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LEARNING OVERSEAS

A NEW DIRECTION

Ever wanted to take a holiday and learn a new skill? Try your hand at romance writing, archery, conservation or wilderness guiding and transform your life with an overseas course and a new sense of direction. **Words by Clover Stroud**

Green and glittering as an emerald, Bhutan is a country that surprises and inspires at every turn. Perched high in the Himalayas, between the snowy peaks of Kanchenjunga and Everest, it was to Bhutan I went following my divorce, in search of a mountain wilderness I hoped would give me some wide open perspectives on my new life. What I didn't expect was that I'd return to England having honed my skills with a bow and arrow.

Archery is the national sport in Bhutan. Groups of men in *ghos*, a traditional knee-length robe, usually accessorised with trainers, can be seen practising their target skills all over the place — I spot archers on strips of land near the airport, and later, as we climb into the mountains, there are more bowmen at Uma Paro, a resort where I was to stay as a guest.

Bhutanese people are very friendly, and the previous king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who abdicated in favour of his son, famously declared himself more concerned with his people's 'gross national happiness' than their GNP, an idea that was later adopted by David Cameron's so-called 'happiness index'.

Perhaps their love for archery has something to do with this. It's a deeply addictive sport, and after just one lesson I was hooked on the hypnotic power of the tension in the bow as I pulled it back, fitting an arrow to aim at a target on the furthest side of the field before me. And while it may look relatively simple, the art of hitting the bull's eye is in fact extremely challenging.

By the end of my week in Bhutan, I'd trekked up to the 17th-century Bumdra Monastery, surrounded by yaks and faded prayer flags; eaten the national dish of *emo datsi* (chilli and cheese) in the capital Thimphu; and gazed in wonder at the deeply magical Taktshang Goemba, or Tiger's Nest, Monastery, perched high up on a steep cliff face.

Learning a new skill while travelling isn't a new trend. After all, willing Brits have been signing up for Spanish lessons in Madrid or pizza-making courses in Florence, for generations. What's changed is that travellers are increasingly venturing further afield in search of ever more idiosyncratic and unusual experiences — whether that's paragliding in

the Rocky Mountains, a Thai boxing course in Bangkok, ashtanga yoga in Goa or exploring the Amazon's biodiversity from an eco-lodge.

What's more, these new skills can often be incorporated into our everyday lives when we return. I've several close friends who were strangers to physical exercise but who became yoga converts following a week on a retreat in Kerala, where they were taught to contort their body into the Lion or Downward Dog on a shell-strewn beach at dawn every day.

Sometimes, though, these skills are things we strive for on holiday not because we intend to use them in everyday life but because they're a reminder of how life-affirming travel can be.

Since returning from Bhutan, I can't honestly say archery is something I use regularly, and yet I'm often reminded of those moments spent staring down the arrow at the coloured concentric circles in the distance.

"Just focus on your target, and then go there," my archery teacher, Utyen Tshering, told me. It's a metaphor that's serving me well as I plot the next stage of my life as a single mother. >>



Image: Buena Vista Images/Getty



Rachel Thomas is a dairy farmer who lives in Wales with her husband, James, and their two children. She attended a week-long romance-writing course in Tuscany, Italy.

How did you hear about it?

I've wanted to write romantic fiction since I was 11, so going on the course was a long-held dream. I found it after a bit of searching on the internet. I'd previously done a creative writing course in the UK, but I liked the idea of going abroad and giving myself a complete change of scene while working on my writing style. I think a new environment is really important to get the creative juices flowing.

How is going abroad for a course different from attending a course in the UK?

Being away from the UK gave me a really good chance to totally switch off, which is important when trying to write fiction. It meant I could channel everything into my writing without being distracted by the demands of family life, or my work as a dairy farmer. At home, I try to write as much as I can, even if it's just for a few moments a day, but having a full week to devote to writing was exciting. It made me understand my creativity in a different way.

How was the course structured?

We'd work as a group in the morning, then break for lunch, before going off to work alone until about 4pm. We'd usually be set a subject to write about during this time, and we'd read our work aloud over dinner. This was quite nerve-wracking, but learning to conquer my fears has since helped me cope better when submitting work to publishers. Learning how to deal with other people's reactions to your work is as important a part of writing as the actual act itself.

What did you achieve from the course?

It was very valuable having the published authors, who were the tutors there, to talk to. Being around a dozen like-minded people who were all working towards the same goal was inspiring as well as really helpful — it made me feel my goal to get published wasn't just a pipe dream. I've met some amazing people, too.

Has it had a positive effect on your writing?

Absolutely. I've had really positive feedback from publishers, and I'm honing my writing skills. I'm optimistic I'll get published, and I don't think this would have been possible without doing the course. It's been hugely inspirational in so many ways I couldn't have expected.



Madeleine Todd lives in Guernsey and is retired. Since first visiting Sasaab Lodge in Kenya in 1989, she's returned 15 times to learn about conservation, tracking and the preservation of the Samburu tribe.

How did you become interested in conservation?

I worked in finance and travelled all over Africa, developing a passion for the country and the lions of northern Kenya. I wanted to learn about the research and conservation involved in studying the lions, rather than simply taking a holiday.

How did you organise this?

I'd stayed at Sasaab as a guest and loved it, so I was fortunate that from 2004, wildlife biologist Shivani Bhalla was running her research project, Ewaso Lions, (www.ewasolions.org) beside the lodge, with the support of Sasaab owners Mikey and Tanya Carr-Hartley. This meant I could stay there while tracking and observing the lions with Shivani.

How did your stay at Sasaab and work with Shivani differ from a conventional safari experience?

I was able to join the Kenya Wildlife Service and Westgate Community Conservancy, working with Shivani to educate myself about the activity of the lions. We'd get up at 3am and be out working in the bush for much of the day.

What sort of activities were you involved in?

The most exciting experience was on a visit in 2010; helping to trap a lion that was to be collared for tracking and observation. It was during a drought, so we dug water holes to attract the lioness with the scent of water. We also learned about baiting the area using the carcass of a waterbuck that had died of natural causes. We were involved with everything, from gutting the animal to camouflaging the cage.

Do local people benefit from Sasaab's conservation activities?

With support from Sasaab, Shivani has developed a Warrior Project to engage with young warriors from the Samburu tribe, helping them to work as trackers and spotters for the Kenya Wildlife Service. Not only does this help tourists understand the role of conservation in Kenya, it also helps the warriors to become more involved in the future of this beautiful destination.

What did you get out of this?

This direct, hands-on experience was really extraordinary, and has helped me broaden my interests in conservation. I felt this behind-the-scenes experience meant I was there as an individual, rather than a tourist. >>

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Tim Francis has worked as a mountain leader and mountain bike guide. He joined Wilderness Scotland's Wilderness Guide Training Programme (WGTP) to enhance his skills. He lives near Inverness with his two children and his wife, Gina.

You were already working as a guide. Why did you decide to do the course?

The programme is very broad, and while it's OK to learn the leadership skills you need to work in the mountains, I wanted to deepen my knowledge.

How were the modules organised?

Most take a day, and the core subjects range from Leave No Trace Awareness to Cultural History & Interpretation. There are also habitat modules and further topics like Astronomy. You can take them as stand-alone courses, with a CPD certificate for each, but to get the WGTP certificate you have to do them all.

Weren't these things you'd already been taught on regular leadership courses?

They're usually seen as softer skills and not given the same weight. However, they really enhance the experience of anyone I'm guiding, as well as my own. I could have read about them in books, but that would have taken years.

Was it like a normal holiday?

I always try to include an element of the outdoors into a holiday. This can be hard with kids, so getting away to study on my own for a few days was a privilege.

What sort of people did you meet on the course?

There were a lot of people re-skilling, having come into this from a different job, like the military, or on a sabbatical from their conventional jobs. There were also young people either straight out of college looking for new skills.

Can anyone do this training?

Anyone can take part, which is what makes it so interesting. The fact it's organised into modules also means you can break it up, to fit around a job or family life, as I know for a lot of people, taking a chunk of time out from 'real life' is something that stops them gaining new skills, which is a shame.

How did you fit the course around your job and young family?

I completed all the modules over two years. The flexibility was great for me.

Which part of the course did you find most useful?

Geology was great, as I'm walking over rocks all the time. Learning about the local landform was fascinating. I also enjoyed the section on cultural history and local interpretation. It gave me a new perspective on something I thought I knew well.

What did you take away from the course?

Apart from gaining new skills, it reminded me what a great world it is out there.

essentials NEW SKILLS

ROMANCE WRITING IN TUSCANY

» The Watermill at Posara: A restored grain, chestnut and olive mill in northwest Tuscany — runs creative writing courses for all levels. The next romance-writing course is in May 2013, led by British author Sharon Kendrick who has over 80 Mills & Boon titles to her name. The week-long Writing Romance course (4-11 May 2013) costs from £1,236 per person and includes transfers (to and from Pisa Airport), tuition, seven nights' accommodation, pre-dinner aperitifs, all meals, local travel and a mid-week visit to either Lucca or the Cinque Terre villages. Flights cost extra. Other creative-writing courses include Crime Writing and How to Write your Memoir. www.watermill.net

WILDERNESS TRAINING IN SCOTLAND

» Wilderness Scotland's Wilderness Guide Training Programme: Courses from £450, including lunches on all modules, transport to venues, course material, handouts and certificates. Fee for attending the modules as stand-alone courses from £55 for a one-day workshop, including tea and coffee and CPD certificate. www.wildernessscotland.com

BHUTANESE ARCHERY

» A five-night stay at Uma Paro costs from £2,980 per person. It includes flights from Heathrow to Paro via Delhi with British Airways and Druk Air, archery tuition and lessons, privately guided sightseeing and transport in Bhutan, full board and Bhutanese government visa and royalties. www.ampersandtravel.com

SAFARI TRACKING IN KENYA

» Learn to track lions in Kenya's Samburu National Reserve with safari guide Shivani Bhalla, staying at Sasaab Lodge. Rooms start from \$545 (£339) per person per night, including full-board accommodation, guided walks, camel rides, game drives and return transfers. www.thesafaricollection.com www.ewasolutions.org

THAI BOXING

» Ampersand Travel has three nights at The Metropolitan Bangkok on a B&B basis, including Muay Thai boxing sessions, airport transfers and flights with Thai Airways from £730 per person. www.ampersandtravel.com