



Three Beautiful Beach Escapes You Can Book Now

By Nina Kokotas Hahn

Days upon days of snow and sub-zero wind chills can drive even hardy Chicagoans out of their minds—or, at least out of town. Regain your sanity with three trips south to balmy, sunny escapes.



Overlooking the Caribbean from a deck at The Bitter End Yacht Club.

1. The Quick Fix: San Diego, California

Take advantage of direct flights from Chicago and great round-trip fares starting from \$226 (United Airlines to San Diego International Airport) for the chance to bask in Southern California sun and daytime highs around a comfortable 65 degrees. Stay in Rancho Santa Fe at the 49-casita [Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa](#) (from \$420), recently awarded the No. 9 best hotel in the country by [U.S. News & World Report Travel](#) and a spot on Condé Nast's 2014 Gold List. Only a 25-mile drive from downtown San Diego, the resort's 43 acres of secluded pools, olive groves, and riotous gardens set within the San Dieguito Valley make you feel a thousand miles away.

What to do: Start with outdoor yoga at the new Serenity Yoga Pavilion, play tennis on pebble courts, and hike or bike on complimentary wheels, onsite or nearby along the beaches and lagoon of Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve. Even the spa with its aromatic plant-based treatments opens up to the outdoors. Itching to get out? Take a scenic drive in one of the three Porsches, available complimentary to guests on a first come first serve basis, or check out the nearby Stone Brewing Co., [a highlight of the San Diego brew scene](#).

2. The Transporter: Papagayo Bay, Costa Rica

Sunny and dry, February is a dreamy time to visit Costa Rica, with highs in the 90s and lows in the 70s. Getting there and back is surprisingly easy, too, with no change in time zone from Chicago and direct flights from \$642 on Frontier Airlines—a great rate considering this is high season.

What to do: Head to the volcanic peninsula of Papagayo with its sandy beaches and wild, high cliffs, and check in at the mod, 85-suite [El Mangroove](#) (from \$290), which opens today. It's the closest luxury beachfront property to any international airport in Costa Rica (a 20-minute drive from Liberia International) and Papagayo Bay's only independent hotel; El Mangroove is also a member of the Chicago-based Preferred Hotel Group, known for its roster of exclusive, anti-chain hotels. Basically, this is the place to get lost in special treatment. Soak it up in private cabanas by the 130-foot plunge pool, the mangrove-shrouded spa, or in your airy suite. Lest you forget this is Costa Rica, the resort's 15 acres of beach forest call you out to the ocean for surfing, fishing and boating excursions, while the artsy town of El Coco is a 15-minute drive away.

3. The Far and Away: Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands

For a serious escape, chart a course to the North Sound of Virgin Gorda and the all-inclusive, 85-room [Bitter End Yacht Club](#) (from \$630 per couple and \$1,103 per family of four a night). Bought by Hyde Park husband and wife Myron and Bernice Hoykins in 1973 (and one of the first hotels on the island), it's family-owned, and technically headquartered in Chicago. You'll have to work to get there, with the most typical route being a one-stop flight to Tortola (Beef Island Airport) via San Juan (from \$655 on United), followed by a 30-minute ferry ride to Bitter End's dock. It pays off when the only thing you can see for miles, from the hammock at your treehouse-style beach cottage, is the big blue ocean and a sprinkling of mind-boggling mega yachts.

What to do: As part of an all-inclusive stay, you have unlimited access to over 100 different kinds of boats, an introductory sailing course from the onsite accredited school, and a junior sailing program for kids seven and up. Take snorkeling trips, sunset sails, and day-long excursions to nearby islands, including the The Baths with its fascinating grottoes and caverns, shipwrecked-laden Anegada with its white beaches, and Norman Island, the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island. The resort faces west, so nightly sunsets over the ocean are also part of the package. In February, strong winds across the sound make it an ideal time to take a lesson at the only kiteboarding school in the BVI, also located at Bitter End.

Travel News

Get a Taste of the Olympics a Little Closer to Home

"About five hours from New York City, there is an Olympic substitute with just about everything you can get at the Sochi Games except maddening transportation delays," says sports writer Bill Pennington. "In and around the Adirondack village of Lake Placid, which hosted the 1932 and the 1980 Winter Games, there is downhill skiing and snowboarding, 31 miles of cross-country skiing trails and skating on the 400-meter oval where the American Eric Heiden won five Olympic gold medals." [Read more at The New York Times.](#)

Take a Look Inside Chicago's New Kinzie Hotel

The new Kinzie opens tomorrow on February 4, replacing the former Amalfi Hotel with a mod look and a hardcore Chicago theme that speaks to the city's early days—and likely more to tourists than locals. [Get a sneak peek inside at Curbed Chicago.](#)

Hear Surprising Facts About Top Las Vegas Hotels

Did you know there's a \$10,000 cocktail called the Ono at Encore's XS nightclub that comes outfitted with Mont Blanc cuff links and a gold necklace, six clean-fuel burning stretch limos at The Bellagio, and a Gong Fu Cha-inspired tea lounge in the Sky Lobby at the Mandarin Oriental Las Vegas? [Get more Vegas surprises at Condé Nast Traveler.](#)