

THE TIMES

Learning holidays

Start the new year with a challenge

Want to make a different resolution tonight? Take a trip and learn to write, speak Swedish, eat well or be daring



Learn how to eat better

A warning — don't tell a chef with two Michelin stars that you've been doing the Dukan, the famous no-carbohydrate diet, and expect to escape a telling-off. "You can't cut out a whole food group without repercussions," Raymond Blanc told me. He was right: the mother of all colds followed. Through the sniffing and sneezing, I realised it was more than the Dukan; I'd got into a cycle of eating late, gulping down unhealthy snacks to satisfy my hunger. It was time to eat properly, which meant learning to cook healthy food.

Cue a nutrition and cookery course at Le Manoir aux Quat Saisons, Raymond's hotel and restaurant in Oxfordshire, where he has long studied the chemistry of food and its effect on the body, helped by his nutritionist fiancée, Natalia Traxel.

"We are made to feel so guilty by all this information about vitamins and minerals," Raymond tells our small class. "But nutrition should be a by-product of good food." And so we cook. We use chicory, an

excellent source of vitamin A and carotene, to compile a simple but delicious winter roquefort salad. Then it's mackerel (to increase our quota of oily fish) on a bed of fennel. The chilli in the aromatic vegetable curry that follows will apparently increase your metabolic rate by 15 per cent. Nothing we make on the day-long course involves expensive ingredients or long preparation; it's all about simplicity. That means that it's probably not suited to those who can cook up a culinary storm, but is great for those who, like me, lack kitchen confidence. You pick up a host of easy but impressive recipes as well as some valuable tips, including how to make perfect poached eggs and omelettes.

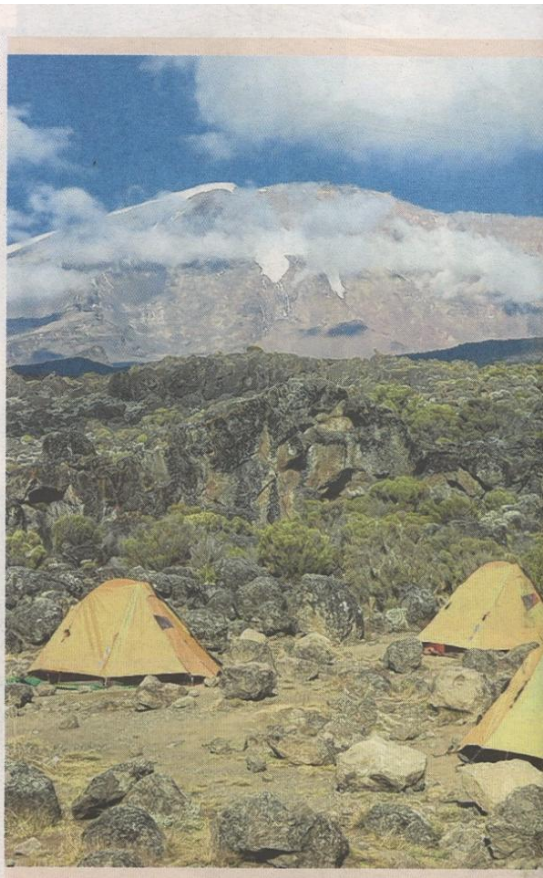
As we cook we taste — oh, how we taste — stopping to appreciate our creations for lunch. There's plenty of information to digest, too: Natalia peppers Raymond's demonstrations with hard facts. And so we learn that a single brazil nut is sufficient for our daily selenium, which helps our immune system; that five portions of

cruciferous green vegetables a week will cut the chance of us contracting many cancers; and that we should never eat fruit after a meal, as it is digested much more quickly than protein.

By the end of the day, we've taken so much on board, both in the brain and the belly, that it's a relief to be able to pack away the chocolate mousse we have whisked up. Chocolate mousse, healthy? Well, at least it's made without cream and with plenty of dark chocolate, which everyone knows is full of antioxidants. As I lick the spoon, I vow that 2012 will be packed with good, healthy food — and plenty of chocolate.

Jane Knight

La Cuisine Moderne et La Nutrition cookery course at Le Manoir aux Quat Saisons (01844 278881, manoir.com) costs from £400pp; when Raymond Blanc teaches, the course is £535pp. This includes tuition, morning and afternoon tea and an informal lunch in the cookery school. The one-day courses start at 9am and finish at 4.30pm



Finally write that novel

It's the 1990s. I'm setting off on a two-week writing course in a venue that's been calling me for years, ever since I first saw those glistening seas and clear skies on the cover of the Skyros brochure. I'm deeply anxious. I want to develop my writing skills and have turned down a place on a creative writing MA to invest in this writing holiday abroad instead. This could be the worst mistake of my life.

Looking back now, there's one photo that sums it all up. I'm on the little patio behind the Skyros Centre, the white-washed houses of the town on the hillside sloping down to the sea behind me, smiling blissfully as though I've discovered a treasure-chest of exciting possibilities.

And I had. Not just from the practical guidance of the course — which, despite being delivered under a canopy of figleaves on a sunny balcony, matched the standard of any college course I've known — but from something more subtle, profound, and long-lasting.

From the moment the ferry pulled into Skyros island, I knew that I'd arrived somewhere special. By the time we were walking up the cobbled streets of the town — too narrow for cars but wide enough for Greek elders to sit watching the children play — I realised that I'd stepped into a place where history and mythology fused, and that the island would work its magic on me.

Skyros Centre in those days had fewer comforts and amenities than now, though the location was captivating and the food



GETTY IMAGES

Climb Kilimanjaro

Many people who attempt to climb Mount Kilimanjaro do not reach the summit. I was determined to be one of those who did. I was doing it to raise money for a charity very close to my heart, to see another part of the world and to push my boundaries.

My training consisted of climbing seven flights of stairs to my office every day for two months, a weekend trip to Wales to climb the little hill they call Mount Snowdon (a mere 1,085m) and spending an absurd amount of money at the outdoor clothing store.

If you're not an experienced climber, nothing prepares you for Kilimanjaro, which — at 5,895m above sea level — is well into severe-altitude-sickness territory. Still, the first few days were fairly easy going: five or six hours' walking each day, stopping for meals prepared by our cook. Accommodation was a two-man tent with a heavy-duty sleeping bag. Toilets were a hole in the ground. If you were lucky, you got to wash with a bowl of hot water and a bar of soap.

The tough part came on the final ascent. After snatching four hours' sleep, we had to get up at 11pm, pull on our layers, have a quick meal, grab our torches and day packs and begin the treacherous hike towards the summit in darkness. The terrain was a combination of scree, which left us feeling like we were progressing one step forward and two steps back, and large rocks over which we had to scramble. The lack of oxygen in the air left me breathless. But I got off lightly compared to many of my companions, who suffered headaches, nausea and dizziness. Two

out of our group of 15 failed to make it to the summit.

The sense of achievement that I felt on reaching the top, at about 8am, combined with the physical exhaustion from the climb and the emotional reason for doing it, was overwhelming. It was the hardest, most marvellous thing I have ever done.

I learnt a lot from it, too. One was the importance of team work. Everyone brought something with them, whether it was knowledge, strength, humour, motivation — or headache tablets. It pushed me completely out of my comfort zone and showed me what you can achieve through determination and self-belief.

It also brought home to me how lucky I am to have a roof over my head and everyday luxuries that I take for granted, such as running hot water and a comfortable bed. Going back to basics in a hostile environment makes you appreciate what a privileged life you have back home.

Would I do it again? Absolutely not. Am I glad I did it? Without any doubt, and I would encourage everyone to try something challenging the next time that they go away. You'll be surprised what you learn about yourself.

Cheryl Dickenson

Cheryl Dickenson and her team raised £27,000 for the Samantha Dickson Brain Tumour Trust (braintumourtrust.co.uk). The Adventure Company (0845 2871198, adventurecompany.co.uk) has a ten-day trek up Kilimanjaro, following the Rongai Route, from £1,999pp, including flights, a guide, accommodation (two nights' lodge and five nights' camping) and most meals

Learn a new language

It's going to be a big new year. Notable changes are afoot. My girlfriend and I are moving to Sweden. But we want to be prepared. We don't want to start our new lives in a new country having to rely on the Swedes' preposterously firm grasp of the English language. That would be discourteous. Although the Swedish government offers free language courses for all immigrants, we want to have at least the briefest of exchanges in the local lingo when we get there. So we threw ourselves into a Rosetta Stone home language course which gave us the basics. "The shopping is in the car." And: "The horse swims." Or was it the other way around?

But I was impatient, so I resolved to learn more quickly. After a little investigation I found Swedish Learning and Living, a company offering an immersive language learning experience on location in Sweden.

They offer a course, "Language and Culture", that involves living in the home of your tutor and a programme that mixes classroom time with "learning by doing". In my case this meant setting off with my tutor and host, Anette, on a tour of Stockholm, visiting the Moderna Museet (the Museum of Modern Art) and chatting in cafés. This approach means that teacher and student can speak Swedish in a more natural environment than a classroom, enabling students to speak with more people (waiters, friends of the family, people on the train and, in my case, a very persistent purveyor of heather who took full advantage of Anette's reluctance to teach me any earthy

language). It's an approach that seems daunting at first but it does work.

At breakfast on my first day I was all at sea as Anette chatted amiably about the weather in Swedish: to be honest, she might have been suggesting that I could lose a few kilos around my midriff and to lay off the cheese at the breakfast buffet, but I have to believe her account of events. But by day three I was able to chat haltingly about my love of the TV series, *The Killing* (totally forgetting it was set in Denmark, not Sweden, but Anette didn't scowl too much), and Abba.

Your days are carefully structured. Breakfast is followed by one-on-one instruction in a quiet part of the house and is customised according to your needs (business Swedish, speaking over writing, survival Swedish, etc). Thereafter, you help prepare lunch, are set a couple of hours' homework and then head off into town with your tutor for a spot of culture. The evenings are your own to explore, spend with the family or just veg out in your room (most tutors' houses offer free wi-fi).

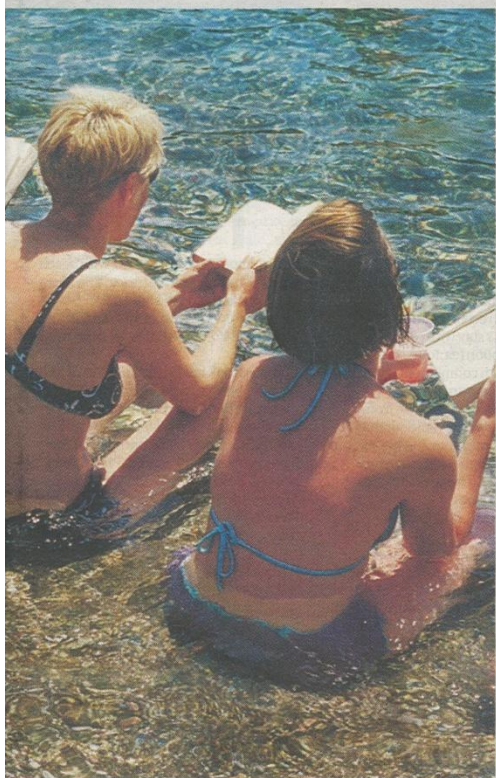
Does it work? *Ja, det gör det verkligen. Absolut. Is it fun? Den bästa tiden jag någonsin haft lärande.*

For you non-Swedish speakers out there, the answer to both questions is in the absolute affirmative. Thoroughly recommended.

Paul Connolly

Swedish Learning and Living (00-463 3785003, swedishlearningandliving.com) costs from about £1,300 for 15 hours of classes per week, including half-board accommodation

JEAN-PIERRE LESCOURET / CORBIS



marvellous. But it was the ethos of valuing both community and individuality that most impressed me. We were shown a way of being together that was inclusive, supportive and creative — not only for two weeks, but forever. I realised that I hadn't come just for a holiday, I'd come to discover that my life was still wide open, crammed with as many opportunities as I wanted to envisage. If I could move out of the confines of my existing self-perceptions in my normal life, I could take this learning home.

Which is why, when I had the choice of relocation or redundancy, I embraced the latter option and announced — with appropriate trepidation — I was now a full-time freelance writer. That year I wrote my first novel, *Frozen Summer*, which was published by Hodder & Stoughton in a two-book contract.

Since then I've broadcast stories on Radio 4, performed my poetry, become Spoken Word Coordinator for my local theatre, written scripts for professional stage productions and led writing groups all over the world from Chile to Thailand. My aim, always, is to show participants what I learnt on Skyros all those years ago: that skills come with practice, but the vital element is personal commitment.

That's why I say, without a trace of irony and with huge gratitude, that my holiday on Skyros changed my life.

Cryse Morrison

Skyros Holidays (01983 865566, skyros.com) has a Your Writer's Voice writing holiday, the course Cryse Morrison took, on September 11-21 from £845pp (half board); several other writing courses will be held before then. Further information at crysemorrison.co.uk

