

LIFE TRAVEL

Rachel goes from film set to jet set



● FILM star Rachel Weisz (*above*) snuggled into a BA seat to sip cocktails, watch films and take a nap to promote the launch of its new first class cabin. The airline says the new cabin, the result of a £100 million refit, is the ultimate in luxury, "avoiding ostentatious gadgets and gimmicks and focusing on simplicity and quality". Staying loyal to the traditional herring-bone layout, it is 12 inches wider than before when the 6ft 6in bed is fully flat. The bed itself has a sprung diaphragm, rather than the traditional foam on a metal base and lighting changes throughout the flight to create a varying moods. There's even a private jet feel to the space, introduced on its Boeing 777 and 747s, as passengers have their personal electronic window blind — a first for a commercial airliner.

● FANS of the jolly pottery of Emma Bridgewater can see an exhibition of her work throughout the summer at Stoke on Trent's Potteries Museum, as well as take a factory tour and visit her decorating studio to try painting or making a pot. As well as the exhibition itself (May 29 to September 26), which celebrates Bridgewater's 25th anniversary, the museum also has work on display

by Picasso, Durer and Degas, along with craft activities, nature trails and other fun stuff for children. Factory tours are free on weekdays while the exhibition is on.

● IF you want to be sure your spring break won't be grounded by a volcanic ash cloud, you could hop a ferry to Jersey for a break with Modern Hotels. Until May 27, the chain is offering three-night breaks at its Mayfair or Metropole hotels in St Helier, from £169 per person (based on two sharing), including breakfast, return Fastcat crossing from Weymouth and transfers. Both properties have indoor pool, Jacuzzi and gym.

● ENID Blyton fans can visit the Devon spot where the children's author found inspiration for all those stories of picnics and adventures. Pretty Soar Mill Cove Hotel is offering two nights' with breakfast and cream tea for £390 for a family of four (sharing), or



£250 for two. Close to 2000 acres of National Trust countryside, Blue Flag beaches, caves, coves and cliff-tops, the hotel also has tennis courts, pools and games room. Valid on all mid-week stays in May.

● THERE is still time to hike East Anglia's undulating countryside (*pictured top right*) and pretty villages during the annual South and



Heart of Suffolk Walking Festival which runs until June 6. It features 30 guided walks, from two-mile ambles, to more energetic hikes of up to 12 miles. Walks generally cost from £2 to £20 (the latter include lunch) but you must pre-book.

● IF you are heading to Royal Ascot (from June 15 to 19 this year) the Macdonald Berystede Hotel and Spa, offers accommodation with breakfast from £275 for two sharing. If you don't want to stay over, but fancy joining the top jockeys, owners and trainers who regularly stay at the hotel, set behind gates in landscaped grounds, there's pre-race champagne breakfast at £22.50 per person

● IF you feel like nipping to Paris for the massive firework display on Ile Saint-Louis on June 24, when the French celebrate the shortest night of the year, Pure Holiday Homes have apartments that offer good value accommodation including a quirky one-bedroom apartment near Montmartre that can sleep up to five, from £75 per night based on five sharing. The operator also has apartments in other European cities.

HOTEL OF THE WEEK SOFITEL GATWICK

► YOU don't expect an airport hotel to be glamorous, but that's the first word that comes to mind arriving at the Sofitel Gatwick. Blame it on the soaring atrium and impressive water feature which greet guests emerging from the tunnel which links this hotel (it looks like such an anonymous box from the outside), with the North Terminal.

London's airport Sofitels are an upmarket franchise. Owners Arora also have the even more impressive hotel at Heathrow T5, but the Gatwick property is older, and despite a 2005 refurbishment suffers from old age in some areas. Wi-fi has not yet reached the rooms, and it took 20 minutes, with outside help, to reconfigure my laptop to work with the ethernet connection — infuriating when what a guest wants most after a comfortable bed and decent bathroom is trouble-

free internet access. The beds are very comfortable indeed, but bathrooms are oddly schizophrenic. L'Occitane toiletries shriek of luxury, but a moulded vanity unit looked cheap, and there was no bathrobe one might expect at hotel with an advertised £200 per night room rate.

But in reality, rooms are far cheaper, and a bargain if you want to park for a week after staying a night to catch an early flight — just £115 for the eight-day package. Breakfast is extra, but the buffet was good, even if coffee was not. Luckily, there is a good selection of in-room teas. A service worth writing home about is the arrivals lounge with showers, gym and relaxation area for anyone wanting to refresh before leaving Gatwick, at just £20.

RATES: from £75, R/O
TEL: 0129 356 7070
ANTHEA GERRIE



Sofitel Gatwick: lobby has the wow factor and arrivals lounge is worth writing home about

TRIP OF THE WEEK...

► IF you have always wanted to see the stunning wildlife of the Galapagos Islands, you just have time to take advantage of a \$1,000 per person (£650) discount offered by Exus on a seven-night luxury Galapagos cruise on M/V Eclipse, as part of a nine night package. With 27 air-conditioned cabins, the Eclipse has the atmosphere of a smaller yacht, but has spacious public areas, including an al fresco dining area, sun deck and Jacuzzi. She anchors at two sites a day and offers a variety of excursions.

The package costs from £3,995 per person, and includes flights, two nights with breakfast in Quito, a tour of Quito, domestic flights, private transfers, and the cruise. Offer valid for May 22-29 or — slightly less insane — May 29 to June 5.

