

Travel

Short cuts

Florence The Hotel Savoy is offering guests the chance to take sculpture classes in the former studio of famous Florentine sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini (1777-1850). A two-day course, including two nights' accommodation, costs from €1,298 per person; www.roccofortehotels.com

Quito A historic mansion that was once home to several Ecuadorian presidents will reopen next month as a luxurious boutique hotel. The 31-room Casa Gangotena mixes neo-classical and art nouveau styles, has a wood-panelled library and a terrace with great views over the cobbled Plaza San Francisco, one of the city's most important squares since the 16th century. Doubles cost from \$460; www.casagangotena.com

London January 17 2012 marks the centenary of Robert Falcon Scott's arrival at the South Pole, the climax of an expedition that continues to fascinate with its stories of heroism and tragedy. To mark the event an exhibition opens next month at the Queen's Gallery in Buckingham Palace, bringing together for the first time a collection of photographs presented to George V by the official expedition photographers and artifacts including the flag taken by Scott to the pole. The pictures chronicle the grim deterioration in the team's physique and morale but other items highlight happier moments: a menu for Midwinter's Day 1911 includes roast beef and yorkshire



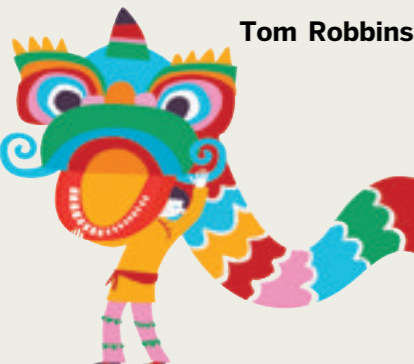
Pole Captain Scott in 1911 Herbert Ponting

puddings. *The Heart of the Great Alone* runs from October 21 to April 15; www.royalcollection.org.uk

Thame Travelodge, the British hotel chain, has bowed to pressure from customers and announced it is introducing free WiFi in 140 of its properties, in what it claims is a first for a budget chain. The service will be up and running by September 12 but comes with a significant proviso: free WiFi is available in café-bar areas but not the bedrooms. www.travelodge.co.uk

Tokyo Boeing will deliver its first 787 Dreamliner to an airline this month, three years behind schedule. The revolutionary plane, the first airliner to be made with a composite rather than metal body, will arrive at All Nippon Airlines' Tokyo base on September 28. Its first commercial flight will be a charter on October 26, followed by its first scheduled service on November 1. It will initially be used on domestic routes but Tokyo-Frankfurt flights are planned for January. "Once our customers get this airplane, they'll forgive us for the fact we're a little late," said Jim Albaugh, chief of Boeing Commercial Airplanes.

Hong Kong In recent years guidebook publishers have developed niche ranges for every type of traveller. Now a Hong Kong-based company claims it has identified an hitherto untapped demographic – children. Aimed at seven- to 14-year-olds, Haven Books' new Kidsgo! range (illustration pictured below) so far covers New York, Bali, Hong Kong, London, Phuket and Sydney. An interactive website accompanies the series, letting children post photos and reviews after the trip. The publishers say the books will help children feel "in charge" of holidays, which parents might be less than enthusiastic about. www.kidsgotravelguides.com



Tom Robbins



Don't rent a villa, rent a village

Hamlets are increasingly available for rental by big groups of friends and family. Claire Wrathall reports

In her book *Fame and Frame*, the celebrity photographer Pat York includes a shot of actor Jack Nicholson walking away from a modest Provençal cottage, on the chimney of which stands a peacock. The picture was taken, she wrote, at a property "near the village of La Garde-Freinet, owned by the director Tony Richardson. We had been invited to join other guests – Buck Henry, Anjelica Huston, David Hockney [who painted the swimming pool] and John Gielgud". The peacock, she said, symbolised "the otherworldly quality of time and place... at this escapist's paradise."

That paradise is now available to rent. In the foothills of the Massif des Maures, 21km from St Tropez, the hamlet was deserted by the time Richardson happened upon it in the 1960s but gradually he began to do up its rustic dwellings. There are now half a dozen: a main house with four bedrooms, three smaller houses and two annexes, one containing an office and laundry, the other a gym. Combined, they sleep 20 and the whole place is available through Petersham Properties.

Founded last year, the company has a small portfolio of alluring properties. Among them, further inland, 90 minutes' drive from Avignon, is another once-abandoned settlement. Le Grand Banc was rescued by a scion of the Fry chocolate dynasty, the engineer and philanthropist Jeremy Fry. Perched 792m up in the Lubéron hills, the 400-acre estate has 20 or so buildings clustered around a single cobbled street. It sleeps up to 24, across eight houses, some of them self-contained studios, others with two or three bedrooms.

Given the rising popularity of big groups of friends or multi-generational family parties opting to travel together – "3G travel" as it's known in the industry – it's not hard to see the appeal of renting a hamlet rather than a large house. Underlying tensions are less likely to erupt if each couple or family unit has their own space. Those who like to sleep in on holiday won't be disturbed by over-excited, early-rising children.

It is a growing trend. According to 63 per cent of the 6,000 upmarket travel agents surveyed for the annual Virtuoso Luxe Report in the US, "family and multi-generational travel" is the pre-eminent trend for 2011.

It's a finding that chimes with the experience of the Landmark Trust, the UK conservation charity that rescues "historic buildings at risk", renovates, and rents them, using the income generated to maintain them and expand its portfolio. "We've certainly had people book the whole of Coombe," says its spokesperson Katherine Oakes, of a picture-book hamlet of mostly thatched whitewashed cob cottages half a



Clusters From top: Castello di Gargonza, 28km from Arezzo in Italy, can accommodate up to 90 people; Le Grand Banc in the Lubéron hills, Provence, sleeps up to 24 across eight houses; the hamlet of Coombe in Cornwall sleeps 36 across eight houses

mile from the north Cornish coast. "And we do know that many of our groups of buildings are used for multi-generational gatherings or friends having reunions. People enjoy being on neutral territory so no one feels obliged to do all the hosting. And staying in a historic building makes the weekend even more memorable."

Certainly Coombe is an unforgettable place for a holiday. There are eight houses, sleeping between three and six people (the village sleeps 36 in all), among them a handsome 17th-century Mill House and a light and airy white-weatherboarded 1930s bungalow, Coombe Corner, set high on the hill that rises above the village.

By contrast, Rhiwddolion is a loosely configured hamlet near Betws-y-Coed in Snowdonia, North Wales, a minuscule place with just three habitable dwellings. One sleeps four, one just two, and the former school-cum-chapel is, rather oddly, fitted out with three single beds in its gallery bedroom. But the setting is sublime, two miles from a paved road in the heart of a Forestry Commission reserve.

The appeal of renting a hamlet is that underlying tensions are less likely to erupt if each family unit has its own space

When it comes to fortified villages, however, nowhere compares with Italy, which perhaps explains the number for hire: places such as Castello di Gargonza, a castellated medieval hill estate 28km from Arezzo, where Dante was briefly exiled in 1303.

In 1696 it became the seat of the counts of Salviati, explains Neri Guicciardini Corsi Salviati, daughter of the Conte Roberto Guicciardini Corsi Salviati, and was run as a farm until the end of the second world war. "But after the war all the peasants left for a better life in the cities, or emigrated to the US. After 30 years of decadence, my father decided to restore it."

At first just five houses were converted into holiday apartments but "in 1997 we added the swimming pool and in 2000 we started refurbishing all the houses [as well as] the stables, the olive press mill, loom room..." Its 23 residential buildings now offer a range of apartments and villas that sleep between two and 10, which together with the castle-turned-B&B at the top of the village accommodate up to 90 people and can be rented in total or in part.

In spirit it has much in common with Montegradolfo, near Urbino in Le Marche, another medieval hill-top village that's

become holiday accommodation thanks to the fashion designer Alberta Ferretti. "Everyone said we were crazy but for us it was a crusade," she said in 2000. "Once I hit on the idea of a hotel, the decision to rehabilitate the whole village followed naturally."

After the opening of an eight-room hotel in the palazzo, she and her co-investors set about having the rest of the place restored and it now offers accommodation for just over 100 in rooms, self-catering studios and apartments, as well as four restaurants, a spa and a church, with school-of-Giotto frescoes, that can be used for weddings.

Newer still is Monteverdi, perhaps potentially the *ne plus ultra* of idealised Tuscan village restoration projects. Located at Castiglione del Trinoro, a walled medieval village overlooking the Val d'Orcia, it's the brainchild of Michael Cioffi, an American lawyer and professor who "fell in love with the place while travelling in Tuscany. It felt lost in time," he says.

He found a building to buy – "a complete ruin" – which he had restored. Then he bought more. To date he's acquired seven, three of which are now stylish villas with state-of-the-art kitchens, leading-edge technology and wine cellars, and two, three or six bedrooms, all ensuite. More will open in due course, as, in June 2012, will a small hotel. In total, he expects the "village" to have about 25 rooms.

That said, the business model for Monteverdi is intended to be self-sustaining rather than profitable. Income from the lets is, for example, being used to fund the only privately sponsored archaeological dig in Italy, an excavation of Etruscan remains on the site. And Cioffi has also established a cultural hub, the Maria Mazzone Centre for the Arts, named after his Italian great-grandmother, a place for classical music, visual arts, small theatre productions and visiting artists and scholars.

"This month," he says, "we've had a Chinese piano and violin duo performing in the 13th-century Romanesque church, which we're also restoring." It is a project that, as Cioffi puts it, was born of "a dream, then a vision and is now coming true".

Details

www.petershamproperties.com, price on application; www.landmarktrust.org.uk, price on application; www.gargonza.it, doubles from €120; www.montegradolfo.com, doubles from €150; www.castelmonastero.com, doubles from €385; monteverdituscany.com, from US\$5,000 a week, including daily housekeeping and breakfast. All can be booked by a single party

The brainiest festival of the summer

Britain's answer to the TED lectures – held in west Wales this month – is also being exported to California. By Stuart Jeffries

Don't be afraid of taking risks," said the first human to hike the length of the Amazon from source to ocean. "Don't listen to negative people. Don't be afraid." Inside a communal teepee on a chicken farm in west Wales, ex-British army captain Ed Stafford was speaking from a roughly sawn-up tree trunk that served as a lectern.

I remember this scene from last year's Do Lectures. Stafford had just returned from two-and-a-half years dodging arrows, befriendng machete-wielding locals and – perhaps most impressively – getting online repeatedly in the jungle to upload his blog. The 100-strong audience had its collective head down, taking notes as he spoke.

Not all speakers were butch adventurers like Stafford. One night I awoke in my tent (we all stayed in furnished tents with decked terraces) with a distinct sense of inadequacy. I realised I was surrounded by all kinds of overachievers.

There slept Tim Berners-Lee, who invented the world wide web. There

snoozed Jay Rogers, chief executive of Local Motors, whose aim is to make cars that last so long that they become family heirlooms.

In another tent was Maggie Doyne, who during her gap year in a part of Nepal ravaged by Maoist insurrection was so struck by the fate of orphaned children that she learned Nepalese and raised funds to build with local people the Kopila Valley Children's Home, in which she lives with 30 children and from where she runs a school.

The Do Lectures are the idea of ex-adman David Heiatt and his wife, Clare, who five years ago established a series of talks in the Ceredigion countryside every September. "The aim is to spread the knowledge as much and as far as possible," David says. All lectures ultimately appear online.

In this, the Heiatts' four-day event is a homespun version of the TED lectures. TED (it stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design) was founded in 1984 by US architect Richard Saul Wurman to disseminate

"ideas worth spreading". From 1990 onwards TED became an annual Californian event and later, after being acquired by computer magazine publisher Chris Anderson, spread its ideas through similar events around the world and by posting lectures on its website.



But while the TED lectures have become a glitzy, global brand, at which you might well find yourself sitting with Cameron Diaz listening to Bill Gates, the Do Lectures are a more intimate, hippyish affair where you might find yourself sharing muesli – as I did last year – with the Cambridge professor for the public understanding of risk, and looking forward to attending a jam-making workshop.

Like TED, the Do Lectures are not-for-profit and might seem to preach to the like-minded, smugly liberal. At TED an invited audience made up of 750 figures from the worlds of business, technology and academia pay nearly \$5,000 each to attend. At the Do Lectures later this month, 80 guests will pay £1,500 to hear 30 speakers. The latter are, at least, allowed to ask speakers questions. Last year Tim Berners-Lee said one aim of his World Wide Web Consortium is to get the 80 per cent who don't use his invention connected, only to be chided by a questioner who argued this would destroy older, purer ways of being. Tough crowd.

At this year's Do Lectures, speakers will include Faisal Rahman, who developed a peer-lending microcredit programme in east London, helping hundreds of women create businesses; Gyanesh Pandey, chief executive of Husk Power Systems, which converts rice husks into electricity at affordable rates in some of India's most remote communities; and, most intriguingly, Phil Minton, singer and co-founder of the scary-sounding Feral Choir.

And this year, the Heiatts' rustic model of innovation-catalysing lecture weekends is being exported to California, the very state where TED was born. Shortly after the event wraps up in Wales, the Do Lectures US will begin on an organic farm and vineyard called Campovida in Hopland. Forty guests have paid \$3,000 to hear up to 15 speakers, including an ex-Nasa robotics specialist who will lecture on the possibility that not only might robots interact with humans, but they might also make us laugh; and a reformed Hollywood screenwriter who will talk

about Street Poets Inc, his organisation that uses writing to turn gang-bangers and drug dealers into community leaders.

In his book *Where Good Ideas Come From*, science writer Steven Johnson argues that being tapped into a network, be it a 18th-century London coffeehouse or an online community, is to be in a fertile ecology for innovation where ideas can be freely exchanged. Spending the weekend with galvanising speakers in a Welsh wood or a Californian vineyard retreat makes that exchange more pleasurable, argues David Heiatt. His blurb says: "The idea is a simple one: that people who do amazing things can inspire the rest of us to go and do amazing things too." True, a year after hearing Ed Stafford, I still haven't yet conquered my personal Amazon, but I remain hopeful.

The Do Lectures (www.dolectures.com) take place at Cilgerran, in Cardigan, Wales, September 14-18 and in Hopland, California, September 22-25. All the lectures will be available online