



TRIPS FOR 2015

1. Meet new people

It sounds too good to be true: a week's stay in a four-star hotel, in a traditional Spanish village, all food included for, well, nothing. But that's what's on offer at La Alberca, in Salamanca province - if you're willing to talk a lot. Diverbo runs programmes that help Spaniards improve their English skills, which is where you come in. Native English-speakers "teach", not in formal lessons but via theatre skits, group games, walks, or chit-chat. In exchange, you get interesting cultural interaction, and a very cheap week away.

Bottom line: Free, excluding flights; frequent dates year-round (00 34 913 813400; diverbo.com).

2. Stress less

"Grab a bow saw and help to cut invasive scrub on the Ivinghoe Hills," suggests National Trust Working Holidays. The organisation is looking for volunteers to keep the Ashridge Estate - where Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire meet - in good order. Join the staff and their four-legged helpers - cattle and sheep, which help keep the scrub and grass in check. The rewards? An "office" with a view, sociable nights with new people, and a chance to clear your head as well as the hills.

Bottom line: £85, including two nights' bunkhouse accommodation; the next starts 23 January (0844 335 1291; nationaltrust.org.uk).

3. Get fit

Outdoor exercisers don't come much tougher than fell runners, who brave weather, way-finding, and wild undulations in pursuit of a more interesting workout. It's certainly more invigorating than the gym treadmill. Novices can join one of Icecicle Mountaineering's Intro Trail and Fell Running weekends in the Lake District; these are open to anyone, and include two days of guided runs in scenic spots, accompanied by coaching tips and advice on descent techniques, pacing, and navigation so you stay safe while keeping fit.

Bottom line: £99, excluding accommodation; 17 January, 25 April, 16 and 30 May, 13 June (01539 442217; icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk).

4. Learn to dive

Always fancied a go at diving but can't afford the air fare to Thailand? The National Diving and Activity Centre in Chesham, Monmouthshire, might not have tropical reefs and 30C sunshine but it's a good place to check whether you actually like the sport before paying out a fortune. It runs monthly pool-based try-a-dive experiences, open to everyone; if you enjoy the experience you can take more lessons and explore the flooded quarry, full of sunken boats, trucks and helicopters. Make a weekend of it: the cen-



ON THE RUN
Fell running in the Lake District (above); canoes on the Norfolk Broads (right); Amsterdam (left)
PH: JERRY LAMPERT



extremely useful, tongues. Bottom line: £75, including lunch, Madingley Hall B&B accommodation from £60 a night; 25 January (01223 746262; ice.cam.ac.uk).

7. Commune with nature

Escape the rat race to forge a closer relationship with Mother Nature - all in the space of a weekend. The Canoe Man organises trips on Norfolk's rivers and broads, supplying the maps, equipment and all you need for a self-guided exploration. Float along in your canoe, keeping a lookout for otters and kingfishers; pitch up at a campsite (near a pub), then carry on paddling the next day. Tackle the River Bure - non-navigable by bigger boats - and it'll likely be just you and the birds.

Bottom line: £70, including canoe hire, two nights' campsite fees and transport; available year-round, but best March to October (01603 783777; thecanoeman.com).

8. Go green

For ideas on adopting a more sustainable lifestyle, head to Embercombe. This site near Exeter overlooks Dartmoor and is run as a charity and social enterprise that encourages engagement with the land, community involvement and leadership. On its Friends Weekends you help with the site's upkeep - ploughing, planting, harvesting, maintaining - as well as cooking and sharing ideas with other, like-minded people.

Bottom line: £40 plus a contribution towards food, including two nights' accommodation; next dates 23 January, 13 February (01647 252983; embercombe.co.uk).

9. Travel more

Perhaps this year you've vowed to see more of the world and broaden your horizons. Why not start with a bargain P&O Mini Cruise to Amsterdam? Sail overnight from Hull to Rotterdam Europoort with your own cabin; take the connecting bus to Amsterdam and spend a day cycling, sightseeing and canal-cruising around the Dutch capital before taking the bus back to Rotterdam for the overnight sail home.

Bottom line: From £79 for two sharing a two-berth cabin; year-round (0871 664 6464; poferries.com).

10. Learn to surf

Cressy's Surf Academy in Porthcawl is run by a South African surf champion who also happens to coach the Wales National Surfing Team - a good person to supervise your first forays into the waves. The academy offers a range of packages, one of which combines a beginner's lesson and four-star hotel stay with full Welsh breakfast. Winter isn't the most enticing time to squeeze into a wetsuit hereabouts, so pencil this one in for warmer April waters - an Easter resolution, perhaps.

Bottom line: From £70pp, including accommodation, equipment and two-hour lesson; April to October (01443 667800; cressysurfacademy.com).

Break the mould, but not the bank

A new year - time for a new you. But if one of your resolutions is to be more careful with your cash, Sarah Baxter has some great ways to reinvigorate your life and stay on budget

tre's cosy wooden huts are open all-year-round.

Bottom line: £30 for one-hour course, £40 for one-night wigwam stay; next Try Dive dates are 10 January, 21 February, 14 March, and 15 April (01291 630046; ndac.co.uk).

5. Embrace a challenge

There's nothing like putting a big goal in your diary to keep you focused. Signing up now for the spring London-to-Paris Bike Ride gives you five months to train, and

will motivate you to cycle in winter; it'll also spur you into raising money for the charity of your choice. It's a tough but manageable challenge too, covering almost 500km in four days, via back roads, battlefields, and rolling countryside.

Bottom line: £99 plus £1,470 fund-raising target (or £735 self-funded), which includes ferry to France, return via Eurostar, four nights' accommodation and most meals; 20 May (020 7424 5505; londonparisbikeride.co.uk).

6. Broaden your mind

Wish you knew more about maths? Astronomy? Art history? Well, it's not too late to learn. Take a day taster course at the University of Cambridge's Madingley Hall to learn something new, and to be able to call yourself an Oxbridge alumni forever. The travel-keen and indecisive should try "Languages and Cultures: Sampling Chinese and Spanish". Over four sessions of lectures and lessons, it offers an introduction to these two very different,

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