



## 18 best-kept island secrets

Mysterious islands to discover and explore



George Osodi / AP file

Children run on the beach as people look on at Sao Tome, Sao Tome and Principe, July, 18, 2005. The tranquil scene is one of many to be had in palm-fringed Sao Tome and Principe, a remote pair of volcanic islands smack dab on the equator whose attraction lies in what this undeveloped corner of the world lacks: No mass tourism. No traffic. No terrorism.

**By Staff**

**ISLANDS**

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ISLANDS magazine searched the seven seas and found that while it may be a small world, the globe is definitely a big place, full of surprising and mysterious islands to discover and explore.

How many palm trees are there in the world with nary a soul relaxing under them? Thousands? Tens of thousands? Millions? We traveled to 20 hidden spots on the globe — from Caribbean and European seas to the Pacific and Indian oceans — and we dutifully noted places palms stand alone. We'll tell you where you can still find a beach to yourself and an authentic island experience. (By the way, we also had the common sense to keep some secrets to ourselves.)

## **CARIBBEAN SEA**

### **1. LITTLE CORN ISLAND**

Just 45 miles off the eastern shore of Nicaragua is drumstick-shaped Little Corn Island, population 800. How has it remained unspoiled for so long? Sure, there are stretches of empty Caribbean beach, \$5 lobster dinners that are de rigueur, hammocks that sway gently in the trades beneath palms and enviable tarpon and bonefishing. But to get here you have to be adventurous, taking the half-hour trip from Big Corn Island in an open boat. Then there's the lack of paved roads and night life — well, except for Happy Hut, a dirt-floor reggae bar. Well, no wonder it has remained a secret. Can you even imagine spending your days trying to brush the white powdery sand out of your skin's creases, or hours eating home-cooked Italian meals at Farm Peace and Love, or nights in colorful cabanas where the only sound to lull you to sleep is tree frogs and surf? Nah. It would be maddening. But Casa Iguana will hold one of its colorful, simple stilted cabanas for you if you dare. [www.casaiguana.net](http://www.casaiguana.net).

### **2. PROVIDENCIA**

Although it is closer to the coast of Nicaragua, the archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina belongs to Colombia, whose Caribbean coast lies 480 miles southeast. San Andrés is the largest of the three islands and gets the most attention from tourists. But 56 miles north of the big island is Providencia, a secret hot spot that has become the favored escape for Colombian cognoscenti. You'll get your taste of the traditional Caribbean here: beaches, seafood and locals who are of European and African descent. The English Puritans set up shop here in the 1600s, using Providencia to raid the Spanish during the colonial period and as a base for selling tobacco and hides to Dutch traders. The islands also were prime pirating ground. Providencia has one of the Americas' largest coral reefs, which has recently been designated a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve. On Providencia, stroll down the romantically named Lover's Lane, a wooden bridge that connects the island to Santa Catalina and its 300 inhabitants. On this tiny island is the pirate Henry Morgan's fort, where you can see the famous brigand's cannons. [www.san-andres.com](http://www.san-andres.com)

### **3. MONA ISLAND**

Forty-two miles off the west coast of Puerto Rico, Mona Island offers intrepid travelers as many bragging rights as those more-distant island getaways. You won't find any high-end resorts on this flat, rocky island unless you bring your own yacht — or consider a North Face four-man tent an escapist's luxury. The payoff here is an authentic, pristine Caribbean island two hours from Miami. Pull a telescope out at night and go constellation crazy when the sky darkens thick and heavy over your head, pregnant with stars you probably didn't even know existed. As the sun rises, grab your snorkeling gear, because this is where Mona Island will ignite your inner explorer. One quick glance through the

looking-glass surface will reveal a seascape rich with thickets of black coral trees and massive sponges that provide shelter to more than 270 species of marine life. Oceans Unlimited provides camping excursions to Mona Island. [www.oceans-unlimited.com](http://www.oceans-unlimited.com).

## **EUROPE'S OCEANS**

### **4. GIGLIO**

This island, off the west coast of Italy in the Tyrrhenian Sea, has been owned by the town of Perugia, the town of Pisa and even the famous Medici family of Florence. It has been inhabited since the Stone Age, was attacked by both the Saracens and the dread pirate Barbarossa and used as a military outpost by everyone from the Etruscans to the Romans to the Abbey of Fontane. But it was under the rule of Pisa in the 13th century that the magnificent medieval walled town of Giglio Castello was built. Meander this world of romantically narrow streets, archways, ramparts, external stairs, holy relics and hidden piazzas. Sample the lovely local amber wine and hike through the hills to do some bird-watching. Trek to Giglio Porto, which overlooks a bay renowned for its clear waters. For a small place (even most Italians haven't heard of it) with such a lengthy history of habitation, it's surprising that about 90 percent of the island still remains relatively unspoiled and bucolic. Giglio is that rare treasure of an island that has remained hidden in plain sight. [www.isoladelgiglio.it](http://www.isoladelgiglio.it).

### **5. ISLE OF ARRAN**

Standing on the rocky cliffs that form the coastline of the Isle of Arran, it's easy to see why the island's slogan is "Scotland in Miniature." The island, a one-hour ferry ride from Ayrshire on the west coast of Scotland, lets you enjoy all of what Scotland has to offer — desolate heaths, Celtic hills, castles and the taste of local scotch — within a smaller space. Wander the vast halls and misty gardens of Brodick Castle, at the foot of Goatfell Mountain. Dating back to the 16th century, the castle now houses artwork and sculpture collected by the various dukes and duchesses who lived in the red sandstone edifice. Tour the mystical Machrie Moor, where you will see several stone circles, and standing stones that are over 18 feet tall. While no one knows their true purpose, the stones are tied to myths of giants roaming the land. Who else would be capable of erecting such monuments? Before nightfall, warm yourself up at the Isle of Arran Distillers; the single-malt made there is a perfect precursor to a dinner of wild salmon, for which the island is known. [www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com). [More about Scotland on ISLANDS.com](http://More about Scotland on ISLANDS.com).

### **6. SAO TOME & PRINCIPE**

Word about São Tomé & Príncipe, a two-island nation that sits 150 miles off Equatorial Guinea on the western coast of Africa, is rippling through the islands travel world like a wild banshee. It's safe, lushly exotic, exquisitely tropical and almost completely undiscovered. Plus, just being able to say you've been there or know about it gives you

some major bragging rights. Sure that's some high-handed hyperbole, but these islands on the equator have everything adventurous travelers could dream of: stream-riddled and mist-shrouded jungles crowded with more than 700 species of plants, including one-of-a-kind orchids and begonias the size of beach balls; 15 species of birds found only on these islands (including the São Tomé grosbeak, which is seen about once every 100 years); and diving and snorkeling in waters that are virtually unexplored. São Tomé is also ringed with apathy-inducing beaches, which you will likely have all to yourself.

[www.sao-tome.com](http://www.sao-tome.com).

## **7. ILE DE RE**

There are secrets, and then there are secrets. Île de Ré qualifies as the latter — it's been witness to the full history of France's human occupation. But when savvy Parisians need to escape, Île de Ré is where they go. This enchanting island off La Rochelle on the Atlantic coast of France is rife with history — forts, castles, haunted lighthouses, crumbling abbeys. Here beach life predominates, and the daily pace moves with the measured tempo of an ambling bicycle along more than 60 miles of bike paths. Cruise through captivating towns such as Rivedoux-Plage, La Flotte and Saint-Martin-de-Ré, all built around fishing harbors with postcard-perfect 16th- and 17th-century fortifications that once kept pirates and the English at bay. Browse markets teeming with flowers, fruit, oysters, vin from local vineyards and pineau, a regional specialty similar to sherry. At night, Île de Ré becomes France's music island, as almost every experience involves sensual, folksy, historic and/or modern beats. [www.iledere.com](http://www.iledere.com).

## **PACIFIC OCEAN**

### **8. SOLOMON ISLANDS**

Scattered across 500,000 square miles of aquamarine Pacific Ocean are the 922 islands known as the Solomons. This is a mystical land of mist-enshrouded rainforest, volcanoes, World War II shipwrecks and skull shrines (the Solomons were infamous headhunting grounds in the 19th century). The islands are riven with waterfalls, and the saltwater lagoon, Marovo, was described by James Michener as the eighth wonder of the world. The Western Province of the Solomons, where Marovo Lagoon, New Georgia, Ghizo and many other islands and atolls are located, is the most-visited area. Keep the numbers in perspective, though: The entire island chain only gets 4,000 visitors per year. Don't miss Skull Island, where you can see a shrine adorned with shell money and the skulls of warriors and chiefs. Also nearby is volcanic Simbo Island, where the megapode bird incubates its eggs in the heat of volcanic sands. Go for a walk in the bush, take a look at woodcrafts such as *nguzunguzu* (a carving placed on the hull of a war canoe), and be sure to go underwater. [www.visitsolomons.com.sb](http://www.visitsolomons.com.sb). [More about the Solomon Islands on ISLANDS.com](http://www.visitsolomons.com).

## **9. NIUE**

"Behold the coconut!" is what one of the original Tongan, Samoan or Cook Island settlers supposedly exclaimed upon seeing Niue, giving the island its name (niue means the aforementioned phrase). They were surprised that a rocky island roughly 1,500 miles northeast of New Zealand, with cliffs rising 60 feet straight from the sea, could support coconut palms — and thus habitation. Today we proclaim, "Behold Niue!" This is where, in fall, visiting whales outnumber visiting humans. A quarter of the island is covered in virgin rainforest, and caves and coves gnaw the coastline, all waiting to be explored (until the mid-1800s the islanders lived in these caves). Although there are roughly only 2,000 residents, you'll find many are well-versed naturalists who will guide you through the mysteries of the rainforest, take you on reef walks and show you the most stunning underwater cave system in the South Pacific. Come to Niue during one of its 14 annual village days and watch the women weave baskets, and then nibble on delicacies cooked in an earth oven called an umu. [www.niueisland.com](http://www.niueisland.com).

## **10. POHNPEI**

One of the world's greatest mysteries awaits on Pohnpei, the largest island in the wide Pacific sweep of the Federated States of Micronesia. The ancient ruins of Nan Madol, massive structures made of stacked basalt "logs" surrounded by manmade channels, have often been called the Venice of the Pacific. Nan Madol once had a thriving civilization, though no one knows when it was built or when its inhabitants left. Exploring Pohnpei, a lush island covered with waterfalls and rainforests, one is hard-pressed to explain why anyone would want to leave this idyllic place. Trek to Mount Nahna Laud, the island's highest point at 2,600 feet, and you'll be treated to a view of the coral reef that surrounds the almost perfectly circular island as well as dozens of rivers and waterfalls. The green foliage, flowers and such striking scenes as Kepirohi, Sawarlap and Liduduhniap falls are breathtaking. But to get to the core of the culture and its legends, you should accept the invitation of the friendly locals and join them around the ceremonial *sakau* bowl, an experience unique to Pohnpei. A few cups of this tingly brew and you may be well on your way to discovering the secrets of this island of mystery. [www.visit-fsm.org/pohnpei](http://www.visit-fsm.org/pohnpei).

## **11. AMAMI**

For a place that even most Japanese people aren't familiar with, Amami Island, about 170 miles south of Japan, packs a punch on the cultural and natural aspects of island adventures. Most of the world doesn't know much about the southern Japanese islands of the Ryukyu Archipelago (which includes Amami), stretching from Kyushu to Okinawa. Because of Amami's relative isolation, the traditional culture of living harmoniously with nature emanates from all aspects of life on this island where Japan and Polynesia meet. Amami's hills are covered in subtropical forests, and its endemic potpourri has earned the island the nickname "Japanese Galapagos." Its coral reefs are on the World Wildlife

Fund's Global 200 eco-regions list; there's a mysterious and primitive rabbit that exists only on Amami and is classified in Japan as a "national monument"; and there are rare endemic thrushes, colorful Ryukyu robins, Lidth's jays, Amami woodpeckers and Ryukyu scops owls. Of course, people live here, too, and Amami is world-famous for its kimonos made of pongee silk. Travelers can see them during summer festival-season parades and watch silk artisans practice *doro-zome* dyeing, a process done primarily on Amami. Plan your trip around the plethora of festivals and traditional dances that rule the island's social calendar. The pageantry and rituals of the Harvest and Yonshi Dance and Yagorodon effigy festival are rarely seen outside these islands. [www.jnto.go.jp](http://www.jnto.go.jp).

## 12. RURUTU

Hidden away in the Austral Islands of French Polynesia, about 340 miles south of Tahiti, Rurutu preserves a Polynesia tradition that has all but vanished elsewhere in this island nation. Every year during the *Tere* ritual, the entire population makes a pilgrimage around the 34-square-mile island, stopping at many of the historical *marae*, or sacred sites (the best-preserved exist at Pareopi and Vitaria). Go there in July when, during the Tahitian *Heiva* holiday festival, the inhabitants of Rurutu compete in the ancient sport of stone lifting. It's like watching a local strongman competition with theme music. Should you come any time from August through October, watch the humpback whales that migrate to these electric-blue waters to give birth to their young, or better yet, snorkel with them. Typically, the mother will rest on the seafloor while the curious calves frequently rise to the surface to breathe. If you've never experienced the majesty of a whale in the water, hearing its whale song pass through your body is a breathtaking and life-changing moment. Like Rurutu itself, the memory of the experience will be unforgettable. [www.tahiti-tourisme.com](http://www.tahiti-tourisme.com).

## 13. LOYALTY ISLANDS

New Caledonia may already be known to South Seas aficionados. It has the largest lagoon in the world and a cosmopolitan capital, Noumea, often called the "Paris of the South Pacific." Its real secrets, however, are 60 miles off the mainland's east coast. The Loyalty Islands of Lifou, Maré and Ouvea are studded with limestone caves and emerald waters and have an intact Melanesian culture. On the capital of Lifou, visit Joking Cliffs, home to a Kanak tribe. On Ouvea, head to the west coast to stroll its uninterrupted 14 miles of beach, see its endemic parakeets and cross the bridge to the paradise of Mouli Island. On Maré, which is divided into 29 tribal villages, attend the festival of the avocado and visit one of the largest underwater lakes in the world. Stay in a *gite*, accommodations that range from grass huts to bungalows and are hosted by Melanesian families. [www.newcaledoniatourism-south.com](http://www.newcaledoniatourism-south.com). [More about New Caledonia on ISLANDS.com](http://www.newcaledoniatourism-south.com).

## **14. KIRIBATI**

Not only is the island nation of Kiribati (pronounced Ki-ri-bas) a secret South Pacific gem north of Fiji, but it's also a place that keeps its secrets well. Almost too well. The three island groups of Kiribati — Phoenix, Line and Gilbert Islands — are swirled in a thick broth of legend and mystery. Amelia Earhart disappeared over the Phoenix Islands, and all kinds of weird anomalies exist throughout the area, especially off the small island of Nikumaroro. At night here, unexplained lights dance and weave through the palm thickets, even though no one has lived on the island for decades. If you come ashore on Nikumaroro you need to “wash” your face with sand to disguise your appearance from the mercurial island spirits. No one is allowed on the island at night. The last person to spend the night there, an Earhart researcher stranded by bad weather, allegedly refused to speak about what happened to him in the dark, alone on the island. But every island in this nation is not an *Outer Limits* episode in the making. Spread over 313 square miles of ocean, Kiribati, which straddles the equator, includes such enchanting islands as Christmas, Millennium, Tarawa (with its many World War II artifacts) and perhaps the most pristine island in the Pacific, Palmyra, which is now wholly owned by the Nature Conservancy. [www.trussel.com/f\\_kir.htm](http://www.trussel.com/f_kir.htm).

## **INDIAN OCEAN**

### **15. COCOS (KEELING) ISLANDS**

About 2,000 miles off the west coast of Australia, the virtually unknown Cocos (Keeling) Islands are the perfect archetype for paradise ruled by the hammock, palm, sand and sea. The closest neighbor, Christmas Island, is nearly 650 miles distant. As a result of this isolation, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands have become a waypost for just about everything that travels great distances under, on or over the ocean. The travelers who usually make this pilgrimage have one of three things in mind: birding, scuba diving and total island relaxation. The numerous red-footed boobies, terns, noddies, herons and frigates were probably the original inhabitants. In 1826 the first settlers arrived, and Home Island and West Island are now where the majority of the local populace of 800 lives. Water-minded explorers quickly find their way to the underwater haven of Direction Island to experience the world-renowned Rip, a site that swells with gray and whitetip reef sharks, giant manta rays, dolphins and fearless Napoleon wrasse. [www.cocos-trourism.cc..](http://www.cocos-trourism.cc..)

### **16. LAKSHADWEEP**

Lakshadweep, which means “thousand islands,” is an archipelago of 12 coral atolls and 10 inhabited and 17 uninhabited islands spread across 8,000 miles of crystalline Indian Ocean. With a history steeped in oceanic isolation, the people developed unique social quirks that frequently occur on remote island outposts. Women on some islands inherit ancestral land, and husbands are obliged to make yearly “upkeep” payments to their

wives. If they fail to do so, the wife can demand a divorce. On the island of Minicoy, the husband takes the wife's family name and the wife rules the family. Lakshadweep's greatest appeal, though, centers on the pale blue waters of the lagoon, the reef, the soft, creamy beaches, the utter friendliness of the people and its total lack of tourism pretense. [www.lakshadweep.nic.in](http://www.lakshadweep.nic.in).

### **17. MAFIA ISLAND**

While travelers often make plans to visit Zanzibar, many miss seductive Mafia Island, located in an archipelago made up of nine islands 100 miles to the south. It's an African safari with hippos, ibises, antelopes and hawksbill and green turtles, with half the coastline — some 511 miles — designated a Tanzanian marine park. Its approximately 40,000 people, mostly Muslims, fish the waters and farm cassava, pigeon peas and papaw. They commute by *jahazis* (dhows) to points on the mainland and also to nearby islands such as Jibondo and Chole. How Mafia got its name is a secret (but it may be derived from the Arabic word *morfiyeh*, which means "archipelago"). Kinasi Lodge arranges island excursions. Drive into African villages like Kirongwe, famous for its clay pots, and Jimbo, famous for its *ukili* mats. On Chole are old Arabic buildings once used as a German prison in World War I. On Jibondo, famous for its boatbuilding, is a shipyard as well as octopus fisheries. [www.mafiaisland.com](http://www.mafiaisland.com). [More about Zanzibar on ISLANDS.com](#).

### **18. TIWI ISLANDS**

In the far north of Australia, about 45 miles off the coast of the city of Darwin, the Tiwi Islands of Bathurst and Melville are steeped in aboriginal history, spirituality and traditional culture. In fact, the islands are a last enclave of Australia's Aboriginal community. Tiwi traditions are completely oral, and the people live off the land much as they have since the Aboriginal beginning of time, called "The Dreaming," when the Tiwis' world came to be. Most travelers visit these islands on day trips from Darwin, but there are a couple of wilderness lodges on Melville. The islands are world-famous for their expressive dot and line art, totem-like Pukumani burial poles and some of the most picturesque waterfalls — Pickertaramoor and Taracumbie Falls on Melville, and Tumwarripi Falls on Bathurst — in all of Australia. The Tiwi language is unique and has no written form. One part of modern life that the Tiwi people have embraced, though, is "footie" (what we call rugby), and this small island enclave produces some of Australia's top players. [www.australia.com](http://www.australia.com) [More about Australia on ISLANDS.com](#).