've got some of the region's best snorkelling right off the beach and one-hour spa treatments for £75 — cheap for the Maldives.

Who won't love it: Fly- and flop-types in search of solitude — this place has a bustling summer-camp ambience.

Travel tip: Boat transfers (90 mins) are included, but consider seriously the £200pp seaplane upgrade: a bucket-list 20-minute thrill to start your holiday.

E £ Kurumi (01306 747008, kurumi.co.uk) has a week from £6,299, full board, for a family of four (two under-12s); kuramathi.com.

Huvafen Fushi

Who'll love it: 'Healthy-mooners' with cash to splash on its underwater spa.

Why? Its two decadent sub-aquatic couples' treatment rooms are loaded with atmosphere making them a magnet for newlyweds. The other four overwater rooms aren't too shabby, either — and the gym is one of the best-equipped in the region. Coupled with 44 photogenic minimalist thatched beach bungalows and overwater villas fitted with glass floors, the resort is intimate and sexy, heaven for the truly loved-up, who may well — to hell with it — book a day aboard Sensuelle, the resort's dhoniboat, which comes with its own chef and wine cellar.

What else? The resort declared itself child-free in January; a refining touch to relish as you float in the wonderful Lonu Veyo pool, with water so saline it's the closest you'll get to a feeling of zero gravity, or as you glide after dark around the main pool, illuminated by a Milky Way of sparkling LED lights. Sartorially, most guests are more Balenciaga than barefoot, so bring your glad rags to slip into for the tasting menu at Vinum, its underground wine cellar, or Feeling Koi, its Japanese restaurant.

Who won't love it: Divers; the house reef and sites nearby have suffered considerable coral-bleaching as a result of changing temperatures.

Travel tip: If you're booking a beach pool villa, ask for one as far from the noisy-ish dive centre as possible.

EEE LWC Holidays (020 84217020, lwcholiday.com) has a week from £3,099pp, half board; huvafenfushi.com.