

TRAVEL

YOUR OWN PRIVATE ISLAND

How you and your friends can have a dream holiday for a lot less than you think | p12



GOLDEN SAMOVARS AND EXPLODING LOOS

Gary Shteyngart on the weirdest flights he's ever taken | p4

BEER, BOARD AND BEDROOMS

Cool London pubs where you can stay the night | p14

WIN A FIVE-STAR STAY IN LYONS

Enter our Where Was I? competition | p23

When it comes to wringing the most out of your travel budget, it's a numbers game. Team up with two or three couples and you can exchange that modest self-catering cottage for a striking coastal villa – for roughly the same price per head. Add a few more pals and you could be zipping around the Med in a yacht, or stumbling out of a private jet like Cara Delevingne in her pepperoni onesie. Four or five families together? How about your own chateau or Tuscan palace? Keep those numbers ticking over and it all starts to get a bit Bond villain: your own private island, your own train.

Grouping up to celebrate big birthdays and anniversaries is nothing new, but increasingly travellers aren't waiting for an excuse. The Big Domain, which lets out large properties across the world, has seen a 30% spike in business this year. Carol Cork, of the private-jet booking service PrivateFly, thinks people are getting more savvy when it comes to holiday economies of scale: "Flying by private jet is one of the things on most people's lists, but if there's a group of you, it can actually be done for a few hundred pounds."

Here are 12 ways you can live the high life for less. It might be time to lower your threshold for who you consider a friend, or to make some new ones. Once you've posted "Who fancies coming to my island on my plane?" on Facebook, they'll come running.



Yours for a song – just bring

It's not who you know, but how many. Group up, and you can enjoy travel experiences normally well beyond the a

PRIVATE JET

FRIENDS NEEDED **6**
PRICE PER PERSON FROM **£170**

The advantages of hiring a jet go well beyond the bragging: no lengthy delays, no overzealous security, no midair scraps over reclining seats. What's less well known is that, with sufficient friends and flexibility, you can do it for the same price as flying with the riff-raff. "Empty leg" flights, only available at short notice, offer savings of up to 75%. PrivateFly recently had a one-way flight from London to Cannes – a private-jet-only airport – that came out at about £1,200 for seven people, or £170pp. If you're a bit less spontaneous, bespoke flights are also available; prices start at about £3,100 for an eight-seater from London to Jersey (£388pp). privatefly.com

SINATRA'S PLACE

FRIENDS NEEDED **7**
PRICE PER PERSON **£147 A NIGHT**

He was known for creating music and mayhem, and there are reminders of



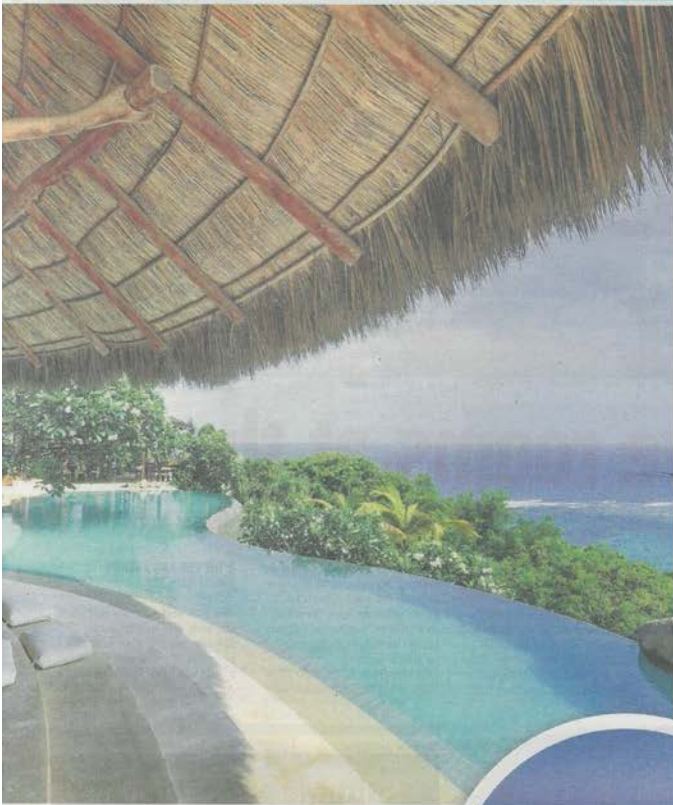
both at Frank Sinatra's former home in Palm Springs, California. The four-bedroom desert retreat, built in 1947, still has his recording studio and piano-shaped pool. Keep your eye out for a chip on the sink, reputedly caused by a champagne bottle the singer hurled during a row with his second wife, Ava Gardner. All in all, a high hedonistic bar for you and seven friends to aim at.

From **£1,175 a night**, minimum three-night stay; beaumontvillas.com

GWYNETH'S CARIBBEAN PAD

FRIENDS NEEDED **9**
PRICE PER PERSON **£89 A NIGHT**

Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin announced their "conscious uncoupling" while staying here, but don't blame the venue – there's little about Indigo, a four-bedroom villa in the Bahamas, that's likely to lead to a break-up. It sits on a pink-sand beach on the Isle of Windermere, which is attached via a



the gang

average budget. Duncan Craig reports



cabins offers views of the world's longest river, and the boat has a pool, sun decks, a cigar lounge and a chef. Also on board are an Egyptologist, to help make sense of the procession of temples and tombs, and an "on-call doctor", presumably versed in treating overindulgence.
From £17,700 a week, including flights; abercrombiekent.co.uk

CORNISH FILM STAR

FRIENDS NEEDED 15
PRICE PER PERSON £17 A NIGHT

Setting a film about time travel in Porthpean House (aka the Big Beautiful Beach House) seems apt – the grade II listed stately near St Austell, which features in Richard Curtis's *About Time*, seems rooted in a bygone era. Built in the 1740s, the eight-bedroom house bears the imprint of five generations of its owners, the Petherick family, and has a drawing room with a grand piano. French windows lead to tranquil gardens, from which a private path snakes down to the beach. Look out for the "time travelling" wardrobe that featured in the film.
From £1,950 a week; thebigdomain.com

MACHIAVELLI'S MANSION

FRIENDS NEEDED 19
PRICE PER PERSON £185 A NIGHT

Don't panic, no underhand behaviour is needed to secure the improbably grand Villa Machiavelli, in Chianti – you simply need 19 friends and, in Tuscan terms, a pretty standard holiday budget.

Set on a vine-strafed hillside, the 15th-century home of the writer and philosopher has 600 acres of gardens and olive groves, and staff to cater to every whim. It also produces its own vintages from the on-site vineyard; free tastings can be arranged. Languish in the loggia, flit between indoor and outdoor pools, and enjoy views across fields of cypress trees to the skyline of Florence.
From £25,830 a week; akvillas.com

MUSTIQUE ESTATE

FRIENDS NEEDED 31
PRICE PER PERSON £81 A NIGHT

Mick Jagger and David Bowie both have mansions on the Grenadine island of Mustique, so why shouldn't you? Yemanja is a sprawling, multi-levelled estate 300ft above gently shelving beaches. A villa and cottages are dotted

around in seven acres of private grounds, along with three pools, a tennis court, a gym and an entertainment room – it's family-friendly in the extreme. A household staff of 10 will take the strain while Mules (the Kawasaki version) ferry guests back and forth to the beach. It's so grand, it almost makes Mick's place, Stargroves, look modest.
From £18,200 a week; mustique-island.com

LOIRE CHATEAU

FRIENDS NEEDED 34
PRICE PER PERSON £79 A NIGHT

Brad and Angelina tied the knot last month at their £36m Provençal estate, and you could be hanging around in a similarly head-turning chateau simply by pulling together the numerical equivalent of a couple of rugby teams (with subs). Château de Challain, a short drive from Angers, in the Loire Valley, is a 19th-century neogothic pile in landscaped grounds, with a pleasing glut of turrets and towers. Damask wallpaper, chandeliers, spiralling staircases and four-posters set the romantic tone, as do suites with names such as Empress and, er, Romance.
From £2,770 a night, two-night minimum stay; homeaway.co.uk

PRIVATE ISLAND

FRIENDS NEEDED 49
PRICE PER PERSON £365 A NIGHT

A white-beach-framed speck of green in the endless expanse of the Indian Ocean, Denis Island is about as exclusive as exclusive access gets. The 25 beachfront cottages are set amid jungle echoing with exotic bird calls, while the spa-temperature ocean teems with turtles, clownfish, rays and dolphins. Canoe around the lagoon, join a nature tour or meet the revered residents of the giant-tortoise colony. An unplugged philosophy holds sway, so don't expect to be furtively checking emails – get the group logistics sorted firmly in advance.
From £18,250 a night, full board; denisland.com

YOUR OWN TRAIN

'FRIENDS' NEEDED 319
PRICE PER PERSON £138

Yes, it's possible: replace your usual miserable fellow commuters with your favourite 640 friends, riding along cheerfully in their own Intercity train. All right, that might be pushing it a little, but even a half-full train can end up costing less per person than some hastily purchased singles – which could bring it within reach of a chunky wedding party. "It certainly makes for a special atmosphere," says Simon Pielow, managing director and co-founder of Train Chartering. "Passengers are asked to return to their seats as we pull in, and often they can't recall where that is."
From £44,000 for a return trip from London to Edinburgh; trainchartering.com



private bridge to the larger island of Eleuthera, and has almost nothing in common with its Cumbrian namesake. Famed for its seclusion, it offers excellent bone-fishing and reef diving. Nearby Windermere Beach is among the world's best, and the property itself is a sunner, with teak decks, hammock-strung verandas and manicured lawns.
From £6,250 a week; homeaway.co.uk

IBIZA YACHT

FRIENDS NEEDED 10
PRICE PER PERSON £180 A DAY

The Balearics, as you may have noticed through the windscreen of your three-door hire car, are awash with what non-nautical types would call speedboats. Do your sums and you can join those tanned beautiful people on deck. For about £180 each, you and 10 friends could be slicing through the Med on a Princess V53 motor yacht, anchoring in hidden coves and being met by the tenders of restaurants eager to offer diners of your manifest means their best service.
From £1,980 a day, including a skipper, but not fuel; ibiza-yacht-rental.com

£50,000 CHALET

FRIENDS NEEDED 11
PRICE PER PERSON £296 A NIGHT

How do you fancy hanging out in a ski chalet that can cost as much as £54,000 a week? If you group up with 11 chums, and steer clear of peak weeks, the delights of one of France's finest pads could be yours for a considerably less intimidating outlay. Mont Tremblant, in Méribel, has a pool, a hot tub, a sun terrace and a cinema room. There's also a chef, a driver and – for the luckless individual who ends up with their foot in plaster after day one – Apple TV.
From £24,900 a week, fully catered, in selected weeks in February and March, and throughout April; luxurychaletcollection.com

NILE CRUISE

FRIENDS NEEDED 11
PRICE PER PERSON £211 A NIGHT

Only available as a private charter, the Sanctuary Zeln Nile Chateau is a souped-up dahabiyah (a traditional sailing boat) that evokes the golden age of Nile cruising. Each of the six air-conditioned

Wanna be in my gang? Pool your funds and you could make like Gwynnie or Mick with your own glamorous island idyll. Main picture, Yemanja on Mustique, will take 32 of you for just £81pp a night. Above left, Château de Challain and Denis Island. Above, a Princess V53 motor yacht. Left, Villa Machiavelli, Chianti