

5 of the best LIFE-CHANGING HOLIDAYS

You expect stunning views, rest and relaxation from a break, but why not enjoy all this and more? From saving wildlife to changing careers, let these holidays inspire you

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help save the environment

WHERE? ROBBER ISLAND, SOUTH AFRICA Become part of the Earthwatch Institute's programme to help the endangered African penguin at its breeding ground of Robben Island, just 11km from Cape Town. The worldwide population of the species has fallen by 90% in the last 100 years, and the Robben Island colony was further threatened by a disastrous oil spill in 2000.

WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL? If you've ever harboured a desire to give it all up and do something more worthy, this is a great way to check out the reality. Robben Island is one of the last breeding grounds of the African penguin and this holiday offers you a unique chance to work with renowned biologists and researchers to help ensure its future. You will spend up to six hours a day among these magnificent birds, monitoring nests and observing behaviour.

WHAT ELSE IS THERE TO DO? Although participants are expected to put in some serious graft, you will also have a little time to explore the area. There's plenty of marine life to spot, including whales, dolphins and Cape fur seals, which play in the cold (and shark infested) Atlantic waters. Don't leave the island without paying a visit to the jail where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 18 years – it has now been turned into a museum where former inmates lead tours around their old cells. Once the hard work is over, you could spend a few days relaxing on the beach at Cape Town before flying home.

Robben Island:
paradise for penguins
– and maybe for you, too

shed those extra pounds

WHERE? TRING, HERTS
In 1925, Champneys at Tring became the UK's first health spa. Today, the resort's holistic approach and reputation has attracted celebrities from David Beckham to Naomi Campbell, who indulge in activities to treat the body, mind and soul. These include stone therapy, water shiatsu and light colour therapy.

WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL? Champneys offers a five-day relaxing weight management

chance for long, contemplative walks, playing other guests at croquet or simply enjoying the outdoor heated whirlpool. Take advantage of the tennis courts, indoor pool and spinning studio, then relax in the games room or the classical-music room before enjoying another Champneys' highlight: freshly prepared gourmet food that's low in calories but high on taste.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

The weight management programme costs from £399.95, including five nights' accommodation, use of spa

sort out your career

WHERE? PICOS DE EUROPA, SPAIN The Big Stretch combines an active holiday with business advice and life coaching in the wild, mountainous Picos region of northern Spain. Guests spend six nights in a farmhouse hotel with dramatic mountain and coastal views, and the last night in a converted 17th-century palace close to Bilbao.

WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL? If you're thinking of starting your own business or becoming self-employed, The Big Stretch could be the way forward. Expert coaches (including course originator Rosie Walford, a creative consultant whose clients include The Body Shop and the BBC) lead group brainstorming sessions in the morning before mountain guides take you for an afternoon of outdoor activities: kayaking in crystal-clear rivers, walking in the mountains and swimming from deserted beaches. Physical activity can trigger ideas and solutions, so after you've had your light-bulb moment, you'll be set to work forming concrete plans for your future.

WHAT ELSE IS THERE TO DO? Days are chock-full with inspirational coaching and physical activities, but evenings are spent relaxing in charming tapas bars and restaurants in nearby fishing ports. It's also worth tagging a couple of nights in Bilbao onto your trip, if only to visit the fantastic Guggenheim museum.

MAKING IT HAPPEN A week's break costs approximately £1,580, including hotels, all meals, coaching, mountain guides and internal transport. For more information, visit www.thebigstretch.com or call Pura Aventura on 01273 676712. Easyjet (0870-600 0000; www.easyjet.com) flies to Bilbao from £24 return.



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