

T R A V E L



60 cool
cottages, hotels
and campsites
to book now
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GREAT BRITISH SUMMER

Why fight for space in summer? The Med's at its best – and cheapest – in spring, says **Chris Haslam**

It's August on some sun-scorched Greek island. The beaches are rammed, the temperature is in the 30s and you've just queued for an hour for a table at a vine-draped taverna. When you finally catch the waiter's eye and mention, by way of breaking the ice, that it's busy, he sighs and says: "You should have been here three months ago."

It's true. You should have been. And not just here, but right across the Med. By late May, summer has moved in, the wild flowers are in full bloom, the beaches are all yours and, above all, it's cheap.

High-season prices aren't inflated to squeeze profits from the date-bound. Rather, they reflect the true cost of the holiday, while low- and shoulder-season prices are discounted to attract custom. May can be more than 60% cheaper than August, and this year there's an even bigger incentive to avoid the peak period.

With Zika in the Caribbean and terror in the Middle East, the Med is going to be packed. So, if you're not tied to school holidays, book now for a golden May bargain. Here are our picks.

TUSCANY 23C

SAVE 56% ON AUGUST PRICES

May is a time of flowers in Tuscany. The yellow rapeseed comes first, followed by the poppies, then the jasmine, the olives, the wild roses and the sage. This is no country for hay-fever sufferers, but for others, it's near perfect. Cherries are in season, as are the fava beans beloved of the locals. To make the most of it, you need a suntrap for two, nice and high, with a private pool and a car. It's called Villa Le Vignacce.

From £422pp in May, and £971pp in August, including car hire; 0800 074 0122, jamesvillas.co.uk

SARDINIA 22C

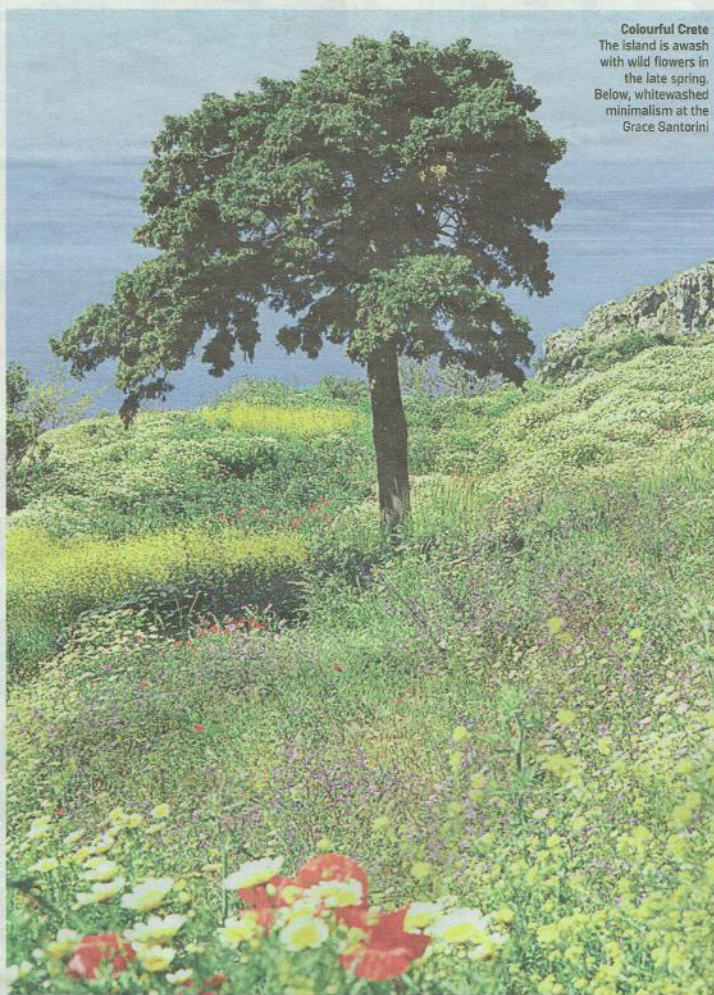
SAVE 47%

High above Cala di Volpe on Sardinia's Costa Smeralda, the charming four-star Hotel Rocce Sarde has a slightly Dallesque feel, scattered as it is among the jumpers and vast boulders that litter the mountainside. There's good hiking around here – just ask Lucia, the manager – and a regular shuttle bus down to the wonderful white-sand beach at Rena Bianca. With sunbeds, umbrellas, toys and a near-perfect beach bar, it gets crowded here in season. But not in May. From £438/£826pp, B&B; 01202 484858, justsardinia.co.uk. Fly to Olbia from £85 with easyJet

AMALFI 22C

SAVE 31%

May should be high season in Amalfi. The weather is perfect, the sea is warm and the lemon trees are in blossom. The roads



Colourful Crete
The island is awash with wild flowers in the late spring. Below, whitewashed minimalism at the Grace Santorini

We've given prices for both a week in May and a peak-season summer week. Prices include flights unless stated. The temperature is the average daily maximum for May

are reasonably clear, the locals are happy (they'll be sullen by August) and the walking is fabulous. The hotels seem to have caught on that this is the absolute best time to be here, so prices aren't hugely lower than at the July peak – about 20%–30% cheaper (prices actually come down again in August). Stay at the Grand Hotel Convento di Amalfi, which offers 53 rooms of Sorrentine luxury in a converted monastery high above the coast. The beach is five minutes downhill. It takes significantly longer coming back.

From £1,493/£2,186pp, B&B; 01293 731573, citalia.com

ALGARVE 25C

SAVE 68%

Bookings to Portugal are up by about 34% on the same time last year, and the Post Office Holiday Barometer rates the country as the cheapest for holiday expenditure out of 44 surveyed worldwide, beating even Bulgaria and Bali. Late May is the best time to visit: the meadows are full of flowers and the baby storks have hatched, so hie thee to Pine Cliffs, the sprawling five-star cliff-top resort with the tricky golf course, the Annabel Croft tennis academy, the sunset champagne bar and the magnificent Praia da Falesia Beach at its feet.

From £482/£1,500pp; 0330 123 1235, expedia.co.uk

TERRESE 23C

SAVE 20%

OK, it's the Atlantic, not the Med, but the point still stands. The Gran Hotel Bahia del Duque Resort is a destination resort on the upmarket Costa Adeje. Its aim is to take you prisoner, keeping you happily trapped in a Portmeirion-like property that has eight restaurants, 13 bars, five pools, a spa and a watersports centre. Rooms are suitably luxurious, but for the best combination of sea views and peace and quiet (the oceanside rooms overlook the central plaza), ask for the fourth floor or higher.

From £839/£1,051pp, B&B; 020 3368 3117, inspiredluxuryescapes.com

CYPRUS 24C

SAVE 21%

Don't go to Cyprus until the back end of May to avoid the irritating sea breezes in the first half of the month. When they've blown themselves out, though, the weather is perfect, with 12 hours of sunshine a day and enough heat to force a midday retreat. Stay at the Almyra, a modern design hotel in the ancient town of Paphos, on the island's southwest tip. Bright and white, with a dramatic slate-lined pool, the hotel is bang on the waterfront and a couple of minutes from the town centre.

From £702/£1,024pp; 020 3451 2688, thomson.co.uk

CRETE 24C

SAVE 56%

The Domes of Elounda is a top-end luxury resort with the emphasis as much on aesthetics as that famous Cretan hospitality. There are 120 secluded suites and villas hidden among the shrubs,

It's magic in May

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many with views across Elounda Bay to the mysterious island of Spinalonga. If you can be torn away from your terrace, you'll find five restaurants, a small beach and a gold-plated spa.

From £937/£2,115pp, B&B;
0844 493 0787, ba.com

CORFU 23C SAVE 48%

The Corfu Imperial Grecotel Exclusive Resort offers nothing but classic five-star luxury on an olive-studded private estate on an isthmus in Kommemo Bay. We're talking chandeliers, cocktails at 7pm and fine dining to dress up for by night, and refined napping beside the pool in the Italianate gardens or down on the private beach by day. Nice spa, too.

From £575/£1,098pp, B&B;
01293 731827, sovereign.com

MYKONOS 23C SAVE 43%

You know Mykonos. It's the one with the windmills and the banging nightlife. In summer, it teems with cruise-ship passengers by day and clubbers by night, but, because most of the clubs open in April, even May can be busy. So you need a hotel at a slight remove from the action. That place is the luxury Mykonos Princess Hotel, by Agios Stefanos Beach. It's exactly what you'd expect from a Mykonos boutique hotel: whitewash and daybeds, and breakfast served until



Clockwise, from left, the Corfu Imperial hotel; locals in Sardinia; greenery on Cephalonia; and a near-deserted Algarve



11am, and, when night-time rolls around, there's a free shuttle into town. From £639/£1,121pp, B&B; 020 3499 5232, easyjet.com

CEPHALONIA 22C SAVE 53%

If you head north from the commercial bit of Cephalonia, past Myrto Beach, then hang a left, you'll come to Assos. It's a dreamy spot, overlooked by a ruined Venetian fortress, and, as it happens, by most tourists. Just three minutes from the beach, you'll find the delightful, family-run Cavos Inn. It's got just nine rooms, and you want rooms 1, 2 or 6, all of which have wall-to-wall sea views.

From £405/£869pp, B&B, including car hire; 020 8459 0777, ionianislandholidays.com

SANTORINI 23C SAVE 25%

The diamond of the Cyclades, with its godlike views of the Aegean, is thought by many to be the most romantic place on earth. You require beaches? Go elsewhere. Culture? Stay in Athens. You want to loaf all day beside a private plunge pool, sipping chilled assyrtiko and soaking up that mesmerising view, stay at the Grace Santorini, a whitewashed minimalist boutique that defines the Santorini experience.

From £1,636/£2,187pp, B&B; 01306 857202, kuoni.co.uk