



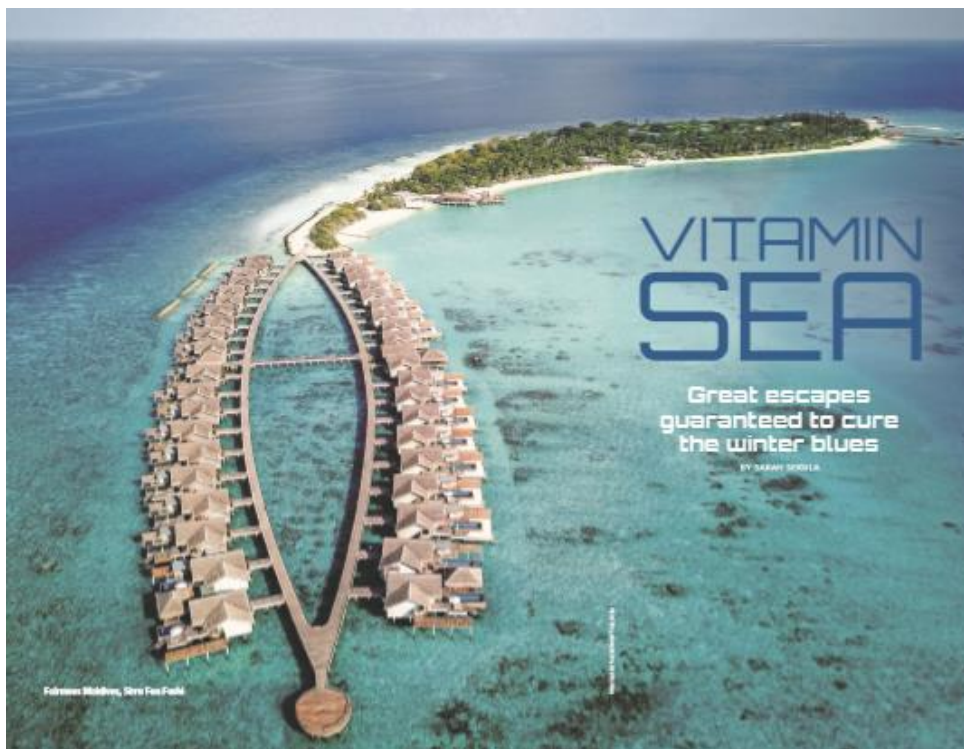
OUTRIGGER®

ENTERPRISES GROUP

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With kayakers to my right and my smiling sister in the lounge chair to my left, I think to myself how nice it is to be doing nothing. We are currently zen-ing out at the Outrigger Mauritius Beach Resort on Mauritius island in the Indian Ocean.

Here's what's not happening: Cellphones are not buzzing; horns are not honking, and TVs are not blaring. Instead, my agenda consists of lunch, yoga and a deep-tissue massage.

In the foreground, the impossibly blue Indian Ocean is at my beck and call. In the background is an inviting, adults-only pool. Being surrounded by water means a quick snorkeling session, catamaran ride or splash time in the pool are all within reach.

In other words, my stress level is at an all-time low.

It's no wonder people vacation by the water. Just ask Dr. Wallace Nichols, a marine biologist and author of *Blue Mind*, a best-selling book that Nichols says proves that being near water promotes happiness and well-being.

His blue mind concept refers to that super relaxed, almost meditative state humans feel when soaking in a tub, carving up some waves or floating down a river. >



He says this mode can actually make you happier, healthier, more connected and better at what you do.

"Whether on a boat or a beach, time spent near, in, on or under water has been shown to relax our minds and bodies," says Nichols, who has spent more than 20 years studying our relationship to water.

"Stress chemicals are reduced and feel-good chemicals increase and heart rate and breathing rate slow," he says. "As anxiety and stress have been on the rise and contribute significantly to illness and disease, water is medicine."

Better yet, he says, the mere sight and sound of water promotes wellness by lowering the stress hormone cortisol, increasing serotonin production and inducing relaxation. As the outside temps drop, balmy water-filled destinations are that much more enticing. Here are some other sunny spots to fill your aquatic prescription for pure bliss:

SNORKEL WITH SEA TURTLES



For Kai McBride, who has lived on Maui for 27 years, the ocean has always had a healing effect: "For me, it's a way of life," she says. "I need to go into the ocean regularly; it's cleansing and gives me peace."

So it makes sense that she worked as a scuba instructor for years, racking up about 5,000 dives: "Diving allows me to explore as well as relax. I love seeing all the diverse marine life, from tiny seahorses to manta rays to sharks and humpback whales."

Wailea Beach is one of her favorites, and the Four Seasons Maui at Wailea is an excellent choice for some R&R. Start with a dip in the infinity pool, then make a beeline down the beach for epic snorkeling. And there's no better

way to get to know the locals (spinner dolphins, turtles and candy-colored fish) than by skimming the surface in an outrigger canoe. From the resort, you've got gorgeous views of Molokini Crater (great for snorkeling and diving) and Kaho'olawe, the smallest of the eight

The Florida Keys have been a welcome respite for sun-loving travelers since the 1930s. With beautiful beaches, live music and pastel-colored bungalows galore, it comes as no surprise that Key West, the southernmost key, was Ernest Hemingway's muse. It was here on this tiny island surrounded by turquoise water that he penned some of his most prolific prose.

These days, the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum is a National Historic Landmark where you can take a tour, snap photos next to his typewriter and say hello to the famous six-toed cats.

If you're itching to hop into that inviting turquoise water yourself, there are loads of impressive dive and snorkel spots, including the outer reefs, where lionfish and turtle sightings are not uncommon. Or opt for a wreck dive for more of a challenge. Several outfitters offer such experiences, including Dive Key West, which has a specific dive to explore the USS Vandenberg, a World War II troop transport that today is the one of the largest most accessible artificial reefs.

Megan Faust and her husband, who have lived in Key West for 10 years, enjoy stand-up paddleboarding to get a dose of blue mind.

"It's very healing because nothing else matters for that moment in time, and the body and mind can repair the damages life inflicts," she says. "People generally feel a biological connection to water that has evolved in a very elegant way into a love for the ocean's aesthetics: the colors, the sounds, the scents, the feel, even the taste."

Prefer to skim the surface instead? Paddleboarding past mangroves is always a treat, and renting a see-through kayak can provide quite

the show (look for stingrays and dolphins darting beneath you).

Come dinnertime, dine on conch fritters at the Conch Shack on Duval Street and top it off with Key lime pie at Camille's Restaurant on Simonton Street. Then, hit Smathers Beach for sunset.

If camping is your thing, a visit to Dry Tortugas National Park is a must. Known for its amazing coral reef system, historic fort and sea turtles, this stunning spot, about 70 miles west of Key West — a two-hour, 15-minute ride by ferry — is a special place to park your tent.

With just 60,000 annual visitors and accessible only by boat or waterplane, the national park's hundred square miles are nearly 99 percent submerged beneath the picturesque waters. And those waters are home to loads of marine life, including moray eels, Goliath grouper and nurse sharks.

Key West, Florida

At the Fairmont Maldives, Sirru Fen Fushi, the blue mind concept is taken to another level. Earlier this year, the luxe resort opened the world's first intertidal submerged museum, known as The Coralarium, complete with a coral forest and a handful of beautiful sculptures. Guests can literally wake up in an overwater bungalow, roll out of bed and swim to the underwater masterpieces.

"The Coralarium is a place of preservation, conservation and education," says Jason deCaires

Taylor, the artist who created the sculptures. His aim is to raise awareness for the protection of Maldivian coral reefs.

By day, guests can tour the art museum with guidance from the resort's resident marine biologists, fish aboard a traditional Maldivian dhoni

and attend art classes. Come evening, an integrated light system illuminates the museum and attracts marine life while creating an impressive sight.

The resort overlooks a 5.6-mile coral reef lagoon, home to manta rays, turtles and large pods of bottlenose and spinner dolphins. There's even a manta ray cleaning station, which means guests get an up-close look at the daily life of these wide, winged creatures. >

Maldives



VISIT THE CORALARIUM

main volcanic islands.

For lunch, plop down on a chaise lounge in your private cabana and order a poke bowl and a homemade gelato or two. And as an added luxury, the staff offers complimentary mineral water facial spray and cold cucumber slices for your eyes.

For more water time, sign up for a scuba or water-aerobics class. End the day with a visit to the in-house chiropractor or acupuncturist.

One thing is certain: You'll leave with relaxed muscles and a warm sense of aloha. ■

Maui, Hawaii

HIDDEN GEMS

MOVE OVER LA, MIAMI AND HONOLULU. SOME OF THE BEST COASTAL TOWNS MIGHT BE ONES YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF. 10BEST READERS SELECTED THESE TOP FIVE — EACH WITH A POPULATION OF FEWER THAN 25,000 AS OF THE LAST CENSUS — THAT OFFER UNCROWDED, UNPRETENTIOUS AND AFFORDABLE SEASIDE FUN IN SMALL PACKAGES, PROVING BIGGER ISN'T ALWAYS BETTER:

1 GEORGETOWN, S.C.

The small community of Georgetown is what Charleston used to be, with 200-year-old homes (more than Charleston in fact), scenic plantations, lots of Southern charm and fewer crowds. Restaurants serve up low country specialties and outdoor adventures include kayaking.

► historicgeorgetownsc.com

2 PISMO BEACH, Calif.

Situated on California's central coast between San Francisco and Los Angeles, Pismo Beach offers white sand beaches and spectacular sunsets and is close to numerous local wineries. A perfect area for surfing or body boarding, this classic California beach town feels straight out of the 1950s.

► pismoeach.org

3 EASTPORT, Maine

Eastport, the easternmost incorporated city in the U.S., serves as a coastal gateway to Downeast Maine and Fundy Bay. While rich in natural beauty, this small town also packs a cultural punch because of the many artists, filmmakers and writers who call the area home.

► goeastport.com

4 VERMILION, Ohio

Vermilion, located on the south shore of Lake Erie, feels more like a New England seaport, complete with a historic lighthouse and rich nautical heritage. Popular in summer, Vermilion's streets feature small boutique shops, art galleries, ice cream parlors, restaurants and concerts on the green.

► vermilionoh.us

5 GULF SHORES, Ala.

Visitors to Gulf Shores can enjoy white sand beaches, fresh seafood, championship golf courses and nearly any water sport imaginable, thanks to the many nearby back bays and rivers. Preserves and state parks protect much of the region, making it a great coastal escape.

► gulfshores.com

