

You want to... get creative

Lucy Thackray tried: **How to Build a Novel, the Isle of Wight**



Why I did it: I've been saying I'd write a book since I was a precocious 12-year-old. But like many just-for-fun projects, my magnum opus was shelved indefinitely. Skyros's focused weekend promised to jump-start it.

How it unfolded: Along with eight other would-be novelists of varying ages and backgrounds, I decamped to the sleepy Isle of Wight one Friday night. If my future novel had lacked a setting, the Grange, our retreat venue, would've made an ethereal one — its dark-wood salons and overgrown gardens hiding mournful statues giving it a hushed, haunted feel. Activity-holiday pioneers Skyros have been organising creative breaks here (and on its namesake Greek island) for 10 years.

After some last-minute idea-crafting (or in my case, napping), our group met for a pre-dinner glass of wine in the tiny honesty bar (hello, generous £4 glasses of Shiraz). After a collective sigh of relief at the friendly, unpretentious crowd, we prattled over a hearty dinner before being ushered into the lounge — our workshop space — for a welcome chat.

Each person's book was unique: one chap was writing a painful family memoir; others were penning comedy capers or female-led thrillers. Author Diane 'DJ' Connell was our warm and encouraging tutor — everyone admired and wanted to impress her. We had three workshops across the weekend — two hours mid-morning and mid-afternoon on the Saturday, then another two Sunday morning. In between, mini 'homework' tasks kept our embryonic bestsellers churning.

Connell's goal is to help you nail a full story arc for your novel, right down to one main incident per chapter. The hurdle people stumble at, she explained, is actually writing the damn thing, so she aims to help you plan out a strong story, then send you off to write it in manageable chunks.

It wasn't all bookworm bliss: only a saint would be thrilled to spend their weekend listening to Julie from Essex agonise over the tiniest plot point. But the retreat did spur a surprising level of camaraderie, and I looked forward to talking books and life with everyone

over dinner. There's no pressure to join in anything outside of the workshops, but as the weekend went on, people increasingly opted in.

Any good? Light on commitment (I only needed half a day off work) and heavy on mingling, it's fun and good value. Shanklin's pretty to explore, too. But I'd have liked feedback on my writing style.

And did it stick? I came away inspired, fired up about my premise, and armed with Diane's tricks to get the creative juices flowing. Am I keyboard-bashing for her suggested hour per day? No. But Sunday afternoons since the course have been sacrificed to the project.

Sign me up: Skyros's How to Build a Novel breaks cost £90 for two days, course only. Double rooms at The Grange start at £77 a night, B&B (based on single occupancy), or you can stay nearby. See skyros.com for details.

Three more creative crash-courses

LIGHT At Crafty Camping, a Dorset glampsite, you learn to whittle basic wooden goods. Cabinetmaker Guy Mallinson runs one-, two- and five-day courses. You work your way up from spoons to chairs (hostunusual.com; one day from £150pp; tents sleeping two from £88 a night, two nights minimum).

MEDIUM Tons of tour operators run photography breaks, but it's Light and Land's main gig — and they're just as good at building tour itineraries as at sourcing tutors. There's a huge range, from two-nighters in Brighton or Yorkshire, to camera-wielding tours of Vietnam or Morocco (lightandland.co.uk; two-night UK breaks from £799, B&B, including tuition).

FULL-ON Loved art at school, but haven't picked up a paintbrush since Rick Astley was number one? Check out the Watermill at Posara, Tuscany. On week-long breaks led by British artists, you'll learn how to capture the local landscapes, developing your own style (watermill.net; seven nights from £1,445pp, full board, excluding flights).

know this

You're slightly at the mercy of your author's own style, so check out their bios. Ours was gunning for commercial big-sellers with sensational plot twists.



Retreats with *results*

Q
Yoga or Pilates?

A Yoga retreats are more popular and can be a bit tree-huggy, often with vegetarian food, no caffeine or alcohol and lots of chanting. More practical Pilates focuses on core toning,

and is good for those with bad backs. For a traditional yoga retreat, try Silver Island in Greece, set on a private island, with wonderful teachers (silverislandyoga.com; six nights from £1,160pp, full board; flights

extra). Less spiritual, more chic is Tri in Sri Lanka (trilanka.com; doubles from £250, half board, with yoga). For Pilates, Como Hotels run great retreats (comohotels.com). Or try both at Absolute Sanctuary, on Koh Samui (absolute-sanctuary.com; one week from £1,520pp, full board; no flights).



4 TOP COOKING HOLIDAYS

Where to sizzle up a storm while enjoying the view

HAMPSHIRE

Eat well, cook well, right? Chewton Glen is that rare English country-house hotel where the food is truly first-class, and the Kitchen is its new half-restaurant, half-cookery school from celeb chef James Martin. Courses range from muffin-making with kids to South American street food (chewtonglen.com; rooms from £144pp, room only; classes from £45pp).

SPAIN

Golearnto.com excels at singles hols — great if you're looking to spice up more than your culinary skills. On its week-long Spain Cooking and Culture tour, jaunts around the Aragon's Pyrenees break up three days of lessons

— mastering gazpacho and wild boar in red wine (golearnto.com; seven nights from £1,049pp, full board, excluding travel).

FEZ

Nothing will make you want to pick up a cookbook (and a tagine pot) like a Moroccan holiday — and Palais Amani in Fez does a chef-skills break you can really dig into. You'll get the lowdown on trad local ingredients, visit the souks on a spice-finding mission, and learn to make tagine, flatbreads and sides (palaisamani.com; from £388pp, B&B, including two dinners, tours and cooking, but no transport).

FRANCE

Famously finicky about food prep, France's cooking schools are the world's most intense. Just outside Bordeaux, Le Gargantua does one-, three- and five-day courses, tackling seasonal food or *pâtisserie* treats. Pack a flair for presentation (legargantua.com; one day from £167pp, course only).

