

SPECIAL
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THE GOLD LIST 2019

OUR EDITORS' ALL-TIME FAVOURITE DESTINATIONS & PLACES TO STAY

+ THE WORLD'S MOST
EXTRAORDINARY
TRAVEL EXPERIENCES



UMAID BHAWAN PALACE INDIA

Rajasthan isn't exactly lacking in grand heritage hotels, but there are at least two reasons to visit this property above all others. First, a section of it is still home to the former Maharaja of Jodhpur and his family (one of the largest private residences in the world) and second, for the extraordinary scale of the imposing architecture and the 26 acres of precisely manicured grounds. High on Chittar Hill, overlooking the Blue City, this golden-coloured sandstone pile has operated as a hotel since 1971, but it was the arrival of Taj Hotels in 2005 that elevated the service to match its royal setting. Art Deco interiors unfold over ornamental latticed stonework, artfully lit carved pillars, a sweeping marble staircase, exotic frescos and a neck-aching, 105-foot-high cupola. There are some pretty spectacular rooms – such as the Maharani Suite with the original bath carved from a single piece of pink Italian marble – but choose a Royal Suite for terrazzo flooring, original palace artwork and grand bathrooms leading to private balconies that frame views of the peacock-speckled gardens. A morning workout in the marble squash courts will justify a lazy afternoon in the subterranean spa, and then dinner of spice-laced *Jodhpuri murgh* in Risala restaurant.

To stay here among the old-world opulence is to really get a flavour of Jodhpur's gilded glory. +91 291 251 0101; taj.tajhotels.com. Doubles from about £270



SONG SAA PRIVATE ISLAND CAMBODIA

Bold, crazy, ambitious, foolhardy, visionary – any number of adjectives could have been used to describe Australians Rory and Melita Hunter when they formulated their plan some 12 years ago to create a destination hotel on two tiny islands in the little-known Koh Rong archipelago, 20 miles off the coast of Cambodia. Yet the sublime result was Song Saa – the first opening outside of Siem Reap to rekindle an interest in travel to Cambodia after decades of oppression (their next project is 200-hectare Song Saa Reserve at Siem Reap). Nine of the 27 standalone villas (each with a private pool) are on stilted platforms over aquamarine water, the rest dotting the shoreline or tucked into the jungly interior of the larger island; the smaller island, linked via a wooden walkway, remains an unblemished nature reserve. But it's Melita's creative touch that really defines the look and feel of Song Saa: driftwood and bamboo from broken-up fishing boats and abandoned houses have been recycled into walls, floors and furniture. The Song Saa Foundation runs in conjunction with the hotel, championing health, employment and education among local communities, and tackles issues such as waste management and marine protection. So staying at this top-class island hideaway also means supporting social and environmental change. A meaningful blueprint for sustainable travel. +855 92 609488; songsaa.com. Doubles from about £690

