

Test the water

If your idea of a capsule holiday wardrobe is a wetsuit, then you're sure to love these water-based adventures to suit every budget



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DIVE IN MAURITIUS

Christine Hall takes the plunge

A few minutes into my first scuba dive at sea, I'm already wide-eyed as a shoal of electric-blue and yellow fish swim past. Then a *Finding Nemo* clownfish peeps out from among the vivid coral. As I try to get my diving buddy's attention, a giant clam snaps shut by my flipper. It's amazing – or would be if I weren't quite so nervous. As mesmerising as this topsy-turvy underwater world is, I still have one eye on our boat.

A 'learn to scuba dive' holiday sounded like a great antidote to sun-lounger fatigue. Where better to try it out than in the warm – and relatively still – Indian Ocean? Staying in Mauritius, at the four-star Les Pavillons Hotel, makes it even more idyllic. The hotel has luxury in spades, plus its own diving centre, complete with a lagoon and several diving sites suitable for both beginners looking to complete a PADI course, to more advanced divers. It feels a bit odd to be in full, sea-going regalia in this heat but, nonetheless, I waddle past the sun-loungers to the infinity pool for my introduction.

Half an hour later, teeth clamped on the respirator, I suck in oxygen, knowing my life depends on it, and manage to cross a length. But my brain is still in fight or flight mode. I'm suppressing my rising panic by repeating the instructions: breathe through your mouth, not your nose! Don't guzzle all your oxygen!

After the morning's training, I'm ready to head out to sea. We go out by speedboat, around the palm-fringed peninsula and past the dramatic Le Morne mountain. I chat



The calm waters of Mauritius



Christine prepares to meet the clownfish (right)



happily to Emanuele, my instructor, on the way, but my stomach lurches when we stop. Do I really have to fall backwards into the water? Emanuele gives me confidence, however, and I sit on the side and give in to gravity – it feels a real achievement. We find the line attached to the anchor, and descend. You can't 'swim' with a tank on your back, but instead you use your flippers to move forward. Compared with the exotic fish slowly gliding through the water, I feel horribly clumsy. But their serenity is infectious and I soon calm down, using my flippers more efficiently and even daring to briefly let go of Emanuele's hand. I use the hand signals we practised as he points out trumpet fish, Moorish idols, box fish and a rare baby emperor angel fish.

The aquatic landscape is thrilling, with anemones and starfish dotted around the coral and multicoloured fish darting out from ravines and crevices at every turn. What frightened me earlier in the day now gives me a sense of freedom. Back on the boat, Emanuele says wistfully that he's jealous of first-timers like me – you can only experience the awe of your first dive once.



Les Pavillons' lagoon

Travel facts

Seven nights in a superior room at Les Pavillons, Mauritius, starts at £1,675 per person, half-board, flights included. Book with If Only (www.ifonly.net, 0141 9554040). For more information on Naiade Resorts, visit www.naiaderesorts.com or call 020 7348 4880. The Discover Diving Day Course, plus dive, is run by Easydive and costs from £80, www.easydivemauritius.com



Fishermen at Taghazout

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BODYBOARD IN MOROCCO



Jane Labous gets barrelled in the surf

'Stacked like corduroy,' sighs Aiden, one of our tutors, gazing at the sea. He's talking about the waves, of course. Here on Morocco's Atlantic coast they're perfect for bodyboarding – big rolls of water curling towards the shore in straight lines, just like corduroy. To be part of the bodyboarding gang, it seems you need these quiet moments contemplating the ocean, murmuring things like 'sick', 'reef break' and 'closing out' to no one in particular.

It doesn't take me long to learn the lingo; if I get a good wave, I'm 'shredding' or 'ripping', and the very best thing that can happen is to

get 'barrelled', when you surf into the tube of the wave. Watching one of our instructors, Rob, a British champion, perform jumps, spins and blasting aerials, I realise it's going to be a challenging holiday. There are 16 of us on this trip and we're all different standards, ranging from amazing girl riders and a teenage boarding nut and his dad, to rookies like me. We surf all day, every day, and if we're not in the water, we're cruising the coast looking for breaks, with the odd evening yoga session thrown in to make sure we're completely worn out by sundown.

Our surf lodge is in Taghazout, a sweet, chilled-out surf town about 30 minutes down the coast from Agadir. With its simply furnished bedrooms, cushioned lounge areas and loads of healthy food, it's an ideal base.

On the first afternoon, Aiden shows the beginners how to catch a wave: arch your →



Jane (right and above left) rides the wave



back, keep your head up, look where you want to go. Before long I'm completely comfortable in my fins. They're not very cool, but they're an awesome piece of kit. Kicking with them propels the board through the surf to power onto waves, and in no time I'm proudly striding about in them.

When Rob describes an oncoming set of waves as 'the best I've ever seen in Morocco', I'm pretty scared. They're certainly some of the biggest I've encountered. But he persuades me that, although staying in the impact zone – where the waves break – may mean I'm closer to the shore, it also means I have a harder time. He coaxes me 'outback' – the area behind the breaking waves where it's calm – and a set rolls towards us.

'Paddle!' he shouts. Suddenly I'm dropping off the edge of an enormous wave. It's steep and scary but breathtaking. I'm shredding! As the week goes on I become braver and paddle out onto reefs and point breaks – where the waves break off a coastal headland.

At the end of the day, my legs and shoulders ache, I have 'fin rub' and a variety of reef cuts. All in all, the signs of a proper surfer.

That night, we chill out at the lodge. Reclining on Moroccan cushions, listening to crashing waves and drinking cold beer, we watch videos of the day's surfing. Cries like 'Lloyd got barrelled!', 'Epic!' and, in my case, 'Ah, wipe out!', ring out until bedtime.

After six days of surfing, beachside yoga and a whole lot of fun, I'm feeling fit and invigorated. I've come a long way. I'm braver, I can catch a wave and I've made at least one lifelong surf-buddy.

Bodyboarding? I'd say it's 'totally sick'...



The relaxation terrace

Travel facts

Rob Barber's Bodyboarding School in Morocco, 7 to 14 November 2010 (www.robbarber.com or call 01637 879571), costs £499 and includes beach-front villa accommodation, all meals, transport to the surf and daily coaching sessions. Flights additional. Ryanair and Easyjet fly from London to Agadir from £70.



Beachhuts on Mudeford Spit



Ruth masters the sail

LEARN TO WINDSURF IN DORSET



Ruth Chandler catches the breeze

With one foot parallel to the mast and the other at 90 degrees to the back of the board, I clasp the boom with my right arm. Result – I've mastered the sailing position and it's barely midday! I come back down to earth, though, as my instructor, Andy, asks me to step off the simulator. Well, at least I had a sea view. Dorset's Mudeford Bay stretches into the distance, teasing me to test the water for real.

I'm learning to windsurf over a couple of days down on the south coast. Courses run through the Royal Yachting Association are taught all over the UK, but I've picked this part of the country for its sheer coastal charm and, OK then, for the boutique hotel in nearby Christchurch that promises a night of luxury after all that activity.

Being a trifle uncoordinated at the best of times, just the prospect of correctly arranging

limbs, not looking at my feet, balancing on the water and detecting wind direction leaves me with brain ache. If all that isn't enough, Andy adds, 'Oh – and you've got to look cool, too.' Yeah, right.

Yet once I know how all the rigging works, I'm raring to see it in action. The weather's being kind – the 3 to 4 knot wind is perfect for learning. As well as trying to stay upright,

“I'M COASTING ALONG NICELY UNTIL I CAN'T RESIST LOOKING DOWN. HEY PRESTO, I CAREER HEADFIRST INTO THE WATER”

I'm learning how to tack – sailing against the wind – and the all-important practice of changing direction, so I don't accidentally drift out to sea. I gingerly shuffle my feet and reorganise my arms and legs, dancing around the mast and, despite a few dodgy moments when the board rocks from side to side, I amaze myself by staying afloat during this 180-degree turn.

Admittedly, I'm more break-dancer than ballerina, but I've stayed high and dry for what feels like a good 15 minutes now. 'Dude, you're doing great,' shouts Andy as he flies past in the rescue boat on a mission to help another, less stable member of our group.

Coasting along quite nicely, I'm thoroughly enjoying myself. That is, until I can't resist looking down at the water – breaking Andy's first commandment – and hey presto: less of a tumble and more like a crash. I career headfirst into the bitterly cold water. Hugging my board for dear life, I comfort myself with thoughts of the evening ahead: a long soak in the lovely big tub and the mud therapy in the luxurious spa, not to mention dinner...

The next morning feels like starting all over again. How can I have forgotten everything already? I manage to hoist myself back onto the board and listen intently to Andy's reminders about which foot and which hand go where. Within minutes I'm off and breezing out into the bay once again. But soon I realise that yesterday's successes were beginner's luck rather than skill, as I find myself in the water more often than on the board.

However, I finish the lesson with a flourish, (the 5 to 6 knot wind might have helped, too) and fly back into the bay. I muster the strength to peel off my wetsuit, change and drive back to the hotel for a restorative G&T. A little later, I'm consuming all the seafood the Dorset coast can muster in the hotel's Tides Restaurant.

As I bite into one more prawn, I decide that I'll definitely be back – this windsurfing taster has left me hungry for more. And just plain hungry, too. All this sea air sure does give a girl a healthy appetite.

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KAYAK IN SCOTLAND



Kate Langrish takes to loch life

I'm pretty sure the seal is smirking at me. As I splash around in my bright orange kayak, getting caught up with my own paddle, he regards my clumsy attempts with a quizzical expression. And now another head pops up out of the water to watch. The irony is that I've ventured into a kayak for the first time because it's one of the best ways to see the wildlife inhabiting this beautiful part of northwest Scotland. But it seems the wildlife is viewing me as the entertainment!

Luckily, with the help of The Torridon's activity instructor, Chris, I'm soon making smoother strokes (albeit far slower than Chris and my husband). And the effort is worth it. As we make our way around the coast, we spot cormorants and shelducks, and even, the rarest of treats, two sea otters. Somehow, on the water, they're not scared of you – maybe they can see from my cumbersome technique that I'm not much of a threat.

Kayaking can be an adrenaline-fuelled sport, but this sort of tour, where you work your way around a loch, is perfect for beginners. You don't need to be super-fit, and it's very relaxing. As you glide silently across the water, mountains towering above you, life couldn't be more zen. Back on dry

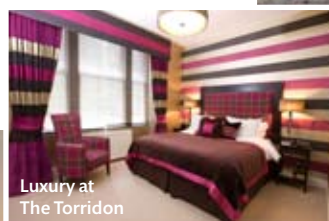
land, Chris loads the kayaks onto his Land Rover and drives us back to The Torridon hotel, where a wonderful meal of local seafood is served up. We take our coffee to the bar and gaze out of the huge windows as the sun sets over the loch. It's flat calm, and maybe my eyes are playing tricks, but I'm sure I see a little head pop up again. ☑

Travel facts

A double room at The Torridon, Annat, By Achnasheen, Wester Ross (www.thetorridon.com, 01445 791242) costs from £205 per night B&B. Kayaking tour for two costs £70 for a half day, £120 for a full day. **ZEST READER OFFER** Get a free half-day activity for two if you book two nights or more (on bookings made before the end of October 2010).



Kate, snug in her kayak



Luxury at The Torridon



The hotel is a former shooting lodge



Travel facts

Windsurfing lessons cost from £17.50 per hour with Andy Murray of Solent-based Ocean Sports (www.oceansportstuition.co.uk). To find accredited lessons near you, visit www.rya.org.uk. A double room at Captains Club Hotel, Wick Ferry, Wick Lane, Christchurch, Dorset (www.thecaptainsclub.net, 01202 475111) costs from £229 per night on a B&B basis.