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LIVING

Get Off the Grid With These 7 Quiet Destinations

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by KATE DONNELLY

Atacama Desert, Chile
Photo: Alamy

Sometimes you just need to unplug. From spiritual deserts to crystal blue waters and lush rainforests, these seven off-the-grid destinations around the world are perfect for those seeking a much-needed respite from urban life. Channel your best sense of enlightenment at these mellow, road-less-traveled offerings (no cell phone required).

1. Atacama Desert, Chile
Certainly, the journey is the destination in the humbling, dry high desert of Atacama. With its surreal, Mars-like geography primed for silent reflection, head out for a morning horseback ride or enjoy a walk through the Valley of the Moon, over vast glistening salt-meets-rocky flats and radical dunes. An all-day excursion to Lagunas Altiplanicas is where mountains loom in the distance and alpaca-like vicuñas roam nearby dreamy teal lakes. Later, feast on a lunch of quinoa, roasted vegetables, and local Chilean wine, enjoying some of the best views in Chile. Obviously, stargazing is requisite (preferably at the ALMA Observatory, and if you like soaring to new heights, a sunrise hot-air balloon ride gives new meaning to floating.

Where to Stay: Seamlessly blending into its extraterrestrial landscape, the sublimely striking boutique hotel, Tierra Atacama, once a cattle corral, fills its lovingly sparse 32 rooms with earthy textiles, adobe walls, soft cowhide rugs, and outdoor showers. Slough away dry skin at the on-property spa with local desert salts and white clay and afterward, replenish further with a swim. In the evenings, guests sit around the terrace's crackling fire pits with Pisco Sours infused with rica rica (a local aromatic herb) as the blazing golden-pink sun sets over the majestic Andes.

Sedona, Arizona
Photo: Alamy

2. Sedona, Arizona
Already beloved by mystics and astrologers, the dazzling light, legendary red rock, and otherworldly terrain beg for mobile phones to be silenced. Arrive early at the architecturally beloved Chapel of the Holy Cross (a gift from philanthropist Marguerite Brunswig Staude), a strong, ingenious design built into earthy cliffs. Channel the force of the area's vortexes at Bell Rock, where there's a series of trails with panoramic views, and where the earth is said to buzz with "heightened" energy. Looking for crystals? Drop by Mystical Bazaar or Crystal Magic. In the mornings, soak in the forested canyon colors of West Fork Oak Creek Trail. At night, it's all about the galaxy—looking up has its benefits.

Where To Stay: With only 16-rooms, Mii Amo's (whose name means "one's path") features Southwestern décor, adobe brick, indigenous stone, and an East-meets-West Japanese-inspired courtyard. Join either 3, 4 or 7-night curated "Journeys" and dip into the newly unveiled spa menu dedicated to local treatments—i.e., a nourishing, intoxicating piñon body scrub and calming Medicine Wheel meditation.

Anguilla, British Virgin Islands
Photo: Alamy

3. Anguilla, British Virgin Islands
Away from St. Barth's glitzy scene (and blissfully with far fewer cruise ships), the tropical island of Anguilla still feels like a secret. After a quick speedboat ride from St. Maarten, unpretentious sun-seekers love the palm-fringed, white-sand sophistication. Drop by the softly lit, teal-shuttered Blanchards for local grilled crayfish and the famed cracked-coconut dessert. The casual seaside Straw Hat Restaurant serves an Anguillan Cuban sandwich and Carib lager. For island music, the local star Bankie Banx performs at Dune Preserve while Sandy Ground's funky venue Pumphouse doubles as a dance spot and serves boozy Pyrat rum punch. Shimmering water-lovers should sign up for legendary Caribbean snorkeling or scuba diving.

Where To Stay: The newly crowned Four Seasons, designed by Kelly Wearstler, holds dramatic views of the vibrant sea and a tranquil infinity-edge pool. In the mornings, sign up for an early yoga class or soothe what ails with a Blue Tranquility massage. Later, the casual Half Shell bar, a chic beach-hut venue, serves fish tacos and an earthy-sweet smoothie using the green superfood moringa (and if you please, rum). At dusk, the sun-kissed gather at the alluring Sunset Lounge for sushi, Laurent-Perrier Champagne, and a rolling soundtrack of waves.

Costalegre, Mexico
Photo: Alamy

4. Costalegre, Mexico
Far, far away from the crowds of Puerto Vallarta, visit the quiet exotic wilderness of Costalegre (meaning "Coast of Joy"), a place where those in the know have long sought pristine, deserted beaches and enchanting sunsets. You don't come here for shopping or the beach bars, but rather for winding dirt roads and a vast ecosystem. For activities, there's golfing, polo, and horseback riding, and for nature lovers, a bird-watchers paradise with close to 300 varieties like black ibis, and occasionally, pink flamingos. And, rest assured, sunsets are always perfect.

Where To Stay: For high exotic visuals, drop your bags—hopefully, packed with caftans—at Casa Cuixmala (recently reopened after a hurricane). Atop a mountain surrounded by lush jungle and tropical gardens, Moorish-inflected rooms designed by Robert Couturier pop with bright blue and orange. Ride horses through coconut groves, boat alongside crocodiles, or simply spread a beach blanket. Organic meals are plucked from on-site gardens. Alternatively, if barefoot-chic beachfront solitude appeals, Las Rosadas's bungalows on Chamela Bay smack of boho-inflected dreams, with vibrant textiles, fresh ceviche, and high-end tequila. It's also home to a sea-turtle sanctuary.

José Ignacio, Uruguay
Photo: Alamy

5. José Ignacio, Uruguay
Less than 20 miles northeast of the jetsetter's delight Punta del Este sits the quiet fishing village of José Ignacio. For simple local seafood, drop by the rustic-chic Parador La Huella or the tree-house-vibed Namm, with a warm teak, candle-lit dining room serving sashimi and pasta dishes. Source linens and cozy hand-knit sweaters from Santas Negras, and for a stretch, The Shack Yoga offers beachy Vinyasa-style classes. For the bigger panoramic picture, horseback riding at Estancia Vik bestows sweeping views of the rugged, pastoral Uruguayan countryside.

Where to Stay: For an intimate stay, drop your bags at the 37-room boutique hideaway Bahia Vik. Overlooking Mansa beach and using materials like wood, steel, and black zinc, there's also plenty of contemporary Uruguayan art (the owner is a well-known collector). In the morning, go for a swim, and at night, watch the rolling surf with a seat at the breezy La Susana, with local catch-of-the-day flavors, open-grilled meats, and a bottle of Vik's own Milla Cala—a velvety red blend.

Galápagos Islands, Ecuador
Photo: Alamy

6. Galápagos Islands, Ecuador
Let's just say Darwin was certainly onto something—the shores of the Galápagos are a virtual melting pot of giant tortoises, sea lions, marine iguanas, and blue-footed boobies. The province capital, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, makes for perfect kayaking or scuba diving while the site of Devil's Crown, known for its jagged rocks, offers stellar snorkeling with turtles, stingrays, and an occasional Hammerhead shark.

Where to Stay: Perched on an extinct volcano of Santa Cruz Island, the secluded, eco-friendly, 14-room Pikaia Lodge is composed of soaring floor-to-ceiling glass windows, bamboo floors, and Ecuadorian teak furniture. Wake up early for yacht excursions to a small host of nearby islands, with abundant snorkeling, hiking, and even a visit to organic coffee farms. After you stretch your legs, it's back aboard for a lunch featuring fish and steamed vegetables. Come evening, take advantage of the infinity pool under the stars.

Madagascar, Africa
Photo: Alamy

7. Madagascar, Africa
Like the Galápagos Islands, Madagascar offers rich, vibrant wildlife. Off the northeast coast, the smaller island of Nosy Ankao, part of a private five-island archipelago, could well become the new Maldives. Think a tropical sanctuary of unspoiled nature, calm foot-in-the-sand beaches, and lush jungles. It's also where the notion of "blue safari" caters to experiences like guided water journeys and marine life activities.

Where to Stay: On the northern end of Madagascar, the brand new Miavana features a lodge with 14-villas designed by Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens. Seclusion reigns among white sandy shores, aquamarine bays, quiet beaches, and hidden lagoons. From your villa, snorkel in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, sign up for whale and dolphin watching, fly-fishing, and kite-surfing, or trek into the forest to find the native, ring-tailed lemurs (resembling both monkeys and squirrels).

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Inside an Elegant Wedding at a 12th-Century Castle in France

MAY 19, 2017 9:24 AM
by ALEXANDRA MACON

39 VIEW SLIDESHOW
Photo: K Hulett Photography

Olivia John, a managing director in Blackstone's real estate group, and Columbia Business School student Donovan Hamlet's courtship all started with a case of mistaken identity. "We met at the gym in New York City when Donovan accidentally mistook me for my twin sister, whom he knew," explains Olivia. "I said I didn't know him and he was probably confusing me with my twin, but I was definitely intrigued. We continued to bump into each other, and eventually exchanged numbers."

The two had been dating for a year and two months when Donovan suggested they celebrate his birthday with a trip to Paris, Olivia's favorite city. "Unbeknownst to me, Donovan had been plotting for months to propose, going so far as flying to my parents' home in Chicago to get their blessing four months prior and talking to my friends to find out what kind of ring I might like," says Olivia. "He even had my sister try on rings to confirm my ring size."

Donovan's plan was to propose at sunset at the Jardins du Trocadéro in Paris—a beautiful garden with fountains that overlooks the Eiffel Tower. "The fountains were turned off because of a heat wave, and he hadn't realized that his planned 8:00 p.m. proposal time was well before Paris's 10:00 p.m. summer sunsets," says Olivia, laughing. "But he decided to do it anyway, and it was that very weekend that we decided to return to Paris for the wedding."

Once engaged, the couple quickly clicked with their wedding planners, Anne and Nancy from Fête in France. "I interviewed five different Paris-based wedding planners, and they immediately stood out because Nancy responded to my inquiry within five minutes despite it being 11:00 p.m. in Paris," says Olivia. "I loved her sense of urgency, and they brought our vision to life. Our photographers, Kevin and Katie of K Hulett Photography, also did an amazing job capturing the day. "

The search for a dress was a little more cumbersome. Initially, Olivia was looking for two dresses—one more conservative formal gown that would appropriate for a [redacted] appliqués and a flowy skirt, and she paired it with custom-made earrings from Sara Gabriel and Jimmy Choo heels. She carried a bouquet of white calla lilies—a nod to the calla lily arrangement Donovan sent her the morning after their first date.

Allison Depriestre of Modern Beauties did the bride's makeup. "I wanted my makeup to be natural!" For her hair, she went with a half-up, half-down style. Meanwhile, Donovan wore a custom-made navy Alfred Dunhill tuxedo with black lapels and Bally shoes. "He modeled his tux off of Daniel Craig's James Bond tuxedo in *Skyfall*!" exclaims Olivia.

Both the bride and the groom are Catholic, and after some research, they found only two churches in Paris that will marry Americans if they don't have a connection to the city. After scouting out the options, they became enamored with L'Église de la Madeleine, a national monument spanning an entire city block. "The church is absolutely stunning, so we just added small bouquets at the end of the aisles and a few large arrangements on the altar." The traditional Catholic ceremony featured a full mass officiated by Father Brian McCarthy, an American priest. Because La Madeleine could not be closed off to the public for the event, rows were sectioned off at the front of the church for guests, there were also about 100 other people in the back watching the ceremony. In keeping with French tradition, the bridal party and guests exited the church first. They then lined up outside and showered the couple with white rose petals when they came out. "Before we exited and walked past our guests, we passed several strangers who were also cheering us on!"

The newlyweds then hopped in a black Bentley and made their way to the small town of Cernay-la-Ville and the Abbaye des Vaux de Cernay, or "The Abbey," a venue Olivia and Donovan discovered after flying to Paris one weekend and checking out six or seven locations. "It was built in the 12th century, and we knew immediately it was the right place," says Olivia. "We wanted the reception venue to be spectacular—a place with rich history, one that our friends and family could not experience back home." Guests mingled on the historic property and marveled at the magnificent monastery ruins during cocktail hour.

Dinner was served in the grand Salle des Moines. The meal started with herbed prawns accompanied by fresh cheese infused with pesto, and then guests had a choice of roast chicken breast with seasonal vegetables or beef fillet with oyster mushrooms and a crispy potato galette. Everything was (of course) paired with a fine French wine—an aromatic Viognier for the white and a rich Bordeaux for the red. An over-the-top dessert buffet of not one, not two, but three wedding cakes along with cupcakes, mini cupcakes, macarons, brownies, cookies, and meringues gave guests ample options to satisfy their post-dinner sweet tooth.

International DJ Just Dizle then got the party started with the perfect blend of hip-hop, R&B, and pop music. "The fun lighting created the exact atmosphere we were going for," says Olivia. "Most of the guests stayed around until 2:30 a.m. when the last bus left the venue!"

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