



● A cloud passes over Morro Rock in Morro Bay, California.

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the result is superb, and understandably rammed.

Order the fish sandwich and you'll be guided to the display case to select which of that morning's catch you'd like crisply coated and fried as the filling. It's not rocket-science but it is ludicrously and oh-so-simply delicious, ditto the fresh and the fried oysters. Mark, having clocked the British accent, drops by to show some photos of his mother, a Pearly Queen. It's somewhat surreal, discussing cockney traditions in the California sunshine, on the Pacific, listening to a local musician perform Eagles covers, while the local sealions honk contentedly in the background, but it's also pretty damned perfect.

Those last three words come up a lot over the next few days, as we simply switch off, kick back and enjoy Morro Bay and its surrounds. From lunch, we drop our bags at the charming Anderson Inn – great views, ultra-chilled, spacious, comfortable rooms with a suitably aquatic vibe – and, well, just fall back into Morro Bay life starting, perhaps inevitably, with a boat cruise around the bay.

We hire an electric boat from Estero Adventures and cruise, silently and blissfully, around for an hour, observing wildlife and enjoying the air. A natural promontory – now mostly a State Park – sits between Morro Bay and the Pacific, providing calm waters for all sorts of boating activities, as well as perfect conditions for oyster beds and an incredible array of wildlife. Indeed, every January, Morro Bay hosts one of the world's biggest birdwatching festivals – morrobaybirdfestival.org – where you'll potentially see some 200 species.

Take a short stroll away from the ocean and you'll find a small town that punches way above its weight. There's a charming movie theatre, a little local retail, assorted

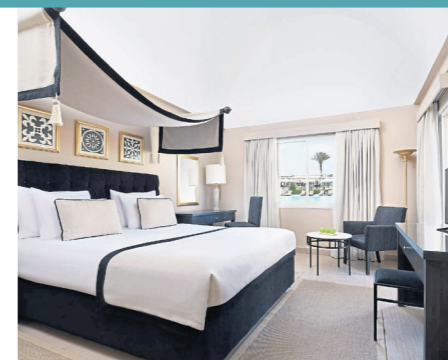
bars and clubs with active live music and comedy programmes, a healthy craft beer scene – and yes, the Three Stacks And A Rock Brewing Company does exist – a fine smattering of restaurants, and a buzzy café/coffee scene: Scout Coffee, in particular, is excellent by any city's standards. Push a little further afield, and you're in some of the most beautiful hills and scenery California has to offer.

But, inevitably, it's the water that draws us back, time and time again. A gondola ride – on a gondola imported from Venice – is utterly charming. We also push out into the Pacific for some (failed) whale watching (wrong time of year) and some (successful) dolphin spotting and the guys behind the excellent Morro Bay Oyster Co very graciously take us out to their oyster beds on our final morning. Each experience borders on the magical.

Morro Bay's newest tagline is "Come get salty" and that feels like the one that should stick. We got salty, not to mention truly relaxed and very well fed – and would do it again in a heartbeat.

Factfile

For more information on Morro Bay, take a look at www.morrobay.org. Rooms at the Anderson Inn – andersoninmorrobay.com – start at around £220 per night. Morro Bay is nestled around 200 miles/four hours' drive from both Los Angeles and San Francisco. Flights to both cities from Scottish airports – via Heathrow or another US hub airport – start at around £700 return per person. Gondola tours start at \$130 per hour. Cruises and dining experiences can be booked via Central Coast Gondola at centralcoastgondola.com. Estero Adventures electric boat cruises start at \$100 per hour and can be booked via esteroinn.com/estero-adventures. Details of The Morro Bay Oyster Company can be found at www.morrobayoysters.com



● From left: The Jaz Makadina Hotel; stunning waiting area; poolside; and modern double bedroom.

Souks, spa days and plenty of heat in Red Sea winter sun resort

WORDS
SARA DARLING

I didn't see Rosetta's Stone, Tutankhamun's tomb or the enigmatic Sphinx on my journey to Egypt; but I did witness stunning sunsets, windsurfers, luxury spas and souk shopping on the Arabian Peninsula that encompasses the Red Sea. Interestingly, no one can officially decide why it is christened Red. Some historians believe it is named after the tribe of Himyarites who once lived along its shores. Others believe it describes the sea's location relative to the ancient Mediterranean world – in ancient languages, the colours black, red, green and white referred to north, south, east and west; whilst others say it is named after the red-hued "sea sawdust", a type of bacteria that grows near the water's surface.

Whatever your theory, the touristic area of Hurghada is a far cry from the exciting chaos of Cairo, and as I headed through the barren desert sand-scape from the airport with nothing to guide my driver apart from the luminescent moon, I felt like I was being transported into an alternate universe – just a two-hour time difference from the UK.

My destination was an uncomplicated 45-minute transfer, thanks to the night's clear roads – only slowing down for routine police checkpoints around the town's perimeter and another search as we entered the Jaz Hotel complex which was to be my home for the duration. I had chosen the Jaz Group for my

● The beach at Jaz Makadina Hotel, Hurghada. Below: Sara Darling.



solo trip as they boast eight hotels in the Hurghada area and an adjacent souk with a range of stores selling Egyptian goodies. The resort can be booked on an all-inclusive basis, which includes buffet breakfast, lunch and dinner at the El Masry main restaurant plus snacks and drinks; I also treated myself to the Dine Around programme which allows guests to enjoy a complimentary dinner at any one of the seven restaurants in the village.

My driver dropped me at the foyer and I was welcomed with a much-needed cold beverage as I completed my check-in details and was given a brief orientation – with the faint sound of an '80s disco reverberating every time the doors opened – but really on

that first night, I was already ready for bed! After being escorted to my room overlooking the bay, I was too tired to explore, but excited to see what was on offer when I arose.

I awoke early to the sound of waves lapping and staff brushing down the sand in preparation for the guests; and when I stepped out onto my balcony, I was met with a carpet of coconut-palm umbrellas and the faint smell of sunscreen that complimented my view of the insanely blue Red Sea.

Looking forward to chilling in the sun, I had plans to do yoga, snorkel and finish my book whilst topping up my tan, but little did I realise that there was so much more on offer – from the impressive treatments at

the spa and hammam, to shopping and golf.

However, the main draw for me was the access to the beach, and the stunning Sinai Peninsula is a hotbed for its coral reefs with the Red Sea home to turtles, rays and barracudas. With a dive shop on site, there are daily excursions for diving or you could, like me, pick up a snorkel and enjoy dipping in and out of the water at your leisure to see an array of neon fish and flourishing coral reefs closer to the shore.

I could have easily spent my days splashing in and out of the sea – less than 100m from my room – but my "village package" included a single entry to the group's Makadi Water World Aqua Park, a short

(free) transfer away, with 50 slides including multi-lane race tracks, gentle drops, near-vertical free fall slides and a children's area.

I was also able to tick parasailing off the bucket list.

While the UK shivers under grey clouds and drizzle, Egypt's weather dials its way up to the perfect temperature with blue skies aplenty – it's no wonder it's a popular option for a winter sun escape.

Factfile

I stayed in the Jaz Makadina, Safaga Rd, Hurghada 1, Red Sea Governorate 1960402, Egypt www.jazhotels.com/destinations/madinat-makadi



My Scotland

Sunday strolls and scrans with Shauna Urquhart.



Loch Brandy

This popular hike in the Angus glens is a must-do activity. The route is steep but short, rewarding you with stunning views at the top. For a well-earned pub lunch, visit the nearby Glen Clova Hotel. Alternatively, take a quick drive down to The Drover's Inn where you can enjoy a cosy lunch by the fire or indulge in an à la carte meal in the dining room.

Broughty Ferry



Packed with food, drink and beachside charm; the perfect location to enjoy the upcoming festivities. Discover small plates at Sol Y Sombra Tapas bar and creative cocktails at Bruach or relax with a classic ale at the family run Fort Hotel. There's truly something here for everyone.



Flotterstone

Located at the base of the Pentland Hills, Flotterstone offers picturesque trails and scenic views around the Glencorse Reservoir. Just a short drive from Edinburgh, it is the perfect city escape. After a morning exploring, head to The Horseshoe Inn for a delicious, country pub meal – I highly recommend their fish and chips. They are also dog friendly, so your four-legged friend can enjoy the day out with you.

● For more travel tips, follow Shauna at @scrannigans on Instagram.