



SWELL TIMES: New flights will take visitors direct to the ocean resorts of Costa Rica



FROZEN NORTH: The ice truck that takes visitors to the Langjökull ice cave in Iceland



WILD TIME: Go elephant-spotting on an air safari over Kenya and Namibia

and will open up the beautiful landscape of the Scottish Borders and Midlothian to tourists. Visit borders railway.co.uk.

SAFARIS

AN EPIC 34-day Air Safari from Kenya to Namibia and back takes place from May 3 to June 5. You will fly over some of the most stunning locations in Africa, including the Rift Valley, Zambezi River, Victoria Falls, Skeleton Coast and the Kalahari desert. Activities include tracking wild chimpanzees, game drives to follow the migration and visits to nomadic tribes. Visit aardvark safaris.co.uk.

SOLAR ECLIPSE

THE Arctic will experience a total eclipse of the sun on March 20 and weather conditions in early spring in the far north make it an ideal location to watch the world plunged into darkness. A new ship, the Magellan, will head to Iceland and the Faroes on its 12-night maiden voyage on March 15 to see the phenomenon as well as offering the chance to view the Northern Lights. Visit cruise andmaritime.com.

ATTRACTIONS

MONT St Michel, one of the most popular tourist sites in France, is set to become an island again in the summer with the destruction of the old causeway linking it to the mainland. Tourists can access it via an elevated footbridge, take a horse-drawn carriage or hop on one of the free shuttle services across a new road bridge.

Be the first to explore deep under Europe's second-largest icecap when the Ice Cave opens at Langjökull in Iceland in the spring. The gigantic cave, the largest man-made ice structure in the world, stretches some 1,000ft through solid glacial ice. It consists of

MADCAP:

Shrek and Donkey



five chambers that penetrate far below the surface of the glacier and include a chapel and Grand Hall culminating in magnificent sapphire-blue ice at its heart. Tours to Iceland are available through Discover the World (discover-the-world.co.uk).

WATERWAYS

SAIL a historic yacht through the Norfolk Broads this summer. The original boats dating from the 1930s are built entirely of mahogany with gaff rig sails. They have no engine or electricity and are lit by oil lamps. Two- to four-berth yachts can be hired through Waterways Holidays (waterwaysholidays.com).

Cruise along the spectacular Columbia and Snake River in South Washington and Northern Oregon in an authentic paddlewheeler. The American Express oozes old-world charm and houses a vast collection of historical artefacts from Alaska and the Gold Rush era.

It visits Astoria, the oldest settlement in the Rockies, The Dalles, which was once a major Native American trading centre, and the wineries in Richland and Pasco. Visit bon-voyage.co.uk.

ISLANDS

THE last chance to sail to the remote South Atlantic island of St Helena before its airport opens in 2016 is on offer through Halcyon Collections (halcyon-collections.com).

Join RMS St Helena on October 2 for a 23-night Last Great Adventure, which will include guided walking tours, excursions in 4x4 vehicles and dolphin-watching trips.

Explore the lesser known islands of Cape Verde on a 14-night walking holiday with Cape Verde Choice (capeverdechoice.com).

The trip visits Santiago, Fogo, Sao Vicente and Santo Antao, trekking through terraced hillsides and mountain villages and along dramatic coastal footpaths.

The high flyers and lame ducks of the past year

SO HOW has 2014 been for travellers? What have been the major developments, and highs and lows? Here is the Crafty Traveller's review of the good, the bad and the ugly over the past 12 months...

FLYING

IF YOU were among the many thousands of passengers whose flights were disrupted earlier this month due to IT failure with the UK's air traffic control system, you may not agree – but overall it's been a pretty good year for flying.

Heathrow opened its impressive new Terminal 2 without a glitch. Learning from the fiasco of the opening of Terminal 5, the airport moved airlines in to T2 gradually, rather than all in one go.

More Boeing 787 Dreamliners – roomier planes with fresher air – have begun flying long-haul routes. Thomson (thomson.co.uk) is flying the Dreamliner on the majority of its long-haul routes this winter, and on all of them from next summer, while in October Virgin began flying its first Dreamliner from London to Boston.

Ryanair (ryanair.com) has continued on a gradual path to self-improvement, introducing this year allocated seating for all, products for families and business travellers, a more user-friendly website and swifter complaints handling.

Supreme Court rulings in October have improved our chances of getting compensation for delayed or cancelled flights under EU rules – the CAA (caa.co.uk) has details.

Lastly, this year the Government announced reductions in Air Passenger Duty for many flyers that kick in next year. From April, on some long-haul flights the tax will fall – to Australia, by £26 a head flying economy. From May, for under-12s flying economy, APD is being abolished – saving a family with two primary-school-age children jetting to Florida £142.

CAR HIRE

MANY car rental companies are still ripping off customers. They advertise enticingly low rental rates, but then force bookers to cough up for a tank of petrol (often at a price higher than at the pump) and give nothing back for unused fuel – or, a new ruse, refund for leftover fuel but retain a non-refundable service charge. Hats off to Enjoy Car Hire (enjoycarhire.com), which this year became the sole broker to deal only with car hire companies with fair fuel policies.

The other on-going rip-off is the extortionate excess waiver insurance sold by rental companies. You can buy the insurance separately at a

fraction of the price – see moneymaxim.co.uk for options.

ACCOMMODATION

RENTALS of private apartments and spare rooms are undergoing a phenomenal boom, particularly in cities where such stays are often a cheaper and more interesting alternative to hotels. Airbnb (airbnb.co.uk), a slick online operation that links hosts and guests and provides a payment system, is the key player driving the growth. It lists more than a million properties – double the number of a year ago – and facilitated stays for over 16 million guests during 2014.

STAYING CONNECTED

INCREASING numbers of hotels offer some sort of free wi-fi these days, but too many are charging extra for premium, high-speed and in-room connectivity. With almost all cruises lines, you pay a fortune to get on the internet. So credit to Saga (travel.saga.co.uk) for introducing free wi-fi in public areas on its ships this year.

Roaming – using your mobile when abroad – is another rip-off.

So operator Three (three.co.uk) deserves praise. Its customers can use devices at no additional cost to their UK plans in 16 countries, with France, Switzerland, Norway, Finland and Israel added this year.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

FLYING poses one of the biggest challenges to those with disabilities, and the help and advice given are inconsistent and often poor. Great news, then, that earlier this month the Civil Aviation Authority got new legal powers to ensure airports and airlines comply with European rules on what special assistance should be forthcoming.

SINGLE TRAVELLERS

I'VE also detected progress this year in the attitude of travel companies towards solo holidaymakers. More no-single-supplement deals are being made available, and some cruise operators such as Norwegian Cruise Line (ncl.co.uk) are offering more cabins designed for singles. Website www.101holidays.co.uk/singles is an excellent brand-new resource for ideas.

PASSPORTS

IN THE early summer, at least 30,000 passport applications were not processed within the required time and the Passport Office had to draft in hundreds more staff. This caused enormous stress for those affected, and many people ended up paying extra to have their applications fast-tracked. Heads have since rolled, so hopefully things will run more smoothly next summer...

Fred Mawer



WINNER: Air Passenger Duty is being axed for the under-12s