

THE SUNDAY TIMES SECTION 7 | AUGUST 10, 2008

travel

WHO SAYS THE HOLIDAY'S OVER?

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Wilderness for super-softies

Luxury holidays can get so boring, darling — but roughing it can be so, well, rough. Matt Rudd enjoys the best of both worlds in the Italian Dolomites

There was no standing room in second class on my train last week, so I got to stand in first. A real privilege. You overhear a different kind of conversation in first.

"I know, George. You're so right. A luxury hotel can get sooooo boring."

"Terribly, terribly so."

"And, ironically, George, it's all that luxury, isn't it? The fluffy bathrobes. The massaging. The Jacuzzis. Drives me mad."

"The breakfasts with the omelette chef and the 20 yoghurts and the champagne. And all the smiling staff. The endless smiling. It gets to you."

Standing there on the packed 19.37, I began to feel sorry for George and his friend in their roomy seats. All that overeating and lying around: poor them. There's no aim to their holidays.

No peaks and troughs. No point. The trick, of course, is to earn your luxury: a deluxe weekend at the end of a marathon hike; a fortnight in a tent on a windswept mountain followed by back-to-back treatments in a five-star spa. If George were to trek through the desert for a month, eating nothing but scorpion faeces and drinking nothing but his own urine, he wouldn't complain about the fluffy bathrobes waiting at the end of it.

Of course, some people just won't do the urine-drinking. Too spoilt, you see. But that's okay — there is a half-way solution. You base yourself at the luxury hotel, then, just as the hand-feeding-of-grapes is getting too much, you vanish into the wilderness for a night. Then, just when the wilderness is getting too much, you scurry back to the luxury hotel again.

We did this in the Italian Dolomites, and it worked a treat. The luxury hotel in question was Rosa Alpina, in the swanky little town of San Cassiano, and it does the spa/smiling/champagne-at-breakfast stuff very well indeed. Its restaurant has two whole Michelin stars, and some of our fellow guests were eating there every night... the ones, that is, who weren't being helicoptered to Venice for lunch. They were beyond help. We weren't: not quite. Two days in, at the point when our facial muscles were cramping from having to return all the radiant Alpine smiles, just as our two-year-old was beginning to behave like the son of a Russian oligarch ("I want caviar, dada, bring me caviar, waaaaaaa"), we decided it was time for that shot of wilderness.

When I say wilderness, don't panic, George. The hotel owns a small chalet high up the side of an adjacent mountain. On the roughing-it side, it has only a light bulb's worth of solar electricity, rainwater taps, mattresses in the eaves and no satellite television. On the not-really-roughing-it-at-all side, it has a rack of fancy wines, the same crisp cotton bedding and fancy toiletries as the hotel and, goddammit, the fluffy bathrobes. What normally happens is that the guests have a slap-up dinner at the hotel, then, as darkness falls, they

are transferred to the chalet (a precipitous 20-minute 4WD ride away) to sleep it off. Madness. You miss the whole evening. We decided to really live life on the edge and get transferred there before dinner.

"We'll cook our own food on the grill," I said bravely. So, Hugo Pizzinini, the third generation of Pizzinini to run Rosa Alpina, asked the kitchens to prepare a little picnic.

An hour later, it was just us and a 270-degree mountain view. True wilderness. And the picnic, of course: four steaks, a rack of lamb, platters of antipasti, an abundant basket of home-baked bread, Michelin-star cutlery, salads, balsamic vinegar, two types of rock salt and a nice bottle of 1996 chianti for toasting the epic sunset. It wasn't exactly Ray Mears.

Even so, Hugo had suggested at the time of booking that the chalet wasn't to the liking of all his guests. In fact, he'd had one couple phone (or BlackBerry, I bet) to demand rescue one hour after they'd been dropped off. They hadn't liked the silence.

This, more than polar bears trapped on melting ice cubes, more than the continued success of no-win, no-fee injury specialists, more than 20 minutes in a branch of Phones4U just wanting to buy a phone, not a CD player or a camera or

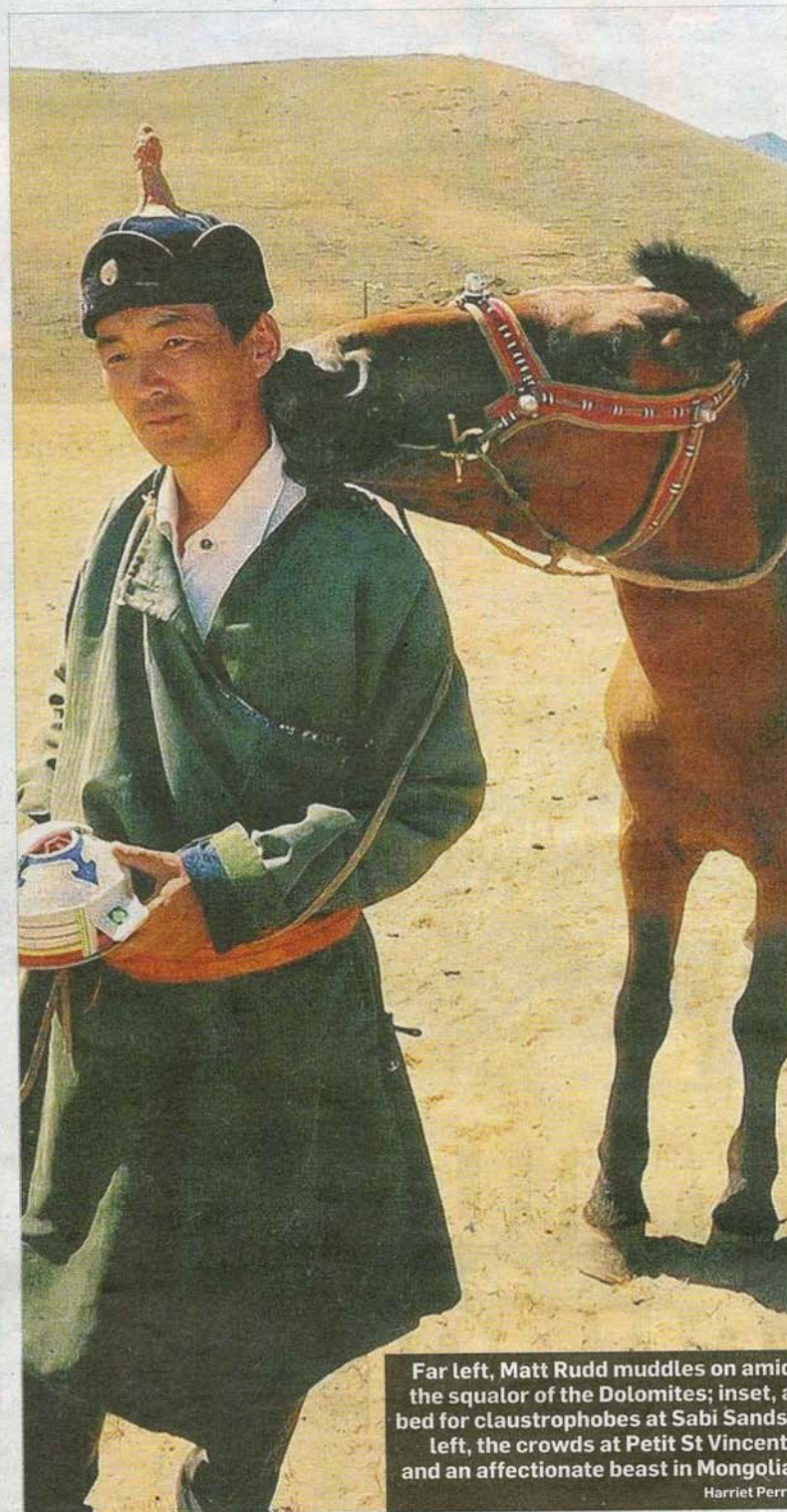
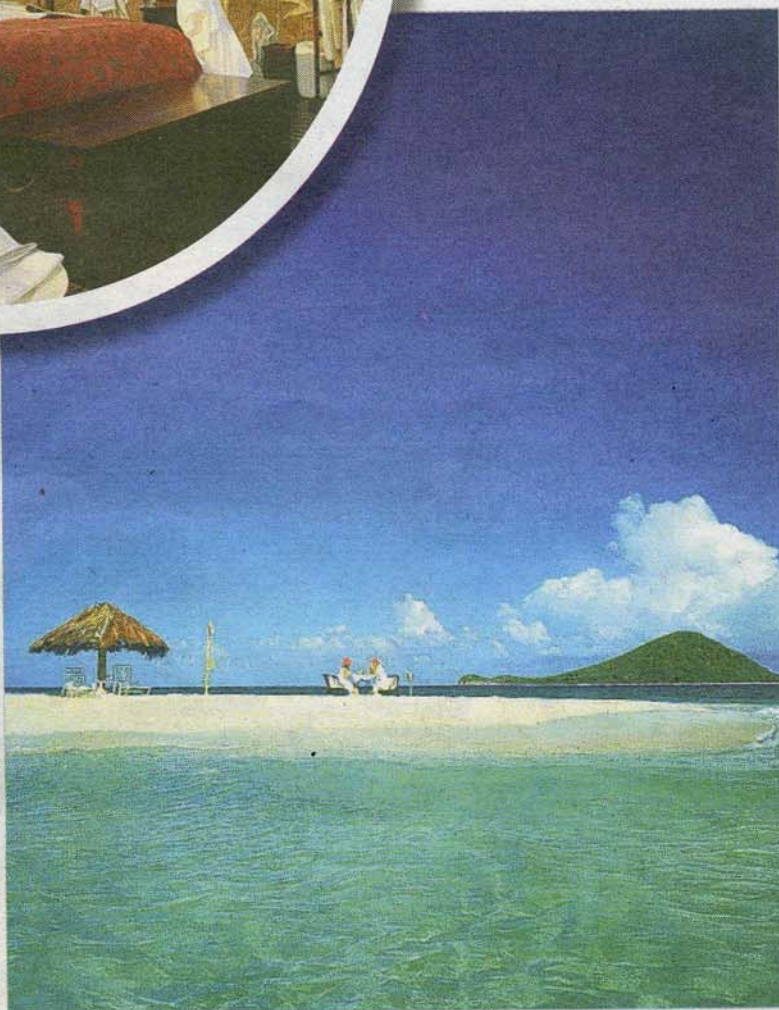
a toaster, just a phone, just a goddamn phone, demonstrates that there is no hope, no hope at all, for the world. When people can be transported to a perfect and, let's be honest, posh cabin on top of a mountain, left in total peace to contemplate how remarkably fortunate they are to be there — just them, the booze, the roaring fire and the world-beating views — and they phone 15 minutes later to be rescued! Because it's too quiet! I'm speechless.

Well, I'm not. In fact, we chatted for hours, me, my wife and the son of the oligarch, on our private mountain. Then, when the day had burnt out, we crawled up to our loft beds and slept that deep, dream-free, high-altitude sleep of the oxygen-deprived.

At 7.30 on the morning after our night of not-in-the-slightest-bit-rugged wilderness living, there was a knock at the door. Breakfast: fruit, pain au chocolat, fresh orange juice, cereals, hot chocolate, coffee and tea for me. But no milk. No milk for my morning tea. These damned Italians thinking just because we're in Italy, we'll suddenly start drinking tea without milk. Who do they think we are? What do they think they are playing at? That really was roughing it, I can tell you. They hadn't even brought 25 types of omelette — apparently, the potholed mountain



"No milk for my morning tea. What did they think they were playing at? That really was roughing it, I can tell you"



Far left, Matt Rudd muddles on amid the squalor of the Dolomites; inset, a bed for claustrophobes at Sabi Sands; left, the crowds at Petit St Vincent; and an affectionate beast in Mongolia
Harriet Perry

track scrambled that idea. Four hours later, we packed our bags, left them for the porter, and wandered down the mountain for two hours, using our own feet and everything. By midday, we were back. Back to the steam room and the shelves of moisturisers and the 10-course menu degustation and the slippers neatly adjacent to the bed. We'd thoroughly earned our luxury now, of course. We'd spent a whole night out in the wilds, alone with nature (and the wine and steaks and Egyptian cotton sheets and breakfast in bed). We hadn't even called to be rescued or anything.

"Cheese and ham with my omelette this morning, my good man. And, yes, champagne. Whyever not?"

Travel details: deluxe rooms at the Rosa Alpina (00 39-0471 849 500, www.rosalpina.it) start at £210, B&B. The chalet costs one extra night at your room rate, including transfers and breakfast. Check the website for weekend deals — some include a chalet stay. The barbecue starts at £55pp, depending on your level of extravagance.

Original Travel (020 7978 7333, www.originaltravel.co.uk) can arrange three nights at the hotel and one in the chalet; from £580pp, based on two sharing and including flights and car hire.

SIX MORE DELUXE HOTEL OUTPOSTS

UNDER THE AFRICAN SKY

It's just you and the Big Five when you opt for the treehouse experience at Lion Sands, in the Sabi Sands game reserve, South Africa. Your pretty bush bedroom is 15 minutes from the main lodge and on a platform high in the branches of a 100-year-old jackalberry tree. There's a four-poster swathed in muslin, a dainty dressing table, a wine cooler for the champagne and — essentially — an ensuite for when the other kind of nature calls. **Details:** 00 27 11 484 9911, www.lionsands.com; doubles from £440, full-board. A night in the treehouse costs an additional £122.

ISLAND IDYLL

Phuket may not sound promising for splendid isolation, but the Evason is set in 64 tropical acres, miles from Patong's no-holds-barred 24-hour go-go bars. The splendidly isolated bit comes if you book a night in the

honeymoon suite. A 10-minute ride by traditional Thai boat from the main resort, it's the only room on Bon Island, a lush bouquet of rainforest trails and powder-fine beaches that are all yours from sunset to sunrise.

Details: 00 66 7638 1010, www.sixsenses.com; doubles from £106, room-only. A night in the honeymoon suite starts at £447.

STEPPE AWAY FROM THE HOTEL

The Terelj, 30 miles from Ulan Bator, is Mongolia's first five-star boutique, a former Soviet summer camp that has had a multimillion-pound makeover. But you can't visit the world's most sparsely populated country without spending a night in those wide open spaces, so the hotel will drive you a further three hours out into the steppes to your own beautifully decorated traditional yurt. Admittedly, it's on the outskirts of a ger camp — but, really, that's lonely enough, with wild horses roaming about.

Details: 01372 361873, www.slh.com/terelj; doubles from £100, B&B. A night in the yurt costs an additional £70.

FIND YOUR SPOT ON THE ATLAS

Kasbah Agafay, just outside Marrakesh, is a stylishly converted 150-year-old hilltop fort with commanding views over the Atlas Mountains. You can stay in a five-star, air-conditioned tent in the hotel grounds... if you're a wimp. Those made of sterner stuff can let a guide lead them deep into the desert, set up an authentic Berber camp on a golden sand dune and see the sun go down as the Moroccans have done for centuries.

Details: 00 212 24 36 86 00, www.slh.com/kasbahagafay; doubles from £285, B&B. A night in a Berber tent starts at £100.

ROBINSON CRUSOE EXPERIENCE

Petit St Vincent, in the Grenadines, excels in the sort of discreet seclusion that would leave Greta Garbo wondering when the party's starting. Its cottages are remote enough themselves, but hotel staff can drop you off on a deserted beach with nothing more than a cooking stove to make dinner, two kerosene lanterns and two sleeping bags. Then they go and spoil it all by providing a pop-up tent in case it rains.

Details: 00 1 954 963 7401, www.psvresort.com; doubles from £355, full-board. The Robinson Crusoe experience costs £40.

WILDERNESS, HOLLYWOOD STYLE

The forests of New Zealand's South Island have starred in a string of A-list movies, including the Lord of the Rings trilogy. The view from Blanket Bay of Lake Wakatipu's blue glacial waters, framed by imperious craggy mountains, is equally Oscar-worthy, but for true hideaway heaven, the lodge will helicopter guests to a shepherd's hut in the remotest reaches of the Southern Alps, with just a couple of prime steaks for the wood-fired barbecue and some seriously good wine. **Details:** 00 64 3 441 0115, www.blanketbay.com; doubles from £350, half-board. A night in the shepherd's hut costs £1,100, half-board.

Susan d'Arcy



ANYONE THERE?

For your own wilderness, check out the world's most remote hotels at

timesonline.co.uk/wheretosay