

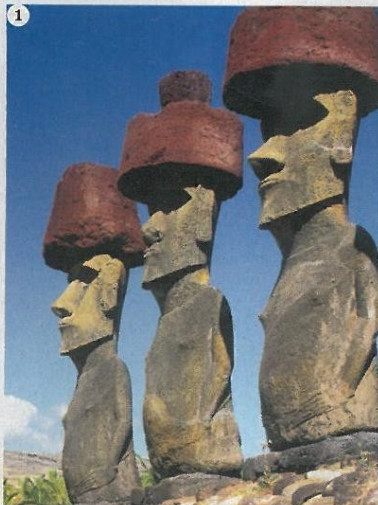
pagodas, pavilions and a marble boat the size of a house. The Empress Dowager Cixi, the de facto ruler of the Manchu Qing Dynasty from 1861 until her death in 1908, was a particular fan of this Xanadu. As we took a boat across the lake, I imagined her sitting on the bank with her councillors, drunk on power and plotting her next move.

We were sad to leave again so quickly but AtYourSide had assured us the flight back would be a nice surprise. They had booked us on a double-decker Lufthansa A380 plane, brand new and extremely roomy – the washrooms were downstairs. On paper, a three-day city break in China sounds mad, but it's not if you have your trusty tour guide with you. **ES** atyourside.asia; lufthansa.com

CHECK OUT

Private property

If you thought a private island hideaway was out of reach, think again. Ariara in Palawan in the Philippines is a 125-acre tropical paradise island so pristine it's practically a cliché. It can accommodate up to 17 guests (with 30 staff), and you're sure to have the place all to yourselves as it operates on a strict 'one party at a time' basis. Accommodation is scattered about the island between beach cottages and jungle villas and a central lodge for get-togethers. And the cost? Just \$295pp, per night, including all meals and two dives per week (ariaraisland.com).



The Tapati Festival in Easter Island is one of the most important in Polynesia, featuring local music, dancers, feasts and fairs

1 Easter Island
2 A clownfish

The whole Hogmanay

See in 2012 in Edinburgh, the home of Hogmanay. The Glasshouse hotel's New Year package offers five-star city centre accommodation, with perks including a guided ghost tour, whisky and chocolate tastings, and a piper at teatime. Minimum two-night stay; £479 per night, B&B, based on two sharing. The hotel is offering ES readers a 10 per cent discount and a free bottle of champagne in each room on arrival on bookings made before the end of November – quote GHSNEY (theetoncollection.co.uk).

Supper in style

As the National Gallery gets set to unveil its replica of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* on 9 November, art buffs can see the original in Milan. The Principe di Savoia hotel is offering a two-night Renaissance Art Package, staying in one of its top suites and including a VIP viewing of the masterpiece, a culinary masterclass with the hotel chef and entry to the Renaissance collection at the Pinacoteca di Brera. From €4,000 per room, per night B&B; minimum two nights. Until 31 December (hotelpincipedisavoia.com).

Festival fun

For a festival that's just that bit more special than the rest, book now for a place at Explora's Easter Island lodge Rapa Nui during the Tapati Festival, 3-18 February 2012 (high summer there). It's one of the most important annual festivals in Polynesia, featuring local music, grass-skirted dancers, feasts and fairs. You'll have the chance to take part in traditions such as *vaka tuai* (making and sailing reed canoes in teams), *takona* (body-painting) and *haka pei* (riding banana tree trunks downhill at speed). It's so much more than rock'n'roll. From \$2,385pp for a three-night stay, inclusive of meals, excursions and transfers (explora.com). **HH**