



SHORE AS HELL

How to survive a vacation.

A typical idea of the perfect vacation might be an expensive luxury hotel with an infinity pool and private beach—somewhere you barely have to lift a finger. An increasing number of people, however, are paying the same sum to be marooned, naked and alone, on a tropical island. Introducing the growing demand for desert island tourism.

Aspiring Robinson Crusoes often contact Alvaro Cerezo, whose company, Docastaway, has organized over a thousand such trips since 2010, whisking visitors off to remote, uninhabited islands in Southeast Asia or Central America. Prices range from \$100 to \$400 a night, depending on the location and whether you choose “comfort mode,” where food and accommodation is provided, or “survival mode,” where you are abandoned with little more than a lighter and a machete.

The majority of Cerezo’s clients choose the latter. “Most people want to test themselves,” he says. “They want to know they could survive the end of the world.” It’s a curiosity sparked by the popularity of reality shows like *Survivor* and *Alone*, which promote the art of “bushcraft.” Viewers watch and wonder: Could I make a fire? Hunt fish with a spear? Live for a week without electricity?

Desert islands have long called to something deep in the human psyche. They recur as motifs in Greek myths, blockbuster movies and newspaper cartoons. They are invoked as a blank slate for thought experiments—as in BBC Radio classic *Desert Island Discs*, where guests discuss the eight songs they would be cast away with—or the more philosophical concerns of *Lord of the Flies* or *The Tempest*, where an island strips characters of the trappings of the civilized world, exposing the essential, innate qualities of the human experience.¹

Cerezo knows that his business won’t last forever. “One day there will be no more desert islands,” he says, explaining that the islands he rents are permanently threatened, either by uncooperative local governments, a buildup of trash, the activity of local fishermen, or the construction of holiday resorts. He describes his quixotic quest for new islands as “a battle we are always waging against civilization.”

This is just one of the tensions at play. Another is the irony that, while many visitors choose to be cast away in order to escape modern technology, they also take photos and videos to post on social media. Cerezo estimates that around 30% of his clients “aren’t interested in the experience, they just want to post something on Instagram.” They know that the most engagement online is not garnered by exclusive resorts but by unique travel experiences.

Ultimately, while desert island tourism simulates the solitude of a true castaway experience, it lacks its defining feature: strandedness, when there’s no hope of return. Rather than opening a space to remake yourself permanently, these trips seem more like exhaust valves to let off the pressure of modern life before flinging yourself back into its currents. They’re a chance to spend some time alone, with only a machete for company, and be back in the office next Thursday—just you, the sunset and, as the Docastaway website assures, 4G internet, in case you get bored.

(1) The most requested piece of music in *Desert Island Discs*’ 82-year history is Handel’s *Messiah*. Only since the 1980s has rock and pop begun to be requested more frequently than classical.

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