

Take a break from relaxation

There's only so much lounging around you can do on holiday. **Jake Russell** picks out the best activity breaks for the year ahead – for all energy levels

SEVILLE AND THE SIERRAS BY HORSE

The heart of Andalusia can't be reached by road. It lies somewhere in the mountains, along the ancient tracks and bridle paths that hire cars never reach. You'll need a horse for the search: a sure-footed Andalusian with sit-back-and-doze autopilot and, at the flick of a heel, hair-raising sport settings. Nick and Hermione Tudor have a stableful at Finca el Moro, and if you're reasonably competent in the saddle, you can join them for a six-night exploration of the Sierra de Aracena, picnicking in the forests and staying in tiny hamlets. The trip ends with two nights at the couple's pied-à-terre in Seville. Prices start at €1,856pp, full-board (00 34 627 479738, fincaelmoro.com). Flights are extra; head to Seville with BA, easyJet or Ryanair.

EUROPE'S BEST NEW GOLF COURSE

After leading Europe to victory against America at Gleneagles, the Ryder Cup captain Paul McGinley arrived in Portugal to open the estuary-side North Course at Quinta do Lago. Completed in just 10 months, it was voted Europe's best at the World Golf Awards last November. Find out if you agree with a stay at the Hotel Quinta do Lago, where top-end service is complemented by superb views of the nearby beach and the surrounding Ria Formosa nature reserve. Five-night packages start at €1,244, B&B, including three rounds of golf (00 351 289 350350, hotelquintadolago.com). Fly to Faro, 20 minutes' drive away, with easyJet.

CAMINO PORTUGUES

The Camino Frances, which starts in St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, in the

Pyrenees, is by far the most trodden route to Santiago de Compostela. Aficionados – and those looking for a quieter, more contemplative pilgrimage – prefer the Camino Portugues, which follows the wild Atlantic coast for 383 miles north from Lisbon. The entire route takes at least 28 days; better to focus on

the spectacular final section, running 68 miles from Tui, on the Spanish side of the River Minho. As befits a pilgrimage, you'll stay in simple, family-run guesthouses and hotels. A seven-day itinerary starts at €631pp, half-board, including luggage transfers (00 44 20 3468 1516, caminoways.com). Flights are extra; Santiago is served by Vueling, Ryanair and easyJet.

RAFTING THE NOGUERA

Explore's eight-day Pyrenean activity holiday sells out every summer – mainly because of what happens on day two. You wake up in Sort, an outdoorsy town bisected by the lively Noguera Pallaresa, a meltwater-fed tributary of the Segre. The 10-mile middle section of the river comprises Class III and IV rapids, including one named La Lavadora – the washing machine. No further questions. Surviving the river doesn't mean taking the rest of the week off: there's canyoning, kayaking, mountain-biking and abseiling. Kids aged 11 and up will have a blast; adults will struggle to keep up. Prices start at €1,756pp, including flights and some activities (00 44 1252 883605, explore.co.uk).

SURFING IN PORTUGAL

Apart from sharks, rip currents and coral, the last thing you need when learning

to surf is a beach full of guffawing muppets treating your efforts like a clown show. Instead, you want gentle, consistent waves breaking over sand and the complete attention

of a patient, professional instructor on an empty beach within walking distance of your accommodation. Helios Beach Houses, just behind Foz do Lizandro beach, in Ericeira, ticks all the boxes, offering two simple bungalows and a cottage, all self-catering, and a gorgeous rooftop loafing area. The owner, Clara, can arrange horses, bikes and lifts into town. A week in July starts at €527pp,

with five days of surf instruction and equipment hire, but not flights (00 44 20 8144 9950, surfholidays.com). Fly to Lisbon with Ryanair.

CYCLING THE COSTA VERDE

There is a risk that when you first set eyes on the Costa Verde – the magnificent stretch of rolling green hills, empty beaches and deep-blue seas on Spain's northern seaboard – you will never want to holiday anywhere else again. Yes, it rains a bit, but that's what scares the tourists away. It's driest from June to August – the ideal time to try a new nine-night self-guided cycling trip that starts in the foothills of the Picos de Europa and winds westwards through fishing ports, hill villages and valleys to the fabulous resort of Gijón. Prices start at €1,542, B&B, including flights, bike hire and luggage transfers (00 44 845 322 4672, headwater.com).

PARAGLIDING IN ALGODONALES



At the northern end of the Sierra de Grazalema, in Andalusia, lies one of the best spots in Europe to learn to paraglide. You can launch in almost any direction, and consistent conditions allow novices to achieve in a single week what it could take months to learn in the UK. Fly

Spain is a British-run school offering intensive courses that allow you to attain the British Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association's Elementary Pilot qualification. Over five days, the instructors will turn you into a higher being capable of flying figures of

eight, solo, up to 400ft above the olive groves and almond orchards of Andalusia. Prices start at €1,064pp, including accommodation, tuition and transfers, but not flights (00 34 651 736718, flyspain.co.uk). Fly to Malaga with easyJet.

FLAMENCO SUMMER SCHOOL

Never get into a discussion with gypsies over the number of flamenco styles. Some say there are five. Others 17. Others insist that those 17 can be subdivided into 93. But if you're determined to learn the basics, definitely go to the experts. With more than 80 years' combined experience under greats such as Manolete and Ana Cali, the dance mistresses Cristina Serrano Paz, Ana Rojas and Chua Alba will put you through 10 hours of intensive tuition at the Centro Flamenco la Fuente school, in Capileira, a village outside Granada. If you're a beginner, that's enough time to nail the tricky *zapateado* foot-tapping technique; if you're more advanced, you'll learn the *alegría* and the *solea*. Prices start at €522pp, self-catering, including transfers, but not flights (00 34 658 307627, flamencolafuente.com). Fly to Granada with Ryanair.

MOUNTAIN-BIKING IN ANDALUSIA

New for 2015 is a greatest-hits package from the Geordie cycling specialist Saddle Skedaddle, which asked its guides to combine the most hair-raising Andalusian day rides

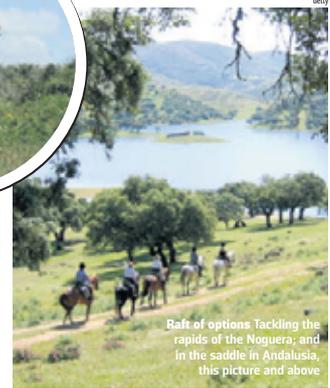
into a week-long adrenaline rush though the Sierra de Grazalema park and the Guadiaro Valley. The result is a single-track-dominated trip involving challenging descents and some nasty technical trails, with thigh-busting uphill sections, following mule tracks, mountain roads and the odd goat path. It's aimed at riders ranging from keen amateurs to heavily scarred experts: beginners need not apply. Prices start at €1,284pp, half-board, with bike hire from €186 (00 44 1912 651110, skedaddle.co.uk). Flights are extra; head to Malaga with easyJet.



Fan zone
Learn flamenco near Granada; below, hit the surf in Ericeira, Portugal



SPAIN & PORTUGAL SPECIAL



Raft of options Tackling the rapids of the Noguera; and in the saddle in Andalusia, this picture and above

