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WHEN IT COMES to real estate, location is everything, and waterfront property always commands a premium. Whether on a hot, tropical sandy beach or perched on cliffs atop rugged rocks and crashing waves, our love for the shore is primal. Seventy percent of the earth's surface is covered with oceans, and those oceans are dotted with islands—a lot of islands. Such islands as Hawaii, Bali and Tahiti are time-honored destinations. Some are lesser-known islands with loyal fans. Others are just being discovered. With thousands of possibilities, the question is which are the best?

We've answered that by polling a panel of experts, ranking Best Islands in numerous categories, from luxury lodging to cuisine, fishing to golf, adventure travel to quality family time. For more than a decade, our uniquely critical travel surveys have taken a much different tack than standard travel magazine reader polls or online votes, which are often manipulated by the hotels and destinations being rated, or by pressure from advertisers. Most polls rely on anonymous participants who may not even have been to the places they vote for. In sharp contrast, we assembled a dream team of bona fide experts in the field, featuring some of the world's best luxury travel agents and travel journalists.

The results were both expected and shocking. Predictably, Hawaii had many fans in almost every category. At the same time Canada, with nearly its entire land mass farther north than Montana, had a tremendous showing, on both its coasts. Without any remotely tropical attributes, it turns out its islands still have plenty to offer.

Panelists argued the case for islands big and small, near and far, in every corner of the globe. Spots as varied as New York's Manhattan, Michigan's Mackinaw, and Maine's Monhegan got nods. One passionate skier heralded the famously deep powder of Japan's Hokkaido as a winter escape. Islands that most people have never heard of garnered votes: Palawan, Folegandros, Fatu Hiva, Moyo, Sifnos, Tilghman and Tagomago.

For premier travel agents, part of the job description is staying abreast of the latest and greatest. They nominated a handful of new top-tier luxury destinations unfamiliar to many consumers. Such islands as Brando and Laucala nearly swept the agents' voting. But the classics also shone, with voters reminding us why places like Bali and whitewashed Greek Isles are so magical. Of course, whatever the poll theme is, travelers love all things Italian, and there was a strong showing for everything from Sicily to Sardinia to tiny islands in Venice's lagoon.

THE WORLD'S

Land surrounded by sea has long been one of travel's greatest allures. Our experts pick the best by category

BY LARRY OLMSTED



BEST island DESTINATIONS

An aerial photograph of a tropical island resort. In the foreground, there's a sandy beach with palm trees and a swimming pool. A line of overwater bungalows with thatched roofs extends into the turquoise water. In the background, a large, rugged mountain rises from the island under a clear blue sky.

Four Seasons Bora Bora is a double threat. Not only was it voted best large luxury resort, the French Polynesian island that shares its name was selected best over-all island.



The Lembah Spa (left) at the Viceroy Ubud resort is but one of the many reasons Bali was named best island for luxury lodging worldwide. Guests paddle an outrigger canoe at Four Seasons Hualalai (right) on Hawaii's Big Island, which was picked as the best large luxury island resort in North America.

OVERALL BEST ISLAND ♦ NORTH AMERICA HAWAII (BIG ISLAND & MAUI)

Our panelists agreed on the 50th state but were split between Hawaii—aka The Big Island—and Maui. Writer Mike Hiller represents the Hawaii camp: “Oceans, mountains, verdant green valleys and bluebird skies. Every season and nearly every climate zone in the world in one place.” World-class agent Chad Clark takes Maui’s side: “With loads to see and do Maui is always at the top of the list. Great sport fishing, surfing, whale watching, hiking, and golf, all in a beautiful tropical climate.” Suggested stay: Four Seasons Hualalai, Big Island; Ritz-Carlton Kapalua, Maui.

OVERALL BEST ISLAND ♦ WORLD BORA BORA, FRENCH POLYNESIA

Bora Bora defines the genre of exotic tropical island with its litany of luxury hotels, all featuring stilted bungalows over crystal clear water. Renowned honeymoon planner Carrie Wallace of MoonRings describes it as “the epitome of what one imagines when thinking of ‘tropical islands,’ with dramatic scenery, clear blue lagoons, overwater bungalows, pretty beaches, lush jungle hillsides.” All of our experts used colorful descriptions like “dreamy crystalline blue water” and “black pearls,” and praised the isolation and privacy. Suggested stay: Four Seasons Bora Bora.

BEST ISLAND FOR CIGAR LOVERS CUBA

Even with the loosening of travel restrictions, it is still tough to freely visit Cuba, but when we pressed panelists, there wasn’t much of a second choice—this island is synonymous with cigars, and also smoking fantasies. “There is no question as to which island is the best for cigars,” says travel agent Mary Ann Ramsey, recalling a visit. “There was something very special about sipping a mojito and watching my husband light up a legal Cohiba at the roof bar of the Hotel Ambos Mundos with Morro Castle in the background. The best cigar my husband enjoyed in Cuba was hand rolled by a tobacco farmer in his curing shed.” A visit affords some of the best cigar shopping as well as the opportunity to tour factories. “How can any island compete with the perceived ‘forbidden fruit’ of an authentic Cuban?” asks journalist Michael Shiels. Freelancer Lynn Seldon sums it up: “Cuba, Duh!” (See June 2015 for hotel insight.)

RUNNER UP DOMINICAN REPUBLIC Excellent cigars, excellent rum, luxury resorts and the best golf courses in the Caribbean combined to make this the top-performing “legal” cigar island among our panelists. It pales in comparison to Cuba for cigar shopping opportunities, but it has many other charms. The new Amanera, the first Aman golf resort, is also the first to produce its own cigars. Suggested stay: Amanera.

BEST ISLAND FOR LUXURY LODGING ♦ NORTH AMERICA ST. BARTS

This small island of St. Barthélemy rivaled the entire state of Hawaii—without one “name brand” hotel chain. How? With lots of luxury boutique properties right on the sand with attentive staff and great food—plus a stunning array of luxury rental villas. “I’m pretty sure there are more Relais & Chateaux per square mile here than anywhere else, not to mention all the lavish villas,” says travel writer Ann Abel. *USAToday* columnist Everett Potter adds, “It doesn’t get any more luxurious than St. Barts.”

BEST ISLAND FOR LUXURY LODGING ♦ WORLD BALI, INDONESIA

There is no close second—even the entire resort-rich Maldives chain couldn’t catch this longtime fantasy island, with its unmatched uber-luxury density. It’s hard to name a top-tier luxury brand that is not here, including stunning Asian standouts Oberoi, Banyan Tree, Anantara, Alila, Pan Pacific and COMO. Many, such as Four Seasons, Aman and Ritz-Carlton, have multiple locations. Wallace of MoonRings enthuses: “Travelers are spoiled for choice...Venerable names and boutique options such as The Samaya and the Viceroy Ubud mean that luxury seekers will find much to love, no matter how many times they may visit.”

BEST LARGE LUXURY ISLAND RESORT ♦ NORTH AMERICA FOUR SEASONS HUALALAI, HAWAII

This Big Island favorite crushed even worthy competition among its Hawaiian neighbors. From its black-lava setting to Nicklaus Signature golf course to authentic cultural offerings, one-of-a-kind touches gave Hualalai honors. “Otherworldly location amid lava fields, fringed by sapphire seas, with seven pools including the King’s Pond filled with 4,000 fish for snorkeling—the essence of the true Hawaii,” says journalist and travel



Classic cars and peaceful promenading are some of the joys of Havana's Malecón (left). Unsurprisingly Cuba was our panel's pick for the best island for cigar lovers. Ian Fleming took in the view (right) while writing his James Bond novels at Jamaica's Goldeneye, which tied for best small luxury resort.

agent Becca Hensley. Boutique travel agent Steve Jermanok says, "You'll appreciate your outdoor shower after all the activities, from private dining on a beach serenaded by a ukulele player to snorkeling with green sea turtles and paddling an outrigger canoe past a pod of wild dolphins." But one expert, Chad Clark, has a warning: "Guests find this property may ruin them for life"—or at least immunize them to the charms of other such resorts.

BEST LARGE LUXURY ISLAND RESORT ♦ WORLD **FOUR SEASONS BORA BORA**

The Four Seasons' preeminence among full-service resorts worldwide was even more decisive here. "The Four Seasons' airy and bright overwater bungalows and land villas provide a marvelous sense of place," says Glenn Litwak of the luxury agency Protravel. "You rarely enjoy such breathtaking views: surrounded by sand-fringed beaches, the turquoise lagoon is enticing, and the spa heavenly in all aspects... staff is at your beck and call." Michael Shiels agrees: "The Four Seasons' view of the lagoon and 2,000-foot volcanic Mount Otemanu is hypnotic. The resort is only accessible by its private luxury boat, which glides through water that looks like ice-blue Gatorade. The resort also has a tiny desert island with a lone palm tree guests can wade to for an insanely romantic, private, sunset dinner."

BEST SMALL LUXURY ISLAND RESORT ♦ NORTH AMERICA **TIE: CLAYOQUOT WILDERNESS RESORT,** **VANCOUVER ISLAND, CANADA ♦** **GOLDENEYE, JAMAICA ♦** **JUMBY BAY, ANTIGUA**

Our only three-way tie showed just how rich the travel world is in boutique luxury properties. With its focus on ecotourism, friendly Vancouver Island vied for overall best island. Clayoquot famously helped usher in the "glamping," or glamor camping trend, with its 27 tents—10 with radiant heated bathroom floors. A luxury all-inclusive structure includes yoga classes, gourmet cuisine, wine, spirits and endless outdoor activities. Abel describes it as "Heaven on Earth... an immersion in nature but with very comfortable tents, excellent food, endless adventure excursions—we had a dolphin jump into our zodiac!"

Goldeneye, the estate where Ian Fleming penned many of his James Bond novels, has been converted into the flagship of record impresario

Chris Blackwell's Island Outpost Jamaican boutique resort chain. Wallace says, "I just love the vibe—great music everywhere, it oozes true Jamaican culture, and one comes away feeling like they have really been to the Caribbean."

With 40 hotel rooms and sumptuous villas, Jumby Bay is among the smallest in the luxury Rosewood brand, occupying its own island off Antigua with private boat, no cars and sugary beaches. It's "just ultra-luxurious," says super agent Anne Scully. "Love the villas and suites...it's where I would want to be transported to on a cold winter day."

BEST PRIVATE ISLAND RESORT ♦ NORTH AMERICA **NECKER ISLAND, BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS**

Sir Richard Branson pioneered this category of celebrity private islands cum hotels, and it has been widely imitated, but our experts still gave the original highest marks. "This 74-acre island features pure white sand juxtaposed with lush tropical flora," writes the staff of luxury experiential travel advisor Black Tomato. "It comes equipped with its own three-person submarine and Michelin-trained chefs—not to mention Sir Richard's very own private home." The resort hosts a single party of up to 34, including the mansion-like Great House, six Balinese homes and two cottages. There's a full array of motorized and nonmotorized watersports, beaches, hiking, tennis and a full spa, plus huge staff and multiple dining options—including a floating sushi bar. Hiller says: "Party like you are Richard Branson."

BEST PRIVATE ISLAND RESORT ♦ WORLD **TIE: LAUCALA, FIJI ♦** **THE BRANDO, FRENCH POLYNESIA**

This was not just a tie but a pair of landslides, overshadowing every other option, as the world's best travel agents fell over each other to cast votes for these two relatively new properties, which have made an incredible industry splash. Many panelists were personally tied and voted for both. The Brando was Marlon Brando's personal retreat, and has just been developed into an ultra eco-conscious boutique resort. Laucala is a bit glitzier, the private island of Red Bull's founder, complete with its own 18-hole golf course by David Kidd of Bandon Dunes fame.

Describing The Brando, Litwak says, "I've never felt so blissfully detached from civilization. All of the secluded villas with private plunge



The long list of luxury amenities at Fiji's Laucala even includes a submarine for reef exploring and championship golf. It tied with The Brando, French Polynesia, for the title of best private island resort worldwide.

pools are on the sandy beach with views of the sparkling turquoise sea... the entire surrounding area is totally unspoiled. Staff seem to know what you need before you ask." Scully adds: "Brando wanted [it] to be a place that reminded the Tahitians of what and who they were centuries ago... his dream is now a reality."

"Pure Paradise," says Chad Clark about Laucala. "This island is Fantasy Island. The most exclusive and luxurious island resort in the world, period. It has five restaurants, a championship golf course, a fleet of boats/yachts, and its own submarine—for 25 villas."

BEST ISLAND RESTAURANT ♦ NORTH AMERICA

TIE: BLUE AT RITZ-CARLTON GRAND CAYMAN ♦ RESTAURANT AT MALLIOUHANA, ANGUILLA

Two Michelin-starred chefs, both focused on seafood, ended up tied: Blue is represented by Eric Ripert (see page 74) of Le Bernardin and the Malliouhana by Jeremy Bearman, of Rouge Tomate. Scully, a food maven, attributes Blue's success to "exquisite local seafood, elevated to the sublime with seasonal flavors and masterful technique by New York's seafood master." Abel says of Bearman's work "I love the reinvention of this restaurant...serves exactly the kind of fresh, clean, simple, healthy-but-not-sanctimonious food I want to eat in a hot, tropical climate."

UNIQUE ISLAND LODGING ♦ NORTH AMERICA

FOGO ISLAND INN, NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA

Huh? Fogo Island? Even most well-heeled travelers have never heard of this rugged and very sustainable locavore resort, located 1,200 miles northeast of Kennebunkport, Maine. But our experts were drawn to it in droves—this was one of the most overwhelmingly popular choices in the entire poll, despite being hard to get to and lacking any tropical features. So what's the appeal? "An artist's paradise that sits on an island off an island, situated along Iceberg Alley, all 29 suites feature floor-to-ceiling views of the North Atlantic," says Scully. "Locally sourced, seasonal ingredients are paired with just-caught seafood in the internationally acclaimed dining room. The island's still-wild world has caribou to track, hills of berries to forage, nature trails to explore and countless birds and sea life to behold." Agent Mary Jean Tully, of Tully Luxury Travel, adds, "Absolutely beautiful and unique surroundings and history."

UNIQUE ISLAND LODGING ♦ WORLD

SOUTH OCEAN LODGE, KANGAROO ISLAND, AUSTRALIA

Our experts know their far-flung spots, and this was another surprisingly popular choice. Becca Hensley explains why: "I am pretty obsessed with Southern Ocean Lodge. This upscale lodge kisses the cliffs, and sort of flows along its side like a scarf in the wind. Melding into the bush, it is all-inclusive, with happy hours in the wild amid a coterie of hopping kangaroos, has a gourmet restaurant, and a wine cellar that is part of your admittance fee—you just walk in and seize whatever bottles you desire, and they are some of the best in the world." There are just 21 luxury suites, and rates include a slate of outdoor and wildlife excursions. When enjoying cocktails on the terrace, don't be surprised when kangaroos join you.

BEST SUMMER ISLAND DESTINATION ♦ NORTH AMERICA

HAWAII (BIG ISLAND & MAUI)

Hawaii's equatorial location means great year-round climate. "The weather is always fine and dreamers can repose on the beaches, hike volcanoes, wander through villages and tour coffee plantations. But it always seems less crowded in summer," says Hensley. Panelists noted its vast array of family friendly activities made it an even better choice for summer vacation. Suggested stay: Mauna Kea, Big Island; Four Seasons Maui.

BEST SUMMER ISLAND DESTINATION ♦ WORLD

TIE: SANTORINI, GREECE ♦ BALI, INDONESIA

Two classic dream destinations prevailed. "In summer, sunset becomes an event here, as the stark beauty of the island is amplified by the last rays falling over the volcanic caldera," says Wallace of Moonrings about Santorini. "Quintessential whitewashed buildings and a shimmering ocean add to its allure." Bali's mix of culture, spirituality, nature, beaches, authenticity and unrivalled choice of top luxury resorts won over voters. Mike Hiller is succinct: "Island of the gods, spirituality and beautiful beaches rule." Suggested stay: Canaves Oia, Santorini; Oberoi, Bali.

BEST WINTER ISLAND DESTINATION ♦ NORTH AMERICA

ST. BARTS

This small Caribbean island won big with experts. It's known for French flair, great food, upscale lodging and a sense of fashion and style missing in many other islands. Veteran luxury agent Litwak says, "Loaded with luxury hotels,



The Fogo Island Inn, Newfoundland, Canada, is an ultra-modern eco-resort with gourmet, locally sourced cuisine in a wilderness setting.



Summer sunsets are magnificent on the island of Santorini, which tied with Bali for the title of best summer island destination.

haute cuisine dining, and boutiques to rival those of Saint Tropez, this island has it all.” Fellow agent Clark calls it “The island of the chic and famous.” Suggested stay: Hotel Saint-Barth, Isle de France.

BEST WINTER ISLAND DESTINATION ♦ WORLD **NEW ZEALAND**

This winner in a landslide was helped by winter being summer there. Scully notes: “One of my most favorite trips ever...abundant wildlife, soft black beaches and of course their famous wineries. It’s an adventurer’s dream-come-true destination. There were times I felt I was on a *Jurassic Park* movie set.” Journalist Lynn Seldon is more succinct: “This island nation has everything.” Suggested stay: Lodge at Kauri Cliffs.

BEST GOLF ISLAND ♦ NORTH AMERICA **TIE: BIG ISLAND, HAWAII ♦** **DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

Headed east or west, American golfers simply cannot go wrong. The Big Island was acclaimed for its multiple luxury golf resorts strung out along the Kona Coast, while the Dominican Republic wowed with the largest

concentration of great courses in the Caribbean, including Teeth of the Dog at Casa de Campo, the region’s perennially top-ranked course. The Dominican Republic’s standing was further improved by the recent addition of Amanera. The world’s first golf resort from luxury brand Aman includes what may now be the new best course in the Caribbean: Playa Grande. Think of it as Pebble Beach with more and better views. The finish is seven consecutive cliff-top holes, unrivaled on the planet. Michael Shiels rings in for our westernmost state, noting the many professional events staged at Hualalai, Mauna Kea and Mauna Lani, all along the Kona Coast, near the courses of Waikoloa and Big Island Country Club. “All are lava, flora and fauna-filled affairs with ocean views.”

BEST GOLF ISLAND ♦ WORLD **IRELAND**

The Emerald Isle is a true golf gem—almost no votes were cast anywhere else. As Clark notes, “Ireland is home to two-thirds of the world’s total links courses. Summer days are long, so there’s loads of playing time.” Golf Channel’s Brandon Tucker calls the island a rip-roaring good time for golf and pints in the pub afterwards. “The folks are colorful and the golf spectacular. Northern



The Dominican Republic tied with Hawaii as the best North American island for golf. One compelling reason is the highly regarded Teeth of the Dog course at Casa de Campo.

Ireland has links as stellar as any in the world, while the Republic has unique courses like Ballybunion, Old Head and Lahinch.” A golf and travel writer, Shiels visits at least once a year and says, “The Emerald Isle is ringed with natural links courses, and in its fertile midlands and mountains, the greenest parkland resort courses imaginable sit at the end of rainbows...an unforgettable island golf experience.” Suggested stay: Adare Manor.

BEST WATERSPORTS ISLAND ♦ NORTH AMERICA **HAWAII (MAUI, LANAI, OAHU)**

With stiff competition from destinations with specific strengths, Hawaiian islands wowed for their diversity. Oahu is one of the best places for beginners to learn to surf at Waikiki, while the North Shore has fabled expert breaks like Bonzai Pipeline and Sunset. Maui includes shore diving, wall diving, beginner diving, visibility and underwater photography. Lanai won acclaim for the protected oceanic nature reserve right on the beach at the Four Seasons Lanai (formerly called Manele Bay), with awesome snorkeling feet from shore, and diving its undersea lava dome formations. Suggested stay: Four Seasons Lanai.

BEST WATERSPORTS ISLAND ♦ WORLD **MALDIVES**

Fiji, Tahiti and Micronesia won raves from dive fans. Bali and Australia wooed surfers. But the Maldives vanguarded all. Panelists made a few things abundantly clear: wherever you go in this archipelago you will

find unbelievable beaches, many with great snorkeling, too many world-class dive sites to count and fantastic surfing. As Hensley noted, “The water is absolutely transparent and the fish and marine profuse and poetic.” Luxury chain Four Seasons operates its only floating resort here, the Explorer, specifically to give underwater access to scuba divers and snorkelers. Suggested stay: Soneva Fushi.

BEST ADVENTURE TRAVEL ISLAND **SOUTH ISLAND NEW ZEALAND**

Our experts agreed: this spot is known as a birthplace of adventure travel. “AJ Hackett invented bungee jumping here,” says Hensley. “Beyond that there’s fishing, white water rafting, skiing in winter, insane mountain biking and heli-everything.” As Black Tomato explains, the South Island is “Known as the outdoor adventurer’s haven, with endless active experiences ranging from a jet-boat ride or river rafting excursion, the world’s highest bungee cords and sky swings, and/or skydiving or paragliding.” Gwen Books sums it up: “Queenstown is the adventure capital of the world...one of the most world-renowned areas for adventure for every age of thrill seekers.” Suggested stay: Matakauri Lodge.

BEST CULINARY ISLAND ♦ NORTH AMERICA **ST. BARTS**

While islands as diverse—and understandable—as Manhattan got nods, our voters could not stop extolling the French and seafood driven virtues of this small but chic Caribbean escape. As Gwen Books says, “Despite the petite size, it is brimming with culinary choices to satisfy a fervent foodie. Your choices span five-star Jean-Georges Vongerichten at Eden Rock to four-star Relais & Chateaux dining to bistros, dedicated fish/lobster feasts, and sand and sea dining at La Plage.” Carrie Wallace seconds this notion: “With roots in France and 80-plus restaurants, St. Barts is a foodie dream. Haute cuisine or simple fare, the food is fresh, well-conceived and innovative. Half the fun of traveling here is planning where you’ll eat each evening.”

BEST CULINARY ISLAND ♦ WORLD **THE ISLANDS OF ITALY**

Italy is always tops among world foodies, and in this case, if there was a chunk of land off its coast, our experts wanted to eat there—especially Sicily, but also Capri, Sardinia and even the islands in Venice. Hensley explains the logic, “Sicily because it is Italy—and Italians take their obsession with food more seriously than anyone else in the world.” Black Tomato was tied between Sicily and Capri: “These gorgeous islands are home to some of the world’s most incredible seafood and freshest produce. An abundance of limoncello producers and wineries are also located there.” Scully goes straight for Sicily: “You have to take your hats off to Italian cooking and this island rivals the top chefs of Rome, Florence and Venice...The best gravy—not sauce—in the world.”

BEST CULTURAL ISLAND

**TIE: EASTER ISLAND, CHILE ♦
ZANZIBAR, TANZANIA**

With its mysteriously extinct populace, seemingly abandoned overnight quarry, incredible remoteness and towering, unique Moai statues, Easter Island wowed everyone who had visited it, becoming the easy answer to the question: “What is the most interesting island?” Like Easter Island, Zanzibar’s Stone Town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, famed for its architecture, spice markets and Swahili culture. As top travel agent Mary Ann Ramsey puts it, “The name alone conjures up images of exotic history, sultans and spices. You can explore The Old Fort, Mtoni Palace and Darajani Market and wander the narrow streets and alleys...you will see people piling spices on the side of the road to dry and cure, and women and children carrying baskets on their heads.” Suggested stay: Explora Rapa Nui, Easter Island; Park Hyatt Zanzibar.

BEST ISLAND FOR ROMANCE

BORA BORA

With so many islands, it was hard to get our experts to agree on much, but for this category the choice was clear, especially given the vast assortment of private bungalows on stilts in gorgeous lagoons that are so appealing to couples. “Each tiny island holds a distinctive hotel, each of which fulfills your tropical fantasy. Nearly every hotel gives you the chance to sleep in an over-the-water bungalow, and dive from your terrace into a crystalline lagoon,” says Hensley. She cited the ultimate couples’ perk available: “The Four Seasons delivers room service to your overwater guest room in an outrigger canoe. What’s more romantic than that?”

BEST ISLAND FOR BEACHES ♦ NORTH AMERICA

TURKS & CAICOS

These island groups in the Lucayan archipelago have recently become popular thanks to luxury hotels like Aman’s first beach resort in the hemisphere, the venerable Grace Bay Club and private island resort Parrot Cay, a favorite of fashion icons and rock stars. As Tully says, “These coral islands have powdery white sand and crystal-clear water,” while honeymoon specialist Wallace says: “Providenciales offers Grace Bay Beach, a long, unbroken stretch of clean white sand and calm water. Beautiful boutique resorts dot the bay, and sun worshipers can while away the day or go for long, lazy walks while marveling at the water.” Suggested stay: Parrot Cay.

BEST ISLAND FOR BEACHES ♦ WORLD

MALDIVES

This cluster of private-island resorts drew wide praise for its accommodations, watersports and pampering, but most of all for its incredible—and empty—beaches. Black Tomato proclaims it “an absolute dream for beach lovers. Miles of pristine, azure coastlines, overwater bungalows perched above clear waters of lagoons with endless views of the Indian Ocean. A plethora of private tropical islands bordered by perfectly powdered white beaches.” Wallace concurs: “Blue water, small tropical private island resorts, and fine white sand make this a must for a true beach aficionado.” Suggested stay: Shangri La Villingili.

BEST FISHING ISLAND

**TIE: KEY WEST, FLORIDA ♦
LIZARD ISLAND, AUSTRALIA**

The western end of Florida’s Keys was good enough for Ernest Hemingway, and it was more than good enough for our experts. Key West is renowned for its flats fishing, light tackle and deep-sea big game, impressing Scully and Chad Clark, who says, “With plenty of sailfish and tarpon, Key West is great for fishing during the day and enjoying the restaurant and party scene at night.” Our panelists have a thing for luxury, private-island resorts, and Lizard Island happens to be smack in the middle of the Great Barrier Reef. Gwen Books says, “The remote waters surrounding Lizard Island offer up some of the most exciting fishing in the world—particularly during black-marlin season (September to December). In addition, anglers can expect to hook mackerel, tuna, trevally, mahi mahi, red emperor, coral trout and sailfish. Why not ask the island’s chefs to



The delectable French cuisine of St. Barts, served over stunning views like this at Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s On the Rocks at the Eden Rock resort, wowed panelists.

prepare your catch for a deliciously fresh dinner?” Clark adds that “Not only a world-class resort, it gives you the best chance of catching incredibly large black marlin exceeding 1,000 and even up to 2,000 pounds.” Suggested stays: Hyatt Key West Resort & Spa; Lizard Island Resort.

BEST ISLAND FOR WILDLIFE

GALÁPAGOS

It makes perfect sense: this is where Darwin went to study animals, and in recent years its popularity has soared, almost entirely thanks to its plentiful wildlife. Our panelists, one after another, extolled its virtues. “There could not be a better showcase for wildlife than the Galápagos,” says Wallace. “Travelers typically traverse this archipelago by expedition cruise, stopping along the way to snorkel with sea lions, dive with hammerhead sharks, observe swimming iguanas, and of course see the amazing giant Galápagos tortoises. Shiels adds, “Sharing the beach and snorkeling with sea lions, penguins, sea rays, baby sharks and giant turtles is like being inside a 23,000 square-mile zoo exhibit or aquarium.” Hensley flatly states that “birders and animal lovers will never stop talking about their trip to Ecuador’s storied Galápagos Islands.” Suggested stay: Pikaia Lodge.

BEST UP & COMING ISLAND DESTINATION CUBA

With all the pent up demand, media frenzy and recently the first large cruise ship visit from the U.S., this was an easy choice. Our panelists had little doubt that Cuba is where many island vacationers will be headed in coming years. Ramsey explains: "Cuba is very much alive with art and music. It seems to be everywhere. Spend an evening at the famous Tropicana nightclub with your favorite cigar and a bottle of Havana Club rum and you can imagine what it was like back in the days before the revolution when Cuba was the playground for Americans seeking glitzy entertainment."

RUNNER UP LANAI, HAWAII After billionaire Larry Ellison bought this private island with its two luxe Four Season Resorts and marquee golf courses, he decided it would be a good idea to shutter them, tear everything up, pump in a small fortune and start anew. The Four Seasons Lanai (formerly Manele Bay) has reopened to rave reviews, with fewer rooms, an entirely new design and the state's most expensive suite. The Lodge at Koele will follow in late 2016, and one of the top luxury island destinations on earth looks to be better than ever. "Great golf course, loads of adventure activities and insane ocean views," says Clark. "After a reported \$75 million makeover, Larry Ellison's island is in tip-top shape and will be one of the finest resorts in the world." And that's just for phase one. ❖

OUR EXPERT PANELISTS

Thanks to the following travel experts who generously agreed to serve on our panel and took the time to thoroughly answer our questionnaire:

Ann Abel The former travel editor of *ForbesLife* and *Luxury SpaFinder*, Ann Abel writes about luxury travel and spas for Forbes.com (blogs.forbes.com/annabel).

Black Tomato Staff Black Tomato is an award-winning luxury travel company that specializes in curating tailor-made experiences for its clients. Its well-traveled expert staff predicts the latest travel trends to create itineraries in up-and-coming and remote destinations (blacktomato.com).

Gwen Books The Silicon Valley-based founder of Lifestyle Management has specialized in "Legacy Travel," bespoke luxury experiences of a lifetime, for over a decade. *The Hollywood Reporter* called her a Dream Vacation Agent (gwenbooks.com).

Beth D'Addono is a longtime travel and food writer based in New Orleans. She contributes frequently to *USA Today* and her latest book is *The Hunt New Orleans*.

Chad Clark One of the nation's top luxury travel specialists, Clark runs Virtuoso affiliated Chad Clark Travel Ventures in Phoenix and is a self-described "experience junkie," specializing in bespoke itineraries full of first-person insider tips, industry connections, golf and fine dining (chadclarktravel.com).

Pat Gallagher Our longtime panelist representing the consumer perspective is a Wall Street road warrior, frequent flyer and discerning global business and leisure traveler.

Becca Hensley An award-winning Austin-based travel writer, Hensley is an editor for *Insiders Guide to Spas* and has published her work in hundreds of magazines and newspapers, from *National Geographic*

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Michael Holtz SmartFlyer CEO "Mr. 2A" founded the leading NYC-based Virtuoso agency 25 years ago, and now has multiple offices including Japan. Known for designing once-in-a-lifetime itineraries with insider expertise on the best way to issue First/Business class tickets, he's repeatedly been a *Travel + Leisure* A-List agent (smartflyer.com).

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Everett Potter This prominent travel journalist has written for everyone from *National Geographic Adventure* to *Travel + Leisure*, is a *USA Today* columnist and publishes his own online magazine, *Everett Potter's Travel Report* (everettpotter.com).

Mary Ann Ramsey, CTC, DS Owner and president of Betty Maclean Travel, Ramsey has been a luxury travel advisor for 40 years, specializing in African safaris and cruises, with bespoke shore excursions. She was named Travel Agent of the Year by the American Society of Travel Agents (bettymacleantravel.com).

Anne Scully, CTC The travel agent's travel agent, trip planner to the stars, Scully, president of McCabe World Travel, has been recognized by *Travel + Leisure* magazine as a top 10 Super Agent for years and is one of the world's most sought after advisors (mccabeworld.com).

Lynn Seldon A veteran freelance travel journalist, Seldon has been on more than 100 cruises worldwide and often covers travel to islands. His work has appeared in more than 200 different publications and he has published six travel guides. His most recent book is a novel, *Virginia's Ring*, which the late Pat Conroy called, "A triumph and a tour de force," (lynnseidon.com).

Michael Patrick Shiels A Michigan-based travel writer and author, Shiels also hosts an award-winning syndicated radio talk show and has been named "Michigan Radio Personality of the Year." He's collaborated on titles with Donald Trump and Larry King, writes a travel column for Forbes.com and can be read at TravelTattler.com.

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Glenn Litwak With 40 years in luxury travel, Litwak is an expert agent for Protravel International in New York City. He specializes in deluxe ocean cruising and luxury destinations including Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Capri and Southern France. A Virtuoso member, Protravel has been a leading luxury agency since 1984 (protravelinc.com).