

Learning on holiday

Classrooms with a difference

How to have a proper holiday, have fun and come back with a life skill

SIGHTSEEING or lying around reading books are no longer the only options for a holiday in the sun. More and more people are discovering that you can learn a new skill at the same time as enjoying the pleasures of a proper break. Hilary Birtles came back from France with hats for all occasions, and Chris Caldicott's friends will be amazed by his Indian culinary skills after his visit to the subcontinent. We highlight a selection of the best opportunities, from sculpting in Florence to painting in Andalucia.

Keeping it under your hat

Hilary Birtles travels to south-western France to learn the magical art of millinery

I have always had a passion for hats. When I was growing up in Singapore, my mother and her friends were always sporting amazing creations of varying styles for every occasion and it made a lasting impression. Forty years later, when I heard about the millinery course at the 18th-century Château Dumas, I couldn't wait to get there.

From Toulouse airport, we drove an hour north to the château, through its 22 acres of woodland and walnut groves and up a drive lined with terracotta pots and holm oaks. It was more beautiful than I could have imagined.

My bedroom was light and airy with a roll-top bath and views over the countryside of the Tarn-et-Garonne. The rooms had been furnished from local brocante markets, comple-

mented with trompe l'oeil paintings by the previous owner, artist Robert Constantin.

I was introduced to my fellow course participants—a couple from America celebrating a 50th birthday and two other English ladies with a passion for hats—on the first evening as we set off for the annual hat festival fashion show (Estivales du Chapeau) in the local town of Caussade. We got on straight away. The atmosphere was like a house party at which you arrive not knowing your fellow visitors, but leave as lifelong friends.

'Our tutor helped me transform my "gardening" hat into a straw boater with lavender in the brim'

Tuition began after breakfast in a light and airy workshop to the side of the château. With 25 years' experience, and having created headpieces for everyone, including The Queen and The Duchess of Cambridge, Dillon Wallwork is a wonderfully enthusiastic tutor.

He helped this total beginner transform my vision of an elegant 'gardening' hat into a straw boater with a striped ribbon around the brim and lavender tucked into the bow. Later, he guided me in using an antique block to design a two-tone green hat for summer weddings. The others used the library of reference books to create their designs—for the Americans, a matching pair of caps covered with the Stars and Stripes, and for the



The *château* has plenty of pretty corners in which to relax and give your fingers a rest

girls, a dazzling fascinator in fuchsia feathers and a simple sun hat with a wide brim.

The course covered everything. From the blocking process—the transformation through wetting, stretching and pinning of a straw capeline or a 3ft length of sinamay into a hat brim or crown—to accessorising with coloured ribbons. I found the pinning onto the block the most difficult, but when my fingers got tired, Dillon was at my elbow to do a stint.

After a few hours in the studio, we broke for lunch on the terrace, a suntrap with superb views, surrounded by white oleanders and pelargoniums. The food can only be described as first class, and the week was a gastronomic adventure with the very best of French cuisine: pink fillet steak with frites and béarnaise sauce, confit of duck, onion marmalade and goat's-cheese tart, crème caramel, tarte tatin and, my favourite, a cheese course consisting of a fine basil sorbet with a twist of cheese and a ruby-red plum jam.

istockphoto: Dreamstime

NEED TO KNOW

Other ideas for learning a new skill on holiday

Painting

Andalucia, Spain

A chance to paint the landscapes of Picasso and Velázquez. Beginners' courses in a variety of media are available, based at a family-run hotel overlooking a Moorish castle and the surrounding Subbética Natural Park £1,149 for seven nights, includes full board with wine, five days of tuition, equipment and transfers



(01453 823328; www.authenticadventures.co.uk)

Abruzzo, Italy

With a backdrop encompassing the Gran Sasso mountains, the Adriatic coast and Majella National Park, this is four days of sun-drenched, relaxed tutoring. The whole course can be fully adapted to suit your needs May 23–27, July 25–29 2012, £899, flights not included (020–7241 5006; www.frui.co.uk)

Sculpting

Florence, Italy

In partnership with Galleria Romanelli Sculpture Studio,

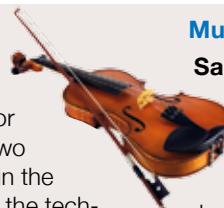
Rocco Forte's Hotel Savoy is offering short sculpture courses for beginners. During two three-hour lessons in the studio, guests learn the techniques of the 'maestri italiani', before creating a sculpture to take home. The 'It's all about Art!' course includes two sculpture lessons, two nights' accommodation and a 'Renaissance' welcome drink at L'Incontro Bar From £565 per room per night (00 39 055 27351; www.hotelsavoy.it)



Music

Samba music, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Options for budding musicians include learning percussion with local band Estilo Moleque, as well as one-to-one lessons at the Beethoven Music School on the instrument of your choice, including piano, organ, guitar, violin and flute. Guests can do as much or as little as they like, and all levels of experience are welcomed £875 for two weeks, or £2,595 for 12 weeks. Includes accommodation, breakfasts, airport pick-up (01273 600030; www.responsiblevacation.com)





From enthusiastic hat-wearers to budding milliners: even beginners will learn to create something lovely by the end of the week's course

After lunch, it was back to the studio, but I always managed a swim in the sparkling pool before dinner. If the heat, or the concentration, gets too much, there's plenty more to do, such as cycling, sunbathing or reading in the beautifully designed gardens or exploring the grounds. There are also optional visits to the towns of Montpezat-de-Quercy and Saint-Antonin-Noble-Val.

Lizzie Hulme's family bought Château Dumas in 2005 and she's been running courses in millinery, painting and yoga for three years. She delights in her 'show and tell' after-dinner games, that tell the stories behind

the treasures that fill the château.

My fellow participants were as entranced by the whole experience as I was—an idyllic holiday destination, excellent food, a new skill and superb end results, even for beginners.

Travel Information

● Château Dumas, Auty, France (07917 806905; www.chateaudumas.net; www.dillonwallwork.co.uk), offers courses in skills such as millinery, painting and jewellery making, from £1,150. The château is available to rent all year round for groups of eight–24, from £65pp per night

Cooking in India with a masterchef

Chris Caldicott learns how to make 'wet curries', use exotic spices and shop in the heady whirl of an Indian market

'Okay, guys, let's cruise the market, sample some of the wares, then stop for breakfast before I go back in there to do the deals at local prices.' Posing as regular tourists, we spent the next hour guided by our host, Adrian, immersed in the abundance of culinary delights on offer among the cacophonous chaos of Goa's Mapusa market. ➤

Cooking

Phuket, Thailand

Combine a luxury beach break with a master-chef Thai course in a purpose-built cookery school on a clifftop overlooking the Andaman sea. Guests can explore food markets and bring back fresh produce for the classes, which take place after breakfast, leaving afternoons free to explore the area. From £2,354 for a five-night 'Thai Master Course', including accommodation, breakfast and airport transfers (0845 625 0445; www.golearnto.com)



The Dordogne, France

Learn everything from butchery and carving to making pasta, bread and intricate desserts, all in the most beautiful of settings. Expert instruction and the chance to choose ingredients from local markets and fields £695 for five days and five nights, based on two people sharing a room (00 33 6 2265 5789; www.cookinfrance.com)

Sailing

Forte dei Marmi, Italy

A five-day 'introduction to sailing' break. Stay in the Principe Forte dei Marmi hotel, then head to the harbour, learn



the basics, cruise along the Etruscan coast and go island-hopping under your own steam. From £2,970 per couple for five nights, including four sailing lessons, transfers, four spa treatments, bicycle hire, two dinners and all breakfasts (00 39 05 8478 3636; www.principefortedeimarmi.com)

Dalmatia

Learn to sail anything from a speedy catamaran to an elegant schooner, with each trip made entirely bespoke in length and route to suit your party's level of enthusiasm and experience. Stop as little or as often as you like, with as many crew as suits your needs

(0800 124 4176; www.saildalmatia.com)

St Moritz, Switzerland

Badrutt's Palace Hotel owns a sailing boat exclusively for the use of guests who wish to learn, further their experience, or even take part in regattas. Three-night sailing package from £1,625 per couple. The season runs from June 24 to September 11, 2012 (00 41 081 837 1100; www.badruttspalace.com)

