

news **BLACKPOOL** claims it “has it all” — and who are we to argue. For the third year running the Lancashire resort will be rolling out its slogan to attract families from around the UK.

The ‘#BlackpoolHasItAll’ campaign helped raise the number of visitors to Britain’s favourite beach resort from 1.02million in 2015 to 1.23million in 2016. And sales of the Blackpool Resort Pass — a book of tickets for all the main attractions — topped £1million.

Merlin Entertainments — which runs a host of attractions in the resort including the iconic Blackpool Tower — is working with VisitBlackpool and Blackpool Pleasure Beach to boost those numbers even further in 2017.

See visitblackpool.com



NY’S NEW HOTSPOT

NEW YORK’S Chelsea neighbourhood has another new hotel, Hotel Henri — a contemporary, boutique property with a rustic and urban flair in Manhattan.

Footsteps away from three of the city’s most dynamic districts — Chelsea, Flatiron and Gramercy — the hotel offers guest rooms with Italian-designed wood panelling and graffiti-inspired artwork, complete with eco-friendly features and all the comforts of home.

Hotel Henri is also home to Shay Ivy, a trendy new restaurant with a subtle mix of mid-century French-style dishes featuring local, organic and high-quality ingredients.

Rooms from £190 a night. See hotelhenrynyc.com

news **GRAND Prix** fans can bag a sporting package in Abu Dhabi with Thomas Cook Sport to take in the nail-biting finale of the last race of 2017.

You can be in pole position on November 26 to secure your place including return flights from your chosen airport, transfers to your hotel, a great choice of accommodation options, circuit transfers, 2-day or 3-day race tickets, welcome drinks reception, merchandise pack and Thomas Cook Sport staff on hand to help — all from £849pp.

See thomascooksport.com/Motorsports/Formula-1-Abu-Dhabi-Grand-Prix



LIVING THE THAI LIFE

HEADING to Thailand this year? Before you book take a look at two new hotels which have joined the ever-growing family at Small Luxury Hotels of the World — Cape Kudu in Koh Yao Noi and akaya Beach Club Phuket, above.

Situated on the unspoilt island of Koh Yao Noi in the middle of Phang Nga Bay, the Cape Kudu Hotel features 55 luxurious rooms including 11 pool villas. Rooms from £198 a night.

Set in a small fishing community, akaya Beach Club Phuket is a blissful boutique retreat on the golden sands of Natai Beach. The 58 luxury suites and stand-alone villas are nestled among tropical gardens. Rooms from £111 a night.

See slh.com

bargain **FIRST Choice** have a week all-inclusive in Rhodes at the 3** SplashWorld Hotel Sun Palace in Faliraki, Greece, from £532pp leaving Glasgow on May 3.

Perhaps Majorca is more your style. Seven nights all-inclusive at the 3* Hotel Belvedere in Cala Mayor is from £482pp leaving Edinburgh on April 29, again with First Choice.

Or try a week self-catering at the 2* Green Bungalows and Apartments in Ayia Napa, Cyprus, with Thomson, from £403pp leaving Edinburgh on May 3.

See firstchoice.co.uk or call 0871 200 7799 and thomson.co.uk or call 0871 230 2555.



WONDER . . . stunning Bayterek Tower, right, and Zenkov Cathedral, Ishim River and Khan Shatyr, above

CITIES OF ASTANA AND ALMATY WORTH

THE golden spires of the magnificent Russian Orthodox Zenkov Cathedral caught my eye as we approached through the trees of Panfilov Park.

Probably the world’s only wooden cathedral — including the nails with which it was built — its ornate interior is awash with frescoes, murals and the sweet smell of incense.

The park is also home to a Soviet-style war memorial and eternal flame in remembrance of a small regiment of soldiers who fought to defend Moscow in World War II and which, bizarrely, is a popular venue for wedding photo shoots.

I was in Almaty, Kazakhstan’s biggest city, former capital and the country’s cultural and financial centre. It lies

close to the border with China. Framed by the cloud and snow-capped peaks of the Zailysky-Alatau mountains, Almaty is a pleasant, green metropolis with broad, busy boulevards.

Not far out of town is the Medeo dam, built to protect the area from major mud slides and which has an ice skating rink nearby.

At more than 5,500ft above sea level it earned its place in the record books as the world’s highest city and conditions are so good that 150-plus world

records in ice skating and ice hockey have been set.

From here, cable cars trundle up the slopes to Shymbulak, the country’s largest ski resort. It’s a pleasant 20-minute ride with far-reaching views.

This is where Prince Harry took his then-girlfriend Cressida Bonas a couple of years ago for some skiing fun. I spent two nights in Almaty then it was a 90-minute flight to Astana. Although the world’s ninth

largest country, Astana is Kazakhstan’s only other significant city and since 1997 has been the purpose-built capital. It didn’t take much thought to name it — Astana means capital. Peering from the window of my Air Astana flight, all I could see after Almaty disappeared was a flat, dry nothingness.

Then just as you begin to think you’ll never see civilisation again, Astana rises out of the barren steppe — no introduction, no outlying suburbs, it just makes a brazen appearance with its traffic-filled highways and oddly shaped buildings.

British architect Norman Foster is responsible for some of the amazing structures, including the Khan Shatyr shopping mall and entertainment centre. It is certainly a peculiar shape — a tented affair best described as resembling a wonky cone which houses three levels of shops. Many are familiar names — Mango, Next and M&S. The

GO: KAZAKHSTAN

GETTING THERE: Air Astana offers return flights between Heathrow and Astana from £492 year-round. See airastana.com

STAYING THERE: Air Astana Holidays can provide tailor-made holiday packages. Six nights (three in Almaty and three in Astana), with four flights, transfers and hotels on B&B basis costs from £729pp. This includes city tours of Almaty and Astana and a seasonal bonus, like a visit to the Arasan Baths or a day skiing at Shymbulak. See airastana.com/uk/en or call 020 7333 0196.

MORE INFO: Visa-free travel to Kazakhstan for visits of up to 15 days is now available for UK nationals. Holiday Extras offers ‘Meet and Greet’ services at all major UK airports for car parking. See HolidayExtras.com or call 0800 1313 777.

EXPLORING FOR TRAVEL JUNKIES

fourth floor is where the surprise lies. This is the indoor Sky Beach Club with water slides, palm trees, mini football field, volleyball court, loungers and sand imported from Dubai. I suppose a beach is rather a luxury in a landlocked country.

Foster also designed the futuristic pyramid-shaped Palace of Peace and Reconciliation. This towering eyeful is home to an opera house, museum and conference facilities and, because Astana’s temperature ranges from a blistering 35°C-plus in summer to a shivery -40°C in winter, two sides of the pyramid are on roller bearings to allow for contraction and expansion.

Just across the road is Central Asia’s largest mosque which can accommodate 3,000 worshippers.

And The Bayterek Tower is also worth seeing, particularly at night when the structure and its fountains are lit up in glorious technicolour.

I sampled several restaurants in Astana and one thing they all had in common was helpful, pleasant staff and generous

portions. However, visitors should be prepared for haphazard service, with main courses often arriving before the starter and customers being served when their food is ready, regardless of others at the table.

Most menus have photos of the food, helpful for anyone who doesn’t know what a bowl of soup looks like. Kazak food is traditionally meat-heavy and “beshbarmak”, a sort of stew made with horse meat or mutton, is one of their speciality dishes.

As a non-meat eater I didn’t fare too badly, though, because

the country’s multicultural history means that dishes from European, Russian and Uzbek cuisines are also always on offer.

Kazakh tea (chai) is popular and national cafes called Chai-Khana, roughly translating as “tea rooms” serve the speciality. It is not customary to tip waiting staff here and the local currency, the Tenge, has suffered a devaluation so prices are cheap by our standards. Most places also accept US dollars or credit cards.

If anyone who travels still buys souvenirs, then the most popular items from Kazakhstan are silver jewellery and the Kazakh national dress or “shapan”. The latter you may not even need to buy because, if you become friendly with a local, one of their traditions is to present you with this heavily embroidered kaftan before you leave the country.

During my short stay in this former Soviet Republic I only managed to skim the surface which, of course, provides me with another reason for going back.

GILLY PICKUP



DIVERSE . . . water slides at futuristic Khan Shatyr and traditional meat market



ALL THE BEST SKI DEALS...

INDULGE your family with a late break to the iconic resort Courchevel 1850 in France, renowned for being one of the most stylish places in the Alps.

A week at Chalet Hotel Crystal 2000 is from £399pp. Price is based on a family of four (two adults and two children 2-10, travelling on April 16. Price includes flights from Edinburgh to Geneva and seven nights’ catered accommodation with a cooked breakfast, afternoon tea, children’s high tea and five-course dinners with complimentary wine. See espritski.com or call 01483 791 920.

● **STAY** seven nights at Chalet Lys Margot, in Tignes, France, from £719pp (was £909pp) travelling on April 16. Price is based on two sharing and includes flights from Edinburgh to Geneva and seven nights’ chalet catered accommodation including buffet breakfast, afternoon tea and a four-course evening meal with complimentary wine. See skitotal.com or call 01483 791 935.

● **GET** your skis on! Ski Club Freshtracks ‘La Grave Easter Off-Piste Weekend’ in France costs £850pp and includes four nights’ half-board in the 3★ hotel Auberge Edelweiss, return scheduled flights, transfers, three days with mountain guides and the services of a Ski Club leader. Departs April 13.

See SkiClub.co.uk/freshtracks or call 020 8410 2022.

● **TAKE** to the slopes in Obergurgl in Austria for a week and stay at Chalet Christophorus from £579pp including flights from Manchester on April 16. The price includes transfers and chalet catered accommodation including buffet breakfast, afternoon tea and a four-course evening meal with complimentary wine. See igluski.com or call 0203 811 6381.

● **FOR** those looking to take their skiing further than Mountain Tracks — a small, friendly team specialising in guided mountain adventures — have a trip going hut-to-hut on Monterosa Summit in Switzerland. The area has more 4,000m peaks than anywhere else in the Alps and some of the wildest glaciers. Eight days, including six full days with mountain guides, two nights’ B&B hotel accommodation and five nights’ half-board accommodation in high alpine huts is from £1,595pp leaving April 29.

See mountaintracks.co.uk or call 020 8123 2968.

● **A WEEK** all-inclusive at Club Med’s La Plagne 2100 in La Plagne, France, is from £1,149 per adult and £940 per child leaving Edinburgh on April 16. See clubmed.co.uk or call 020 3811 1507.



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