HELSINKI, FINLAND

A strong Finnish

Spring is a fine time to take the plunge in Helsinki, with the last of the snow clouds disappearing over the horizon and the ice that clad the Finnish capital’s shores over winter thawing for the year. Start by taking the ferry to Suomenlinna, a former island fortress a 15-minute chug away that’s now home to cafés, museums, restaurants and a brewery. Once you’ve finished ambling its cannon-lined perimeter, return to the city to indulge in that most Finnish of activities: the sauna. Löyly, the ultimate study in the use of pine, is a striking addition to the waterfront. After stints in its dry and smoke rooms, make like a local and leap into the brisk waters of the Baltic outside. You can recover with elk meatballs and a Finnish lager in the adjoining restaurant.

Löyly is a contemporary sauna complex close to the centre of Helsinki; there is also a restaurant and sun terraces overlooking the sea.

MAK E IT HAPPEN

1. BA, Norwegian and Finnair fly to Helsinki (from £130; finnair.com).
2. A two-hour session at Löyly costs £16, weekend brunch costs £24 and weekday lunch £28 (book ahead; loylyhelsinki.fi).
3. A return ferry to Suomenlinna costs £4.30 (hsl.fi).
4. A 72-hour Helsinki card includes free public transport as well as other discounts (£55; helsinkicard.com).
5. Stay at Art Deco-styled Lilla Roberts, in a former police station in the Design District (from £130; lillaroberts.com). Quote “PROLP” on website bookings by 30 June for 15 per cent off your stay.
Animal encounters at Yorkshire Sculpture Park have hitherto been limited to the sheep grazing its fields. Now, for the outdoor gallery’s 40th anniversary, Chinese artist and keen controversialist Ai Weiwei has installed his globe-trotting series of 12 zodiac animal heads. These are outsize versions of bronzes looted by British and French troops from Beijing’s Summer Palace in 1860. Standing taller than the viewer, the effigies are his response to a modern cause célèbre in China. Ai Weiwei’s Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads is on show at Yorkshire Sculpture Park from 8 April 2017–22 April 2018 (ysp.co.uk). Admission is free; parking costs £2.50–£8. The park is just off junction 38 of the M1. It’s also served by bus 96, which runs between Barnsley and Wakefield (travelsouthyorkshire.com).

VALLETTA, MALTA

Three cities in one day

Less than a fifth the size of Greater London, Malta is one of the world’s smallest countries but it’s crammed with diversions for a short break. This month – the start of the festival season and warm weather, but without the peak crowds and prices of summer – is an ideal time to visit the country’s historic citadels. A short ferry ride from the capital Valletta, with views of its timeless skyline back across the harbour, the Three Cities (as Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua are known) are a great place to pause yourself for a day or two. Visit them at their waterfront restaurants, get lost down narrow backstreets bedecked with flowers, and explore centuries-old history at the Inquisitor’s Palace and Fort St Angelo.

WEST YORKSHIRE, ENGLAND

Heads up

Animal encounters at Yorkshire Sculpture Park have hitherto been limited to the sheep grazing its fields. Now, for the outdoor gallery’s 40th anniversary, Chinese artist and keen controversialist Ai Weiwei has installed his globe-trotting series of 12 zodiac animal heads. These are outsize versions of bronzes looted by British and French troops from Beijing’s Summer Palace in 1860. Standing taller than the viewer, the effigies are his response to a modern cause célèbre in China. Ai Weiwei’s Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads is on show at Yorkshire Sculpture Park from 8 April 2017–22 April 2018 (ysp.co.uk). Admission is free; parking costs £2.50–£8. The park is just off junction 38 of the M1. It’s also served by bus 96, which runs between Barnsley and Wakefield (travelsouthyorkshire.com).

THE CotSWOLDS, ENGLAND

Into the woods

The colours most associated with the Cotswolds are the vivid green of its meadows (dotted white with lambs in spring) and the pale honey hue of the local stone that holds up all those thatched cottage roofs. From mid-April to May, however, another colour is as bold to the eye, when woods all across the region are carpeted in purple haze of bluebells. This month on Sheep Street, a culinary haven, the restaurant team at the Sheep make the perfect base for woodland wanderings. This restaurant with boutique rooms is well suited with its accrued history (early 17th-century) along with great views, wood-burning pizza oven and contemporary look inside. From here, head for Foxholes, a peaceful woodland awash with bluebells and dappled light. Pick your way along a network of paths and let your eyes peer for butterflies which are beginning to emerge from their chrysalises.

MAKE IT HAPPEN

The Sheep

Mansfield Road, Stow-on-the-Wold GL54 2QH (01451 821111; thesheepstow.co.uk) From here, head for Foxholes, a peaceful woodland awash with bluebells and dappled light. Pick your way along a network of paths and let your eyes peer for butterflies which are beginning to emerge from their chrysalises.
**IBIZA, SPAIN**

The White Island

Visit Ibiza before the last weekend in May – when most big clubs throw their opening parties – and you’ll find temperatures in the high teens but its beaches much quieter than usual, and its restaurants largely filled with locals. New hotel Hostal La Torre, on the rocky promontory of Cap Negret, is an ideal place from which to enjoy the quieter side of island life. Seventeen simple whitewashed rooms cluster around a plant-filled courtyard garden, but you’ll likely spend most of your time on its sunny terrace. Though a great breakfast spot it’s particularly alluring at dusk, when fashionable couples and friends gather for cocktails and tapas as the sun disappears into the shimmering Balaeric Sea. Spend your days reclining on the many lovely stretches of sand, or making the most of the fine climate with alfresco meals served by Ibicenco kitchens. Beachfront Can Pujol makes the best rice and seafood dishes on the island (Carretera Port des Torrent; paella from £21), while in Ibiza Old Town the top choice is Comidas San Juan. Tucked down one of the atmospheric city’s stone-flagged alleyways, this family-run tavern is fantastic value and always full of friendly Ibicenca (mains from £6).

**MAKE IT HAPPEN**

Hostal La Torre sits on secluded Cap Negret, and many of its rooms have balconies. The west-facing terrace offers sea views – particularly fine at sunset – plus an inventive menu of cocktails and Mediterranean food.

**THE RESTING ROOM**

Excellent seasonal food in the ground-floor cocktail bar, including truffled mushrooms on toast and ox cheek, as well as local beers – and, of course, an extensive gin collection (mains from £12).

**THE GINSTITUTE**

Learn the history of gin over a Tom Collins in the recreated gin palace, before heading to the distillery to blend your own (£110, incl two bottles of gin and four cocktails).

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**EASY TRIPS**

**HIDDEN TALENTS**

Add a string to your bow with a new course

**TILE PAINTING**

LISBON

Azulejos are the painted tiles that are Portugal’s greatest visual art. Try your hand at decorating some with specialist Marie Caroline Vidal: participants are given the finished product to take home once it has returned from the kiln (from £20; Facebook: ‘Workshop-de-Azulejos’).

**PERFUME**

PARIS

At Studio des Parfums in the Marais district, budding perfumiers create their own scent from a menu of 180 ingredients – successful results can be reordered later (from £85; studiodesparfums-paris.fr).

**PHOTOGRAPHY**

ROME

The Eternal City has always had a magnetic appeal to artists, and customised photo tours take in both timeless monuments and hidden points of interest (from £160; romephotographyworkshop.com).

**SCREEN PRINTING**

GLASGOW

Rhubarb & Ginger’s studio classes start with bold and simple two-colour stencilled designs on fabric or T-shirts, while advanced workshops teach colour mixing and more (from £35; rhubarbginger.co.uk).

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**REVIEW OF THE MONTH**

**HEREFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND**

**Mrs Higgs Lodge**

**WHAT NOW?**

Spring is spreading across the hills and vales of Herefordshire, a largely rural county bordering Wales and with plenty of options for walking.

**WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT?**

Mrs Higgs Lodge is the perfect place to observe the change in season. Set within a 3,000-acre private estate and buried deep in woodland, there’s a touch of Snow White about the cottage, with squirrels and deer the only life you might expect to encounter on a daily basis. Built as a hunter’s lodge in 1835, the cottage gets its name from Mrs Higgs, whose husband had worked on the estate. She had no electricity or running water, would have bathed and washed in the nearby stream and brought up her water from a natural spring well. The current set-up is a nod to her time here, with all the rustic, off-grid charm retained but with the new-fangled additions of internal plumbing and electric lighting.

**WHAT’S MY ROOM LIKE?**

The lodge is over two floors, with an open-plan lounge, kitchen and dining area downstairs, and two bedrooms upstairs, one with a double bed and the other a twin. All the rooms have a wood-burning stove, wood-paneling and stone floors. Outside, there’s a hot tub, picnic benches and fire pit.

**WHAT AM I EATING?**

For self-catering, there’s a gas cooker and BBQ at the lodge, and supermarkets in Hereford, a 20-minute drive away. Alternatively, Oakchurch Farm Shop is a couple of miles away (oakchurch.net). Seven miles away, the Tram Inn does good pub grub (mains from £9; thetraminn.co.uk).

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**GOOD TO KNOW?**

The steps up to the bedrooms are steep so the lodge isn’t suitable for young kids or those with mobility issues. You’ll also need a car to access the lodge as it’s set far within the grounds of its estate. Note there are no plug sockets, limited mobile-phone signal and no wi-fi in the property: the idea is to escape modern life for a little while when staying here. Well-behaved dogs are welcome.

**WHAT’S THE DAMAGE?**

Bookings are for a minimum of three nights and the lodge sleeps four people (from £495; qualityunearthed.co.uk).

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