

Word Of Mouth

Edited by Lisa Scott travel@ukmetro.co.uk

The week in numbers: More than 1,200 new species have been found in the Amazon in the past decade, according to the WWF. The report Amazon Alive! charts 637 new plants, 257 fish, 216 amphibians, 55 reptiles, 16 birds and 39 mammals

Retreat to private luxury



South-east Asia's first W Retreat
While London eagerly awaits the opening of its own super-hip W Hotel early next year, from Monday travellers to Thailand can enjoy the lush and luxurious environs of the group's first W Retreat in south-east Asia.

On the northern shore of Koh Samui, an island traditionally favoured by backpackers, the W Retreat is home to 75 villas, each with their own private pool.

Two villas are called 'Wow' suites, while one is known as 'Extreme wow': a two-bedroom, two-storey affair, covering 900sq m, with its own 20metre pool.

A further 17 villas are available to buy for anyone with a spare £1.2million swishing around.

The resort will include a Way spa, the WooBar, a W Lounge, two restaurants, a private beach

Our weekly page looks at launches around the world, from accommodation to tours to hotel bars. This week: Koh Samui gets the W treatment, panda care in China and Harlem's first new hotel in 40 years

and W's signature upscale service. W says the arrival of the retreat is part of a larger trend towards higher-end tourism in Koh Samui, which has previously suffered from rapid, careless overdevelopment.

'Koh Samui is becoming a hip and trendy island once again, with more luxurious shops and businesses arriving,' says Christian Humbert, director of sales and marketing for the W Retreat.

'But the spirit of the island ties in well with the W philosophy – we say you should relax by day and celebrate at night, and Koh Samui has that same energy.'

He admits there are already plenty of five-star hotels and luxury resorts on the island but says: 'They are all focused on honeymooners, on candlelit dinners and whispering, which is all very well if you are on honeymoon. We will offer a different experience, with more bars and restaurants, a see-and-been attitude, and a DJ playing tunes. The emphasis is on fun and you absolutely don't have to be in a couple to enjoy yourself here.'

Jane Mul Kerrins

Introductory rates for villas start at £335 per night. www.whothel.com

Also check out...

A hip hotel for Harlem

Harlem is known for its jazz and the neighbourhood has had an injection of modern cool with the opening of Aloft Harlem, its first new hotel in more than 40 years. Designed by the Rockwell Group, it features 124 loft-style guest rooms, a lounge, bar and café. Intended for both business and leisure travellers, it also features a smart check-in system, allowing guests to bypass the front desk and head straight up to their rooms.

Rooms from £150, Tel: 001 212 749 4000. For details see www.aloft-hotels.com

Pamper a panda

Thanks to endless Blue Peter appeals, the reproductively challenged giant pandas of China hold a special place in many of our hearts. And at the Bifengxia Panda Centre near the city of Ya'an, two hours drive from



Chengdu, you can do more than simply collect milk bottle tops for them.

As part of a five-day package, you can spend two days as a volunteer, feeding and playing with the pandas, collecting bamboo for them, preparing their food and cleaning out the panda house.

From £449, including five nights' accommodation, full board, excursions and work clothes for the panda patrol. Tel: 020 3344 3866. For more details see www.chinalinkstravel.co.uk

Travel Doctor

Do you have a travel dilemma? Email travel@ukmetro.co.uk

Q I'd like to visit South America for a month but don't speak any Spanish. I've been told you need a reasonable command of the language in many countries there. Can I get by with English or should I do a language course first?

Jamie, 24, Manchester

A You'll find in places where large numbers of tourists frequent, such as Buenos Aires or Cusco, in Peru, that younger people and those working in tourism increasingly have some English. But if you get off the beaten track you'll need to speak a little Spanish. If you can take a short course before you arrive, or even better (and cheaper) when you

arrive, you'll get more out of your trip. Most big cities in South America are good places to pick up a course, with Quito in Ecuador, Lima in Peru and Buenos Aires among the best.

Don't forget it's Portuguese, not Spanish, that is spoken in Brazil. *Tom Hall is Lonely Planet's travel editor. www.lonelyplanet.com*

Q We are planning a honeymoon in spring next year and want to go on safari. My husband's only stipulation is he wants to see lions. Which areas can guarantee them?

Kelly, 34, Newcastle

A If you are planning an early spring honeymoon, then my top tip for the ultimate, romantic safari experience would be Kenya's Masai Mara. Not only is it breathtakingly beautiful but the prides of lion are so prolific that many refer to it as 'lion country'. For a really intimate and special honeymoon, I would recommend staying at one of the luxury tented camps like Kicheche Bush Camp. Located in the Olare Orok Conservancy, Kicheche offers

excellent guiding away from the crowds.

Sally Kirby is co-founder of the Sally and Alice Travel Co. www.sallyandalice.com



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