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THE TIMES

WEEKEND

Where are the warmest destinations in Europe right now?

Hit the beach in Cyprus or lunch alfresco in Marbella with our ultimate guide

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The next few weeks can be a marvellous time to be around the Med. It is no longer gaspingly hot but there's enough strength in the sun for luxuriating by the pool. The land is at its most colourful, particularly when lit by a low-slung late-summer sun. And the sea is retaining its warmth — at present about 23C in the southern reaches of the Mediterranean.

Prices are considerably lower than much of the rest of the year, and hoteliers and restaurateurs will be pleased to see you — provided that they are open, of course. For this is also a risky time to take the plunge, with resorts and islands all over the Mediterranean steadily shutting up shop. With that in mind, and given that the sun is not going to be 100 per cent reliable, I find it's best to choose last-blast destinations that are more mainstream but have plenty of local variety; a hotel in a gorgeously lonely spot is not going to work out well if it rains. And prioritise small, self-catering or family-run accommodation over big properties, which can feel desolate when they're empty.

The selection of destinations that follows —

[Lanzarote](#)

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[Malta](#)

,

[Cyprus](#)

,

[Rhodes](#)

and southern Spain — takes into account all of the above and marries them with the best of the sun conditions, according to the Met Office weather average daily maximums for October (

[metoffice.gov.uk](https://www.metoffice.gov.uk)

). These numbers will be optimistic if you are travelling in November, of course, when the maximums decline by three or four degrees.

But it is not too late for a last-ditch run to the sun and a dose of vitamin D. There are plenty of pool-lounging, horse-riding, badlands-striding, wine-quaffing, fly-driving and road-biking experiences still to be done — and we know where. All prices given are the lowest start price for October/November.

Lanzarote

October average:

27C

Average hours of sun daily:

7

The Spanish migrate to the Canaries in summer and northern Europeans come in winter, so autumn is a bit of a halfway house. Yet this is the time when temperatures are higher than they will be during the islands' famed winter sun season (from December to February) and hotels are far from busy.

Of all the islands Lanzarote is the warmest Canary, but it is also the strangest looking. Thanks to its volcanic origins the island has the texture and colour of elephant hide: wrinkled, humped and bristled, and occasionally covered in different coloured dust where the elephant has rolled. Its villages are splodges of white paint in folds of the elephant's skin. Yet amid all that sombre aridity stuff grows, creating a particularly stark contrast of fresh green on grey.

It is an unlikely place to have become such a tourist success, but there are several things that make it work. It has beaches, of course, the best at the big, cheerful and slightly tatty grandad of a resort Puerto del Carmen, which still has plenty of joie de vivre. There are more intimate beaches in the south at Playa Blanca, which doesn't have the same vibe as Puerto, but the hotels, such as the Rubicon Palace, are more lavish and still buzzy at this time of year (seven nights' B&B from £559pp, including flights; broadwaytravel.com).

Volcanic landscapes are everywhere, but most notably in the Timanfaya National Park, where the solidified lava is like a rictus sea frozen in mid-storm. It's an alien landscape, rugged and sharp, and to wander off-piste across these badlands is to wave goodbye to your shoes — best to do your walking with a group guided by somebody who knows the place like the back of their hand (seven nights' half-board from £1,399pp, including flights, departing on November 5; ramblersholidays.co.uk).

In recent years the island has made a big play for fitness fans. The climate and hills have made it a huge cycle training destination, particularly around the less touristy northern province of Las Palmas, at Haria and Tabayesco (rental from £18 a day; papagayobike.com), and the kite-surfing scene is pretty massive too, at Famara Beach (15 hours of lessons for £435, including equipment; watermanlanzarote.com). Not far away along the coast is Club La Santa, a specialist sports hotel with two Olympic pools, a proper running track and more than 500 activities every week, for truly hardcore holidaymakers who like to sleep well (seven nights' self-catering for two from £903; clublasanta.com).

It's not all high-adrenaline stuff, however. Every Sunday locals and tourists converge on Teguise, the former capital of the Canaries, to browse the stalls and restaurants that line its streets and squares. Jewellery, leather goods and crafts are big — merchandise that will make you realise how close you are to Morocco. And across the island there are many sites created by the artist César Manrique — from his Bond lair-esque Jameos del Agua with a swimming pool, restaurant, bar and events space inside volcanic tunnels and caves, to his various extremely stylish former homes and his funky, spiky Jardin de Cactus (entry to four sites £25 per adult; cactlanzarote.com).

Then there's the local wine and seafood. For a sunset meal, seek out the string of little restaurants along the west-facing seafront of the village of El Golfo. Settle at the waterside terrace of Restaurant Bogavante (mains from £9; restaurantebogavante.es) for all sorts of seafood, from limpets to lobster, watch the sun go down and have a glass of El Grifo, one of the best of the island wines, from the region of La Geria. It's uniquely made from grapes grown in cones of volcanic ash.

Malta

October average:

25C

Average hours of sun daily:

7

This island republic, adrift in the southern Mediterranean between Sicily and the Libyan coast, has long been a haven for knights, monks and pirates. Its neolithic, Roman and Arab backstories have all left their stony footprints, although the defining history is of the powerful crusading Knights of St John — led by the grand master — who controlled Malta from 1530 to 1798.

Where the knights' fearsome fleet of warships rode at anchor in what is one of the world's most sheltered and strategic natural harbours, Valletta, there are now cruise ships and superyachts. And many of the knights' palaces and merchants' mansions of Valletta have been converted into upmarket hotels. It is here you should

aim to stay in this late season, when the island's beach destinations start to look empty.

You don't have to abandon all hope of sun and swimming, however, because a few of these converted city mansions have rooftop pools for warmer days, including the 13-room Palazzo Consiglia, in a 400-year-old property just round the corner from the famous Barrakka Gardens. From here you might catch a glimpse of cloistered nuns pacing back and forth on an adjacent convent terrace, deep in meditative thought (seven nights' B&B from £588pp, including flights; loveholidays.com).

The advantage of staying in town is the proximity to stylish coffee shops such as Caffe Cordina on Republic Street (caffecordina.com), opposite parliament, where you can order an anchovy and spinach pie and collar a government minister to give him or her your view of the world. Then there's Nenu, formerly a bakery, which specialises in Maltese food — particularly pizza-like ftira and, of course, the island favourite, rabbit stew (£16.50; nenuthebaker.com).

At night, however, downtown Valletta is quiet. Social life moves along the promenade to the north, to the inlets and bays of Sliema, St Julians and Paceville. Here the seafront is always busy, and when darkness falls the coloured lights from the bars and restaurants reflect in the water. This is a place of cocktail lounges, designer shopping and five-star hotels such as AX the Palace, with an infinity pool on the roof (seven nights' B&B from £558pp, including flights; tui.co.uk).

Anyone spending any time on Malta will head inland at some point to Mdina, the island's former capital, a traffic-free hilltop city made of glowing golden limestone that was one of the early locations for

Game of Thrones

and still feels a bit like a parallel universe. It's a place to drink tea on the ancient walls, looking down over olive groves and vineyards — the Fontanella Tea Garden and Bar is a good spot, famous for its cakes (fontanellateagarden.com.mt).

Mdina is one of the key stops, along with St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, on a group tour that digs deep into the island's archaeology. Other destinations include the 5,000-year-old temple of Hagar Qim and the extraordinary labyrinth of St Paul's Catacombs. The itinerary isn't all about old stones, though: there's lunch scheduled by the water's edge in Marsaxlokk, a bright and cheerful fishing village where every other restaurant claims to have its own boat (six nights' half-board from £1,395pp, including flights; brightwaterholidays.com).

Cyprus

October average:

26.7C

Average hours of sun daily:

10

It is harvest season in Cyprus, and the island's western end, anchored by the historic resort of Paphos, is the place to get the best of the sunsets. The verges here smell of oregano, and there will be queues at the olive mill, where locals bring their crops for pressing. There are pick-your-own orchards in the western foothills of the Troodos mountains, offering lemons, figs, dates, grapes, limes, pomelos, red grapefruits, guavas and pomegranates, all direct from the vine, bush or tree. Stop off en route to your villa at the end of a day's exploring, fill a plastic bag, and you'll be able to utter those immortal lines: "Can someone peel me a pomelo? I'm in the pool."

As it happens, villas with pools are inexpensive at this time of year. Even a place such as Coral Bay's Villa Veryina, just north of Paphos, which would normally sleep eight, is happy to welcome two at the same cost per person, so seven nights' self-catering is from £240pp, excluding flights (jamesvillas.co.uk).

To get a real feel for the island you have to drive inland, through large flocks of wandering goats, to discover the original, village-based Cyprus, the Cyprus with monasteries and ten Unesco-registered Byzantine churches, the Cyprus that was once a huge provider of fruit and vegetables to the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Traditional agriculture has had a resurgence, and now there are boutique wineries — Lambouri in Kato Platres, for example (lambouri.com) — and little cheese-making dairies such as Katsoura in Galataria (katsouras.com). Sustainable tourism initiatives have created wine trails and routes (csti-cyprus.org) through villages where little tavernas serve basic food based on salad, vegetables, pulses, bread and fruit.

All this can be explored on a two-centre fly-drive that combines Paphos with the fishing village of Latchi, on the north coast right next to the Baths of Aphrodite and Akamas National Park. Even in this late season Latchi remains a good place to find restaurants overlooking the water, particularly the No 9 Lounge, which serves a mean seafood platter (mains from around £11.50; [facebook.com/nog9lounge](https://www.facebook.com/nog9lounge)). Latchi is the place to find smaller, family-run hotels such as the Aphrodite Beach, included in the two-centre fly-drive — a much better bet than a big-brand property, which can be echoingly empty at this time of year. Seven nights' B&B with flights and car hire for two costs from £2,075 (sunvil.co.uk).

Despite the tourism development there is serious walking to be had on the island, notably along the jagged Avgas Gorge, which leads inland from the coast, north of Paphos. Beyond the gorge the tracks get increasingly tough, and even the goats turn back, but somewhere out here is the mysterious Fontana Amorosa, a pool where everyone who tastes the water falls in love (so they say). The challenge of finding it should inspire single travellers, who could join a group of fellow singles on a single supplement-free hosted week at Paphos's Aquamare Beach Hotel, a spa hotel next to the beach (seven nights' B&B, including flights and four dinners, costs from £750pp, departing on October 29; friendshiptravel.com).

Rhodes, Greece

October average:
24.3C

Average hours of sun daily:
8

There's no better place to be when the sun goes down than at the Temple of Athena on the Acropolis at Lindos, lifted heavenwards on a giddy promontory surrounded by sea. So much so that there's regular skirmishing between hawkish temple attendants and influencers determined to capture the moment on their drones.

You can see why they try: Lindos is Rhodes's prettiest settlement, built in the 10th century BC, uphill and inland from its beach-lined harbour, to keep it safe from pirates. In the heat of the day its ancient alleys are busy with donkeys and day trippers, and in the evenings visitors and residents percolate upwards to dine at roof-terrace restaurants, the sound of conviviality wafting over the tiles.

Unfortunately, Rhodes is one of those destinations where the flight schedules wither dramatically from the first week of November, rendering most beach resorts comatose. Yet Lindos, which always has a niche, stays lively.

It's a last chance to head inland to the Traditional Guesthouse Limeri, which sits at the base of Mount Akramitis, Rhodes's second-highest peak, surrounded by pine forest (look out for wild deer) in the village of Monolithos. There's good walking along marked trails from here, particularly up to the Venetian Monolithos Castle, perched on a vertical rock (the monolith). The Limeri (B&B), with its cosy firelit dining room, and the chic, white F Charm in Lindos (room only) are a good pairing for a fly-drive and a seven-night package from £2,276 for two, departing on October 26 (sunvil.co.uk).

Prasonisi Beach at Rhodes's southern tip is a place of pilgrimage for kites. Its isthmus of sand has two water conditions: the offshore side is flat, good for learning, while the onshore side has small breaking waves, perfect for developing new moves. Kite Prasonisi, on site, has all the gear and knowhow (rental and tuition costs are about £61 an hour; kiteprasonisi.com).

If you'd prefer not to venture so far, Rhodes's medieval Old Town has more than a touch of Constantinople, with a maze of alleys and coffee shops that could easily be the backstreets of Istanbul. It was once the site of the Colossus of Rhodes, a giant statue of the god Helios standing by the harbour entrance, and one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The Colossus may have gone, but the more than 600-year-old citadel and the Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of St John, along with dozens of other Unesco-registered monuments, still dominate. And there are intimate places such as the Mevlana shisha bar, with its mosaic floor and stained glass ([facebook.com/hookahbarrhodes](https://www.facebook.com/hookahbarrhodes)). Stay within walking distance of the Old Town in the Semiramis, overlooking the Aegean (seven nights' B&B from £324pp, including flights; travelrepublic.co.uk).

Finally, Rhodes may not have the uber-trendiness of Mykonos or Santorini, but it does have discreet hipster hangouts such as Casa Cook, on the coast by Kolymbia, 30 minutes' drive south of the capital. This is a bohemian boutique hotel, all clean lines, woven throws, rattan furnishings and polished concrete, and in late

October it is warmer and a great deal cheaper than its more fashionable cousins (B&B doubles from £107; mrandmrsmith.com).

Southern Spain

October average:
24.1C

Average hours of sun daily:
7

Spain's south coast offers that heady combination of the sea and sand of the Costa del Sol backed by the foothills and white towns of the Sierra Nevada. And with a large population of expat property owners along this shore, flight numbers into the gateway city of Malaga remain consistent when they are dying away for other summer destinations.

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Malaga makes a worthy weekend in itself, with its beaches, Picasso connections and sweeping views from its 11th-century Moorish fortress, the Alcazaba. In the evenings beachfront chiringuitos, little informal restaurants on the sand, grill espetos — sardines — on wooden embers; you eat them with your fingers (chiringuitopicasso.com).

If that sounds a bit primitive for your tastes but you still want beach, head west to Marbella, particularly its so-called Golden Mile, the stretch of seafront west of the resort centre, where the most expensive properties, tropical gardens, exclusive restaurants and top hotels are located.

Typical of its hotels is the Puente Romano, built in the style of an Andalusian village surrounded by lush subtropical gardens and waterfalls. It's a lavish place, with multiple restaurants, a Six Senses spa, and all kinds of activities from tennis to golf and paddleboarding to Pilates. In short, a place to have a last blast of hedonism (three nights' B&B from £761.50pp, including flights; ba.com).

Uphill and inland, the going gets tougher. In the foothills of the Sierra Nevada are hidden cobbled and whitewashed villages linked by goat-herder paths, with great walking and horse-riding at this time of year, now it is not too hot.

One of the prime routes, following tracks carved out by olive harvesters, forms the basis of a ten-day self-guided hike through the karstic limestone rock formations of the Sierras Subbeticas Natural Park, while vultures circle to see whether you're carrying sandwiches. The starting point is Cordoba, where the big attraction is the extraordinary Mezquita, originally a cathedral, then a mosque and now a cathedral again, its interior a riot of columns and Islamic arches.

From here you walk via a succession of little rural inns to Granada, the spiritual home of flamenco, where you will find the palaces, patios and gardens of the Alhambra, with its fountains and glorious zellige mosaic tilework. The tour features nine nights' B&B, with seven lunches and six dinners, detailed walking notes and guided tours in both cities from £1,880pp, excluding flights (pura-aventura.com).

And finally, the native breed of Andalusian horses are docile and robust, making them ideal for the trail-riding experiences offered by the English-born stable owner and guide Dallas Love. She is based in the village of Bubion, up in the Alpujarra Mountains, where guests stay in the Casa la Sevillana. From here they set out for rides of four to six hours a day, travelling across the pastures and climbing the sierras in the most traditional of ways, along the most traditional of routes (four nights' full board plus horse and guide from £600pp, excluding flights, departing on November 5 and 12; inthesaddle.com).

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