

Travel

POSTCARD
FROM...
ICELAND

The village of Fáskrúðsfjörður is remote, even by Icelandic standards. Shouldering the frigid north Atlantic in the far east of the country, it is 650km on the winding coastal road from Reykjavik, Iceland's only major city. This is a quiet farming and fishing community, though the area is best known among Icelanders for the *Eistnaflug* — a heavy metal festival nearby, whose name literally translates as “the flying testicles”.

A new arrival, however, is putting the village on the tourist map, by drawing on Fáskrúðsfjörður's unlikely French connection. The Fosshótel Austfirðir is not so much a hotel as a museum with rooms, showcasing a bygone era when fishermen from France set up a second home here.

To explain more, local volunteer guide Hafþor Eide leads me into the hotel's freshly painted reception. Wall-mounted photographs show the building, completed in 1904, was once a hospital where French nuns nursed scurvy-ridden fishermen who had arrived here despite thick fog, drifting icebergs and frequent shipwrecks. It takes a leap of imagination to connect this history with the setting we're in, a minimalist 26-room Scandinavian-



Matthew Cook

style hotel with a French restaurant and views over the fjord.

Entering the first room of the basement museum, we meet a cluster of startlingly realistic silicone figures. The fishermen are reclining on life-sized wooden bunks and dressed in thick Icelandic socks, their faces lit by dusty lanterns. Sounds of creaking wood and crashing waves fill the room. “If our visitors feel seasick, then we have done our job,” Eide says.

“The gloves they wear were knitted by local women in exchange for biscuits and red wine,” says Eide. “They put two thumbs on each glove, as the men wore them out so fast.”

A new arrival is putting the remote village on the tourist map, by drawing on its unlikely French connection

i / DETAILS

Caroline Eden was a guest of Visit Iceland (visiticeland.com). Double rooms at Fosshótel Austfirðir (fosshotel.is) cost from £120 per night. Return flights with WOW Air (wowair.co.uk) from London to Reykjavik cost from £98; Air Iceland (airiceland.is) flies between Reykjavik and Egilsstaðir in eastern Iceland from £104 return. For further information about the region, visit east.is

Hotel insider | Doing

business or changing planes

in Singapore? A new resort

offers a tropical island escape

just outside the city.

By Sanjay Surana

Can there be a more perfect antidote to city life than a quick escape to an island retreat? Singapore, the third most-densely populated country in the world, has its own island getaway in Sentosa but that is connected to the “mainland” by a bridge. For a more palpable escape, Singaporeans and visitors take a 45-minute ferry ride to Bintan, an Indonesian isle to the southeast. The journey from city chaos to coddling calm is supremely painless, with the city's skyscrapers shrinking to a miniature outline as the catamaran skirts past legions of tankers and container ships.

For anyone in need of rapid relaxation after a business trip to the city or between long-haul flights, it is a boon. In less time than it takes to digest a paper from cover to cover, the boat docks on Bintan's sleepy northwest coast.

A broad chunk of the north of the island is taken up with tropical beach resorts, homes, golf courses and shops but the Sanchaya, launched last month, is the first luxury resort to open on the island for a decade. The property is owned by Natalya Pavchinskaya, a Russian businesswoman with a background in art history who moved to Singapore in 2006 and used to visit Bintan at weekends. In 2011, she heard of a nine-hectare parcel for sale in Lagoi Bay and fell for the plot, located in the middle of a gently curving crescent with a clutch of uninhabited islands just offshore. Work began soon after but the planned completion date of September 2013 was repeatedly pushed back.

The hotel experience starts at Bintan's Bandar Banten Telani ferry terminal, where guests are welcomed into a spare, white-on-white lounge with a chilled, scented towel while immigration formalities are handled by hotel staff — Sanchaya is the only property to have its own lounge. From here, the 10-minute drive to the resort takes in towering palms and hills covered in dipterocarps.

Sanchaya, Sanskrit for “collection”, claims the cultures of Southeast Asia as inspiration but its look equally celebrates British colonialist architecture. The first glimpse of the property, built on an old coconut plantation, is the Great House, its black-and-white exterior mimicking the houses where government officials and British army officers lived in Singapore. Home to nine suites, the dining room, bar, library, wine room and meeting space, it delivers a suitably dramatic first impression out front, with a landscaped courtyard anchored by a tiered fountain. At the back is the classic beach-idyll view with a reflecting pool that seemingly blends into a 50m saltwater infinity pool and then the emerald-cyan sea. The villas, 21 of them, form a loose semi-circle around the Great House, each displaying influences from various Southeast Asian nations, including Thai-style pitched roofs with six layers of cedar shingles and masculine dark teak interiors, Khmer glazed pottery jars, Burmese colonial window frames, and Laotian temple ornaments.

Rooms come in colours atypical for a beach resort, elegant white and steel-



An hour from the city



From top: view from the rear of the Great House at the Sanchaya; a bedroom in one of the villas

grey, and supply the usual drool-worthy accoutrements: Egyptian cotton sheets, Lefroy Brooks claw-foot tubs, Bang & Olufsen televisions and sound systems, Chinoiserie-style cabinets, polished chrome floor lamps. And while these touches might sound like excess, the rooms never seem fussy or overly designed, more like the well-curated country home of a tasteful, flagrantly rich relative who'd spent some fine years in the colonies. Suites have roomy terraces that are especially inviting during those quick, raging tropical downpours, when the sea and sky merge in the distance. “Companions” trained by the British Butler Institute — yes, such a thing exists — attend all rooms.

The common areas continue the colonial theme. The bar recreates a late-1800s explorers' club, with vintage prints, antique telescopes and compasses, a reassuringly worn Gray-Nicolls cricket bat, and custom furniture. The Dining Room, where patrons are cooled by ceiling fans with palm-leaf-shaped blades, has French doors, gauze linen curtains, brass teapots in display cabinets, boxed frames of star anise, bamboo and rattan chairs. Food spans continents, from contemporary European (watermelon soup with truffle oil) to a tongue-tingling, tonsil-tickling Southeast Asian *mee mamak goreng* (fried noodles with chicken, prawn, egg, and slivers of fiery red chillies).

Snapshots of local culture make cameos — at breakfast the *Jamu Gendong*, or herbal drinks lady, hawks a basket filled with recuperative concoctions, like an earthy turmeric and tamarind shot beneficial for the immune system. Elsewhere, and depending on the hour, guests find themselves sipping cold-pressed fruit juices, coffee from the Indonesian islands of Java and Lombok, fragrant teas from Nepal, and cocktails made as they should be — on the spot after a little back-and-forth with the cheery barman, not thoughtlessly plucked from a multipage menu.

There's a pretty Lilliputian spa with dedicated freestanding pavilions for Thai massages and a fledgling garden of herbs and flowers. The rota of beach resort activities departs from the norm: croquet with tea or Pimm's, archery with a traditional bow, pétanque with



pastis. The staff — some raw, clearly new to the hotel industry's dynamics and rhythms, others with global experience — are a young, sweet, upbeat bunch.

Yet despite the obvious comfort, expense, and warmth of the property, the most memorable moments are those cloaked in quiet. Enjoying the linear, sculptural beauty of the palm trees that line the beachfront; lying on the pool loungers, listening only to the wind rustling through palm fronds; walking to Pulau Batu (rocky island), a hillock of an isle surrounded by boulders that's accessible on foot at low tide. Climbing to the top, past the charred remnants of a campfire, you'll feel like you're on a desert island. And isn't that the greatest escape of all?

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Sanjay Surana was a guest of the Sanchaya (thesanchaya.com); suites cost from \$520 and one-bedroom villas from \$593, including tax and transfers from the ferry terminal. For details of ferries from Singapore to Bintan, see brf.com.sg

From downtown to seashore: more island retreats within easy reach

From Rome: Ponza

Tiny Ponza is the island the Romans don't want the rest of us to know about. In summer you can hardly move for designer-clad Italians schmoozing in the pavement cafés, tanning themselves on the pebbly coves and snorkelling in the clear Mediterranean waters. But outside of August it's the perfect antidote to traffic-choked Rome. Hire a Vespa and go in search of an empty cove or take a boat trip to the gorgeous, uninhabited isle of Palmarola, with its underwater grottoes and rock pillars. **Where to stay:** Ponza has no five-star resorts but the Chiaia di Luna is one of the better options, with bright and breezy bedrooms, an outdoor pool and beautiful hillside position (doubles from €100, hotelchiaiadiluna.com) **How to get there:** The Vetor hydrofoil (vetor.it) takes just over an hour from Anzio, which is a half-hour train ride from Rome.

From London: Osea Island Driving across the old Roman causeway on to Osea feels like leaving

the 21st century behind. There are no shops, bars, restaurants or surfaced roads on this estuary island in Essex — just a handful of weather-boarded cottages, an Edwardian manor house with tennis court and pool, an overgrown orchard and four miles of unspoilt beaches. There's nothing low-key about the guest list, though. The island, which is owned by record producer Nigel Frieda, is home to two recording studios and is a popular filming location. So don't be surprised if you bump into the odd celeb. **Where to stay:** The Sweetshop is a charming cottage for two (from £325 for two nights, oseaisland.co.uk).



Ponza, near Rome — Getty Images

How to get there: Trains from London Liverpool Street to Witham station take less than 50 minutes, then it is a 15-minute taxi ride to the island (crossing at low-tide).

From New York: Long Island

When New Yorkers get a craving for sand dunes and salty air, Long Island is their first port of call. Stretching 190km east from New York harbour into the Atlantic Ocean, the island has a resort for everyone, from the chi-chi Hamptons to the surfers' hangout of Montauk. In recent years several of the island's old-school motels have been given a new lease of life as hip hotels and beach clubs, attracting a livelier crowd. **Where to stay:** The Maidstone has brought a touch of Scandi-chic to East Hampton with cosy, colourful rooms, bikes for hire and yoga in the garden (doubles from \$545, themairstone.com). **How to get there:** The Long Island Rail Road departs from Penn Station in Manhattan (mta.info/lirr). On summer weekends, its high-speed Cannonball service reaches Westhampton Beach in 94 minutes.



Osea, 70 minutes from London

From Hong Kong: Lantau Island Lantau is twice the size of Hong Kong Island but has only a fraction of the population, with miles of walking trails winding between monasteries, beaches and fishing villages. It's no forgotten outpost: you'll also find Hong Kong Disneyland, the Big Buddha of Po Lin Monastery and the Ngong Ping 360 cable car. **Where to stay:** The slick new Auberge Discovery Bay opened last year on a prime waterside site, with 325 rooms and an impressive spa (doubles from HK\$961 (£81), aubergediscoverybay.com).

How to get there: Regular catamaran (30 mins) and traditional ferry services (50mins) run between Hong Kong Island and Lantau.

From Vancouver: the Southern Gulf Islands

The Southern Gulf Islands, off the coast of British Columbia, are a playground for outdoor-loving Canadians, who come here to hike and camp in the pristine forests and kayak, scuba dive and sail in the sheltered waters. There are more than 200 isles to choose from but Salt Spring Island is one of the most accessible and rewarding for visitors, with artisan shops, galleries, farmers' markets and wineries. **Where to stay:** Hastings House is an elegant country house hotel with spacious suites, a spa and manicured lawns overlooking the harbour (doubles from C\$395, hastingshouse.com). **How to get there:** SaltSpring Air runs daily seaplanes from Vancouver with a flight time of around 35 minutes (saltspringair.com).

Joanne O'Connor