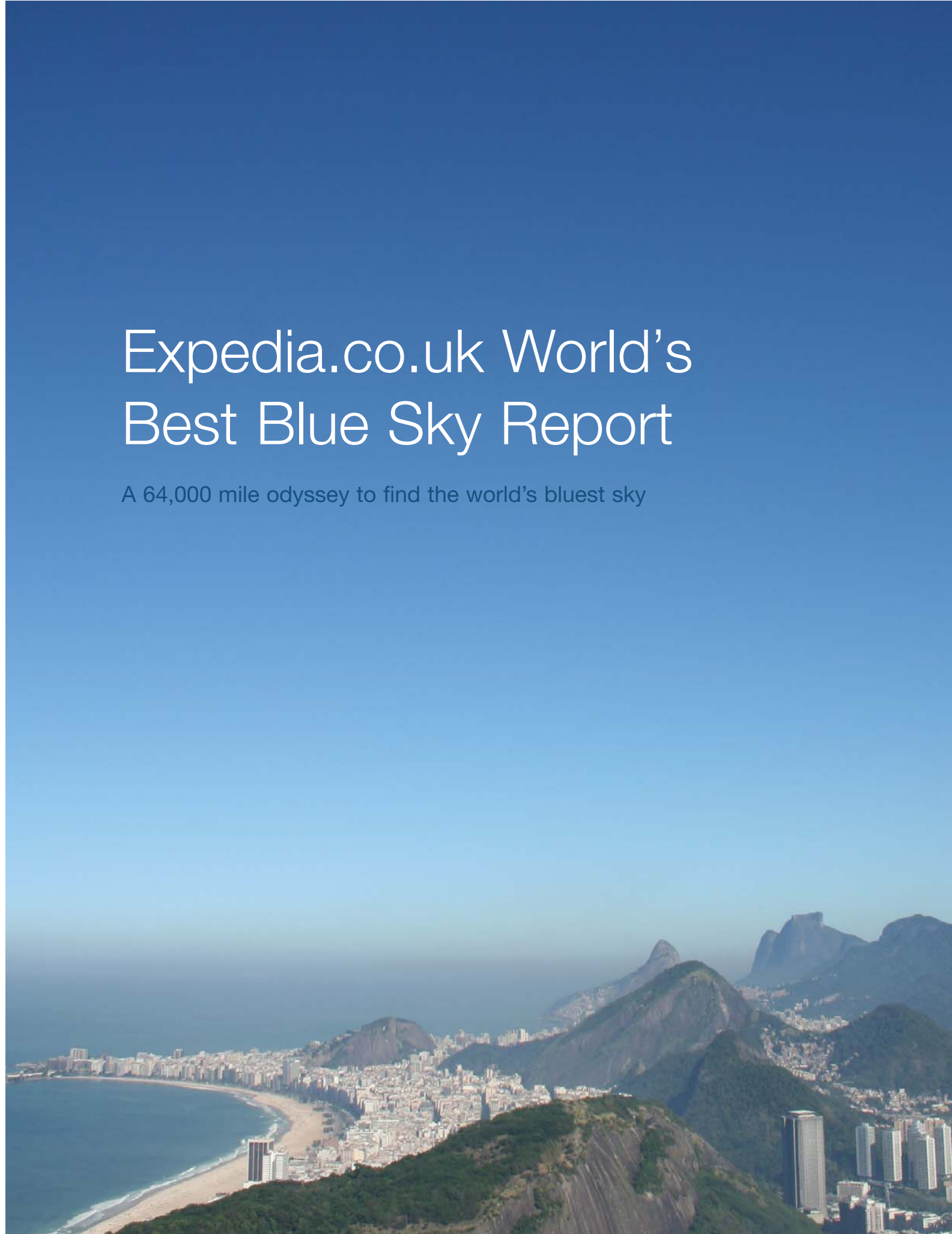
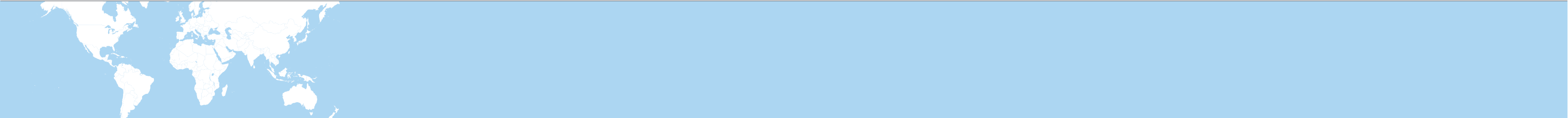


Expedia.co.uk World's Best Blue Sky Report

A 64,000 mile odyssey to find the world's bluest sky





Introduction

A great holiday is the sum of many parts, but ask any holidaymaker and they will say that blue skies – whether soaking up the sun, in the surf or on the slopes – are essential.

Gazing up at bright blue skies can have a huge effect on our mood, making us feel calmer, happier and invigorated. The very act of looking up at a blue sky is something people associate with being away on a great holiday. But where in the world has the best blue sky? And how do you quantify it?

Expedia.co.uk has spent the last six months working with scientists from the UK's National Physical Laboratory to do just that, revealing which blue sky can be crowned the world's best in this ground breaking report.

Finding the world's best blue sky

In April 2006, Anya Hohnbaum, a 27 year old TV researcher from Glasgow, was chosen from 2,000 other hopefuls to take on the job of Expedia.co.uk's Blue Sky Explorer, winning the chance to travel the world in search of its best blue sky.

Thousands of travellers cast their votes on www.let-yourself-go.co.uk to determine which destinations made it into the final 20 worthy of a visit on Anya's action packed itinerary. Thousands more followed her journey on the site as she hopped from one paradise destination to another.

Crossing six continents, 20 countries and 20 destinations, Anya conquered blue skies at destinations as varied as South Africa, Japan and Alaska – visiting, testing and rating all of them in the first research project of its kind.

All of the photography in this report has been taken by Anya on her travels and much of the content has come from her personal journals which you can read at www.let-yourself-go.co.uk.



The testing

Expedia.co.uk worked with the National Physical Laboratory (NPL) and its Optical Radiation team, led by Dr Nigel Fox, on how to define and quantify the 'best blue sky'.

Anya performed scientific tests using a spectrometer to measure the light scattered from each sky, from which NPL could then determine the exact sky colour, brightness and cloud density at each location.

However, this wasn't just a scientific piece of research. In order to translate her findings into something more tangible for the everyday holidaymaker, Anya conducted a series of tests to measure the overall 'blue sky effect' – from how bright the sky was and how many clouds there were in it, through to the general ambience and how it made people feel.

Why is the sky blue?

NPL develops and accurately measures colour standards which are used throughout the world to ensure that colour measuring equipment from Bolton to Bangladesh will produce compatible results.

So, what is colour? Dr Nigel Fox explains: "Colour is just our perception of scattered light. The colour of objects depends on how they are illuminated, how they absorb or scatter light, and how our eyes and brains react. Only three primaries are needed to represent all possible colours; red, green and blue."

The science explained






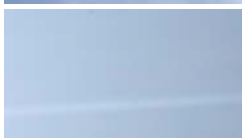
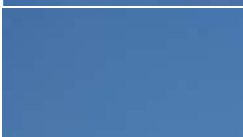

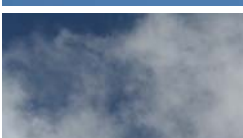

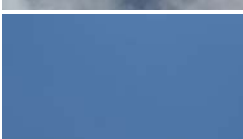




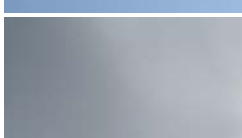




White light from the Sun containing all wavelengths ("colours") in the spectrum enters the Earth's atmosphere.

The sunlight is then scattered by the molecules present in the atmosphere.

This scattering, called Rayleigh scattering, is more effective at short wavelengths (the blue end of the visible spectrum) and so the sky is preferentially blue.



The world's best blue skies

	1st Rio de Janeiro Brazil		11th St Lucia Caribbean
	2nd Bay of Islands New Zealand		12th Dublin Ireland
	3rd Uluru Australia		13th Marrakech Morocco
	4th Denarau Island Fiji		14th Glacier Bay Alaska
	5th Cape Town South Africa		15th Phnom Penh Cambodia
	6th Antananarivo Madagascar		16th Amalfi Coast Italy
	7th Karumba The Maldives		17th Koh Samui Thailand
	8th Tokyo Japan		18th Edinburgh Scotland
	9th Castel Dinas Bran Wales		19th Pyramids of Giza Egypt
	10th Long Beach Los Angeles		20th Cornwall England

The route



Blue sky methodology and results

Blue sky measurement procedure

Expedia.co.uk consulted NPL on the best procedure to ensure the blue sky tests were consistent and fair at each location. They outlined a series of steps to ensure the colourmetric and radiometric based quantites that were measured were robust and compliant with international standards.

So Anya made sure that:

- All measurements were made at 10 am local solar time, chosen as skies tend to be clearer in the morning and a noon Sun would present high scatter issues
- A similar size area of sky was measured at each location
- The area of sky measured was geographically similar in position to the sun and background environment at each location

Photography

An integral part of Anya's kit, she used a Canon EOS 350 camera to take hundreds of blue sky photos at each destination, capturing each area's natural beauty and mood. A Sigma fish-eye camera lens helped to create the dramatic blue sky images. Some of the photographs taken were used to assess the blueness of the sky at the NPL laboratories:

To regulate the camera at each location, Anya took a picture of NPL's test card (pictured) at each testing ground. The camera was set with a 50 mm focal length.



Anya would stand with her back to the sun, change the focal length to the widest field of view (22 mm) and take a photograph of the horizon with a good section of each sky in each photo.

Anya would lie on her back and take a photograph of the sky directly overhead. The camera was set with a 50 mm focal length.



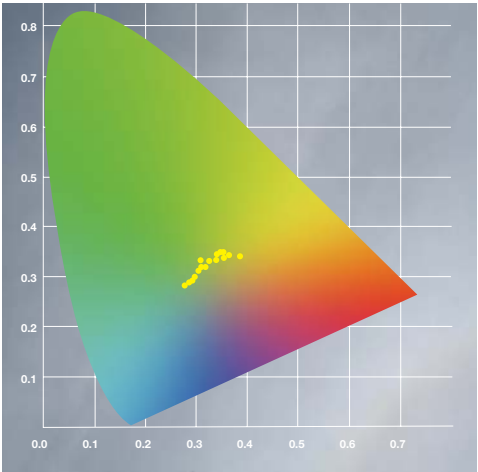
Anya would lie on her back and take a photograph of the sky directly overhead with a fish-eye lens, which captures a much larger area of sky.

Colour

Anya used a spectrometer, an optical instrument used to measure light and colour, to take readings at each location. The results were analysed by the Optical Radiation team at NPL to determine which sky could be definitively crowned the World's Best Blue Sky.

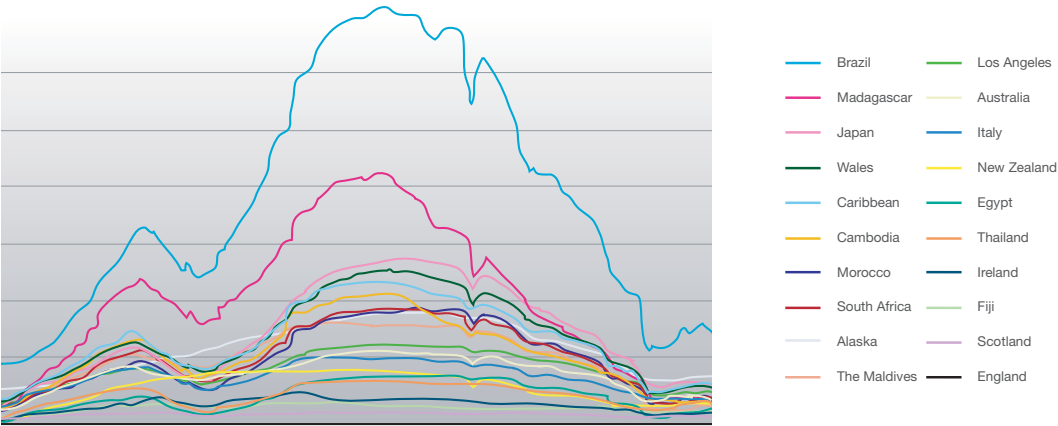
As all colours are based on three primaries (red, green and blue), the winner of the World's Best Blue Sky was the one which most excited the blue receptors in the human eye. Featured as the location farthest into the blue area of the diagram on the right, the winning destination is Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

For further information on how the data was analysed, please see the NPL website: www.npl.co.uk/blueskies.



Brightness

The spectrometer also helped to determine which sky was the brightest. Analysed by NPL, the graph below shows that Rio De Janeiro, Brazil had the brightest blue sky whilst Cornwall, England was the most dull on the day of testing.



Sunglasses factor

But what does this mean for the average holidaymaker? Anya also performed her own test to advise travellers what strength eye protection they would need to bask under the brightest blue skies in the world, using varying strength sunglasses.



California



Ireland
England
New Zealand
Thailand
Alaska



Cambodia
Scotland
Italy
Australia



Japan
Fiji
Morocco
Wales



Cape Town
Maldives
Egypt
Madagascar



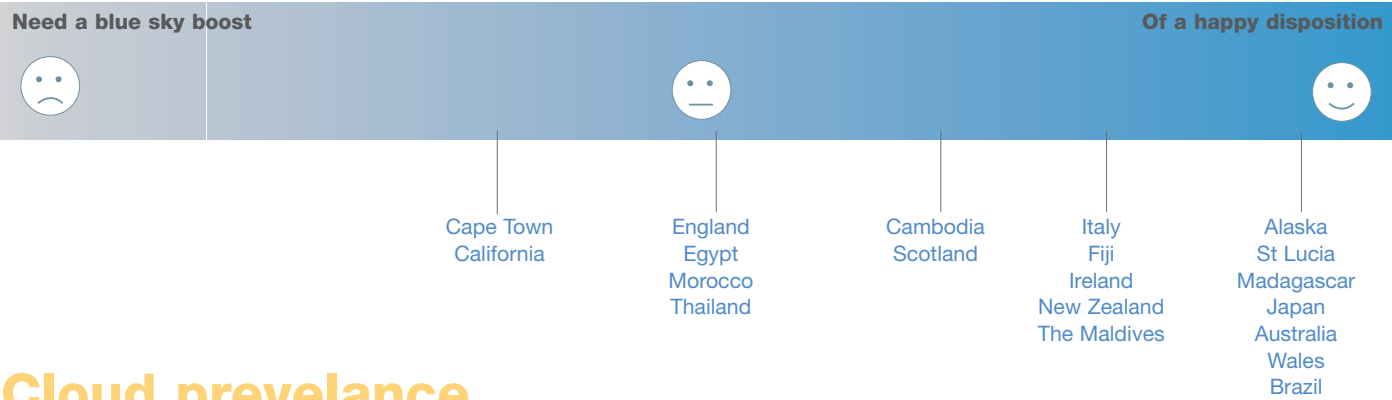
St Lucia
Brazil

That holiday feeling

Holiday destinations often evoke different feelings. These can be brought about by the friendliness of the local people, beautiful settings, strong cultures and fascinating histories. Blue skies also contribute to creating this holiday mood.

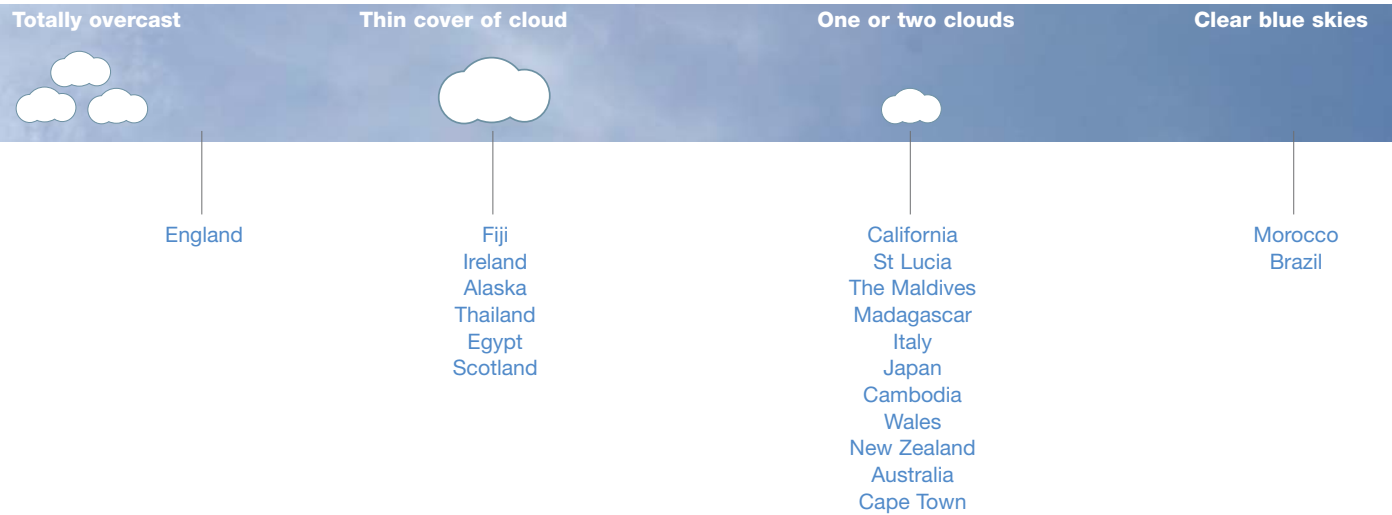
At each destination on Anya's trip she made it her business to speak to the locals and visiting tourists to get their point of view on how each blue sky destination made them feel.

From a straw poll of 100 people at each destination travellers are most likely to get that holiday high in Alaska, St Lucia, Madagascar, Japan, Australia, Wales and Brazil.



Cloud prevelance

The best blue sky isn't necessarily one that is cloud free. In fact a cloud can often make a blue sky seem more blue due to the contrasting colours. Anya identified what cloud cover (if any) was present at each testing location.

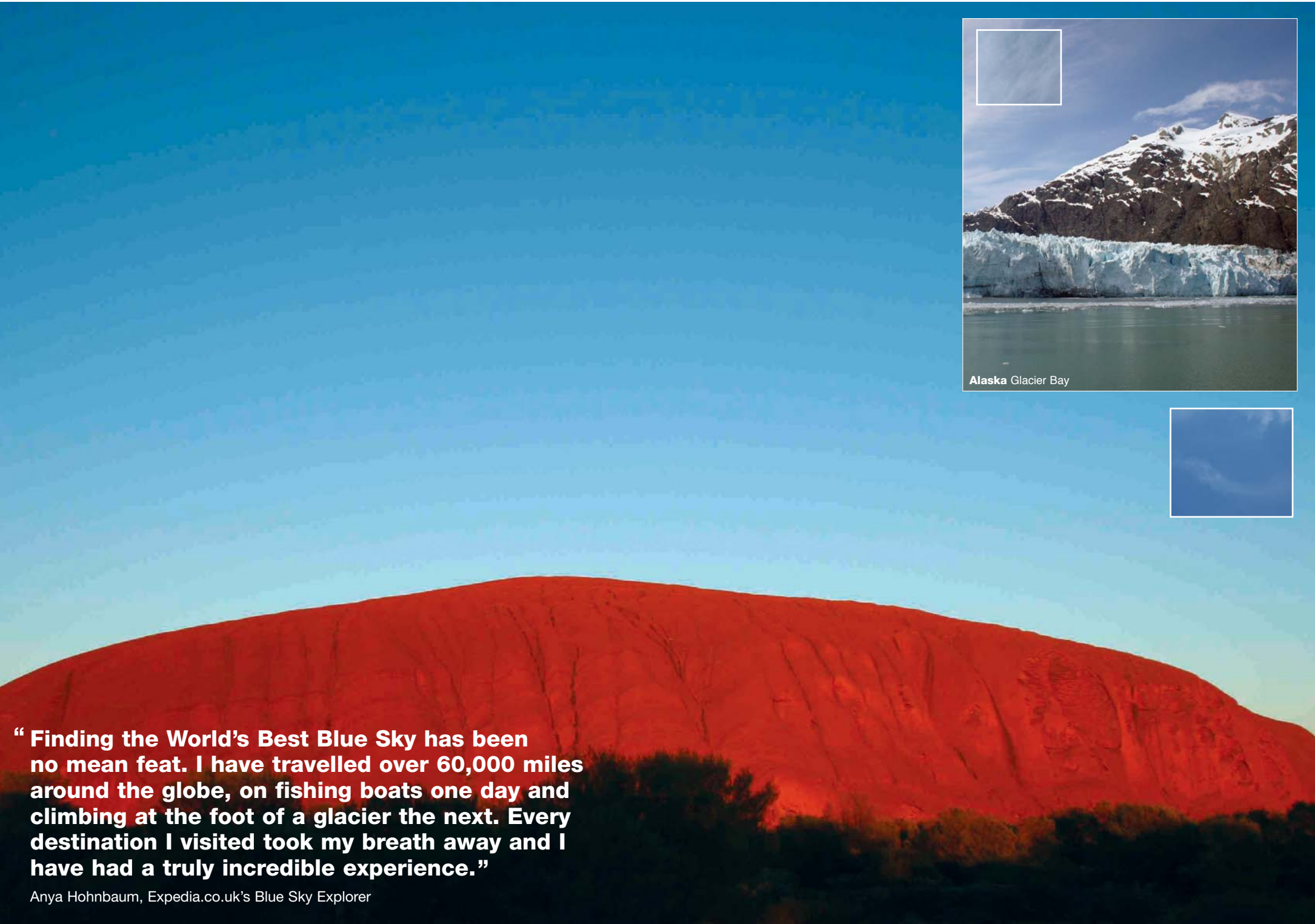


Temperature

Results from the colder destinations on Anya's itinerary prove that warmer climes and blue skies don't always have to come hand in hand. So whether you're looking for a holiday on the slopes or chilling out on the beach, there is a destination for you in the World's Best Blue Sky League this summer.



The world's best blue skies uncovered



“ Finding the World's Best Blue Sky has been no mean feat. I have travelled over 60,000 miles around the globe, on fishing boats one day and climbing at the foot of a glacier the next. Every destination I visited took my breath away and I have had a truly incredible experience.”

Anya Hohnbaum, Expedia.co.uk's Blue Sky Explorer

Alaska Glacier Bay

Blue Sky League Position: 14th

Alaska was one of the coldest destinations on Anya's itinerary, but one of the most beautiful. An 'ice desert', Alaska is made up of breathtaking scenery and clean alpine air.

You are most likely to enjoy a trip here as a couple (the country is known as the fourth most romantic destination in the world!) and many of the hotels are equipped with outdoor hot tubs for basking under the bright blue sky in style.

Anya performed her testing at the Glacier Bay National Park. The area was covered in ice just over 200 years ago and now offers an intriguing natural laboratory for scientists and a stunning area for visitors to explore.

Anya's Top Tip: *“If for any reason you become tired of the hot tub, there are plenty of activities (like kayaking, river rafting, boat tours or hiking) to keep you warm and on the move!”*

Australia Uluru

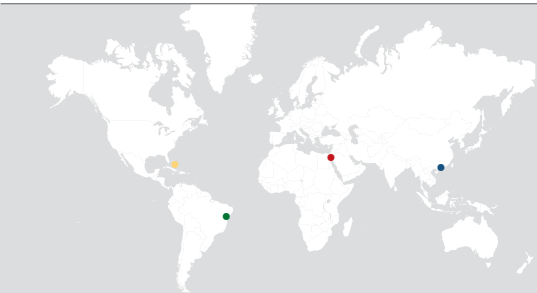
Blue Sky League Position: 3rd

As a complete opposite to Alaska, the area around Ayers Rock is dusty and dry. Officially known as Uluru, since it was returned to its Aboriginal owners in 1985, it is one of Australia's most famous landmarks and the country's most visited site.

It's the largest standing monolith in the world, rising some 430 metres from the desert, and looks amazing from the air flying in to Connellan (Ayers Rock) airport.

The red colour of Uluru is due to iron minerals in the surface rocks oxidising with the air. Summer here officially starts in December and winter in June. It has a desert climate, mostly dry, with brilliant blue skies all year round.

Anya's Top Tip: *“Make sure you ask for a seat on the left-hand side of the plane if flying from Sydney to Connellan, as you won't see the rock from the right-hand side!”*



Brazil Rio de Janeiro

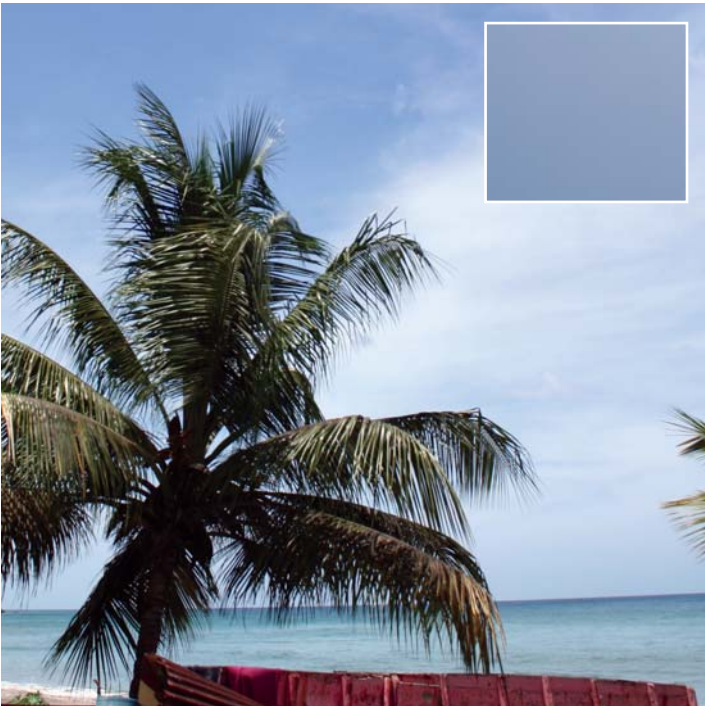
Blue Sky League Position: 1st

Brazil may have failed to win the 2006 World Cup, but it will be able to boast at least one accolade this summer – The World's Best Blue Sky.

Anya performed her tests in Rio de Janeiro, also known as the cidade maravilhosa or marvellous city. The Cariocas (people of Rio) are a hedonistic bunch, so head for this destination with your friends to party under the bluest sky in the world!

There are so many things to see here. Get even closer to the great blue sky on Sugar Loaf mountain or by visiting Cristo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer).

Anya's Top Tip: "If you want to escape the hustle and bustle, head down to Ipanema beach and treat yourself to a Caipirinha cocktail and some typical tapas-style snacks. Try the bolinhas de queijo (deep-fried cheese balls) and salgados (in this case, a pastry filled with fish)."



Caribbean St Lucia

Blue Sky League Position: 11th

St Lucia is part of the Windward Island chain, a sub-group of islands in the West Indies, 21 miles from Martinique, and 100 miles North East of Barbados.

A perfect place for couples or families, the local people are very friendly and good humoured – perhaps due to the blue skies.

Like all Caribbean islands, St Lucia enjoys a hot, tropical climate throughout the year. The average daily temperatures of 27°C (80°F) tend to be tempered by trade winds.

The majority of St Lucia's most stunning beaches are located in the North West of the island and the calm waters are perfect for kids to paddle about in!

Anya's Top Tip: "Head to Rodney Bay near Castries for great restaurants and a night out partying. Every Friday there is a free street party and locals and tourists come together for a night of fun!"



Cambodia Phnom Penh

Blue Sky League Position: 15th

Cambodia has had a turbulent past but is well on the road to recovery. Tourism is on the rise again and the local people are welcoming visitors.

November to February in Cambodia means clear blue skies by day and cool evenings – perfect weather for exploring the temples.

Cambodia is a peaceful, spiritual, and enchanting place with some beautiful architecture to view, such as the temples from the Angkorian period.

Anya's Top Tip: "Take a trip to Psar Tuol Tom Pong, aka the Russian Market in Phnom Penh. This gem of a place is stocked with, amongst other things, clothing, souvenirs, handbags and jewellery."

Egypt Pyramids of Giza

Blue Sky League Position: 19th

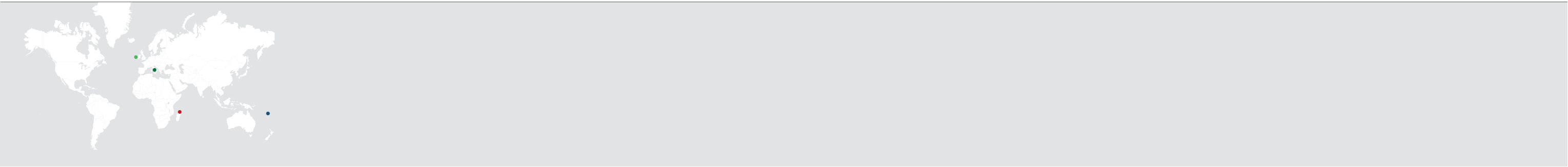
Egypt, also known as the "world in one country", is immersed in history, tradition and culture and is one of the oldest tourist destinations on earth. Well known sites such as the Nile Valley, The Pyramids of Giza and the natural wonders of the Red Sea draw people to visit Egypt year upon year.

Egypt's climate is hot and dry most of the year. During the winter months temperatures reach an average of 20°C (68°F) on the Mediterranean coast and a pleasant 26°C (80°F) inland. Maximum temperatures can reach 31°C (88°F) in the height of the summer.

Egypt is a mecca for scuba divers world-wide and with this high level of demand many dive centres operate along the entire length of the Egyptian Red Sea coastline. Its unrivalled coral reefs home countless species of weird and wonderful fish.

Anya's Top Tip: "Hire a camel to ride around the edge of the Sahara desert (mine was called Mickey) or a horse to enjoy a night-time gallop around the brightly lit pyramids – true Indiana Jones style!"





Fiji Denarau Island

Blue Sky League Position: 4th

The South Pacific is renowned for being a tropical paradise and Denarau Island does not disappoint.

Its location is perfect – only a 20 minute drive from Nadi International airport, or 10 minutes from Nadi town, which makes it very accessible.

Perfect for couples or travelling friends, you can head off the beaten track and discover a bit more of Fiji on a trip out into the Nausori highlands. Climb over 2,500 feet, where the air is a bit cooler and the blue sky views are dazzling.

Film buffs should visit the island of Modriki, where the film Cast Away, starring Tom Hanks, was shot.

Anya's Top Tip: “The natural spring water here is so fresh and renowned for its high mineral content. Soothe your tired feet with a paddle in one of the many waterfalls. I did and it was heavenly!”

Ireland Dublin

Blue Sky League Position: 12th

Dublin is a place to be enjoyed by everyone – from families to couples and friends.

The coldest months are January and February, while July and August are warmest. Although, whatever time of the year the locals will always give a warm welcome.

No trip to Dublin would be complete without a visit to the Guinness Storehouse, where visitors can have a look around and enjoy a free pint of the traditional ‘black stuff’.

With friends, head out to the Temple Bar area for an evening full of frolic with an endless choice of restaurants, pubs and bars.

Anya's Top Tip: “After conducting my experiments on the beautiful grounds of Trinity College, I hopped on one of the sightseeing buses for a whiz around Dublin's main tourist attractions. The guide was extremely funny and full of jokes. I would highly recommend it.”



Italy Amalfi Coast

Blue Sky League Position: 16th

The Amalfi Coast in Italy is considered by many to be the most beautiful stretch of coastline in Europe. The towns all have great restaurants, luxury hotels, shopping boutiques and sunset views.

The Mediterranean climate of southern Italy is milder and sunnier than the North, with dry summers and wet autumns and winters in Naples. July is the hottest month in Naples with average temperatures ranging from 18°C to 29°C (64°F to 85°F).

Probably the most popular of the towns along the Amalfi Coast is Capri. Although there are no beaches, Capri has some wonderful walks, along shoulder-width lanes bordering the prettiest of gardens and into wilder terrain.

There's a luxurious air to this region, so head for the Amalfi Coast if you're looking to spoil yourself and enjoy the finer things in life!

Anya's Top Tip: “Take a ferry taxi west to Positano, a charming little resort town with Moorish architecture and even steeper streets, with beautifully astounding views.”



The Maldives Karumba

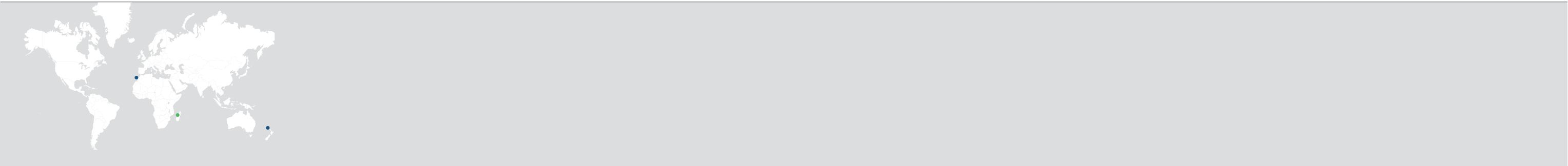
Blue Sky League Position: 7th

Resorts in The Maldives woo tourists with promises of ‘the last paradise on earth’ and if your idea of paradise is a pristine tropical island with swaying palm trees, pure white beaches and brilliant turquoise lagoons, then The Maldives will not disappoint.

Most suited to couples or honeymooners, The Maldives has a tropical climate with warm temperatures all year round and a great deal of sunshine and blue skies. The hottest month on average is April and the coolest, December.

Even though it is a place suited to lovebirds, you could bring your family. Many of the resorts are child-friendly, offering day-care services and activities for the younger ones.

Anya's Top Tip: “The Maldives is five hours ahead of the UK so jet-lag shouldn't be too severe. However, the spa on Kurumba where I stayed offers a special jet-lag massage and a host of other treatments to help you unwind.”



Madagascar Antananarivo

Blue Sky League Position: 6th

Two hundred and fifty miles off the east coast of Africa, Madagascar is more than twice the size of Britain. The Island is ringed by golden beaches and palm trees – a true paradise.

Madagascar's lush coastal areas deliver that warm, wet tropical feel with regular rain year round, while still managing a good amount of sunshine during the day.

A trip to Madagascar would not be complete without a visit to one of the country's national parks. Anya visited the Reserve Speciale d'Analamazaotra which is the smaller of two parks sited in the Parc National de Antasibe-Mantadia.

On her adventure she saw many different types of palm trees, medicinal plants including Chamomile, lizards, spiders, and the national bird of Madagascar, the Ibis.

Anya's Top Tip: "Very few people speak English here so if you're looking to visit Madagascar, make sure you pick up a French phrase book and start practising before you go!"



New Zealand Bay of Islands

Blue Sky League Position: 2nd

If you didn't have to travel over 26 hours to get to New Zealand (from London) you would be forgiven for thinking that you were landing in Scotland, with the masses of green rolling hills and livestock.

The Maori name for New Zealand is "Aotearoa" which translates as 'Land of the Long White Cloud'. The weather and climate is of paramount importance to the people of New Zealand – many of whom make their living from the land. Its climate is dominated by two main geographical features – the mountains and the sea.

The Bay of Islands region has the finest maritime park in New Zealand with 144 Islands and secluded bays. The Bay has an abundance of marine life, including the big marlin, whales, penguins, dolphins, gannets and many other species.

Anya's Top Tip: "If you have bags of time, take in the scenery by hiring a car and driving from Auckland to Kerikeri in the Bay of Islands rather than flying – it takes between three and four hours, depending on traffic. And pack a wind and water proof jacket for those outdoor activities!"

Morocco Marrakech

Blue Sky League Position: 13th

One of Morocco's most important cultural centres, Marrakech is a lively former capital famed for its markets and festivals. It is the shortest distance you can travel from the UK to find yourself in another continent.

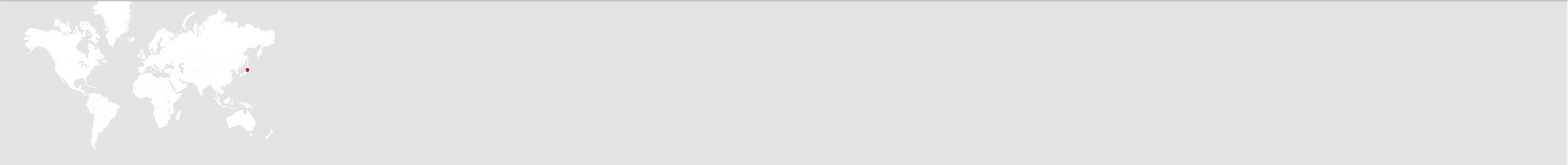
Marrakech and the interior of Morocco can become stiflingly hot in summer, easily exceeding 40°C (104°F). Fronting the desert, these plains are also subject to springtime sandstorms (usually in April). Even in winter, the lowlands can be hot during the day, with the mercury hitting 30°C (86°F), but temperatures drop quickly in the evening.

On a short stay break in Marrakech, the Medina is a place not to be missed. It's a network of over a thousand streets spread across 6.47sq km (20 sq miles).

Marrakech is a shopper's paradise, a city full of skilled artisans making (mostly) quality products in wood, leather, metal, brass and silver.

Anya's Top Tip: "If, like me, you have a limited amount of time in Marrakech and want to see and learn as much as possible, then organising a guided tour is essential."





Japan Tokyo

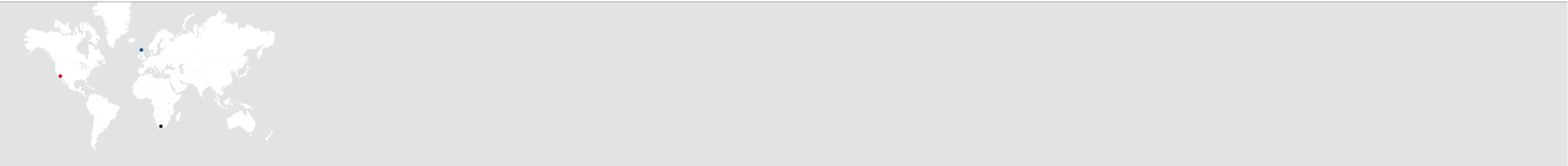
Blue Sky League Position: 8th

Many things might spring to mind when thinking of the metropolis that is Tokyo.

Electronics, sushi, sumo wrestling, animation and art house films and of course the dozens of skyscrapers armed with giant TV screens touching the bright blue sky! The city is all this and more and would most appeal to travelling couples or friends.

The neighbourhoods of Akihabara and Shinjuku also offer superb deals on all electronics. Perfect for picking up the latest invention to show off to your friends back home!

Anya's Top Tip: "Head for the Shibuya district to look at the neon skyscrapers (and hairstyles) that fill this exciting area. Visitors should come here to buy vinyl records, funky clothing, people-watch, or spend a couple of hours in a Love Hotel!"



Scotland Edinburgh

Blue Sky League Position: 18th

Edinburgh is unique among Scotland's cities. From dance clubs in 15th-century buildings and fire breathers outside Georgian mansions, this is a place that knows how to blend ancient and modern.

Temperatures in the hottest months (usually July and August) can show daytime highs of around 21°C (70°F); anything higher is regarded by local residents as a heatwave!

For panoramic views, walk up the dramatic Salisbury Crags that lie just in front of Arthur's Seat (the ancient volcanic hill that is climbable and also offers spectacular views).

From here you can see such landmarks as Holyrood Palace, the famous Firth of Forth Bridge, the sea and on a clear day, the distant Trossach Mountains.

Anya's Top Tip: "Don't miss the Edinburgh Festival held in August – the city really comes alive with tonnes of great comedy events as well as live music, dance and opera to enjoy. But plan your accommodation and travel early – things get booked up quickly!"



South Africa Cape Town

Blue Sky League Position: 5th

South Africa is an exhilarating, spectacular and complex place down to its diversity of people, wildlife, climate and scenic splendours.

South Africa is a mostly dry and sunny place but the climate is moderated by its surrounding oceans. As you journey further east, the handier your rain gear becomes.

Table Mountain is one of the world's most astonishing sights and most spectacular at sunrise or sunset. The best and quickest way to get to the top is by cable car. There are over 300 different ways to hike or bike back down again.

South Africa is renowned for its world class beaches. The best are Clifton Beach, for seeing and being seen, Camps Bay for family fun, and Sandy Bay for an overall tan!

Anya's Top Tip: "Wine tasting at Groot Constantia Wine Estate, on South Africa's oldest wine farm is fantastic and there are some fabulous restaurants – a fish restaurant called 'Simon's' is particularly good!"

North America Long Beach, Los Angeles

Blue Sky League Position: 10th

Destination 11 on Anya's itinerary, the city of Long Beach is the second largest in Los Angeles County and is one of the most popular places to visit in California.

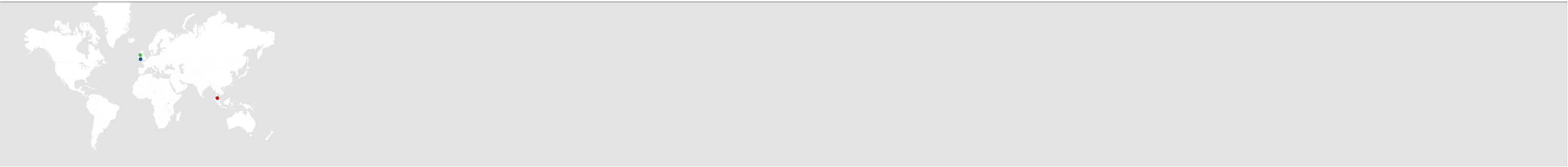
Located on the south side of affluent Los Angeles, it is home to the rich and the famous and is the hottest place on the California coast, with nearly 345 days of sunshine every year.

Summer temperatures are a sizzling 70-80°F, and winter temperatures are quite comfortable at 55-65°F, making Long Beach the ultimate year-round holiday destination.

Its most famous attraction is the ocean liner 'Queen Mary' now turned in to a hotel and where Anya stayed on her visit. There are a number of tours you can take which explain the boat's role in World War II.

Anya's Top Tip: "Go to 'Muscle' (Venice) beach for some great people-watching opportunities or day dream about living the Hollywood lifestyle by driving through Beverly Hills and checking out the massive mansions!"





Thailand Koh Samui

Blue Sky League Position: 17th

The Kingdom of Thailand draws more visitors than any other country in South East Asia. Koh Samui is Thailand's third largest island and during the last decade it has become one of South East Asia's premier tourist destinations.

The best overall time for visiting most of Thailand climate-wise is between November and February when it is not too wet and not too hot.

Koh Samui is a beach lover's paradise – there are so many beaches on the island to explore, each offering something different. For those in search of scenery, head to Bang Rak beach on the northern coast, famous for its huge Buddha image at the eastern end of the beach.

Anya's Top Tip: "If you don't fancy joining the globe-trotting backpackers at a full-moon party on neighbouring Koh Phangan, then you could spend a few days learning to dive and getting your PADI certificate with one of the many reputable dive companies on the island. It's an amazing experience!"



United Kingdom Rock, Cornwall

Blue Sky League Position: 20th

The town of Rock is across the Camel estuary from the fishing port of Padstow. Occasionally referred to as 'Chelsea-on-Sea', Rock is reputed to be the home of more millionaires than anywhere else in Cornwall.

Rain falls the year round, but in summer the rain is often derived from thunderstorms generated over France. Cornwall can expect well over 1500 hours of sunshine annually and whilst May is usually the sunniest month, May to July average around seven hours of sunshine a day.

Various leisure pursuits include sea angling, fishing trips, sailing, canoeing, rowing and water skiing. There is a foot ferry across to Padstow, still a working port, but very popular with tourists, particularly because of the numerous local fish restaurants. There is also a water taxi available, for those staying out late.

Anya's Top Tip: "For a really fresh dinner, go and catch your own! Head out on a fishing trip and fill your basket with mackerel and then eat it from a barbeque on one of the fine sandy beaches – bliss."

Wales Castell Dinas Bran

Blue Sky League Position: 9th

Castell Dinas Bran is set high above Llangollen and can be seen for miles around. 'Dinas Bran' translates as Crow City in English, but it is usually known as Crow Castle.

The North East of Wales finds itself the driest region in the country. The wind blows mainly from the South West so winters are generally mild and summers cool.

Llangollen is a haven for shoppers looking for interesting and unusual gifts. There are also many interesting walks in the town. A favourite walk is the stroll along Dee Lane and Victoria Promenade to Riverside Walk.

Thousands of visitors from around the globe descend on Llangollen in July each year when it hosts the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod.

Anya's Top Tip: "Don't forget how beautiful the landscape is on your doorstep! Wales is really stunning and steeped in history. Castel Dinas Bran – a 13th century medieval castle and hill fort – has links with the legendary Holy Grail! Definitely worth a visit."





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