



FT REPORT - HOUSE & HOME - FRONT PAGE: Faraway places (with butlers)

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Like a notoriously loose woman, the second home destination that is too readily accessible has started to lose its appeal. Budget flights, crowded beaches, traffic jams and packed restaurants have done for the Mediterranean coastline what student posters did for impressionist landscapes - lowered its stock. Discerning high-rollers now demand luxury homes in remote and almost inaccessible locations.

Gone are high-end estate agents' breathless exhortations that you can be "door to door in under two hours" or "sitting on your Marbella balcony in half the time it takes to get to Manchester from London". Now the sales hook for the super-rich is how challenging the journey is to some virgin corner of planet earth. The narrower the landing strip or more unusual the "arrival experience" (by seaplane, helicopter or speedboat), the greater the appeal and the higher the cost.

"It's not just a property trend, it's a lifestyle and tourism trend," says James Davis, development director of estate agency Hamptons International. "It's aspirational and about the fact that you can reach this place that most people wouldn't have the resources to get to. But once you get to your hideaway you want all the luxuries as well."

Modern technology such as the private jet and the internet might have ushered in a return to the romance of novels such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island* and *Swiss Family Robinson* but it's unlikely that the original castaways would recognise the package of trimmings that comes as standard with a 21st-century remote hideaway.

There are no parrot-shouldering pirates slumming it in wooden stockades or Ben Gunns hiding in caves and dreaming of cheese. Instead there are comfort-cooled luxury villas with water slides and private pools. Though most properties come with a simply dressed Man Friday, he is likely to be a cordon bleu chef with a knowledge of wine (and a cellar) to rival a sommelier in a Paris restaurant.

"With people living fast-paced lives in cities like London, Tokyo and New York, when the time comes to get away there's nothing more attractive than a serene natural destination in the middle of nowhere - without having to sacrifice luxury," says Sonu Shivdasani, who with his Swedish wife, Eva, runs Soneva, which has top-end, ecologically friendly spa-resorts on paradise islands, predominantly in the Maldives. They are launching Soneva Kiri, a development of 46 pool villas on the Thai island of Koh Kood, which is accessible only by private aircraft followed by a speedboat. Yet, in spite of its inaccessibility, prices start at £2.5m for vast homes of bamboo and sun-bleached pine that are as fastidiously green and close to nature as a stick insect on a twig.

It is the simple things in life that are the most highly prized, believes Shivdasani. "Freshness is a rare experience for those that dwell in cities," he says. "(Like) a salad that was still sitting in the garden two hours earlier or a fish recently swimming by."

In property as in lifestyle, we are entering a more health-conscious age. Just as the fashion for the cholesterol-filled Michelin-starred meal has given way to a more low-fat organic diet, so the remote location villa has lots of new age touches. We have come a long way from the 1970s and

1980s, when the high-status second home tended to be a gilded Xanadu festooned with decoration and redolent of hedonism. For example, at the Four Seasons Residences, a resort in the Seychelles, the swimming pools have been designed to incorporate boulders that have remained in the same place for thousands of years. And today the most expensive and exclusive of overseas houses are designed in such a way that it's sometimes hard to actually see them. For all their state-of-the-art luxury interiors, they convey the simplicity of Buddha sitting cross-legged in transcendental meditation. Abstinence-decadence, one might call it.

"There's definitely a trend towards barefoot chic," says award-winning architect Richard Hywel Evans. "Except that when you click your fingers a butler comes running." He has just about cornered the market in top-end hotel-villa resorts. "More and more people phone us with more and more remote and extraordinary islands that we buzz off and have a look at. I'm building a pontoon-hotel 100 miles off the Australian barrier reef where you can go scuba diving out of your bedroom window."

Hywel Evans is also constructing 28 villas, together with "five A-frame grass huts," at Zil Pasyon on Félicité, a private island in the Indian ocean, an hour and a half's boat ride from the Seychelles. Properties are up to 15,000 sq ft and are priced from £1.8m. The development by spa company Per Aquum merges into the landscape when seen from the sea or air - what Hywel Evans calls "stealth architecture". Owners will be able to use an air-conditioned helicopter service to get to the resort in 15 minutes from the Seychelles capital of Mahé.

"Stepping off the plane directly on to the beach is one of the greatest ways to start a holiday," says David Hew of Kamalame Cay, a private island on the edge of the Tongue of the Ocean in The Bahamas. "Guests arrive in Nassau and then transfer to the private terminal and land right in the creek that runs behind the Cay."

The family-owned and operated hide-away has beach-front lots available for \$1m plus the cost of building a home, which varies depending on design. Staff provide hotel-style services and residents also have access to the Great House, a gathering place for meals and cocktails.

Indeed, it is the growth in private air travel that is fuelling the boom in far-flung homes and resort-hotel developments, says Hywel Evans. "It's just like it was with boats a couple of decades ago. Once people have a plane, or a franchise on one, they can go where they like and so you have all these new destinations opening up."

Rob Hersov, vice-chairman of Net Jets, which offers fractional aircraft ownership, has seen unprecedented growth in the past five years. "First, this is due to the boom in the economy," he says. "Second, because people hate airports and want privacy and exclusivity in their flying that commercial airlines can't give them."

He reckons that when the super-rich buy private aircraft, leisure travel is as much a part of the reasoning as business use. "People use them to go to their holiday homes," he explains. "It's not just short-range aircraft but long-range too. People will use their (franchise) miles to go house hunting and they will look at places such as Mozambique and Tanzania. Half the analysis is 'Where can I fly to be reasonably exclusive?'"

But poisonous plumes of airline emissions lingering in our skies are starkly at odds with "remote" developers hyperventilating their eco-credentials. According to Friends of the Earth, aviation is the fastest-growing source of carbon dioxide in the UK and a significant factor in climate change. Growing numbers of alpha males looking to play Robinson Crusoe by way of a personal Learjet are hardly going to mitigate the greenhouse effect. Mindful of the contradiction, the Soneva group gives two per cent of its annual revenues towards off-setting carbon emissions. And developers Jean-Michel Germin and Markus Frey, who are building a 56-unit resort on Long Island, 20 miles from Phuket, which can be reached only by helicopter, are enthusiastically planting trees.

But Sean Collins, chief executive of estate agency Pure International, is sceptical. "To be perfectly honest, I'm utterly bored by the fact that any project anywhere in the world will tell you why it's so good environmentally," he says. "The reality is there's hardly any project that doesn't leave a firm environmental footprint and on top of that you have increased air travel to get to the place."

It might be argued, however, that the high-end market can assist in limiting the environmental impact by reducing the density of people.

If money used to go hand-in-hand with decadence, the way to bring your country into economic viability is to preserve its pristine appeal with a handful of very high-end developments.

"The world has become much wealthier and there is a lot of new money in places that were exotic in the past," says Davis. "That has pushed the old money out so now the sophisticated money that is less brash and showy is heading to these new resorts where you won't find the paparazzi lens or recognise everyone in the hotel bar."

Not that there isn't snob value in the new second homes addresses. If you are a businessperson based in a high-density city, the more remote your get-away the bigger the feather in your cap. "People are very impressed at a dinner party when you say that you have a home on the edge of the jungle," says Davis, who is marketing the Four Seasons Residences complex in the Seychelles, where the typically high-spec villas are priced from £3.34m and blend in among the palms and albizia trees.

Such an untainted Eden that took a little bit of effort to get to is what appealed to Alec Pettigrew, a Hong Kong-based trader, when he bought a large plot on Jumeriah Palm Island (known locally as Barama Bay Island), just off the coast of Phuket in Thailand. Having cast around various parts of the world, he decided on one of just 11 plots on the island, which can be reached only via a 10 minute speedboat ride from Phuket.

Here he has commissioned an architect and is in the process of building a large family house. A hotel by Dubai-based developer Emaar is scheduled to be built in the future but, other than that, there are just a few neighbours on large plots. "Hong Kong is a fantastic modern city but you can have enough of it," says Pettigrew. "I don't need to call it home. Communications technologies today are so advanced that you can work out of anywhere and this is a very, very special place."

Today's treasure island might look like the kind of place where the mail boat only pulls into port once a week but it must have wi-fi.

