

Trips for the tastebuds

Excite the senses with a bespoke foodie travel package, writes **Pól Ó Conghaile**

Gourmet getaway food is usually part and parcel of the whole travel experience. But what if you want to take things up a level and make it the entire focus of your trip? Here are a few appetisers.

JOIN A PASTA ACADEMY

Lake Garda, Italy

What's the best foodie country on Earth? Italy tops the list for many gastronomes — including CNN Travel, which recently hailed it as having “food that has enslaved tastebuds around the globe for centuries”.

Stick a pin anywhere in a map of Italy and you'll find a delectable town, city or region. Every good chef needs his or her ingredients laid out in advance, however, and that's exactly what Topflight is offering in its 2014 brochure. Inside, Italy specialists have come up with several gastro getaways, including cookery courses in Florence and a Tuscany tasting tour departing next May.

Tastiest of all, perhaps, is a chance to combine a holiday in Lake Garda with a two-day pasta academy, including wine and olive oil-tasting, lunch with drinks and dinners in two Italian restaurants — along with flights, four-star accommodation and a boat tour — from €1,099pp.

Details: (01) 240-1701; topflight.ie

TRAVEL WITH PAOLO TULLIO

Spain, France, Italy

Last autumn, Travel Department teamed up with renowned food critic and ‘Weekend’ columnist Paolo Tullio for a tapas tour

of Barcelona.

The holiday included three days of traipsing around the best tapas bars in the city with Paolo, plus two days crammed with excursions including Montserrat, Park Güell and a tapas workshop with an expert chef.

Unsurprisingly, the trip was a runaway success. So much so that Travel Department is now cooking up a whole series of foodie holidays with Paolo for 2014.

Full details will be available next month, but we've already got wind of another tapas tour in Barcelona, a Cannes and Cote d'Azur cooking and gourmet holiday and a bay of Naples food experience. The original five-day trip cost €779pp, so expect similar prices for these getaways.

Details: (01) 637 1600; traveldepartment.ie

SEAWEED FORAGING TRIPS

West Cork

Did you know seaweed has twice as much vitamin C as orange juice? Or that it can help with weight loss, high blood pressure and food cravings?

Those are just some of the insights served up over a day-long foraging adventure with Atlantic Sea Kayaking.

You don't even have to know how to kayak for this day break. The pace is gentle, the boats are stable and tandem seats mean novices can take a back seat as guides do the heavy lifting (or paddling).

All you need to do is sit back and enjoy up-close-and-personal interactions with the coastline, poring over a smorgasbord of seaweed and sea vegetables along the way.

Jim and Maria Kennedy lead the tours, with the occasional addition of food writer Sally McKenna, author of ‘Extreme Greens: Understanding Seaweeds’ (Estragon, €20). After learning to identify different species of seaweed, guests are guided to remote beaches or islands so they can cook up and taste the fruits of their foraging.

Tours cost €90 per person and run year-round. Atlantic Sea Kayaking also does packages with Inchydoney Island Lodge and Spa.

A package bundling two nights' B&B, the seaweed kayaking adventure (10am to

4pm), a half-day coastal walk, dinner (often including seaweed) and a packed lunch starts from just €350pp.

Details: 028 21 058; atlantic-seakayaking.com; inchydoney-island.com

EDIBLE PARIS

France

It's easy to be bamboozled by Paris. Where are the best bistros? Which are the hot tickets? Where are the has-beens that are best avoided? And where can you find the most authentic cheeses and chocolatiers?

That's where a local foodie friend comes in handy. And food critic Rosa Jackson, who has edited several editions of the ‘Time Out Paris Eating & Drinking Guide’, certainly fits the bill. Conveniently, she also runs Edible Paris, which offers bespoke tours of the French capital.

How does it work? Simple. You send an email outlining your likes and dislikes, and Jackson writes back with a personalised itinerary directing you to the best suppliers and restaurants in the city.

Itineraries range from half-day (€125) to three-day tours (€500) and include maps. Jackson says she visits every shop, market and cafe that she recommends (you can see a sample of them on her website).

“Suppose chocolate is your passion,” she says. “Drawing on my years of experience as a Paris restaurant critic and food expert, I will not only point you to the best chocolatiers in town, but will tell you which creations you must not miss — Jacques Genin's fresh mint ganache, for instance.”

Jackson also offers personalised and guided tours (€300 for 1-3 people), in addition to cooking classes and food tours in another aptly-named French city: Nice (petitsfarcis.com). Bon appetit! Details: edible-paris.com. Aer Lingus, Ryanair and Air France fly to Paris.

CRUISE WITH MARCO PIERRE WHITE

Malta, Italy, Croatia

Cruising isn't for everyone, but it does some things spectacularly well — most notably providing a floating hotel that takes you from port to port, without you having to pack and unpack.

For foodies looking to sample several types of cuisine in one trip, that's a pretty nifty way of getting around.

P&O Cruises has a 17-night cruise departing Southampton on April 13, with stops including Cadiz, Malta, Venice, Dubrovnik, Corfu, Messina and Gibraltar.

The adult-only Arcadia features restaurants by Atul Kochhar and Marco Pierre White. White himself is scheduled to join the cruise from April 27 to 30.

Travelnet.ie has full-board from €2,275pp, with flights. It's a good time to sign up as The Arcadia is being refurbished this winter, with a new nightclub and a refit for White's Ocean Grill on the cards.

You can expect most passengers to be British and there's a pool, spa, casino and lots of shore excursions on the programme too.

Details: Call Travelnet on 021 485 1700; travelnet.ie; pocruises.com

A TASTE OF THE CAMINO

Portugal and Spain

Wine, food and a healthy hike to keep the calories at bay — that's the offering on this four-day frolic from CaminoWays.

The tour begins in Porto, a stunning city where you'll enjoy dinner overlooking the riviera and its famous tumbledown townhouses from the banks of the Douro.

You can try the traditional Portuguese bacalhau (cod) or some more contemporary dishes, before enjoying a private tour of the city and its port wine cellars in Vila Nova de Gaia the following morning.

Day two sees the first stage of the Portuguese Way (Porto to Fajozes, 15km), with the second following on Day three (Fajozes to Arcos, 25km). Accommodation is included — in Fajozes, you'll bed down in Quinta das Alaias, a 19th Century country house — from €350pps, but not flights.

In truth, you can eat like a king pretty much anywhere along the Camino — from fishermen's stews in Santander to Galician specialties such as pulpo a feira (octopus), caldo gallego (a broth flavoured with pork lard) and tarta de Santiago (the almond cake bearing St James's cross).

Details: (01) 525 2886; caminoways.com

FLAVOURS OF NEW YORK

(NYC and New England)

January and February are as off-peak as it gets for tourism in New York. Christmas is toast and the weather is Baltic, sure, but the post-seasonal slump can throw up some great deals. New York offers every kind of food tour imaginable — from the Slice of

Brooklyn Pizza Tour (\$80, but you don't have to wait in line at Grimaldi's) to romps around Chinatown, Nolita/NoHo, Chelsea Market or Greenwich Village with Foods of New York (\$65pp, including eats).

And for a real splash, Sunway is selling Trafalgar's 11-day New York Zest and New England's Best foodie tour here in Ireland.

The trip takes in Manhattan and Boston, with insider experiences along the way, including a tasting tour in NYC, a visit to a cranberry bog in New England and a spate of cheese-tasting at the family-owned Cabot Creamery in Vermont. Yum.

Prices start at €3,529pp, including guides, flights from Dublin, B&B and several meals.

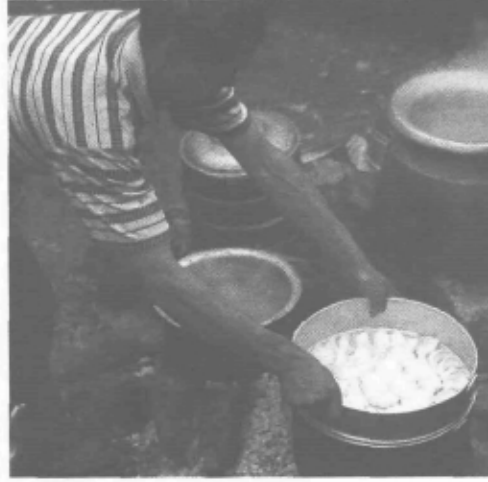
Details: asliceofbrooklyn.com; foodsofny.com; sunway.ie

A TASTE OF INDIA

India

Explore has a brand new Taste of India tour with departures during October, November and December 2014. The 13-day trip concentrates on southern India and includes a visit to the smashing Devaraja market with Hema Nandi, a member of Mysore's Royal Family before learning some of her family's traditional recipes, a class on making momos (traditional dumpling) in a Tibetan settlement, and a visit to Attumukham Restaurant, as featured in Rick Stein's book 'India'. Holiday costs from £1,160/€1,384pp, excluding flights.

Details: +44 844-0901; explore.co.uk



Clockwise from top left: Coloured powders at an Indian market; momos ready to cook in the kitchen of a restaurant; homemade salsa preparation; tapas, Barcelona. Opposite page: Macaroons, Paris

