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Travel Eastern Europe's Extravagant Getaways

Lauren Sherman, 02.21.08, 6:00 PM ET



It's not hard for frequent travelers to rack up enough stamps in a year to fill a passport. But even trips to Saint Tropez, Ibiza and Santorini become routine when you spend so much time on the road.

That's why Eastern Europe is a hot ticket: It's virtually uncharted territory for the luxury traveler.

Until now.

In Depth: Eastern Europe's Extravagant Getaways

In Pictures: Eastern Europe's Extravagant Getaways



There are a couple of factors that contribute to the surge of high-end resorts opening in places like Bulgaria and Poland, says Paul Kerr, CEO of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World, a Surrey, U.K.-based directory of 440 hotels and resorts spanning 70 countries.

One is that tourism is fast becoming a source of economic growth. Visitors to Turkey, for example, spent over \$819 million dollars in 2006, a 7.4% increase from the year before, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute, an Ankara-based government agency. The second is that historic buildings in the region are a virtual bargain compared with real estate in western and central European countries.

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"The governments of these countries, says Kerr, "are putting in heavy benefits and awards to hoteliers when they take a historic building and make it a luxury property."

Many of these countries—including Poland and Hungary—offer tax breaks to foreign businesses that bring in tourism dollars, allowing hoteliers to save up to 15% on their investment. Discounts are also often given on building and maintenance supplies.

Historical Haunts

The 24-room **Chateau Mcely** is one such spot. American businessman Jim Cusumano bought the property—which sits in the midst of the Czech Republic's St. George Forest—from the Czech government in 2004; he purchased it on a whim, with his wife, a real estate agent in the area.

They've since renovated the chateau (which had been used for government conferences), furnishing each bathroom with Italian marble, covering chairs and beds in rich brocade fabrics and sourcing 17th-century furniture for a truly palatial effect.

Another such resort is the 162-room **Grand Villa Argentina** in Dubrovnik, Croatia. On the outskirts of the city, the villa was a popular getaway in the 1960s—attracting guests like Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor—and was restored in 2002. Along with a private beach, there are four onsite restaurants serving Croatian, Mediterranean and international dishes, plus a spa, gym, indoor pool and sauna.

Got a trip you're dying to take? Weigh in. Add your thoughts in the Reader Comments section below.

Adam and Eve, on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey, may not have as rich a history, but it sure is luxurious. With nearly 500 rooms overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, this design-conscious resort—with all-white rooms lined in mirrors and floor-to-ceiling windows—is anything but boutique. Guests are assigned their very own "angels"—personal executive assistants who book restaurant and spa reservations and can arrange babysitting and special celebrations.

Around the resort, guests can relax at the private beach, pool and spa, or party at nine different bars, including the 24-hour Bluetooth Bar and two-floor disco. Hungry? There are several on-site dining options, from sushi at Arrigato to Russian at Mutbak to Italian at Salve.

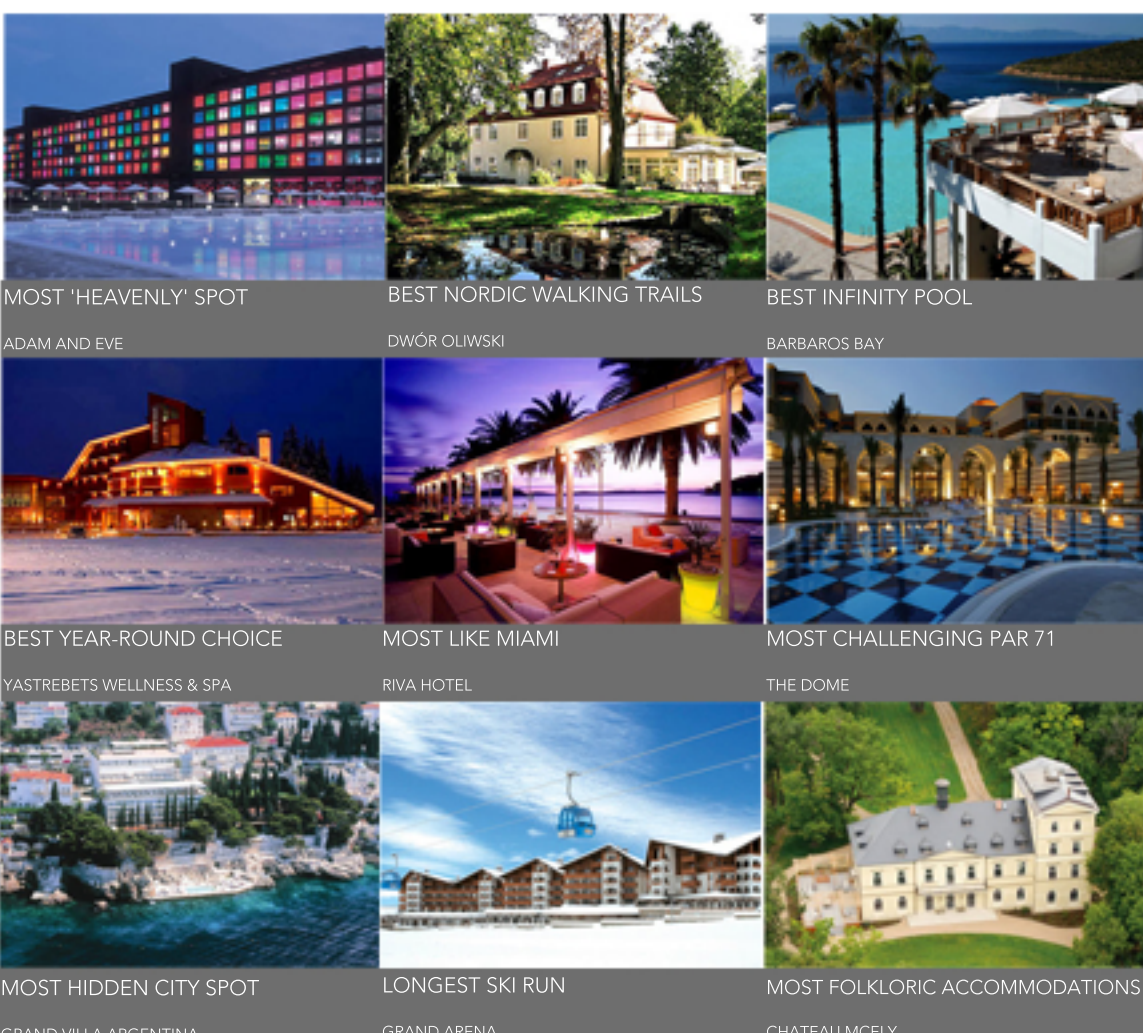
With resorts like these popping up at a fast clip, how can travelers trust that the luxury property is up to snuff?

Endorsements from a luxury consortium, like the Kiwi Collection, help; it and groups like it have a set of standards each hotel must meet before gaining admittance. Criteria include a five-star rating from several independent sources; pristine customer service records; and amenities like butler service to a full-service spa, 24-hour room service and king-sized accommodations.

Pam Lassers, a spokesperson for Abercrombie and Kent, a luxury tour operator based in New York, says these groups, including her own, send their representatives to each spot before endorsing it. Desire a firsthand account? Call and ask to speak with someone who has been on the property. You'll be able to ask them specific questions and gain insider info.

After all, it's not only about being the first, but being the first to do it well. "It comes down to bragging rights," says Kerr. "It's about keeping ahead of the Joneses, not [just] keeping up with them."

In Pictures: Eastern Europe's Extravagant Getaways



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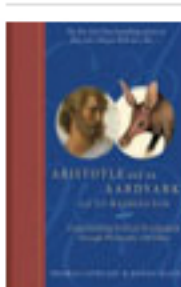
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