



# MAGNIFICENT MAN-CATIONS...

*Forget man-bags and man-sheds. PÓL Ó CONGHAILE has a raft of tips for hardcore bonding and gentle bro-mancing alike. Welcome to the man-cation...*

## 1. Mayo: Man Vs Clare Island....

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is a weekend of rock-climbing, abseiling, snorkelling, orienteering and more on Clare Island.

First things first... Clare Island ain't the Caribbean. You won't be prancing around in your Speedos drinking cocktails from coconuts. What you will be doing, however, is having the craic. And that, my friends, is an order.

After a 20-minute ferry ride from Roonagh Pier, you'll check into the Go Explore Hostel (it's got en-suites in all rooms), and report to Adventure West for a programme of activities that can be adapted for all levels of ability (and none). Afterwards, kick back at Sailor's Bar & Restaurant for a feast of seafood, pints and tunes.

The price includes the ferry, activities and two nights' B&B (food and drink are pay-as-you-go), and Clare Island Adventures are happy to tailor-make packages too.

Details: [clareislandadventures.ie](http://clareislandadventures.ie); from €169pp.

## 2. Sweden: A Rafting Adventure...

Buried deep within the DNA of every male is an urge to build things. Not all of us actually build stuff, of course – and those of us who build don't always build well. But the urge is still there, and here's the perfect way to let it loose.

In the spirit of Tom Sawyer, Adventure Holidays has a five-day rafting expedition on Sweden's River Klarälven. You'll arrive to find a big pile of logs and rope, assemble your own raft (don't worry, there's an instructor at hand) and, once the construction is finished, you'll be ready to cast-off down the river.

Over the next couple of days, rafters will float through 50km of Swedish scenery, swimming, wedging on sand banks and getting to know one another (each raft takes up to six people) along the way. The trips are available June through August, and the price

includes flights, car hire, tents, food and rafting equipment.

Details: [adventure-holidays.ie](http://adventure-holidays.ie); from €660pp based on four sharing.

## 3. South Africa: Shark Diving...

Nothing brings people together like the prospect of cage-diving with a great white shark. Trust me, I've been there – and almost puked with fear.

The best-known spot for shark diving in South Africa is probably Dyer Island. The penguin-stuffed passage between it and Geyser rock is "like Kentucky Fried chicken to the great white," as my guide put it. The White Shark Diving Co. and others run daytrips from Gansbaai, 170km east of Cape Town, from around €90pp.

Not everybody enthuses about cage-diving of course. There's a case to be made that tourists treat sharks like circus acts, that chumming invites them to associate humans with food. Others say it's educational, builds awareness, and offers a far better alternative to commercial or game fishing in the area.

For a cage-free option, try the Aliwal Shoal on South Africa's Indian Ocean coast. It is home to over 1,200 species of fish and oodles of turtles, humpback whales and whale sharks. Ragged-tooth sharks assemble on the shoal from June to November to mate – when it's possible to see over 100 of them on a single dive.

Gohop.ie, Trailfinders, Sunway and Joe Walsh Tours all offer South Africa packages. Hotels.com has the four-star Balmoral in Aliwal North from €133 per room per night. It's one of the oldest original colonial country-style hotels in the country.

Details: [sharkcagediving.co.za](http://sharkcagediving.co.za); [hotels.com](http://hotels.com).

## 4. Las Vegas: Top Guns...

After Tommy Bowe and chums finished last summer's Lions tour, did reports suggest they would celebrate with a nice weekend of

pampering in Monart? They did not. They suggested a masterclass in male bonding in Las Vegas.

Sin City isn't all about casinos and clubs, of course... far from it. Vegas has made a big effort to diversify in recent years, with top-notch food, outlet shopping (one friend of mine always arrives with an empty suitcase) and awesome activities.

When it comes to kicks, a flight over the Strip with Maverick Helicopters (from \$119/€87pp) can't be beat, but another aerial experience certainly comes close.

Sky Combat Ace offers "one of the most realistic aerial combat experiences in the world available to the general public", with a limo service to and from your hotel, a briefing with actual fighter pilots, flight suit-fitting and the main event — up to 60 minutes in the air performing basic fighter manoeuvres from \$399/€293pp.

The experience ends with a de-brief, with photos and video shot from the planes and socialising in the bar with your new fighter pilot friends.

Details: maverickhelicopter.com;  
skycombatace.com; lasvegas.com.

#### **5. Wales: Mountain Biking Buddies...**

Mountain biking is a serious business in Wales. Before the London Olympics, several top mountain-biking teams based themselves among its trails — man-made assets that, combined with the natural landscape, really spark the imagination.

The piece de resistance is Bike Park Wales, the UK's first full-scale mountain bike park. Found in the heart of the South Wales valleys, this is a network of downhill and lift-assisted trails built by riders for riders. It only opened last August, so the runs are fresh-from-the-packet, and the tracks cater for all abilities, too. Park entry is £5/€6.10, with a weekend pass for uplift — to save your quaking calves — from £55/€67.

Where to stay? Try the Winchfawr Lodges nearby. These four-star self-catering properties are a couple of miles from the Bike Park and have everything from secure mountain bike storage, power wash cleaning facility to a large drying room for those wet clothes. A week's stay starts from £350/€421, based on four sharing.

Details: bikeparkwales.com;  
winchfawrlodge.com.

#### **6. Northern Ireland: Blokarting & Blind Driving...**

Fancy an adventure holiday that doesn't involve a flight? Then get your car pool on for a trip across the border. Northern Ireland is one of the main filming locations for Game of Thrones, and its activity options are worthy of Westeros, too.

Kick-off with a bash at blokarting in

Ballymena, Co. Antrim. What's that, you say? Why, a blokart is a three-wheeled kart powered by a sail — you control it using a handlebar and a sheet rope that determines the sail's angle. It's a big-ass boy toy, hitting up to 50mph under the supervision of a British Champion Blokart racer... three-hour sessions cost from £50/€61pp depending on the group size.

Like that? Then you'll love driving blind in a Land Rover. Todd's Leap is one of the largest outdoor activity centres on the island, featuring 100km of purpose-built tracks, trails and off-road courses, including 'blind' Land Rover driving.

The idea is to drive around an obstacle course, trying not to knock anything over, relying completely on your back-seat drivers (AKA buddies) for direction.

And yes, there is a big red emergency button.

Details: blokartworld.com; toddisleap.com;  
discovernorthernireland.com

#### **7. Costa Rica: Cavemen in the Caribbean...**

Most people go to the Caribbean for its white beaches. While that's fine for a couple of days, however, what happens when you get itchy feet?

Sunway has an alternative. Its 12-day G Adventure holiday in Costa Rica includes a trek into the rainforest to live with locals, sleep in a cave behind twin 26m waterfalls, make your own sugarcane candy, experience a traditional sauna, rappel down hidden waterfalls and white-water raft on the Savegre River.

As holidays go, that's about as far as it gets from all-inclusive, gated-resort-style packages in the area. The price includes several breakfasts, lunches and dinners (the advice is to allow US\$270-370 for meals not included), accommodation (including a sleeping bag for the cave), transfers and guides throughout.

Details: sunway.ie; 12 days from €2,158pp.

#### **8. Turkey: Bro-mance in Bodrum...**

A boy break in Bodrum mightn't sound like the most thrilling of adventures, but throw several diving lessons into the mix, and it's a whole other story.

The crystal turquoise waters surrounding Turkey's Bodrum Peninsula are ideal for scuba diving — whether you and your buddies are experienced divers or absolute beginners who want to give it a try, or learn to dive with qualified instructors.

Prices with Wings Abroad start from €50 for divers (transfer, equipment, lunch and insurance) and €25 for non-divers (transfer and lunch included), and you can also book flights and accommodation from €389pp with the company.

Details: [wingsabroad.ie](http://wingsabroad.ie).

### 9. Monaco & Mondello: In the Driving Seat...

Wanna hear those F1 engines roar?

Since 1929, the Monaco Grand Prix has been one of the most prestigious (and let's face it, one of the sexiest) motor races in the world.

You can jet right into the action courtesy of Thomas Cook Sport, which has three-night packages from €1,208pp, including B&B at the Novotel in Nice and return flights from London. Flights depart London on Friday, May 23.

Meanwhile, if you want to get some hands-on F1 action without shelling out over a grand, there are several options closer to home in Mondello.

Mondello Park's Motor Racing Experience (€199pp) kicks off with a classroom briefing and a training run in a saloon, before letting you behind the wheel of Formula Sheane single-seater for 10 laps with your ass inches from the asphalt.

I've been around Mondello in a 1.6l Mazda 3, and that nearly made me hurl, so I can only imagine the sensation of driving an F1-style motor. If you want to make a night of it, Mondello can organise group packages with nearby hotels.

Details: [thomascooksport.com](http://thomascooksport.com); [mondellopark.ie](http://mondellopark.ie).

### 10. Nepal: Everest Base Camp

At 8,848m Everest is the world's tallest mountain and - if UK operator Exodus is to be believed - a trek to its base camp is "the ultimate man-cation".

Who are we to argue? The trek follows in the footsteps of the great mountaineers, passing through sherpa country and small Nepalese villages, following the Dudh Kosi before the hard work begins with the ascent to Namche Bazaar.

There's time allowed for acclimatisation en route, but give your fitness a reality check before signing up here. The goal is Everest Base Camp on the Khumbu Glacier, together with the opportunity to climb Kala Pattar (5,545m) for a breathtaking view of the highest mountain on Earth. The 17-day trip departs throughout 2014, with prices including flights from the UK, accommodation and most meals.

Details: [exodus.co.uk](http://exodus.co.uk); from €2,140pp.

### 11. Spain: Conquer the Camino (100km of it, anyway)...

Spain's Camino de Santiago de Compostela



has always been about bonding. Bonding with yourself, bonding with your blisters, bonding with your fellow walkers and, in theory at least, bonding with the good Lord Himself.

Caminoways.com has lots of different walking holiday options, but the most popular is the last 100km of the Original Way which was the early route joining the cities of Oviedo and Santiago, although walkers on this short stretch kick-off in Lugo before combining with the more social French Way for the final haul from Melide to Santiago.

Accommodation is in hotels and country cottages along the way, and the trail is self-guided, with maps and directions provided.

Details: [caminoways.com](http://caminoways.com), from €645pp (flights extra).

### 12. Ireland: Beat about the Bush...

Fancy a walk on the wild side? Ray Mears and Bear Grylls have given a huge boost to bushcraft adventures all over the globe, but you don't have to limit your wilderness therapy to hours gazing wistfully at the TV screen.

In Ireland, bushcraft activities are available at the Kippure Estate in Co. Wicklow with Bushcraft Ireland in Co. Louth and with the Living Wilderness Bushcraft School in Co. Meath, among others. Survival skills packages include hands-on work with fire-lighting, navigation techniques, shelter-building, making traps, foraging for food and tracking wild animals like fox and deer.

Best of all is the chance to sleep under the stars, where you can unleash your inner Grizzly Adams in a setting you and your buddies will never forget. A bushcraft survival weekend at Kippure Estate costs from €199pp.

Details: [adventurewicklow.com](http://adventurewicklow.com); [bushcraftireland.com](http://bushcraftireland.com); [bushcraft.ie](http://bushcraft.ie).

### 13. Tanzania: Safari & Spice Island...

Everybody should go on safari at least once in their lives - if only to experience what it feels like to come face to face with a lion, leopard or elephant several hundred miles from the nearest phone signal or internet connection.

GoHop.ie has what it reckons is the perfect mates' itinerary: a 10-night safari and beach package, including a stay in Dar es Salaam, a guided camping safari in Selous National Park, and some quality R'n'R on the beach in Zanzibar.

The Selous is one of Africa's wildest conservation areas, and activities there will include guided game viewing by boat, 4x4 and on foot.

Details: [gohop.ie](http://gohop.ie); from €2,490pp.

### 14. Canada/US: Rocky Mountains Motorcycle Tour

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Here's a chance to ease into Easy Rider mode: a once-in-a-lifetime journey from the emerald waters of Seattle through the Cascade Mountains and Canadian Rockies to bask in the natural beauty of Lake Louise and Banff, Alberta.

From Canada, the 15-night motorcycle tour crosses back into the US through the razor sharp peaks of Glacier National Park and the gnarly grandeur of Yellowstone National Park and her most cherished treasure, Old Faithful.

The itinerary, which includes flights, B&B, fuel, a custom riding jacket and late-model bike rental, culminates with a ride through Rocky Mountain National Park, before ending in the mile high city of Denver, Colorado.

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Details: [celtichorizontours.com](http://celtichorizontours.com); from €4,889pp

#### **15. Portugal: Surfing Ericeira...**

When it comes to buddy-time, nothing beats surfing your brains out. So why not book a couple of days off to do just that... on Portugal's Atlantic coast?

Surfholidays.com is an Irish company packaging accommodation and surf lessons in Europe, and it has several eye-catching offerings in Ericeira. Friends can fly into Lisbon with Ryanair or Aer Lingus, take a night or two in the city - maybe checking out a Benfica game, or hitting the Bairro Alto - before tackling the waves.

The company recommends the Chill In Surf House for digs, so you can stay on the beach, surf to your heart's content, and party into the wee hours after. One week's accommodation, with seven lessons and equipment, starts from €340pp.

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Details: [surfholidays.com](http://surfholidays.com) (flights extra).

*NB: All offers subject to availability.*









