

>> Activity holidays

Out of this world

From a yoga break in Egypt to a 4x4 safari in Utah, Matthew Stibbe looks at some breathtaking special breaks



FIND YOURSELF ON ICE

"Open yourself up to the mountain and the moment," advises Deborah Reiman, a graduate of Kristen Ulmer's Ski To Live course in Utah, western US. The four-day course aims to improve your skiing by improving your mind, with a combination of yoga, meditation and intense ski coaching. "My skiing has changed," says Reiman, "I'm so much braver and freer. Part of this was mindfulness and part of it was Kristen herself, who gives you this go-for-it confidence."

A typical day would be: a yoga class, breakfast, a day's skiing and three hours of guided meditation.

Although most people were there to improve their skiing and many were hardcore, macho skiers, they quickly got into the meditation. As Reiman says: "Both aspects of the clinic feed on each other—the skiing gives you mindfulness and the spiritual workshop opens you up for your skiing. I'm going again in January."

● Four-day course from \$1,895 per person: www.kristenulmer.com

TAKE FLIGHT

There's an old joke that goes: "If God had meant us to fly, he'd have given us more money." One way to make it cheaper is to learn in the US, where aviation fuel costs a lot less. Add in a favourable exchange rate and you can save up to 50 per cent of the cost of getting a private pilot's licence.

At Orlando Flight Training in Florida you can complete the 45-hour flight training course, sit your written exams and take your test with a CAA-approved examiner in as little as 14 days. But it's better to allow three or four weeks, especially if you haven't trained before. Heightened security means the visa and paperwork can take a while.

● The 21-day private pilot's course, including accommodation, costs £2,995 while a two-week VIP intensive course costs £3,995: www.flyoft.com

GO WEST, YOUNG MAN

Lajitas in the west Texas "panhandle" is miles from anywhere. Billing itself as the "ultimate hideaway" it even has its own runway for private jets. For

Break even: reach a high and then hit the slopes with Ski to Live (left) or swing low at the championship golf course at Lajitas (18th hole below)



the rest of us, it's a six-and-a-half-hour drive from El Paso.

The reward is a combination of the Old West and a deluxe resort hotel, with hitching posts, a check-in area that looks like a sheriff's office, and a lobby straight out of Diamond Lil's whorehouse and saloon (if Ralph Lauren had done her interior design).

Activities carry on this theme. Besides the championship golf course, you can learn to be a cowboy or cowgirl at the equestrian centre, learn to shoot like John Wayne and then ride the trail through the property's 25,000 acres to an open-air rancher's dinner.

● Rooms start at \$165 per night: www.lajitas.com

HIT THE BOTTLE

DuVine Adventures runs leisurely cycle tours through the vineyards of France and Italy along pretty back roads. Much of the time is spent eating, relaxing and wine-tasting.

The six-day trips appeal to bon viveurs more than cyclists. One wine enthusiast raves: "My wife and I went on a DuVine cycling holiday through Burgundy that travelled through the Grand Crus between Montrachet and the top end of the Côte D'Or (arguably the best wine region on the planet).

Stayed in some super châteaux, drank wine and ate at Michelin-starred restaurants."

Get yourself there and pretty much everything else is included: accommodation, meals, guides, bikes and helmets. Tastings are included but not wine with meals.

● Trips start at around £1,500 per person: www.duvine.com

STRETCH YOURSELF

"In Egypt, we climbed Mount Sinai and spent a night in the desert with the Bedouin," says Mary Niker, a yoga trainer who organises retreats and holidays.

Niker has been teaching yoga for five years and practising for more than 20. Having run retreats in her local area, at the Abbey and Charney Manor (a Quaker house) in Oxfordshire, she now also goes as far afield as Egypt and Brazil.



The good life: soldier on in Utah (above right); swing through the vines in France (right) or cosy up in the Icehotel (below)



Tracy Gill, a marketing manager, went on an Egyptian yoga retreat in May. "It was fantastic," she says. "I've studied with many yoga teachers over the years and Mary is exceptionally good. Add to that the wonderful location right on the Red Sea, an in-house masseur and the local sights, and you have the perfect cure for executive stress."

Niker has built up a loyal following. Her retreats tend to be small groups of six to 16 people. She has hooked up with Free Spirit Travel, but many of her courses and trips are arranged independently. ● UK weekends start at £200 and foreign trips at £325 plus flights. Contact Niker via www.marynikeryoga.com or book via www.freespirituk.com

GET INTO GEAR

It's back to Utah for the ultimate outdoor adventures. Try a safari around the Canyonlands National Park and the Colorado River in a Hummer: the 4x4 of the US army and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Choose a sunset safari, a four-hour grand safari or a star safari, which takes you away from light pollution to stargaze with telescopes.

The Moab Adventure Center also has Tomcars—quadbikes on steroids, designed for the Israeli army—for exploring territory





unreachable in any other vehicle. Add some rafting on the Colorado River (including a white-water run), mountain-biking and hiking, and you could fill a week in scenery straight out of a John Ford movie. Moab is just under four hours' drive from Salt Lake City or there is a regular shuttle flight from there to the local airport.

● Moab Adventure Centre prices start at \$39 for a half-day's rafting but most activities cost around \$100: www.moabadventurecenter.com

CHILL OUT

To escape from modern life, go to the Museum of Foteviken in Sweden and become a Viking. Well, technically, you start out as a thrall or slave, but promotion comes quickly as you learn how to live in the 10th century.

To get away from it all and chill out, the Icehotel near Kiruna in northern Sweden is the place to go. Every year a new hotel is carved out of the ice like an igloo. Guests sleep on reindeer hides in thermal sleeping bags. If Martinis in ice glasses don't do it for you, try snowmobiling, dog-sledding, a northern lights safari or fishing.

● Viking museum: www.foteviken.se. Rooms at the Icehotel start at £215 per night: www.icehotel.com



Wine Directors' bins

Master of Wine **Hugo Rose** reveals the reasons behind the changing taste of French wine

FRENCH VINTNERS ARE struggling to come to terms with a modern lifestyle that includes not only fusion cooking, but also the drinking of wine away from the table. Many producers acknowledge the need to adapt or perish, though inevitably for those steeped in tradition this is a daunting task. Being market-friendly means more than simply aping the New World approach to labelling by variety, though examples of this banality abound. The taste of the wine has

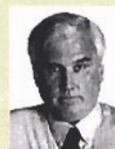
to change, with greater weight of fruit coming in and less of those complex savoury, vegetal characters that we have long

considered the essence of wines such as Burgundy or Bordeaux. An example that straddles both camps is 2001 **Château Phélan Ségur** (£19.95) in the celebrated Médoc appellation of Saint-Estèphe. The 2001 is a model of bright, virtuous fruit and oaky complexity.



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Stock options



Malcolm Craig offers tips and trends from the London stockmarket

“With the US elections over and UK interest rates still on hold, the UK stockmarket has convincingly breached the 4,700 level mark as measured by the FTSE-100 index during the closing months of 2004 and we should see the rally extending into the new year.”

Previous tips

I tipped **Uniq** in September 2003. The share price has risen strongly. As I forecast, this food processor, specialising in chilled and prepared foods, has received yet another bid approach—believed to be a private equity firm. City analysts reckon Uniq could command up to 250p per share. **Hold.**

I tipped **Geest**, the fresh and prepared food group, in August 2004, and the share price has risen strongly. Icelandic retailer **Bakkavor**, which took a 20 per cent stake back in June, is now free to make a bid. City punters are looking for a cash bid of 650p per share. **Hold.**

Tip of the month

I tip **Marshalls**, the landscape products company, at 290p, for reasons which should see the share price hit the 350p mark by mid-2005.

One is that Marshalls makes **good, steady profits** from its business. At the latest interim half-year (to end June 2004), pre-tax profits were £30.4m against £29.1m in the same period in the previous year. **Sales rose by nearly four per cent** to £190.2m. Numis Securities is looking for a full-year pre-tax profit of £53.1m and of £56.3m in 2005.

Marshalls is a **strong cash generator**. The landscape products division saw sales up by more than three per cent to £157.8m, with record levels of sales inquiries from domestic customers and robust demand from the public sector and commercial customers.

Clay products divisional sales rose by nearly 10 per cent to £17.4m with operating profit up 55 per cent to £3.1m. **Natural stone** division's sales at £14.9m were at last year's high level. A good result, as the latter was boosted by the contract to transform London's Trafalgar Square into a mainly pedestrian area.

Net asset value per share is a hefty 169p and gearing is at a reasonable 60 per cent. The market price tag is £411m.

Marshalls is a **tempting bid target**, although no bid hopes are factored into the current share price. This is an industry where size matters and a foreign predator could well be tempted. A bid would throw up a large windfall capital gain.

Stockmarket and alternative investments can fall as well as rise in value. Readers should consult their own professional advisers.