

guardian.co.uk

Inspiring holidays for 2011

OK, we can't promise a new you ... but here's our pick of inspiring ideas for holidays and short breaks guaranteed to point you in a new direction



Joanne O'Connor
The Guardian, Saturday 15 January 2011



Learn the delicious cuisine of San Sebastián.

CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK

A retreat for softies, Ireland

Part spiritual retreat, part boutique hotel, the four hermitages in the grounds of Glencomeragh House (+353 52 613 3181, glencomeragh.ie/Hermitages), a Catholic religious order in County Tipperary, are a cut above your standard hermit's cave. Jacuzzi baths, underfloor heating and satellite TV come as standard in the beautifully light and simple cabins built around a small "sacred space", which is open to the elements to invite contemplation. People of all denominations – and none – come here to join one of the regular spiritual programmes or just to take time out from their busy lives. From €80 a night for single occupancy. Stay for two nights or more for just €60 a night.

Bibliotherapy, UK and abroad

Reading the right book at the right time can be a life-changing experience, but don't rely on the "3 for 2" offers at Waterstones to inform your literary choices. On a reading retreat you can enjoy one-to-one "bibliotherapy" sessions with experts who will tailor a reading list to your requirements, the chance to discuss books with like-minded folk and plenty of free time for uninterrupted reading. Literary salon host Damian Barr will reprise his popular reading retreats this year: a weekend at a country house in Sussex (18-20 February; £395pp, readingweekend.co.uk) with special guest writer Geoff Dyer, and a week-long retreat at the St James's Club in Antigua, highlights of which will be

bibliotherapy sessions on the beach and storytelling over sunset cocktails (2-6 May; book through Kuoni, 01306 747008, kuoni.co.uk) From £1,665pp for seven nights' all-inclusive, including flights.

Back to nature, Devon

Dartmoor-based company Wildwise, (01803 868269, wildwise.co.uk) has a track record of offering courses that go beyond the usual bushcraft skills of firelighting and foraging to explore how nature can be a source of artistic and spiritual inspiration. This summer it will be offering a Council of All Beings workshop designed to strengthen our connection to the natural world and unleash our creativity through dancing, writing, visualisations and ritual. The course takes place from 11-12 June and costs £125. Participants will camp on Dartmoor and eat an evening meal around the campfire.

De-mystifying meditation, Portugal



Spa holiday expert Wellbeing Escapes (0845 602 6202, wellbeingescapes.co.uk) has launched a collection of "Mind Unwind" packages – based at some of the world's most acclaimed destination spas – which aim to de-mystify meditation. A three-night package at the Longevity Wellness Resort, in a lush nature reserve in the Algarve, costs from £1,100pp, including flights to Faro, initial consultation, classes in meditation, breathing and relaxation, two walking meditation sessions and relaxing treatments such as a massage and facial.

RELEASE YOUR CREATIVITY

Guerilla art, London

Find out if you have what it takes to be the next Banksy on a "guerilla art" day in London. Join San Francisco-based artist and curator Lori Gordon for an in-depth, experiential workshop which examines the idea of making anonymous art in public places. Run by the innovative School of Life (020-7833 1010, theschooloflife.com), the workshop will explore ways of sharing your vision with the world, whether it be for fun or to make a statement, even if you are not a traditional artist. The workshop takes place on 16 April and costs £112pp.

Pottery in the medina, Marrakech

The atmospheric medina is the setting for a new three-day Traditional Pottery course. Based at a luxury riad hotel, Dar Les Cigognes (+212 524 382740, lescigognes.com) from 13-16 June, the course will include two half-days in a local master potter's studio trying out local techniques and learning about the art of Moroccan pottery, visits to galleries and stalls to see local ceramics, a hosted dinner with talk on the artistic scene in Marrakech and a rooftop party with local dancers and magicians. From €570pp for

three nights B&B, not including flights.

A brush with art, Venice



Photograph: Alamy

Discover for yourself the magical light and cityscapes that have inspired artists for centuries on a painting or photography holiday in Venice. Authentic Adventures (01453 823328, authenticadventures.co.uk) will give budding Canalettos the chance to immerse themselves in "La Serenissima" on a four-night painting holiday. The package costs £1,119pp including half-board accommodation at the Hotel Ala and three full days of tuition. Departs on 6 June. A similar package for photographers is being offered with departures on 17 February and 17 November. Prices from £949pp. Flights are not included.

Get crafty, Cornwall

Basketweaving, sewing and knitting are just some of the crafty courses being offered at the Bedruthan Steps Hotel (01637 860555, bedruthan.com) in Cornwall this year.

Recently described by Kirsty Allsop as "the crack cocaine of craft", freehand machine embroidery is the focus of a relaxing two-day course led by local needlewoman Poppy Treffry. After learning the basics of pattern cutting and freehand embroidery, participants will choose their fabrics and design a product such as an embroidered cushion cover. Courses take place 25-27 March and 18-20 November and cost £264pp for a two-night break.

LEARN SOMETHING NEW

Open college, Oxford



Each summer, one of Oxford University's oldest and most beautiful colleges opens its doors to the public. Now in its 21st year, The Oxford Experience (01865 270360, conted.ox.ac.uk/courses) at Christ Church from 10 July offers more than 50 residential five-day courses, covering topics as diverse as The Brontës and Warfare in the Modern World. No formal qualifications are required to take part. Tutorials take place in the morning, with free time after lunch to join one of many optional visits around Oxford. Highlight of the week is a champagne reception in the Cathedral Garden followed by a gala dinner in Christ Church's Tudor Hall. Weekly course fees of £1,090pp include all tuition costs and six nights' full-board accommodation in college.

Taste of the Basque country, San Sebastián

San Sebastián is one of the great gastronomic capitals of Europe, famed for its Michelin-starred restaurants and its pintxos, the Basque country's delicious take on tapas. San Sebastian Food (020-3286 7777, sansebastianfood.com) can tailor-make culinary adventures, ranging from a guided pintxo tasting tour to a lesson in the kitchen of a local chef. Its three-day culinary package, culminating in dinner at the three-Michelin-starred Arzak, is an epicurean's dream. From €65pp for a two-hour pintxo tasting tour.

Star traveller, Brecon Beacons

If you've been inspired by the BBC's Stargazing series to find out more about the wonders of the universe, look no further than the Brecon Beacons national park. Thanks to its low levels of light pollution and a new programme of night-sky events, the area is the perfect destination for would-be astronomers. [The Cardiff Astronomical Society](http://TheCardiffAstronomicalSociety) will be hosting stargazing nights for all ages on 5 March and 8 October (01874 623366, breconbeacons.org; adults £6, children £4). And on 12 August there will be a special event with Dark Sky Wales to coincide with the annual Perseid meteor shower. On 30 July solar telescopes will be set up at the visitor centre to allow visitors to view solar flares, which will be visible during daylight hours. Stay at nearby Damson Cottage (01874 676446, breconcottages.com; sleeps two, from £331 for a week) and you can enjoy a spot of stargazing through the cottage's own antique brass telescope.

Fighting fit, Brazil

Get fit while immersing yourself in Afro-Brazilian culture on a new capoeira holiday from Journey Latin America (020-8747 8315, journeylatinamerica.co.uk). Capoeira combines elements of martial arts, music and dance and was originated by slaves working on the sugar and tobacco plantations of Bahia. Based in the atmospheric colonial quarter of the coastal city of Salvador, the trip will introduce visitors to Afro-Brazilian history, with private classes at a local capoeira school and plenty of time to explore one of the most vibrant cities in Brazil. The seven-day holiday starts from £797pp including accommodation, capoeira classes and guided excursions, but not flights.

Farming the Victorian way, Shropshire

If 21st-century technology leaves you cold, return to a simpler way of life on one of the Victorian "life skills" courses on offer at the Acton Scott Historic Working Farm (01694 781 307, actonscottmuseum.com) in Shropshire. The estate was used as the location for the BBC TV series Victorian Farm, and the one-day courses cover a variety of skills which would have been essential for rural 19th-century life, from blacksmithing and henkeeping to lacemaking. "A Day in the Life of a Victorian Farmer's Wife" (11 July, £65pp) gives participants a taste of domestic daily routine: light the kitchen range, feed the pigs and poultry, do the laundry and bake scones for afternoon tea in the cottage parlour, all the while wearing period costume.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Give street children a new chance, Cambodia

Travellers to Cambodia are being offered the chance to get off the tourist trail and see for themselves some of the projects that have been set up to provide support for the country's most disadvantaged people. As well as visits to the classic sights such as Angkor Wat, the 14-day Cambodia Good Cause tour from Regent Holidays (0845 277 3317, regent-holidays.co.uk) will include a visit to the French charity PSE, which helps children escape from a life on the garbage dumps by giving them schooling and life skills; lunch and a cooking class at one of Phnom Penh's best-loved restaurants, where former street children are taught all aspects of the hospitality industry; and an opportunity to meet classical dancer Em Theay, who survived the Khmer Rouge period to help reshape the Royal Ballet of Cambodia. The trip costs from £1,970pp including accommodation, guide and travel by private car. Flights are not included.

Live the good life, Devon

If you've ever dreamed of escaping the rat race to live the good life, this is the course for you. Learn about the basics of self-reliance and running a smallholding on a three-day course in north Devon. Topics covered include livestock and land management, organic vegetable and fruit growing, natural beekeeping, and the potential for earned income, with visits to several local smallholdings for inspiration. The weekend, which runs from 24-26 June and costs £165, is one of a year-round programme of courses run by the Yarnier Trust (01288 331692, yarniertrust.org), which promotes sustainable and creative living. Accommodation is offered at the trust's farmhouse in Welcombe Barton from £20 per room, or camping is available in the grounds from £8pp per night.

How to be a tourist – and a volunteer, Nepal

Explore (0844 499 0901, explore.co.uk) has introduced a range of "Experiential Tours" for 2011 which combine volunteering with traditional small-group adventure touring. The 21-day Nepal adventure starts with a walking tour of Kathmandu, white-water rafting along the river Trisuli, an elephant-back safari in the Chitwan national park and chill-out time in the lakeside town of Pokhara. Then the group will spend a week helping out with lessons at a local school in Gati, a remote spot near the Tibetan border, living with the villagers in their homes and assisting with community tasks. Prices are from £2,216pp with flights. Departures 30 July and 12 November.

Human rights education, South Africa

With its brutal history of apartheid and colonialism, there can be few better places than South Africa to get involved in campaigning for human rights. Projects Abroad (01903 708300, projects-abroad.co.uk) has short-term placements in Cape Town which give volunteers the opportunity to work alongside respected humanitarian organisations, while gaining first-hand experience of human rights law in practice. Volunteers will be able to get involved at grassroots level, raising awareness of human rights in a variety of marginalised communities or at-risk groups such as prisoners, children, women and rural communities throughout the Western Cape. Project dates are flexible and last a minimum of a month. Prices start from £1,695pp, not including flights.

Ads by Google

[Seychelles group tours](#)

Reiki courses, Seychelles adventure Shared accommodation, hiking, snorkel

www.tambaratravel.com

[Planning to Visit India?](#)

We Know What to See, Where to Go & when to Go. Ask for Best Quote Now

www.TraveltoIndia.net/booking

[Travel to Morocco](#)

Plan and book your private trip with your moroccan travel expert

www.morocco-for-you.com

Readers' tips

Have you been there? Share travel tips about your favourite places on [Been there](#), our interactive travel guide to the world.

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2011