

where to go when



Mzaar is covered in snow again. Courtesy Mohammed Azakir / The Daily Star



Cyprus is set to celebrate its lively Carnival. Petros Karadijas / AP



The new Amanfayun in Hangzhou. Courtesy Amanresorts



There's plenty of snow at the ski resort in Gulmarg. Tauseef Mustafa / AFP



Vienna's State Opera during a traditional ball. Hans Punz / AP



It's always time to tango in Buenos Aires. Julian Finney / Getty Images

Season of light and colour

From skiing in Lebanon to India's Holi festival, here's a timely guide to the Spring. Selected by Killian Fox

February

Ski on a fresh pile of snow in Mzaar, Lebanon

February/March

Lebanon has long been associated with snow – its name derives from laban, meaning "white", and white is the usually the dominant colour on the lofty Mount Lebanon range between December and April, although this year the snows have only just fallen. Skiing only became popular here midway through the last century. Back then, the country was nicknamed the Switzerland of the Middle East. That reputation has since been threatened by conflict in the region, but now, with tourism once again blossoming, a ski break in Lebanon makes more sense than ever. Mzaar is the largest and most exuberant of the country's six resorts and it is a mere 46km from Beirut, adding weight to the old boast that you can ski in Lebanon in the morning and swim in the sea in the afternoon. The resort has 46 slopes, beginning at 1,850m, with a total of 80km of ski tracks. However, many visitors to the ritzy Mzaar prefer to hang out at the lofty Intercontinental Mountain Resort and Spa rather than exert themselves too much, which means that lift queues are a rarity. The steep treeless slopes, rising to 2,500m, afford breathtaking views of the Mediterranean below, where more energetic skiers might end up before the day is out.

A double room at the Intercontinental Mountain Resort and Spa costs from US\$253 (Dh929). Visit www.ichotelsgroup.com (00961 9 340100)

Dance and feast in the streets in Limassol

February 4 to 14

Every spring, before the fasting period of Lent, Cyprus enters a feasting period known as Carnival. For 10 days and nights, the island throngs with vibrant parades, fancy-dress parties and lively musical performances. The weather is already warm, spring flowers are in bloom, and, as Lent draws near, great spreads of delicious local food await the hungry reveller. Nowhere does Carnival better than Limassol, Cyprus' second city on the picturesque southern coast, where the celebrations are high-spirited and brightly colourful. The smartest way to experience the Carnival this February is to take advantage of a special package being offered by the Londa (www.londahotel.com; 00357 25865555), an award-winning boutique hotel on Limassol's waterfront. You'll receive four nights' accommodation with breakfast, dinner at the Caprice restaurant, and a hydrotherapy treatment in the hotel's luxurious spa, all for \$1,147 (Dh4,214) with airport transfers thrown in. First opened

in the 1980s, the Londa was totally refurbished recently by an acclaimed Italian design team and it has since become one of Cyprus' hippest hangouts. The festivities kick off on February 4 – the beginning of *Kreatini*, or "Meat Week" – with the arrival of the Carnival King. Make the most of the island's wonderful cuisine (the second week of Carnival revolves around cheese) before the Grand Carnival Parade heralds the beginning of Lent on February 14.

Celebrate Chinese New Year in leafy Hangzhou

February 14

When the Venetian explorer Marco Polo visited Hangzhou at the end of the 13th century, he declared it "without doubt the finest and most splendid city the world". Some 700 years on, many still consider Hangzhou, with its botanical gardens, tea plantations and picturesque West Lake, to be China's most beautiful city. If Polo were around today, chances are he'd be writing in praise of Amanfayun, a luxury resort which has just opened outside the city's historical centre. Set in a secluded valley amid bamboo groves and Buddhist temples, and built around an old tea village, Amanfayun is all about peace and serenity – valuable commodities in a location only 160km from Shanghai. The state-of-the-art spa, with a reflexology room and a Tai Chi studio, is the resort's centrepiece, and its layout of stone houses interspersed with elegant courtyards increase the sense of privacy and tranquility. However, the best reason to visit in February (aside from substantially reduced opening rates) is the jubilant celebration of Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival, ushering in the Year of the Tiger on February 14. Expect colourful parades bedecked with dragon costumes and red lanterns proceeding through the village thoroughfare at the heart of the resort.

A double room at Amanfayun costs from \$333 (Dh1,223). Visit www.amanresorts.com (amanfayun@amanresorts.com; 0086 571 8732 9999).

Ski the heights of snowy Gulmarg in Kashmir

February/March

Even though it occupies a great chunk of the world's mightiest mountain range, India has never been a first-choice destination for ski enthusiasts. Now all that is changing. As facilities improve in the Himalayas, canny skiers are heading to resorts such as Gulmarg, in Kashmir, which boasts the highest pistes on the planet and some of the longest. Skiing was introduced to Gulmarg by two British army officers in 1927, but only in the last few years has the resort come into its own. This season heli-skiing will be available here for the first time, opening up ac-

cess to 22 peaks over the 4,000m line, including the awesome 4,800m Sunshine Peak. The resort receives heavy snowfalls at regular intervals and the high altitude preserves the lightness of the snow making it a powder-lover's dream. While off-piste skiing here is a major attraction, Gulmarg's slopes are well-groomed, with reliable ski-lifts and gondolas designed by France's Poma Group. Although tourists remain wary of conflict-worn Kashmir, the transfer from the capital Srinagar, a mere 45km away, is quick, easy and safe. The low prices at Gulmarg make it even more attractive, with lessons at \$5.50 (Dh20) per day, this is one of the cheapest places in the world to learn how to ski. The best place to stay is the Hotel Highland Park (www.nivalink.com/highlandparkhotel/index.html; 0091 1954 254430) which has double rooms from \$120 (Dh442).

March

Vienna celebrates one of its most famous talents

From March throughout 2010.

There are not one but two reasons to honour Gustav Mahler over the next 18 months. The great Austrian composer was born 150 years ago this coming July, and May next year marks the centenary of his death. In those short 50 years, Mahler sealed his reputation as one of the greatest composers of the late Romantic era and a key precursor to the avant-garde movements of the 20th century, although his genius was not fully recognised during his lifetime. With celebrations of his music being planned all over the world in the next couple of years, now is Mahler's time in the sun. To make the most of these anniversaries, you've really got to go to Vienna, where Mahler served as the Artistic Director of the Court Opera from 1897 to 1907. Celebrations begin in March with a major exhibition at the Austrian Theatre Museum (from March 10; www.khm.at/en/austrian-theatre-museum) and a Kreisler Trio concert at Palais Lobkowitz on the 17th. Mahler pilgrims will also want to visit the Vienna State Opera, which contains a Rodin bust of the composer, the Arnold Schoenberg Centre, where many of his manuscripts can be found, and the Grinzinger Cemetery where Mahler is buried with his daughter Maria.

Get messy during India's riotous Holi festival

March 1

The festival of Holi, celebrated by Hindus to mark the arrival of spring, is, quite literally, a riot of colours. Over several days in February/March, exultant revellers crowd India's streets sloshing coloured water around and smearing each other with bright dyes. It's a real spectacle



During India's Holi festival (above), millions of people across the country fling dye at each other. Bruno Morandi / Hermis / Corbis The belongings of Grace Kelly (left) will be displayed at the V&A. Courtesy of the Erwin Blumenfeld

to witness – paint-throwers wear white clothing to make the explosions of red, yellow and green even more vivid – but a brush with a Holi celebration in full flow can be a rather overwhelming experience. Hotel Diggi Palace, a calm retreat in the pink city of Jaipur, in Rajasthan, lays on a high-spirited paint party every year in its beautiful gardens, with musicians, dancers and a great arsenal of colours. Paint is thrown with just as much gusto, and you WILL get covered from head to toe, but at least you can retire to your peaceful hotel room nearby if it all gets too much. Diggi Palace, located close to the centre of Jaipur, is a great base from which to explore the city, with its gem stores and elegant palaces, and the dramatic Amber Fort which crowns the mountains above it.

A double room at the Hotel Diggi Palace costs from \$43 (Dh160). To book, visit www.hoteldiggiipalace.com (0091 141 2373091).

Enjoy the view from the Burj Khalifa in designer style

Opening in March

No longer content with dominating the fashion industry, big-name labels such as Versace and Missoni have been extending their influence, and aesthetic sensibilities, to the world of luxury accommodation. Now the biggest and boldest example of a couturier/hoteller crossover is coming to the UAE. Armani Hotel Dubai, designer Giorgio Armani's first venture into the hospitality business, is scheduled to open its doors on March 18. As befits a hotel which promises something out of the ordinary, the setting is as extraordinary as they come. The 160 guest rooms and suites are located over 10 levels of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building which opened earlier this month. It stretches over half a mile into the Dubai skyline, but guests with an aversion to heights need not worry as most of the Armani rooms occupy lower levels in the run-up to its opening. It's owned by the Algodon Wine Estates and Champions Club, one of Argentina's premier malbec producers, but it's not just the wine-list they've taken care of. The mansion, a six-storey Belle Epoque gem built in 1912, has been stunningly refurbished, with Cappellini furniture, ebony floors, and Italian Calacatta marble in the bathrooms. It boasts a rooftop pool, a haute French-Argentine restaurant and just 10 suites, some exceeding 360 square metres and all with views of a high waterfall and a hanging garden in the atrium. For avid pianists, the Royal Suite features a baby grand. Culture vultures of all stripes will particularly enjoy Buenos Aires in April, with the International Festival of Independent Cinema from April 7 to 18, and a major book fair taking place in the city. The lovely,

Sneak to the beaches to watch turtles in Oman

March/April

Watching enormous and ancient green turtles nesting on the sands of the Indian Ocean, as they have done there for millions of years, is

one of the great privileges awaiting visitors to Oman. One major drawback, for enthusiasts who have travelled a long way to witness this extraordinary display, is that there are no decent hotels at the popular turtle-viewing destinations, including Ras al-Hadd. This month, Swiss-Belhotel opened a luxurious 21-room resort on Masirah Island, a lesser-known spot some 200km to the south and 15km off the east coast. Four species of turtle nest on Masirah's sandy beaches, including the green and leatherback species. The island is one of the few sites in the region where Galapagos and Atlantic turtles can be seen, and it boasts the largest concentration of nesting loggerhead turtles in the world. Nature lovers will also be thrilled by the great wealth of bird species – a total of 328 have been recorded, including flamingo and glossy ibis. Other types of thrill-seeker will take advantage of the strong southerly winds, which pick up in April, for windsurfing and kite-boarding. Alternatively, tired turtle-watchers can unwind poolside at the Swiss-Belhotel resort or on the beach beyond.

Swiss-Belhotel Resort Masirah Island (oman-masirah.swiss-belhotel.com; 00 968 255 04 274) has double rooms from \$220 (Dh810).

April

Strike a pose in fashionable hot-spot Buenos Aires

April

With its cool shops, buzzing art scenes and glamorous nightlife, Buenos Aires is one of the world's hottest destinations right now. Hip and luxurious accommodation options are not exactly in short supply, so it's really saying something that the Algodon Mansion, a new hotel in the chic Recoleta district, has been causing a major stir in the run-up to its opening. It's owned by the Algodon Wine Estates and Champions Club, one of Argentina's premier malbec producers, but it's not just the wine-list they've taken care of. The mansion, a six-storey Belle Epoque gem built in 1912, has been stunningly refurbished, with Cappellini furniture, ebony floors, and Italian Calacatta marble in the bathrooms. It boasts a rooftop pool, a haute French-Argentine restaurant and just 10 suites, some exceeding 360 square metres and all with views of a high waterfall and a hanging garden in the atrium. For avid pianists, the Royal Suite features a baby grand. Culture vultures of all stripes will particularly enjoy Buenos Aires in April, with the International Festival of Independent Cinema from April 7 to 18, and a major book fair taking place in the city. The lovely,

Admire Princess Grace at London's V&A

From April 17

Two major style events hit London this spring. Fashion Week whooshes through in February, and in keeping with the pace of today's fashion world, most of the ultra-hot outfits parading the catwalk at the start of the week will be out of date by the weekend. The glamour on show at the Victoria and Albert Museum (www.vam.ac.uk; 0044 207 942 2211) in April, by contrast, is timeless. The wardrobe of Grace Kelly, the 1950s Hollywood star who became a real-life princess, goes on display on April 17. The exhibition will feature dresses from

mellow autumn weather is an added bonus.

Algodon Mansion (www.algodonmansion.com; 0054 11 3530 7777) is accepting reservations from April 1 and has double rooms from \$774 (Dh2,844).

Discover South America's secret of Uruguay

April

Unlike its larger and more popular neighbours Brazil and Argentina, Uruguay, which nestles between the two on South America's Atlantic coast, has never been much more than a blip on the tourist radar. But now, with a swanky new airport just opened in Montevideo and a party scene burgeoning in Punta del Este on the south coast, that blip is beginning to flash a lot more brightly. To get to the upscale heart of Uruguay's tourist revolution, head 40 kilometres north-east of Punta del Este to a quiet fishing town called José Ignacio. Appearances can be deceptive. Behind the sleepy exterior of the village, with its one grocery store, you'll find an array of ultra-stylish hotels and cutting-edge restaurants, including Marismo, a "secret restaurant" on the beach, and celebrity chef Francis Mallmann's wonderful Garzón. The most anticipated new arrival in 2010 is Playa Vik, due to open in March. Along with its sister property Estancia Vik, which opened last year, the hotel promises to be a haven for lovers of art and modern architecture, boasting artwork by Anselm Kiefer and furniture by Zaha Hadid. For a village without a nightclub, José Ignacio's celebrity tally is impressively high: Naomi Campbell, Ralph Lauren and Shakira have all been sighted here, soaking up the peace and quiet. Go before the secret gets out.

Playa Vik is set to open in April (www.vikhoteles.com; 0034 902 160630) with double rooms from \$300 (Dh1,102). Stay at the Estancia from \$500 (Dh1,836) for a double room, per night.

Admire Princess Grace at London's V&A

From April 17

Two major style events hit London this spring. Fashion Week whooshes through in February, and in keeping with the pace of today's fashion world, most of the ultra-hot outfits parading the catwalk at the start of the week will be out of date by the weekend. The glamour on show at the Victoria and Albert Museum (www.vam.ac.uk; 0044 207 942 2211) in April, by contrast, is timeless. The wardrobe of Grace Kelly, the 1950s Hollywood star who became a real-life princess, goes on display on April 17. The exhibition will feature dresses from



The new Armani Hotel opens in Burj Khalifa. Courtesy Emaar Properties



Follow the turtles to Oman's beaches. Courtesy Ras Al Jinz Project



Estancia Vik is one of many hidden spots in Uruguay. Courtesy Vik Hotels Group

traveller's world Sue Ryan

Turbulence hits BA

British Airways (BA) strike is back on the agenda after this week's balloting of the cabin crew. The 12-day strike organised over the Christmas and New Year period was aborted because of a legal technicality concerning a few staff who had taken voluntary redundancy being invited to vote on the issue. But it was always going to be a temporary reprieve and new voting papers were sent out on Monday. It will take around three weeks to collate the results and a strike is likely to take place in March.

Once again it is not about pay but about new working arrangements. They will have to work harder as crews will be cut from 15 to 14 on most long haul flights and work patterns will change. BA lost around US\$650m (Dh2,386m) in the last financial year and is heading for even greater losses this year. A strike would be disastrous – the airline would take years to recover from industrial action and just the threat of it is ruinous – creating conditions in which more cuts will become necessary. So on the face of it, logic says that staff must be mad to pursue this route.

But I was struck while talking to a stewardess friend recently about the gulf between the two sides. To my surprise, this mild-mannered, intelligent girl said that she had voted for the initial strike. She and her colleagues had had no idea that it was planned for the festive holiday period and she thought it below the belt for the union to have attempted to ruin a million people's vacations, but her greater anger was reserved for the management. My friend has worked for the company for more than 20 years and had been proud to be with an airline, which even if it was no longer the world's best, was up there with the best. "Now I am embarrassed," she says. "Standards have slipped so much. I now don't even like to tell people whom I work for. We could tell them what is wrong and how to fix it but they don't want to know."

It is her sense of disenfranchisement that is eating away at her. Given this... ultimately way of telling the management she thinks they are rubbish. As a mother of two young boys and living 805km from Heathrow because of her husband's job she is also worried about the impact of the new shifts which will make it harder to juggle home and work. My reaction was "welcome to the real world". It has always seemed that her working arrangements had been excessively comfortable compared to the rest of us.

So I thought of her when BA ratcheted up the pressure on crew by threatening to remove the coveted travel privileges from any staff who take part in a walkout.

All staff receive 90 per cent discounts on air fares for themselves and their nominated family or friends as long as seats are available. Also after five years service, crew members are eligible for one set of free tickets to anywhere on the BA network per year. The warning came in a letter from BA's head of cabin crew, Bill Francis. The perks are apparently not part of the contract and the loss will worry my friend and many of her colleagues far more than the loss of pay thanks to any change in shift work.

Chief executive Willie Walsh has also called for ground staff to start retraining as cabin crew, which again is perfectly legal. It is hard to see a bleaker outlook – loss of perks for the crew, a disaster for the company, and relationships between different types of staff so fractured that we, the passengers, will be unable to escape breathing in the air of animosity.

This is the time of the year when last year's anecdotal evidence translates into hard numbers. If you thought hotels in the UAE dropped their prices last autumn, you were right. The average rate of a room fell by 21 per cent in November, year on year. The figures come from STR Global, the research company. It also reveals that occupancy was down to 58.9 per cent in the same month in the previous year, relieving pressure on consumers.

Figures released by the UN

World Tourism Organisation also show that tourists visiting the Middle East declined by six per cent in 2009 from the year before, but the figures began to recover dramatically in the second half of the year, and they have forecast a return to positive growth for 2010.

Business Monitor International (BMI), the risk analysis and forecasting body, is cautiously optimistic about the outlook for the UAE. It has revised its negative growth forecast from minus three per cent to minus two per cent based on a growing domestic travel market.

"Taking on board the relatively modest growth in tourist arrivals to Dubai in [the first quarter] of 2009 and very disappointing data on visitors to Sharjah over the same period, BMI maintains a rather poor outlook for the UAE tourism sector in the short term." Oh dear, but it goes on:

"Recovery in growth in arrivals is anticipated in 2010 and will pick up from 2011 with stronger growth rates than our earlier forecasts."

That faith is reflected by the industry, which continues to invest here. STR figures show there are currently 442 hotels in the pipeline across the Middle East and Africa region, with a total of 120,440 new rooms. Top of the list is Dubai with 29,727 rooms open for business and 15,291 rooms currently under construction.

Abu Dhabi comes next with 13,701 new rooms planned and 6,939 already under construction. Interestingly, 25 per cent of the regional total comes under the "un-affiliated" sector; hopefully that means more boutique hotels are on the way. Not that all the hotels described as being in the pipeline are a surety.

It was announced this week that Fairmont's Palm Jumeirah Hotel will miss its scheduled completion date later this year as one of its backers, the Kuwaiti firm IFA Hotels & Resorts, struggle to secure funding. As Thomas Storey, the president of the Canada-based Fairmont commented:

"The question is... ultimately will the Palm ever get developed out now the way it was originally envisioned? I think it is a question mark now. "I think it can [make us money]. The issue is [that] we've got to get it built first."

Projects closer to completion have fared better. The next big opening is the 396-room five-star hotel at Ibn Battuta Gate in Dubai. Construction is now complete and the property is due to be handed over to owner Seven Tides this week with an anticipated opening by the Swiss hotel group Mövenpick in May.

Oman Air boasts that this coming month it will be the first airline in the world to have full mobile phone and Wi-Fi connectivity across its new Airbus A330 fleet. Construction is now complete and the property is due to be handed over to owner Seven Tides this week with an anticipated opening by the Swiss hotel group Mövenpick in May.

✉ sryan@thenational.ae

It is hard to see a bleaker outlook – loss of perks for the crew and a disaster for the company