TOP 10

CLIMBING PARADISES

SET SAIL FOR AN ENDLESS SUMMER, AS WE BRING YOU THE WORLD'S TOP TEN CLIMBING PARADISES.

From Cornish cream teas to dicey deep-water solos in Vietnam; from bikini bouldering in the British Virgin Islands to tufa tugging in Thailand, here are ten rock climbing paradises to die for. Leave the drizzle behind and dig out that credit card – it's time to make your life a beach.

"Tropical waters, climbing off the beach and daily massages. This is truly paradise."

PHOTO: DAVID CLIFFORD

Exotic rock: Jessa Younker deep-water soloing on Poda Island, Thailand. The warm waters of the Andaman Sea make Thailand a true climbing paradise. "Deep-water soloing is the the perfect combination of adventure and serenity," reckons Jessa.

1 Cornwall
UK

If you want a climbing staycation this summer then the bullet-hard granite of Cornwall takes some beating. The climate is more Med than Manchester, with surfing, sunbathing and cider for après-climbing. Cornish trips were once de-riguer before Easyjet, but with the plummeting pound they've made a comeback. It's not just penny pinching: the climbing down here really is worth all those hours in the car. There are over thirty crags with Bosigran, Sennen and Chair Ladder being the honeypots. All three are packed with classic, well-protected routes – and only a stone's throw from a cream tea.

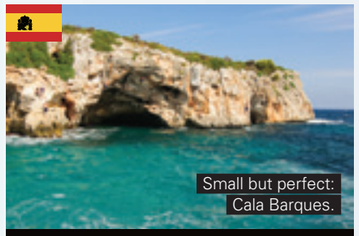
SIZZLE FACTOR: 2/10

It's hot, but we're not seeing coconuts.



Cornish cream: Demo Route (HS 4b) - one of the top 50 climbs in the UK.

PHOTO: TOM BOND



Small but perfect: Cala Barques.

PHOTO: ADAM LONG

3 Mallorca
Spain

The mad-for-it Med island has life beyond Magaluf. Leave the sunburnt hordes behind and dive into some of the best deep-water soloing around. Bumpy boys and girls can head to the hardcore 18m-high Cove del Diablo for world classics in the F7s and 8s – giving wild moves and even freakier falls if you fluff the high cruxes. The rest of us will roll up our towels and head to Cala Barques: a deep-water soloing paradise with friendly drops, crystal-clear water, a swimming cave and a nearby nudist beach.

"The best deep water soloing I've found abroad has to be Mallorca. I first went ten years ago with a team of super-keen climbers, when Cova Diablo only had two climbs on it. We were like kids in a sweet shop. We're still looking for the next mega crag but so far this is it."
Gav Symonds

SIZZLE FACTOR: 3/10

Clear-blue water, friendly deep-water soloing and a nudist beach? Where's my passport?

2 Sardinia
France

Head for heaven in a half-moon bay. Sardinia, the second-largest island in the Med, has been seducing climbers for years with its many crags, but Cala Luna (half-moon) is the jewel in its climbing crown. This solitary beach, 4km south of the town of Cala Gonone, has some of the best climbing on the whole island. Reached only by foot or passenger ferry, overhanging limestone cave routes and a mighty 100m-high crag tower over a half crescent of white sand, lapped by the emerald-green sea.

SIZZLE FACTOR: 8/10

Could be a perfect beach experience – if you go off season.

"For climbers, Sardinia is the most diverse of all the Med islands. It's got over 6,000 routes - from granite bouldering to big walls and everything in between." David Pickford



Sarah Garnett on the crux pitch of Cala Incantore (6c+), Cala Goritze, Sardinia.

PHOTO: DAVID PICKFORD

4 Kalymnos
Greece



Burning arms: Dave Barrans slays the stamina monster that is Aegialis (7c) at the Grande Grotta, Kalymnos.

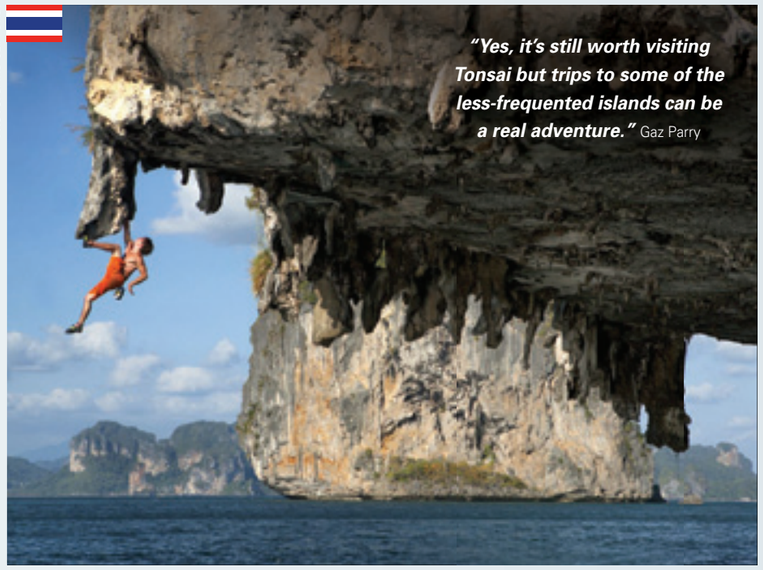
PHOTO: STU MCNEIL

I'm pumped…watch me! Who hasn't heard of the arm-busting overhangs of Kalymnos? With walls of featured limestone within walking distance of the blue Aegean Sea, majestic sunsets, windswept hills, and Greek hospitality it's no wonder that Kalymnos has re-invented itself as a rock-holiday hot spot. Lying a few miles off of the Turkish coast, close to the island of Kos, just 10 years ago, you'd have only heard of this place if you were interested in buying sea sponges. Now 'Kaly' draws climbers of all ages and nationalities with its amazing range of routes: from slabby technical routes to the famous overhanging tufas. OK, sometimes you might have to queue for the famous lines but it's easy to get away from the crowds.

"No other destination deserves the title of 'sport climbing paradise' more. For a blend of premium-quality climbing and a holiday vibe, Kalymnos takes some beating. But be warned: it gets crazily busy in season." Neil Gresham

SIZZLE FACTOR: 4/10

Perfect holiday rock. Can be crowded and you have to walk to the beach.



"Yes, it's still worth visiting Tonsai but trips to some of the less-frequented islands can be a real adventure." Gaz Parry

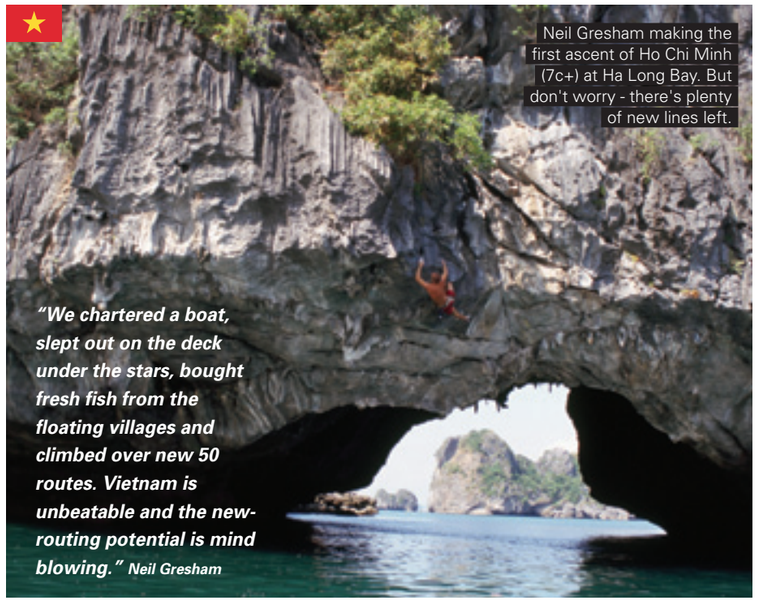
PHOTO: DAVID CLIFFORD

5 Thailand
Thailand

Stalagtites, sun cream and Singha beer? It's a go go. Thailand has long been the tropical destination of choice for climbers, ideal for an indulgent two-week hit or a stop-off on the grand tour. With warm tropical waters, climbing off the beach, white sands, delicious food and daily massages, this is truly paradise. The traditional climbing areas of Tonsai and Railey are past their best these days but the three-dimensional tufa climbing is still world class. Ripples of climbing development are spreading out into the Andaman Sea, including on Koh Lao Liang. This is a tiny island with not much there: one private camping resort, a kilometre of untouched beach, a handful of the best routes in Thailand, four hammocks and a cool-box bar. Hardly worth going.

SIZZLE FACTOR: 6/10

Paradise doesn't come any more tropical than Thailand. If only it was still a secret.



Neil Gresham making the first ascent of Ho Chi Minh (7c+) at Ha Long Bay. But don't worry - there's plenty of new lines left.

"We chartered a boat, slept out on the deck under the stars, bought fresh fish from the floating villages and climbed over new 50 routes. Vietnam is unbeatable and the new-routing potential is mind blowing." ***Neil Gresham***

PHOTO: GRESHAM COLLECTION.

6 Ha Long Bay
Vietnam

The new Thailand? The new Mallorca? Who cares: jump on a boat, fill it with climbing shoes, beers, chalk and swimsuits… stop the boat, check the depth and up you go. You could probably deep-water solo here for a hundred years and still not climb every line. Vietnam's Ha Long Bay is a maze of over 2,000 soaring limestone towers rising out of the tropical sea. There are several sport routes but why lug gear half way around the world when you're in water world? When it gets too hot and you need some shade, just stop the boat and hop off onto a beautiful secluded beach.

SIZZLE FACTOR: 6/10

Adventurous deep-water solo venue with a lifetime's supply of routes? Get there and name your own.

Katy Dartford climbing in Cayman.

PHOTO: KATY DARTFORD.

7 Cayman Brac
Cayman Islands

Feeling wedged? This 12-mile long limestone chunk is better known for stashing your hard-earned – or spending it on glamorous weddings – than it is for climbing. But Cayman Brac (just south of Cuba) has two faces: the south-west side of the island is where the glam weddings take place but the north-east side is wild and virtually uninhabited except for hermit crabs and lizards. There are seven climbing areas (with 70 routes from F4 to 8a) and some undeveloped deep-water soloing. The best way to climb here is to spend half a day on the north shady side, head to the sunny side for snorkeling, then finish off with jerk chicken and rum punch.

SIZZLE FACTOR: 7/10

This is exotic rock. Climbing here will give you bragging rights to match your suntan. G&T please.

8 British Virgin Islands
British Virgin Islands

Make sail for the British Virgin Islands – the Caribbean climbing paradise. Better known as a sailing fantasy lands, there are over 60 islands in the archipelago, but you need to lay anchor on Virgin Gorda (The Fat Virgin). Here, you'll find clusters of gigantic granite boulders shaped by the sea, lying on the beach between the warm Indian Ocean and dense jungle. Dig your bouldering mat out of the hold and work up a thirst before retiring to a tikki hut on the beach for a cold beer.



Beer or bouldering, wonders our brave explorer.

PHOTO: SUZANNE JONES.

SIZZLE FACTOR: 8/10

Bouldering's died and gone to heaven. If you want a paradise holiday tick, you'd be hard pressed to beat this.



PHOTO: ROB SMITH.

9 Philippines
Philippines

The second-largest archipelago in the world, with over 7,000 coral-fringed tropical islands, the Philippines is one of the great treasures of Southeast Asia. And, being on the 'wrong' side of the South China Sea, it's also your last chance to escape the hordes descending on other parts of Asia. Below sea level, the Philippines has some of the world's best diving; above sea level, it's got a variety of climbable rock, including Palawan Island. The climbing scene is just getting going here, the people are laid back, the beer good and the food cheap. Up for it?

SIZZLE FACTOR: 8/10

Climbing here will be a full-on quest. Where is it? Where's the best deep-water soloing? Is that snake poisonous? Time to find out.

"Madagascar is every kid's dream, I can imagine that many people only think that this place exists in the film. It's an amazing place to travel and meet people from another world."
Gaz Parry

"Climbing on Nosy gave not only magical climbing but the most pristine, golden beach ever. And more kinds of sea shells than you could ever imagine."
Anne Arran

Anne Arran cruising Les Dents de la Mer (F6b), Nosy Andantsara.

Madagascar

Mad island; mad name. This exotic island off the south-east coast of Africa is just starting to blip on the climbing radar. Over the last decade, this ex-French colony has consistently lured some of the best climbers in the world to its Tsaranoro big-walls: Michel Piola, Lynn Hill and Kurt Albert have all paid a visit, as have top Brits, including Jack Geldard and James McHaffie. But you don't have to be a big-wall superstar to climb here – there are over 500 sport routes, countless boulders and enormous potential for more. At the Montagnes des Français area, near Diego, you'll find 120 routes, from F4 to 7c, on huge thai-style stalagtites but without any thai-style crowds. If you crave more isolation, hop on a boat and head to the sacred Nosy Hara group of islands, to the west of the mainland. Nosy Andantsara has amazing coral and fish for the snorklers and around 40 sport routes from 3 to 8b on perfect limestone for the crankers; Nosy Anjombavola has another 40 routes between F5 and F8a. This is real Robinson Crusoe territory – home will seem a long, long way away.

SIZZLE FACTOR: 10/10

If you're into off-the-beaten track tropical exploring, then bung this mad island onto your bucket list.

Words: Katy Dartford and Alex Messenger.

PHOTO: JOHN ARRAN.