GOT WANDERLUST? PÓL Ó CONGHAILE AND NICOLA BRADY
HAVE THE ULTIMATE TRAVEL HOTLIST FOR THE NEW YEAR

1 JAMAICA & Cancun
Long-haul package holidays rarely involve direct flights, so the recent news that Falcon and Thomson are to fly a Boeing 787 ‘Dreamliner’ direct to Jamaica and Cancun this summer was greeted with huge enthusiasm. The 9.5-hour flights start in June, with prices including 14 nights all-inclusive at the four-star Club Hotel Riu Tequila in Cancun from €1,709pp, based on a June 20 departure. Fourteen nights all-inclusive at the four-star Riu Ochos Rios in Jamaica costs from €1,929pp, departing June 26.
Do It: falconholidays.com; thomsonholidays.ie

2 A NEW LOOK Ryanair
Unless you have a penchant for garish yellow, you’ll be glad to hear that Ryanair will be rolling out revamped interiors for 2016. The airline, which has already introduced swanky new uniforms by Irish designer, Emma Colbert, plans to tone down the not-so-mellow-yellow colour scheme, as well as introducing improved lighting and new ‘slimline’ seats (with more legroom) with its Boeing ‘Sky interior. Just don’t hold your breath for business class...
Do It: ryanair.com

3 THE WORLD’S LARGEST CRUISE SHIP
Harmony of the Seas, the largest number of Royal Caribbean’s Quantum-class ships, debuts in Europe this May. RC doesn’t do subtle, so it’s no surprise to learn that this will be the largest passenger ship afloat (it’s two metres longer, but 20pc more fuel-efficient than its sister ships). Expect a zip line, robot bartenders, 10-story slide and two Flowriders on board, as well as a full-length production of Grease. The thrills are multiplying...
Do It: Harmony of the Seas (royalcaribbean.com) has three-night sailings from Southampton from €519pp in May.

4 IRELAND’S ANCIENT EAST
We’re still not sure what it will look like, nor the exact geography it entails, but momentum is gathering behind Fáilte Ireland’s latest marketing proposition. A ‘trending region’ that links 6,000 years of Neolithic, Early Christian, medieval and Anglo-Irish heritage sites and stories, the idea is to get tourists lingering longer in an undervisited area – funding has already been announced for a 3D Viking Experience in Waterford and a ‘Norman Way’ heritage route in Wexford, for example. The Wild Atlantic Way saw Ireland spread its wings. This goes back to our roots.
Do It: irlandismarvelis.com (the website is due to go live in spring).
5. ATHENS

Greets and its wealth of jaw-dropping islands have always been tricky to get to from Ireland, but the launch of two new direct flights to Athens from Ryanair and Aegean Airlines – will blow it wide open in 2016. Spend a few days exploring the city itself (there’s a lot more to it than the Acropolis, you know) before heading to Santorini for a trip to launch a thousand Instagrams.

Do it: Ryanair (ryanair.com) fly to Athens from Dublin from March, while Aegean (aegeanair.com) will fly twice weekly from June 50 to September 10.

6. LUXURY RAIL TRAVEL

Residents? What recession? Ireland’s first luxury touring train, the Belmond Grand Hibernian, will be taking to the tracks in 2016, offering exclusive two-, four- and six-night itineraries throughout the island. The tours, run by the same company that operates the über-opulent Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, will likely be dominated by international visitors with several thousand bob to spare. Meanwhile, Sunway (sunway.ie), celebrating 50 years in 2016, is launching three- and four-star train trips in Venice, Florence, Rome and Verona.

Do it: Prices start at €3,225pp for a two-night trip, all-inclusive, on the Grand Hibernian. See belmond.ie/grandhibernian.

7. CORK AIRPORT: THE COMEBACK

This time last year, who had thought that Cork Airport would be predicting top growth in 2016? Yet here we are, heading into a 12-month period with new services to Boston, Barcelona, Dusseldorf, Madrid, Menorca, Nantes and La Rochelle among others to look forward to. There’s something in the air, all right...

Do it: corkairport.com

8. BRILLIANT BOTSWANA

Botswana tops Lonely Planet’s Best in Travel List for 2016, with the travel bible describing it as “democratic, progressive, enlightened — but above all, invigoratingly wild.” Botswana celebrates 50 years of independence next year too, making it the perfect time to explore this stunning of a southern African country.

Do it: shakespeare400.org and shakespeare-england.co.uk

9. EURO 2016

Nails will be bitten to the quick during group games, but Euro 2016 is also about the craic... and nobody does craic like the travelling O’CONNORS crew. With airline fares going through the roof, this is the time to reconnect yourself with Irish Ferries, Stena Line and Brittany Ferries, with whom you can car pool your way to the continent... and the annals of sporting fandom glory. For students of the game, 2016 also sees the FIFA World Football Museum opening in Zurich, Switzerland.

Do it: Going to press, Stena Line (stena.co.uk/euro2016) was quoting return fares for a car plus two from €476. See also irishferries.com and brittanyferries.ie.

10. SHAKESPEARE’S ENGLAND

To visit England, or not to visit England? 2016 marks the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death, so get ready for a multitude of events to celebrate the Bard. In London, The Globe will be showing 37 new films along the Thames. In his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon, there’ll be a new immersive theatrical experience at the RSC, with a special birthday celebration weekend planned for April 23–24. 2016 is also the Year of the English Garden, marking 300 years since the birth of iconic landscape gardener, Capability Brown.

Do it: Shakespeare400.org and shakespeare-england.co.uk

11. SAN SEBASTIAN, SPAIN

Wroclaw and San Sebastian are the European Capitals of Culture for 2016. Curving around the scallop-shaped La Concha beach, framed by leafy green mountains and boasting an Old Town rambled with pintxos bars, we’ll take any excuse to visit this place Basque city. A izkirsos is the local term for a pintxo bar-crawl — the best fun involves compiling a list of recommendations and then going delectiously off-script. Foodie fans of Spain will also be pleased to hear that Catalon is the European Region of Gastronomy 2016.

Do it: dream2016.com/en/europe/regionofgastronomy.org

12. ROLLERCOASTER THEME PARK RIDES

Another year, another wave of theme park rides. Taking the planet’s thrillseekers to the next level in 2016 are The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, scheduled to open at Universal Studios Hollywood in April, and Skull Island: Reign of Kong, at Universal Orlando. Seaworld is debuting Makahana, a 320-foot tall coaster, while China gets its own House of the Mouse when Disneyland Shanghai opens this spring, complete with a Zip-Strip-themed hotel and the largest ever castle in a Disney Resort.

Do it: Reef America (reefamerica.co) has flights and accommodation in Orlando from €379pp based on a family of four sharing in September.

13. DUBLIN 2.0

Voted one of Lonely Planet’s Top 10 cities to visit in 2016, Dublin got a recent rebrand in the shape of a new logo and tagline: A Breath of Fresh Air. The was have had a field day with that one, but the capital will be at the heart of the 1916 Rising centenary commemorations, and the new EPIC Ireland visitor...
attraction is set to open in the CIQ Building, showcasing “the unique journey of the Irish nation”! Dublin’s food, shopping and social scenes are thriving, but the city needs to future-proof itself against currency fluctuations and revitalised competitor cities like Glasgow, Manchester and Amsterdam, too. The rare all-time times, rebooted.

Details: visitdublin.com

14 THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

His unique vision has made sofa tourists of us all, and now David Attenborough has turned his attention to the Great Barrier Reef. The legendary naturalist’s new documentary series is currently airing on BBC One, and if you want to retrace his steps there are any number of ways to experience the spectacular reef, from snorkelling to scuba, submarine and seascapes. Climate change and cyclones have taken a huge toll on this natural wonder, but it remains “one of the most wonderful places in the world”, Sir David says.

Do It: See australia.com or queensland.com. Fly to Cairns or Brisbane with Etihad (etihad.com) or Emirates (emirates.com).

15 NORTHERN IRELAND’S YEAR OF FOOD & DRINK

Northern Ireland mightn’t strike you as a foodie meca — but then again, 15 years ago, neither did Copenhagen. Every great culinary culture starts with the ingredients, and this year, Northern Ireland is hoping to tell the story of its culture, heritage, people and landscape through an exciting schedule of food and drink events based around monthly themes (January is Breakfast Month, for example, while February invites us to ‘Love Local’). The exchange rate may curtail some appetites, but it’s worth saving for a splurge in Belfast’s two new Michelin Star restaurants at Epic and Or Belfast (Northern Ireland had been starless since 2011).

Do It: tourismni.com/yearoffoodanddrink

16 LOS ANGELES

It’s one of the coolest, most underrated cities in America, and it’s about to get a whole lot easier to get there. Following on from the direct service introduced by Ethiopian Airlines from Dublin this year, Aer Lingus is re-launching its own direct flights to LAX in May, adding still more options for travellers (Iceland’s low-cost carrier, WOW Air, will fly via Reykjavik, too). Sprawling, seductive and surreal... LA goes way beyond the glitz and glamour of Hollywood.

Do It: Round-trip fares with Ethiopian airlines (ethiopianairlines.com) start from €407pp, while flights with Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) start from €520 each way.

17 HOTEL INTEL

Checking in? Then check out the glut of new hotel openings around the world in 2016, including the highly anticipated Nobu Hotel in London. Aman is opening its first property in the Maldives, and Belfast’s 52-bed Bulfinn Hotel is set to launch in the second half of the year — it’s the new offering from the Beacon Hotel Group behind the five-star Merchant Hotel. Flights are also set to turn the Harland and Wolff headquarters and drawing offices into an 86-bedroom hotel.

Do It: nobuhotels.com; smart.com; beaconhoterevery.com

18 HOLY YEAR 2016: A CAMINO TO ROME

Think of the Camino, and Spain naturally springs to mind. 2016 is an extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy, however — as announced by Pope Francis. This means it will be a popular year for pilgrimages to Rome, as well as the iconic Santiago de Compostela. Pilgrims to Rome will find the Holy Door at St Peter’s Basilica open for the year, while the cathedral in Santiago will also open its Holy Door (this wasn’t due to happen again until 2021). Get yer boots on... Do It: PrincesgateWorld.com has a seven-day guided tour on the Camino to Rome departing March 19, and walking during Easter Week 2016, from €479pp including half-board accommodation, luggage transfers and guide. Flights extra.