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GEOGRAPHIC

WIN! A NINE-DAY
TRIP TO JORDAN

TRAVELLER

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Travel talk

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Ask the experts

Our panel give advice on the perfect party pad in the UK and trips to the Indian region of Kashmir

Q I'm planning a big 40th birthday celebration and would like to rent out a castle with around 20 friends for a long weekend — with the potential to have more people come for a party. Where would you recommend?



Juliet Kinsman, editor of Mr & Mrs Smith:

If you're looking for a stately pile, why not hire the art-filled Elizabethan manor house just north of the Norfolk Broads. As you might hope from a property where the main hall dates from 1569, it has flagstone floors, a huge carved fireplace, 17th-century portraits, and a grand oak staircase leading to a Tudor-style sitting room and four-poster beds — so far, so castle-like. Add to this stylish soft furnishings, plenty of nooks and crannies for your courtiers to sip cocktails in and a little boutique-hotel soul.

It's all very well stepping back in time for your landmark celebration, but be assured that the owners can meet your 21st-century demands. This regal, exclusive-hire retreat can sleep 14, plus 10 in the neighbouring Longbarn and six in the Dovecote barns. The gardens are impressive too, and there's a heated pool from May to October. Main hall from £3,400; Longbarn, £1,400 and Dovecote, £800 for three nights, including a butler or housekeeper. felminghamhall.co.uk

Alternatively, why settle for a landlubbers' castle when you can have your own private-island retreat? Spitbank Fort (pictured) is bang in the middle of the Solent. Here you can commandeer your own 19th-century naval defence fort off the coast of Portsmouth. This island-of-sorts sleeps 16 in eight bedrooms for £5,000 a night, which includes Champagne reception, a three-course dinner and breakfast for guests, plus you can invite up to



40 more people to a full-on evening shindig. You'll be hard pushed to beat a group shot of you all in the supersized hot tub sipping Champagne. amazingvenues.co.uk
Suited to even grander, larger-scale celebrations, AmaZing Venues is also offering No Man's Land Fort. Brand new from October, this 22-bedroom exclusive-use escape is located in the sea, one mile off the coast of the Isle of Wight, and is currently being renovated in cahoots with English Heritage.

Embellished with high-end extras (heated pool, sauna, steam and spa-treatment rooms, plus helicopter landing pad), its Officer's Mess and rooftop can host up to 200 for a party. And don't let the unpredictability of the British climate worry you — you'll barely notice what the weather is like from the inside. In fact it can be all the more dramatic looking out to a lashing sea. Prices are yet to be confirmed.

GET IN TOUCH

If you're in need of travel advice, email our team: inbox@natgeotraveller.co.uk

Q I've always been interested in going to Kashmir and I believe it's 'safe' again. What's the best way to travel there?



National Geographic Traveller (UK)'s associate editor,

Sarah Barrell: Set on a geo-political faultline between India and Pakistan, Kashmir was off limits to travellers for decades. Its slow re-emergence on the tourist map was accelerated when the Foreign Office eased its travel warnings for most of the region a little over a year ago.

Burgeoning tourist investment has blossomed and there are now luxury lodges in its sky-scraping Himalayan powder-ski resort, Gulmarg, which tops 3,979m, as well as golf courses and an influx of new high-end hotels.

If you base yourself in the atmospheric, lake-fringed city of Srinagar, it's entirely possible, and safe, to travel independently. But a package is the most efficient way to get the most out of this rich and mountainous region — dubbed the 'Switzerland of Asia'. Stay on one of the traditional houseboats on Srinagar's Dal Lake, or simply kick back in one of the mountain resorts. And ride out to the Mughal gardens in a canopied shikhara paddle boat.

Greaves India has a 10-day all-inclusive trip to Delhi, Srinagar and Gulmarg from £2,399 per person. greavesindia.co.uk

