


# CLASS TRIPS

A newly acquired skill or talent is the perfect souvenir from one of these idyllic vacation spots.

BY SHELLEY SEALE



Frequent travelers sometimes feel as if they've visited every museum in Europe or seen every temple in Asia. As more people seek a deeper travel experience, learning vacations provide the ultimate souvenir: a new skill or passion to carry with you. Experiential travel is a way to truly discover a country's culture and enrich your life long after the trip is over. The possibilities are nearly endless and dependent upon your unique interests.



## Photography Forays and Surfing in Beautiful Costa Rica

Costa Rica has been an increasingly popular destination for American travelers and transplants for more than a decade. The peaceful nation's 34 parks and reserves make it a nature-lover's dream. The landscape from one side of the small country to the other is diverse, with volcanic mountain ranges, rainforests, fertile valleys dotted with coffee plantations and of course, the warm waters of both the Pacific and the Caribbean oceans.

The stunning tropical beauty, abundance of nature and friendly people present the perfect canvas for photography, a hobby enjoyed by most travelers that allows them to bring their experiences home.

The School of the World in Playa Jaco offers a digital photography classroom in the midst of paradise. The one- to four-week programs are designed to give students a working knowledge of the elements of photography including lighting, composition, apertures, shutter speeds and basic photo editing. Learning how to capture better shots is a major goal, and students are taken on excursions in search of great locations.



"The digital photography revolution has made it easier for people to experiment and learn how to improve their photography skills, without the cost or waiting time of film," says Brian Phelps, director of School of the World.

But the learning opportunities don't stop there. The school combines its photography courses with your choice of surfing, yoga or Spanish lessons. "Surfboards are more common than cell phones in this small town," says Phelps. "Due to the fact that the Playa Jaco area is well known to have great waves and warm water year-round, it is only natural that so many people come here to learn how to surf."

School of the World provided one of the first options available for studying Spanish near the beaches in Costa Rica. "The school's Spanish courses incorporate international Spanish teaching guidelines with Costa Rica's local variations of the language," Phelps explains. "Studying in a Spanish-speaking country allows students to immediately practice what they have learned with native, Spanish-speaking people."

Yoga is the newest program of the school, rounding out an innovative set of combined learning opportunities.

## Spanish Language Immersion in Mexico

It's often easy to study a new language, but difficult to actually speak it. The magic of acquiring language skills while in a foreign country lies in the complete immersion in an entire culture. The native speakers surrounding you provide not only constant opportunities for practice in real-life settings such as markets and shops, but also a much deeper insight into the history, government, arts, even pop culture and slang, of the host country.

On the Riviera Maya in Mexico, travelers can pamper themselves in the luxury of the award-winning beach resort of Maroma while learning Spanish. Students are provided a special "pulsera," or bracelet, which signals to resort staff that they wish to speak Spanish only, allowing the local language to come to life for them. Spanish-English dictionaries are provided in every room, and the Palapa Cultural Center stocks a wide selection of Spanish books, magazines and movies. After class, guests can reward themselves for their efforts in the Mayan healing spa, SCUBA diving or swimming with dolphins, or going on a nature walk with a marine biologist.

Less than two hours north of the Riviera Maya lies Veracruz, a port city offering the traditional life of old Mexico. The tourists are mostly Mexicans from around the country, and it's possible not to see another American during your stay. Here, The Language Immersion School prides itself on an accomplished track record of helping its students become conversational in days. The unique approach combines classroom learning with Out-And-About Labs to give hours of daily practice with locals.

"Think back for a moment about all the people you've known who studied Spanish in high school or college," says Eric Langner, co-owner of the school with his wife, Linda. "How many of them can actually speak the language? Traditional instruction is fine for learning grammar, structure and vocabulary, but it almost never succeeds at getting you talking."



## class trips

The Language Immersion School believes equally in its second goal of active participation in the local culture. Additional learning opportunities include cooking, ecotourism, folk dancing and guitar-making. “Good immersion schools take you to the markets and shops, the little restaurants and museums and parks,” adds Langner. “Good immersion has you visiting with the locals and joining them in the activities of daily life.”

## Set Sail on a Theme Cruise with Family or Friends

Why limit your experiential vacation to land? There are plenty of opportunities to combine learning with travel when you take to the water. Many cruise lines offer theme packages and instruction on a multitude of topics.

Crystal Cruises has developed an extensive program called the Creative Learning Institute. From keyboard lessons with a trained Yamaha instructor, golf lessons by a PGA pro, to wine-tasting instruction with the Society of Wine Educators, guests of specific sailings explore the world by sea while opening their minds onboard. Ballroom dancing, photography and tennis are some of the other workshops available on these cruises.

Silversea Cruises offers similar enrichment voyages such as a Wellness Program that integrates nutrition, exercise and spa therapies to create the opportunity for complete rejuvenation of mind, body and soul.

“At Silversea, we believe it’s important to make the journey as extraordinary as the destinations we visit,” says Gina M. Finocchiaro, media relations coordinator. “On every cruise we feature special guest lecturers who host engaging presentations on a broad range of topics.” These have included author Frank McCourt and astronaut Dr. Kathryn D. Sullivan, the first American woman to walk in space.

For learning cruises, you can also go small. American Safari Cruises offers one-of-a-kind yacht charters for 12 to 36 guests, providing a tremendous platform for learning experiences for both adults and children. The Kids in Nature program presents activities such as kayaking, mountain-biking, whale-watching and snorkeling. Children under 12 travel at a 25-percent discount and receive a backpack filled with mementos of their explorations.

Tim Jacox, vice president of sales and marketing for American Safari Cruises, says, “We get closer to the wildlife, scenery and people than any cruise vessel, which is both a product of the maneuverability of our yachts and the small number of guests. With exclusive visits to small, remote villages in all of our voyages, guests are immersed in the destination. Learning is offered directly through our expedition leaders/naturalists, or indirectly as we bring the yacht, kayaks and inflatable boats so close to everything that learning happens naturally.”

The intimacy of a barge cruise in France provides an ideal venue for hands-on culinary classes, such as those offered by Frontiers International, whose recommended fleet of vessels includes a barge featuring a demonstration kitchen that adjoins the dining room. Guests start the day with a morning shopping expedition to one of the local markets,

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*British Isles*  
11 days

SEPTEMBER 3  
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14 days

**Ballroom Dance**  
NOVEMBER 12  
*Lisbon to Miami*  
10 days

**Ancient Civilizations**  
OCTOBER 8  
*Athens to Venice*  
12 days

**Photography**  
JUNE 2  
*Lisbon to Venice*  
12 Days

NOVEMBER 1  
*Barcelona to Lisbon*  
11 days



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accompanying the chef to select ingredients for the evening meal. Once back onboard, the chef guides guests through the preparation of a regionally flavored feast.

Behind-the-scenes visits can also be arranged, providing a chance to learn about French cheeses at a fromagerie, or to watch a pastry chef whip up a delicacy at a patisserie.

“Another important facet of meal presentation,” explains Frontier’s Jill Jergel, “is matching the wine with each course, and wine-tasting while learning about the regions’ vintages is surely a highlight!” The suggested barge offers twin or double suites, and is available for a private charter for up to eight passengers.

## Culinary Adventures in Romantic Italy

What better place to learn new cooking skills than beautiful Tuscany? Amidst the rolling green hills and russet rooftops, Villa San Michele in Florence offers a range of cooking classes from internationally renowned chefs. Here visitors discover how to prepare the regional cuisine and enjoy wine tastings—while side trips to Chianti and the museums of Florence complement the experience.

The class themes and recipes themselves are varied, from traditional pasta and Tuscan specialties to cooking for one in their “Singles” course, and a compact class tailored for children ages 8 to 14. Small, restricted classes mean that each student has a hands-on experience alongside the chef; all classes are in English and suitable for every level of expertise.

Each course promises a unique gastronomic journey in the beautiful setting of Villa San Michele, a former monastery. This Orient-Express property is an “intimate and elegantly transformed Michelangelo-inspired 15th-century cloister, commanding glorious hilltop vistas of Florence and Arno Valley,” says Andrew Harper. The extensive Italian gardens are filled with lemon trees and roses, perfect for an evening stroll or enjoying a glass of wine after the day’s cooking.

Sharon O’Connor, creator of the “Italian Intermezzo” collection of recipes combined



with music, teaches a weeklong course at Villa San Michele devoted to the table, taste and beauty of Florence. O’Connor has built a career around her passions, collaborating with great chefs and musicians around the world to bring together food, art, music and travel.

“Each person has their own stovetop and all needed utensils,” says O’Connor. “We are served the dishes we make in class at fabulous lunches on the villa’s loggia overlooking Florence. Participants enjoy a Catherine de’ Medici Renaissance dinner on the last night, with costumed waiters and musicians performing gorgeous Renaissance music. Everyone feels like an aristocrat by the end of the evening!”

O’Connor, herself a cellist, performs baroque trios with two Florentine musicians during breaks in the cooking instruction. During the May 24-29, 2009 Italian Intermezzo, participants also will enjoy guided tours of art museums and an evening concert in Florence, rounding out the Italian cultural experience.\*

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*Hotels and Resorts, Florence:*

**Villa San Michelle**  
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