

Cover story

► Peak escape: Shinta Mani Mustang's 29 rooms have spellbinding views of Nilgiri's snow-capped, 23,000ft summit in Nepal

Continued from page 3

bedrooms in traditional white "ger" yurts around a central stone-built hub. There's no phone signal or Wi-Fi here, allowing you to disconnect completely while exploring the surrounding desert on foot, horseback or camel, and learning more about the Mongol nomadic way of life.

Doubles from £2,083pp for a two-night all-inclusive itinerary (00976 11 325 786; threecamellodge.com)

Minaret Station Alpine Lodge South Island, New Zealand

Distance from civilisation:
44 miles from Queenstown

There is only one way to get to this secluded retreat: a scenic, half-hour helicopter ride from Queenstown through mountain valleys, over snow-capped peaks and above twisting rivers. Set in a meadow at 3,000ft in South Island's Southern Alps, Minaret Station Alpine Lodge feels a million miles from anything with just four extremely private chalets surrounded by the steep slopes of the glacier-carved valley. Those helicopters are deployed again to transport guests to activities in otherwise inaccessible spots: heli-skiing to untouched snow, heli-biking to cruise along scenic lake-side traverses, heli-hiking to isolated ridges or the amazing blue ice caves of Aoraki Mount Cook, New Zealand's highest mountain. Back at base, the lodge kitchen creates feasts that might include venison, lamb or beef from Minaret Station's 50,000-acre working farm. Each chalet has its own hot tub for soaking off the day's adventures under the startlingly clear Milky Way.

Doubles from £1,545pp, including all meals and beverages and a private hiking guide (0064 3 443 5860; minaretstation.com)

Bullo River Station East Kimberley, Australia

Distance from civilisation:
128 miles from Kununurra

The Kimberley is remote even by Australian standards: an untrammelled frontier ranging over the entire north-west corner, where extreme seasons transform the landscape from arid rock formations and wide dusty plains to thundering waterfalls and swollen river gorges when the Big Wet rains arrive. The 12-bedroom Bullo River Station, a working cattle farm spanning almost half a million acres, is a chance to experience the Kimberley in all its wild wonder. This is the raw outback on an almost unimaginable scale – the nearest neighbours are a three-hour drive away. Every day the 2,000-strong Brahman-cross herd is mustered across the Top End terrain – guests can join the team to see how it happens, all while keeping an eye out for wallabies, dingoes and wild buffalo. There's deep Aboriginal history here too, with around 200 rock-art sites hidden among the station's cliffs and ridge lines created by the area's Miriwung-Gajerrong ancestors. From £739pp, all inclusive, with private guiding activities and scenic helicopter tour (0061 8 9168 7375; bullover.com.au)



▲ Enthralling: Shinta Mani Mustang's low, stone buildings meld with the wild Nepalese landscape

Shinta Mani Mustang Jomsom, Nepal

Distance from civilisation:
220 miles from Kathmandu

Bangkok-based architect and designer Bill Bensley creates fantastical hotels in far-away places. High in the Himalayas, between the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri mountain ranges, lies Shinta Mani Mus-

tang, offering a deep dive into Nepal's ancient "forbidden kingdom" – the upper reaches of which were closed to visitors until 1992. Getting here involves several hops to lofty airports or a long wiggling drive (13 hours from Kathmandu; six hours from Pokhara). Set in a low, local Baglung stone building above the black-coloured Kali Gandaki river, each of the 29 rooms has hypnotic, floor-to-ceiling views of Nilgiri's snow-capped triple peak (which reaches 23,000ft). Every aspect of the hotel is equally enthralling: wellness sessions with an 11th-generation Tibetan Amchi doctor, treks to the iridescent turquoise Chhema Lake and creative tasting menus that feature local river trout and foraged herbs or chocolate-filled momos (steamed dumplings). A totally spellbinding adventure. Doubles from £1,389pp, all inclusive, with a minimum five-night stay (00977 980 2336386; shintamanimustang.com)

Explora Patagonia National Park Patagonia, Chile

Distance from civilisation:
17 miles from Cochrane; 186 miles from Balmaceda

North Face founder Doug Tompkins fell in love with Patagonia on a 1968 expedition. Decades later, now married to Kris McDivitt Tompkins (herself the former CEO of the outdoors brand Patagonia), the conservationist couple began buying up swathes of the region to save them



from developers. When Doug died in 2015, the pair's work to restore the land and hand it back to the Chilean government to form part of a huge new national park network was almost complete. One of those created was the Patagonia National Park in the Chacabuco Valley, and Explora's lodge was once one of the Tompkins' homesteads. Compared to the better-known and more visited Torres Del Paine (in Chilean Patagonia) and Los Glaciares (on the Argentinian side) national parks, it still retains that end-of-the-earth feel. You practically have the 750,000 acres to yourself (the lodge is the only place to stay beyond campsites), and can witness this massive rewilding project up close as condors swoop overhead, and guanacos and puma roam. Doubles from £2,334pp, including all meals, drinks, park fees, guided excursions and return road transfers from Balmaceda airport (0056 2 2395 2800; explora.com)

Minga Lodge & Reserve Amazon, Ecuador

Distance from civilisation:
51 miles from Coca

Covering more than one billion acres across nine nations, the Amazon is the world's largest tropical rainforest, home to 10 per cent of all known species on earth. It is a staggering, humbling place, with large tracts of it still unexplored. It's also of course wildly under threat, which makes a stay at one of the eco-lodges working towards preserving the forest and its biodiversity even more worthwhile. In a 700-acre conservancy on the banks of the Rio Napo, Minga Lodge immerses nature-lovers in Amazonian life. The experience begins before you even arrive, on the 2.5-hour motorised canoe journey upriver to the lodge, spot-

ting rare hoatzin and some of the other 304 types of birds that live in the reserve, along with hundreds of other butterfly, frog, reptile and mammal species. Minga is as rooted in the community as it is in conservation, so on top of nature hikes there is also Kichwa cooking, craft lessons and shaman blessings offered, to give guests a holistic taste of the Amazon's rich culture. Doubles from £612pp, including all meals, beverages, transfers, activities, private guides and a conservation fee (00593 98 809 8084; mingalodge.com)

Estancia Cristina Patagonia, Argentina

Distance from civilisation:
45 miles from El Calafate

Estancia Cristina is in its own exclusive corner of the Los Glaciares National Park, reachable only by boat across the icy waters of Lake Argentino. Today it's flocks of adventurers rather than sheep that roam the land at this century-old former ranch, many heading for the immense Upsala Glacier's only land-based lookout point. From there, hike back down via the prehistoric, deep-per Cañadón de los Fósiles (Fossil Canyon), where ancient glaciers have carved out an open-air museum of marine fossils. Another day explore the valley on horseback, riding through forests of birch and lenga trees and across glacial rivers. Back at the lodge, the kitchen turns out empanadas and Patagonian lamb and the cellar is filled with Argentinian Malbecs. The scenery, silence and sheer scale of it all make this a very special spot. Doubles from £925pp, full board, including daily excursions and transfers (0054 2902 49 1133; estanciacristina.com)

Ultima Thule Lodge Alaska, United States

Distance from civilisation:
300 miles from McCarthy

Three generations of the Claus family have lived at Ultima Thule, on the banks of the Chitina River deep in the Wrangell-St Elias National Park and Reserve, the largest National Park in North America at 13.2 million acres. The ancient Greeks and Romans used the term "Ultima Thule" to describe the unknowable lands beyond the northern edges of their maps. But if anyone knows this vast Alaskan wilderness it's the Clauses, who – behind the controls of tiny Super Cub planes that can land on mountaintops or glaciers – take guests into the heart of it. There are no advance itineraries here: each morning from May to September when the lodge is open, the team wakes up and looks at the weather before starting the propellers and zipping off to the massive Bagley Icefield or frozen waterfall at Icy Bay, which reverberates with the echoing boom of calving icebergs. This is about as off-grid and far-out as it gets. Four-night packages from £10,023pp, including all meals, activities, and transfers from McCarthy (001 907 854 4500; ultimathulelodge.com)



▲ Amazon prime: getting to Minga Lodge & Reserve involves a two-and-a-half-hour boat journey up Ecuador's Rio Napo