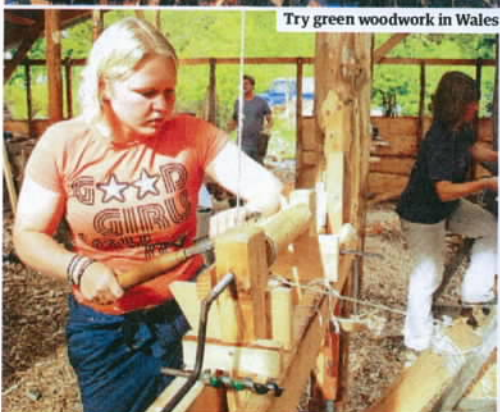
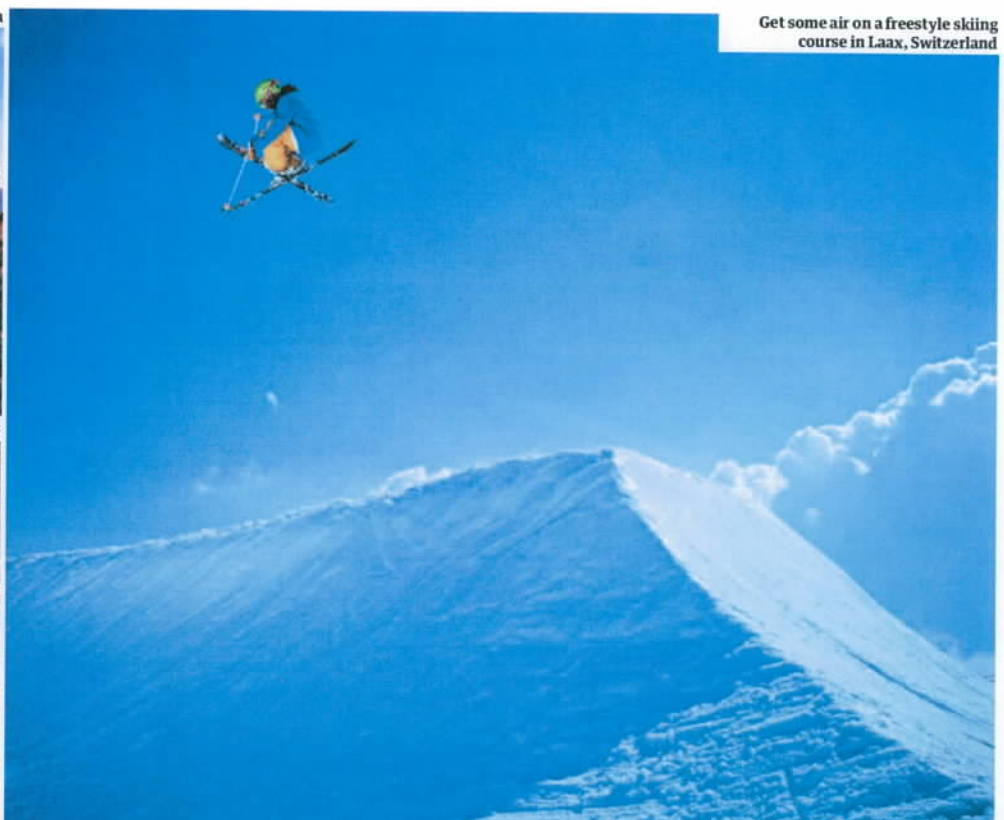


Learn Spanish in Granada



Try green woodwork in Wales



Get some air on a freestyle skiing course in Laax, Switzerland

Jump to it

Holidays in destinations the world over to improve yourself and your life, from cookery and plumbing to meditation and mountain biking

New skills

Food with Flair Somerset Pizza oven-building Norfolk

The Grange in Whatley, south of Bath (01373 836579, cookeryatthegrange.co.uk), brought us Britain's first four-week residential cookery course, back in 1981. Now it is offering a slimmed-down five-day romp through all the methods and techniques that separate chefs from mere cooks. It costs £807 with full board accommodation, and the next course is on 23-27 April.

Or for some alfresco dining this summer head down to Edwards Cob Eco Buildings (01493 369952; edwardscobbuilding.com) in Fleggburgh, on the Norfolk Broads, and learn how to make your own outdoor pizza/bread oven from cob (that's the building material, not the corn holder). It's a one-day course

and costs £80; the next one is on 24 March. Stay at Braid Barn B&B (01493 369849, braidbarn.co.uk, doubles from £75).

Bicycle maintenance London

With their heartening motto, "A puncture is not an emergency", this one-day small group (maximum five people) course run in Holborn by the London School of Cycling will give you all the basic skills you need to become your own bicycle mechanic. Or if you'd rather let someone else get all oily-fingered, you'll learn to tell your chain sets from your hub gears and so get the best service for your steed from your local bike shop.

● £72 (€66 for Cyclists' Touring Club or London Cycling Campaign members); next course 25 February (020-7249 3779, londonschoolofcycling.co.uk)

Learn Spanish Spain

GoLearnTo.com has dozens of brilliant language holidays to choose from.

As well as straight language classes, you can book a trip that combines the classroom with learning something else, such as surfing, cooking or digital photography. Spanish in Spain courses are held in 13 locations - for example,

seven days of Spanish and flamenco in Granada costs from £273pp, excluding accommodation and flights.

● golearnto.com/language-courses

Become your own upholsterer Matlock, Derbyshire

There comes a day when even the brightest sofa or armchair grows tired and wan. Happily, this four-day "long weekend" course on the edge of the Peak District will teach you the upholstery techniques you need to give them new life, so bring along a project. Your accommodation boasts views of the Derwent river valley and there's a maximum of four people on each course (which means there will only be a meagre audience to enjoy your hourly "sofa so good" quip).

● £545, including three nights' half board accommodation and materials; the next upholstery course with availability starts on 19 April (01629 57354, peakupholstery.co.uk)

Forage, slaughter and butchery Le Marche, Italy

It's easy to forget that those shrink-wrapped chicken breasts in the supermarket were once attached to

a living, clucking creature. But after this trip, you'll be well and truly reconnected with your food. You'll slaughter and prepare chickens, watch a pig butchery demonstration, stuff your own sausages and forage for wild mushrooms. And - a little less arduous - spend a day wine-tasting at family-run vineyards in the region. The five-night break is based at La Tavola, a 300-year-old stone farmhouse in the foothills of the Apennines, on 500 acres of organic farmland, rolling hills and truffle-rich woods.

● La Tavola Marche (+39 331 525 2753, latavolamarche.com) runs food-related packages March-October. Its Forage, Slaughter and Butchery trip is on 25-30 October, €885pp, including most meals, wine and activities but not flights

Dressmaking and more Ashby de la Zouch, Leicestershire

Unleash that inner Sonia Rykiel on an unsuspecting public by enlisting at the School of Sewing. For beginners there's an introductory course, while those already handy with needle and thread can try anything from speed tailoring to making a cocktail dress, jacket or tutu. Accessorise by creating a bag, run up your own underwear or have a go

at producing a (literally breathtaking) 18th-century-style corset.

● Two-day courses from £180, three-day from £200; courses throughout the year (01530 416300, schoolofsewing.co.uk). The Royal Hotel (01530 412833; royalhotellashby.com, doubles from £75 B&B)

Plumbing and DIY London

The fetchingly named Staunch and Flow will teach you how your home's plumbing system works and how to carry out basic repairs when it doesn't. The one-day course, usually on a Wednesday, costs £60 (020-8964 6714, london-plumber.co.uk). Or for women who want to get into DIY but without necessarily getting in touch with their inner bloke, Women and Manual Trades runs one-day classes for women in carpentry, plumbing, electrics, painting and decorating, and tiling, all taught by women. The fee is £75; courses in March and April (020-7251 9192, wamt.org)

Get your motorbike licence Brecon Beacons

Are the world's open roads calling to you? BMW Rider Training guides you

Get gardening in Wales



through the process of learning to ride a motorbike, from making your first unsteady trips and passing your compulsory basic training (CBT) on a 125cc machine, to getting your full licence on a BMW adventure-sports bike. It also offers a range of training courses to hone your skills, and you practise on some of Britain's most scenic and exciting riding roads, in the Brecon Beacons - though there is also a centre in Royston, Hertfordshire - 40 minutes from London.

● **Basic two-day courses from £219 with bike hire but not accommodation (0800 013 1282, worldofbmw.com). Five-day Direct Access course £799**

Photography Killin, Perthshire

So, that flash new camera you got for Christmas - perhaps it's time you used something other than the automatic setting. Start taking photos worthy of Brassai by nabbing yourself a course on landscape, portrait, fine art or general photography at Wester Lix, a 200-year-old converted farm. You can also learn digital developing and printing, while those with existing skills can enrol on a four-day masterclass. Tuition comes from a qualified professional photographer, inspiration from the stunning Scottish Highlands.

● **One-to-one sessions from £75, four-day masterclass £595 (including full board accommodation); courses on demand (01567 820990, westerlix.co.uk)**

Green gardening and cooking Felindre, Brecon, Powys

While you're waiting for your name to come to the top of that allotment waiting list, why not learn some of the basics of organic food production? New for 2012 is "Gardening and Cooking for Life and a Sustainable Future", a weekend course teaching you how to garden and grow veg, and throwing in some wild foraging. Plus you get to stay in Primrose Earth Centre's own B&B below the Black Mountains.

● **£200, including two nights' accommodation and food; next course starts 18 May (01497 847636, primroseearthcentre.co.uk)**

Winter Skills Boat of Garten, Inverness-shire

Do you find yourself waiting impatiently for the first shoots of spring before donning your walking boots? Turn yourself into an all-year-round walker with this practical five-day course in the Cairngorms. You'll learn how to use an ice axe and crampons, and how to navigate your way across a landscape buried beneath a thick blanket of snow. You'll also be taught how to build an emergency snow shelter and, most reassuringly of all, how to avoid getting caught in an avalanche.

● **£85, including accommodation and some meals; next course 22 January (01479 831331, scotmountain.co.uk)**



Be your own bike mechanic

Traditional cookery Morocco

Learn to cook the original fusion food - a blend of Arabic, Berber, French and Spanish cuisines - on a culinary tour round Morocco. You'll visit Casablanca, Essaouira, Marrakech and a tiny village in the High Atlas mountains, bargaining for spices in the souks and then whipping up local dishes. By the end of the trip your dinner party repertoire will encompass fish tagine, Berber crepes, beef with prunes and almonds, and more. You'll stay in stylish riads and have plenty of time for exploring and relaxing between cookery classes.

● **Around £1,869 for a nine-day trip, including accommodation, some meals and six cooking lessons, but excluding flights; next trip starts 16 February (accessstrips.com)**

Creative writing Crickieth, Gwynedd

Everyone has a novel inside them. Find out whether yours should stay there or if you're the Dickens *de nos jours* at the National Writers' Centre for Wales. Its tutors lay on highly acclaimed courses for novelists, poets, script and screenwriters and playwrights, while those new to wordsmithery can take a "Starting to Write" course. It's based in one of the loveliest historic houses in Snowdonia national park, Ty Newydd, which is set in woodland with views of Cardigan Bay fit to bulldoze any writer's block.

● **Six-day residential course from £460; courses of varying length throughout the year (01766 522811, tynewydd.org)**

Green woodworking Machynlleth, Powys

There's more to working with wood than assembling an Ikea flatpack. At the world renowned Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) you can learn everything about the art and practicalities of green woodworking from the nation's top woodsmen. Once you're on first-name terms with the shave horse, pole lathe and draw knife, you'll make stools, plates, bowls, spoons and more, all of which you can take home. And what's more, you get to hand-pick your own wood from CAT's wonderful forest.

● **£80 for a five-day course including full board and accommodation; next course starts 23 April (01654 704952, bit.ly/u8ome0)**

Free your mind

Lose your phobia Bristol

Always wanted to visit Australia but too scared of the creepy-crawlies? Perhaps it's time to spend a day at Bristol Zoo tackling your fears. The zoo offers a dedicated course, Living with Spiders, in its education centre, run by a qualified counsellor and hypnotherapist. It lasts up to four hours and includes a variety of approaches to overcoming arachnophobia, including talks, relaxation, hypnotherapy and an optional meeting with some (friendly) spiders. There is also a similar course for victims of ophidiophobia (fear of snakes), subject to demand.

● **£95; next spider courses 24 January**

and 20 March (0117-974 7369, bristolzoo.org.uk)

Couples therapy Thailand

When a relationship is on the rocks, a holiday can make or break time. Instead of seeking help while you're at home and busy with other commitments, devote a full week to working on your relationship, whether you're struggling with a specific problem such as an affair, or just have a nagging sense that you're not as happy as you could be. You'll spend 16 hours with your counsellor, and get 12 weeks of follow-up advice online. The retreat is based at boutique hotels in Chiang Mai, Hua Hin or Koh Samui.

● **From £1,100 a couple, including transfers, seven nights' accommodation and therapy (thelifechangepeople.com) but not flights**

Find peace Herefordshire

Those that have done a silence retreat claim amazing results - the first few days are tough and your mind races, but then you have so much time to think through your issues that you come out feeling free, calm and happy. A 10-day silent Vipassana meditation retreat at the Dhamma Dipa in Herefordshire involves a process of "self-purification by self-observation" to help you eradicate suffering and tension, and feel liberated and able to face your problems calmly. There's no religious element, and no charge, though those who've completed the course usually make a donation.

● **dipa.dhamma.org**

Get into retro yoga



Rustle up a Moroccan feast

Join an artistic community Germany

Spending time with creative people who are living a very different life could inspire you to make a change, or at least make a bit of artwork. There are dozens of retreats run by artists among the many free volunteer placements on the Workaway website (workaway.info). The idea is that you work in return for food and board. Some projects are setting up alternative accommodation for travellers, some are creative communes, and many are looking for creative types to volunteer and join their community. Examples include an international art research centre in Germany near Uckermark (workaway.info/7967513794ce-en.html) which is calling for people with skills to help with art production and research, maintenance of its castle site and dealing with tourists.

Yoga (and dating) Goa, India

Escape the commercialism of Valentine's Day on a yoga retreat in Goa. You could take your partner with you for a romantic break, go alone and indulge in some me-time, or keep your eyes peeled for a sexy classmate - apparently several couples have met on this Quantum yoga course, which focuses on a dynamic, flowing form of yoga, influenced by Ayurveda. It takes place at the Harmonic eco-retreat overlooking Patnem beach. On Valentine's Day itself you'll explore an ancient Portuguese fort, chill out around a barbecue on a beautiful