

# FALL BACK IN LOVE WITH LEARNING

*Increasing numbers of us are abandoning the lazy beach holiday in favour of something more stimulating. Three people follow their passions to foreign shores and discover why a learning break can be so rewarding*

entrancing beat, we understand what storytelling is about, and the magic of Morocco that brought her here. For writers trying to find their story, the desert, with its expanse of nothing but time and echoes of adventure, strips away everything until you're left with only what you need to say.

*Writing retreats cost around £1,100 for eight nights' full-board accommodation, including two nights' half-board, transfers, excursions and tuition. For more information, visit [cafetissardmine.com](http://cafetissardmine.com) and [chambresdamis.com](http://chambresdamis.com).*



*Gilly Smith samples a writers' retreat in Morocco*

It's not a big name author that leads me to a retreat in the Moroccan Sahara, nor the mind-messing solitude of its infinite sandscapes. It's Cafe Tissardmine, an arts retreat 11 hours' drive from Marrakech and nine from Fez, where former Australian arts festival director Karen Hadfield has built her home out of mud and straw, with the help of Berber business partner Youssef Bouchedor. A country with stories in its soul and a woman whose own is 'Out of Africa' meets 'The Sheltering Sky'. How could I fail to find my muse here?

After a night at Chambre d'Amis, a pretty riad in the Marrakech medina, the Cafe Tissardmine driver gathers the group for the drive into the desert. Within hours, we touch the clouds of the High Atlas mountains before descending into ancient valleys where tourism and time fall away. Across dunes lit by stars, lured by Youssef's spiced beef tagine, Karen's bottle of red and a gaggle of writers from Fez, we finally arrive in Tissardmine where indigenous art and traditional Berber design sit together in a haven of tranquillity. We finally retreat to luxury tents with proper beds and I drift off to the sound of the desert breeze on canvas.

Over the next five days, we write until the sun sets. It's space rather than solitude, and soul-stroking by our Berber hosts. As Karen joins their drumming around the fire with ancient stories woven into its



*Michael Hill gets out on the open water in Sweden*

Our guide, Christina, offers words of encouragement. In order to enjoy kayaking, she says, we need to love the rocks and sea. 'Give them a hug and they will look after you,' she says.

Christina is a yoga instructor and masseuse, as well as a sea-kayaking instructor on West Sweden's Bohuslän archipelago. Despite our safety briefing, I still felt some trepidation. I first tried kayaking at school, and had a bad experience, so I knew that being told what to do if your kayak capsizes is one thing – remembering to do it when your boat and all your kit is under water is another. But after a while out on the water, I began to appreciate that feeling those nerves when you have to edge the kayak to turn or ride a big wave is all part of the experience.

For the most part, the sea was calm and clear above the seaweed forests. A group kayak expedition is a bit like a walking tour – people go at their own pace, the faster ones taking detours or exploring stopping points while they wait for the others to catch up. On our first afternoon, we found a secluded cove with white sand and grass terrace to pitch our tents for a night of wild camping. This is common in Sweden, but there are also little fisherman's cabins dotted about the deserted granite islands that are freely available for anyone to sleep in. After a wonderfully fresh meal of salmon and a glass of wine, >>>



**TOP:** Magical Morocco is an ideal place to get away from it all on a writers' retreat  
**MIDDLE:** Head to Sweden for invigorating sea-kayaking in a spectacular setting  
**BOTTOM:** Be inspired by Italy with a cooking course in the Tuscan countryside

PHOTOGRAPHS OF SWEDEN: ©HENRIK TRYGG



>>> the group sat around the driftwood fire sharing stories before getting into warm sleeping bags.

Next morning, having watched the sunrise, we headed back out on the water to explore more. West Sweden's coastline is spectacular, with 8,000 islands cast into the sea; you head towards a little island of granite, noticing the way the ice carved patterns on its surface and how tiny flowers clung to the cracks with lichen and mosses contrasting with the hard rock. From a distance you could spot a lighthouse, or a distinctive red and white cabin and wonder at its remoteness. Then you would turn a corner and see nothing but open water and the huge expanse of sky.

If you don't want to spend more than a few days in a kayak, there are plenty of other things to do. We visited the Vitlycke Museum and rock carvings, and the Nordic Watercolour Museum on Tjörn. But the main attraction really is Sweden's scenery, and the freedom to immerse yourself so completely in the landscape. I'm so glad I got back on the water.

*Christina Ingemarsdotter can be contacted through [kajakuthyrning-grundsund.se](http://kajakuthyrning-grundsund.se) or see [westsweden.com](http://westsweden.com) or [visitsweden.com](http://visitsweden.com) for more information. UK-based [naturetravels.co.uk](http://naturetravels.co.uk) offers kayaking and other activities across Sweden. [Way2goadventures.co.uk](http://Way2goadventures.co.uk) offers trips on the UK coast and rivers.*



### *Danielle Woodward indulges in Italian cuisine in Tuscany*

Having always had a bit of a love affair with all things Italian, how could I resist a cookery holiday where I could learn to make – and eat – my favourite food, in the lush Tuscan countryside? I had a few reservations about travelling alone but I needn't have worried. Our group of six ranging from a teacher to a decorator, were an enthusiastic, friendly bunch with a love of food in common. The atmosphere was relaxed, and the lessons catered for beginners (like me) and more practised foodies.

Arriving at Pisa airport a couple of hours before our driver would pick us up, I decided to go to see the nearby Leaning Tower and spent a happy hour or so wandering around. Back at the airport, I met the group and we were driven to our new home for the next few nights, Villa Arezzo, a converted luxury farmhouse overlooking the Chianti hills. Our delightful host Simonetta welcomed us with drinks and dinner, cooked by the chef Sunshine – a Tuscan

## WHY NOT TRY...

*From exclusive massage therapy to knitting in the Faroe Islands, there's a learning holiday for everyone*

**1** For serious indulgence, book a 'learn couples massage' break at Alila Villas Uluwatu, Bali. It begins with a guide to aromatherapy and anatomy, before progressing to techniques in nurturing, therapeutic and deep-tissue massage. Approx £186 per couple ([alilahotels.com/uluwatu](http://alilahotels.com/uluwatu)).

**2** Improve your photography skills with a weekend course at Holbeck Ghyll, in the Lake District. Professional photographer Bill Birkett guides you through ways to improve your technique in one of the world's most inspiring settings. From £400pp, the next course

takes place from 22 to 24 March ([holbeckghyll.com](http://holbeckghyll.com)).

**3** Sheep outnumber people in the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic by 2:1 – so where better to go to learn how to spin yarn, or knit for therapy? Direct flights from Gatwick resume in May ([visitfaroeislands.com](http://visitfaroeislands.com)).

**4** If you prefer sun-drenched beaches to windswept wilds, head to the Hillside Beach Club, Fethiye, Turkey and take your pick of experiences. Guests at this secluded resort can learn to DJ, try scuba-diving, or enjoy the night sky with a lesson in astronomy ([hillsidebeachclub.com](http://hillsidebeachclub.com)).

born and bred whose parents were hippies, hence his name – who would be teaching the classes.

After breakfast the next day, it was time for our first cookery lesson. Sunshine soon got us to work; a passionate chef who developed his love of cooking from his grandmother, most of his recipes are based on traditional Tuscan cuisine. We made gnocchi, bean soup and tiramisu. I found it very satisfying to help make something from scratch that ended up looking and tasting so wonderful.

The days followed the same routine with a lesson in the morning, then the fruits of our labours for lunch with the afternoon free to relax by the villa pool or join excursions to Florence and Siena. Some afternoons, the gastronomic adventures continued with a trip to a winery for a tasting or cheese maker to try 'the best Parmesan in Italy'. There were also trips to local restaurants.

The holiday was so enjoyable; the cookery lessons were intensive but fun, and I really felt that I had learned a lot I could take away and recreate at home.

*Cookery holidays cost from £899 per person for a four-day break, including return flights, full-board, transfers, cookery lessons and sightseeing. Visit [flavoursholidays.co.uk](http://flavoursholidays.co.uk) or call 0131 343 2500. Flavours also offers painting and Pilates holidays.*

