

52 brilliant weekend breaks for 2010

That's what you've got — and, this year, don't waste a single one. We have your 2010 planned out



Thou shalt not put up shelves. Thou shalt not cut the grass. Thou shalt not stay in watching telly and thou certainly shalt not go to Ikea.

Thou shalt shun the shopping mall and the multiplex and the garden centre and Homebase, and thou shalt go to the local only on week nights. If thou hast a church, thou shalt make thine excuses, and if thou likest a lie-in, thou canst sleep when thou art dead.

For there are but 52 weekends in the year, 104 days of freedom and joy (plus statutory bank holidays), and it is a mortal sin to waste them — especially when we've brought you the very best for 2010.

Unless stated, prices are per person for two nights, B&B, based on two sharing and including flights from London and transfers where appropriate. Check with the operator for regional departures. Airline options are not comprehensive; for more, consult jumblefly.com and skyscanner.net

January 5-6

Nano-break, Cornwall

We've missed the first weekend of the year, so how about a midweek nano-break at the St Moritz hotel, in Cornwall (01208 862242, stmoritzhotel.co.uk)? Here's the deal: you catch the 9.25am Air Southwest flight from London City to Newquay (contact the hotel for regional departure options), from where you're driven to the hotel for lunch, then a surf lesson, followed by a sauna, cocktails, dinner, bed, breakfast, a brisk walk along the beach, a treatment in the Cowshed spa, back to the airport and home. Yours for £199, including flights.

January 8-10

Detox, Wiltshire

Littleton Mill (07786 363553, littletonmill.co.uk) is a stylish and sustainably run wellness retreat deep in the Wiltshire countryside, where the Detox and Rejuvenate yoga weekend promises to "rebalance the system physically, mentally and energetically after the busy Christmas period". All meals are included in the £150 price of a non-residential course; nearby Newhouse Farm (01380 870349, newhousefarmwilts.co.uk) has doubles for £60 per night.

January 15-17

Bonfire, Puglia

Every year, in the town of Novoli, they build a skyscraping pile of olive wood, then, in honour of San Antonio Abate — the patron saint of amputees, animals and gravediggers — they torch it. Cue fireworks, all-night dancing and — most important — vast amounts of fabulous Puglian food. Two nights at the boutiquey Masseria Torre Maizza (00 39 080 482 7838, apuliacollection.com) cost £250. Fly to Brindisi with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com). Car hire starts at £23 a day with Europcar (0871 384 9847, europcar.co.uk).

January 22-24

Open fire, Yorkshire

It's the bleak midwinter, and what you need is a long walk through a frost-blanketed area of Outstanding Natural Beauty — with, crucially, a blazing log fire and a pint of real ale to look forward to at the end of the day. We recommend the George Inn (01756 760223, www.thegeorge-inn.co.uk), a 17th-century example of English pub perfection in the hamlet of Hubberholme, in Wharfedale; doubles start at £75 per night, B&B

January 29-31

Craic, Dublin

This year sees the fifth annual Temple Bar Tradfest, an all-fiddling, all-twanging celebration of traditional Irish music, with the likes of Sean O'Se, Eleanor Shanley, Frankie Lane and Liam O'Maonlai setting the pubs alight. The Clarence (00 353 1 407 0820, theclarence.ie), in the heart of Temple Bar, has doubles from £117. Fly to Dublin with BMI Baby (bmibaby.com).

February 5-7

Ball, Vienna

The Wiener Kaffeesieder ball is the most elegant event of the season. It's held at the Imperial Palace, where 3,000 couples will be entertained into the small hours by the Vienna State Opera Ballet, 15 orchestras, ensembles and soloists. Tickets cost £95 (kaffeesiederball.at); dance lessons for two are £45 an hour at the Rueff Dance School (00 43 1 405 2669, tanzschulerueff.at). Regent Holidays (0845 277 3317, regent-holidays.co.uk) will get you there and put you up at the three-star Hotel Post for £320.

February 12-14

Orgasms, Malmo

Normally, we recommend something soppy and romantic for Valentine's, but this year we're skipping the preamble and getting straight to the point, with a weekend hosted by the Swedish orgasm coach Ylva Franzen at Venusgarden, a B&B outside Malmo (00 46 411 532200, venusgarden.se). Your "love room" comes with "everything you need for a romantic break, from king-size beds to erotic kits and love drinks containing Viagra"; prices start at £122 per night. Fly to Copenhagen with EasyJet (easyjet.com), then take the train from the airport to Malmo (£18.50 return). Let us know how it goes.

February 19-21

Gorillas, Rwanda

Take the night flight from Heathrow to Kigali via Nairobi, arriving in Rwanda on Saturday. From there, a guide will take you north to the Parc National des Volcans, where you'll spend the night at the Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge and, early next morning, trek into the damp foothills of the Virungas to meet the mountain gorillas. It's back at your desk on Monday, by which point it will seem like an

impossible dream. Prices start at £2,040 with World Primate Safaris (01273 691642, worldprimatesafaris.com).

February 26-28

Goshawks, Hampshire

Naturetrek (01962 733051, naturetrek.co.uk) has a weekend exploration of the New Forest and the lagoons along the Solent, seeking out great grey shrike, crossbills, hawfinches and displaying goshawks, as well as brent geese, little egrets, peregrines, grebes, divers, ducks and a variety of waders. The price is £265, including two nights at a hotel in Lyndhurst.

March 5-7

Photo story, Tobermory

Take your photography up a notch with a new Island Landscape Photography weekend, on the dramatically photogenic Isle of Mull. The course is run by a local snapper, Dr Sam Jones, who will lead you to hidden locations while explaining the finer technical points of the art. The price is £249, including two nights' B&B in Tobermory, through McKinlay Kidd (0844 804 0020, seescotlanddifferently.co.uk).

March 12-14

Wonder wall, Carlisle

Head for the border for a unique opportunity to see Hadrian's Wall illuminated from coast to coast. Starting at Wallsend, in the northeast, the line of light — made up of spotlights placed every 250 metres — will travel the length of the wall and end with a special night-time festival in Carlisle. The event is free, and doubles at Tantallon House (01697 747111, tantallonhouse.co.uk), overlooking the best bit, cost £80 per night, B&B.

March 19-21

Snow patrol, Ste Foy Tarentaise

Yellowstone Ski Lodge (07885 282384, yellowstoneskilodge.co.uk) was conceived as one of those ultra-posh, top-end catered chalets that cost the price of your house per week, but it has a little secret: you can hire rooms by the night and still plug into that champagne and powder-bashing party lifestyle (and yes, there is an outdoor hot tub). A weekend costs £338, excluding flights. Fly to Geneva with British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com) or Swiss (0845 601 0956, swiss.com).

Car hire starts at £42 a day with Auto Europe (0800 358 1229, www.auto-europe.co.uk).

March 26-28

La grande bouffe, Pas-de-Calais

An hour southeast of Calais lies an epicurean treasure. Le Buffet, in the steel town of Isbergues, used to be the station canteen, but is now a seriously up-and-coming hôtel de gastronomie, under chef Thierry Wident. Go now, and say you were there before the critics. Inntravel (01653 617000, www.inntravel.co.uk) has two nights' half-board at Le Buffet for £216, including return ferry crossings.

April 1-5

Semana Santa, Seville

Holy Week in Seville has to be seen to be believed, as the 57 cofradías (brotherhoods) process in sombre penitence from their church to the cathedral and back again. It's a soul-stirring spectacle, gilded with all the excesses of Catholicism, and it imbues the city with a darkly delicious sense of anticipation. Kirker Holidays (020 7593 2283, www.kirkerholidays.com) has three nights at the three-star San Gil hotel for £798.

April 8-12

Laughs, Bath

Bath doesn't spring to mind as an especially funny city, but that hasn't stopped them planning the city's second annual comedy festival. Headliners have yet to be announced — check bathcomedyfestival.co.uk for updates — but we're happy to give it a mention: a Bath plug, if you like. I thank you. The elegant Town House (01225 422505, thetownhousebath.co.uk) has doubles from £94 per night.

April 16-18

Belgium in Bloom, Ghent

Every five years, for just nine days, the medieval city of Ghent comes into bloom with the Florales (floralien.be), an exhibition of thousands of intoxicatingly beautiful flower arrangements, covering 4½ hectares, with floriculturalists from all over the world striving to outdo each other with their displays. VfB Holidays (01452 716840, vfbholidays.co.uk) has three nights from £196, B&B, including hotel accommodation in the city centre, return train travel and tickets for the show.

April 23-25

Summit meeting, Scotland

If Chris Moyles can climb a mountain, so can you. Before you book that Kilimanjaro trip, however, get some training on Britain's tallest peak. Ben Nevis is not to be underestimated: sudden changes in conditions can turn a walk in the park into a struggle for survival, so if you've never climbed it before, take an expert with you.

Explore (0844 499 0901, explore.co.uk) has a two-night, fully guided expedition for £299, including hotel accommodation.

April 30-May 3

Camper van, anywhere

It's the journey that counts this bank holiday, not the destination. Using the "road map and dart" method, choose your target, load up the camper van and off you go. No van? No worries: Wicked Campers (0808 234 8461, wickedcampers.co.uk) has a fleet of two- and five-seater vans, with built-in kitchens and camping gear; four days' hire costs £292, including insurance and a map. There are depots in London, Belfast, Dundee and Fort William, on Loch Ness.

May 7-9

Florence and the museums

The British Museum's first big show of 2010 is an exhibition of Italian Renaissance drawings (020 7323 8181, britishmuseum.org; tickets £12), so live like Andrew Graham-Dixon by popping along to the BM for an amuse-bouche before jetting off to Florence for the feast.

Real Holidays (020 7359 3938, realholidays.co.uk) will put you up in the four-star Hotel Aprile and give you a day's exclusive use of a Renaissance expert, who will show you everything you need to see — from Dante's neighbourhood and the Gates of Paradise, via backstreets, palazzi and piazze, to the Duomo and the Uffizi. The price is £449.

May 14-16

Shroud, Turin

They don't bring out the Holy Shroud very often — the last time it was on public display was in 2000 — so if you want to see the linen cloth said to bear the image of the crucified Christ, book now at sindone.org. Viewing is free, and doubles at the Hotel Dogana Vecchia (00 39 011 436 6752, www.hoteldoganavecchia.com) cost £110 per night. Fly to Turin with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com) or BA (0844 493 0787, ba.com).

May 21-23

Pompidou, Metz

Do you remember Bilbao before the Guggenheim? Us neither, and the opening this month of the Centre Pompidou-Metz aims to do the same for this pretty city in Lorraine, raising it from a provincial dead end on France's eastern frontier to a top-end cultural destination. The new TGV link puts the huge new museum just 82 minutes from the Gare de l'Est, in Paris, and the opening show — Chefs-d'Oeuvre? — is a suitably heavyweight exhibition featuring works by Picasso, Matisse and Braque. Get there with Real Holidays (020 7359 3938, realholidays.co.uk), which has two nights in Metz for £289, B&B, including return train travel.

May 28-31

Tall ships, Turkey

This year's Tall Ships Regatta has a historical theme, with the first leg following the route supposedly taken by Jason and the Argonauts as they sailed from Volos, in Greece, through the Dardanelles and into the Black Sea in search of the Golden Fleece. Be in Istanbul for the bank-holiday weekend and you'll catch the fleet as it sails through the Bosphorus. Exclusive Escapes (020 8605 3500, exclusiveescapes.co.uk) offers a grandstand view, with three nights at the waterside Sumahan hotel from £825.

June 4-6

How green is that valley, Wales

The town of Llandeilo, in Carmarthenshire, is the perfect place for an eco-friendly weekend break, thanks to its funky boutiques, organic delis, cafes and pubs. Stay at Fronlas, a boutique B&B that's as green as can be: it has organic mattresses, solar-powered underfloor heating and breakfasts so locally sourced, they know the sausages by name. The walking is fabulous, too. Doubles start at £115 per night, B&B, in high season, booked through I-escape (i-escape.com).

June 11-13

Isle of Wight Festival

It's four decades since Jimi Hendrix played here, and the 40th-anniversary line-up includes the Strokes, Doves, Jay-Z, Blondie, P!nk, Calvin Harris, Vampire Weekend and Spandau Ballet. You should really camp (camping tickets are £150, non-camping tickets £130; isleofwightfestival.com), but if you're squeamish about mud, get a room. Wightlink (0871 376 0013, wightlink.co.uk) has packages from £275, including two nights' B&B accommodation, festival tickets and return ferry crossings.

June 18-20

Easy riding, Co Clare

According to Lonely Planet, the byways of West Clare are one of the world's top 10 cycling areas — an emerald-tinged, salt-tanged meander from the Shannon estuary, past empty Atlantic beaches, to the 600ft Cliffs of Moher and the weird limestone pavement of the Burren. Stay at Gregans Castle Hotel (00 353 65 707 7005, gregans.ie; doubles £178 per night), which offers guests free use of its bikes. Fly to Shannon with Aer Lingus (0871 718 5000, aerlingus.com) or Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com). Car hire starts at £33 a day with Auto Europe (0800 358 1229, auto-europe.co.uk).

June 25-27

Black magic and music, Morocco

“Un festival pas comme les autres” is how they describe the annual Gnaoua world-music festival, in Essaouira, which celebrates the sounds spawned by slavery. Encompassing influences as diverse as Haitian voodoo, delta blues and Brazilian candomble, the event combines African magic and Islamic rituals to refresh the parts that other festivals can no longer reach. Original Travel (020 7978 7333, originaltravel.co.uk) has three-night breaks from £462.

July 2-4

Opera, Verona

If you've never sat in Verona's Roman arena on a warm summer's night and listened to an eye-wateringly beautiful aria, you have been deprived of an experience that will leave you in an aesthetic stupor. So, make amends: Citalia (0871 664 0253, citalia.com) has a two-night break at the four-star Grand Hotel from £399, including tickets for the Saturday-night performance of Aida.

July 9-11

Not just any beach hut, Devon

In a secluded, private cove near Holbeton, in South Devon, there's a beach hut. It has a double bed, a gas hob, running water and a wood-burning stove. And its own hot tub. There's no electricity, but we're sure you'll manage. The price is £295 for the weekend, through Carswell Farm Holiday Cottages (01752 830020, www.carswellcottages.com).

July 16-18

L'Etape du Tour, Pyrenees

If you fancy yourself as the new Bradley Wiggins or Mark Cavendish, why not prove it by riding the gruelling, 108-mile 17th stage of the 2010 Tour de France? Before you say yes, read on. There are three nasty climbs, culminating in the 6,940ft Col du Tourmalet, and the pros, who will be riding the same route on the Thursday, will be clocking about 4hr 20min. Still keen?

The price is £499, plus the £165 Etape du Tour entry fee, with Graham Baxter Sports Tours (0161 703 8161, sportingtours.co.uk), including three nights' B&B accommodation, transfers, storage for your bike and a support crew. Fly to Pau with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com).

July 23-25

Port Eliot Festival, Cornwall

It's described as a literary festival, but one far removed from the luvvie fest of Hay, offering a sanctuary for the uncool and the unconcerned on a seaside estate in Cornwall. Think wild swimming,

poetry, rock'n'roll, cocktails, WI cakes and barefoot dancing beneath a summer moon. And literature. Camping tickets are £100 for adults and £50 for children; porteliofestival.com.

July 30-August 1

Family adventure, the Lakes

This trip from Activities Abroad (01670 789991, www.activitiesabroad.com) is either a precious opportunity to bond with your kids by working together to overcome challenges such as mountain walking, abseiling and canoeing — or an opportunity for the horrors to show you up. Prices start at £345 for adults and £265 for children, including meals, activities and three nights' accommodation at the Keswick Country House Hotel.

August 6-8

Saddle up, Shropshire

The main feature of this marvellous riding trip is a hack along the long-distance bridleway named after a local horseman, Mad Jack Mytton. He famously rode into the Bedford Hotel, in Leamington Spa, up the grand staircase and onto the balcony, from which he jumped, still seated on his horse, over the diners in the restaurant below, then out through the window into the street. For a bet. Let Mad Jack be your inspiration. The price is £275, with Equestrian Escapes (01829 781123, equestrian-escapes.com).

August 13-15

Pigstock, Wiltshire

Reader E Cripwell, from Swindon, writes with the following suggestion: "For the most memorable weekend of 2010, head to Pigstock, at Eastbrook Farm, on the Ridgeway. You put your sleeping bags in the pigsty, visit the pigs, then go to the barbecue and watch the band. The price is £18 per adult, £12 for kids, and it has loos, showers, a campfire and an honesty bar for late-night drinkers. And you can buy a gourmet bacon sandwich for brekkie the next morning. Last year, the children thought it was the best weekend ever." There's not much we can add to that. For details, call 01793 790460 or visit www.royaloakbishopstone.co.uk.

August 20-22

Narrow-boating, Home Counties

Hurling along a canal at three miles per hour is such a quintessentially English delight that we're going to keep recommending it until everyone has tried it. Any canal will do — the network is healthier, cleaner and better maintained than ever — and three days' hire of a four-berth boat starts at £550. That price will get you the 40ft Primrose, based at Linslade Boatyard, just outside Aylesbury, in Buckinghamshire, through Waterways Holidays (0845 127 1020, waterwaysholidays.com).

August 27-30

Hiking, Switzerland

Flee bank-holiday crowds and spend the long weekend exploring the breathtaking Bernese Oberland, hiking in the lee of the Eiger between Kandersteg and Adelboden, and staying at postcard-perfect chalet-hotels. Four nights cost £498, including rail transfers from any Swiss station, with Inntravel (01653 617000, www.inntravel.co.uk). Fly to Basel with BA (0844 493 0787, ba.com) or EasyJet (easyjet.com).

September 3-5

Bargain hunting, Lille

This weekend, the city turns into Europe's biggest flea market, attracting antiques dealers and market traders from across the Continent. The locals set up stalls outside their houses, selling everything from vintage clothing to home-made cocktails. The central Hôtel des Tours (00 33 3 59 57 47 00, hotel-des-tours.com) has doubles for £135 per night. Return train travel from London starts at £65 with Eurostar (0843 218 6186, eurostar.com).

September 10-12

Aurora Hibernalis, Co Cork

On a moonless night, follow your guide, Jim Kennedy, onto the waters of Lough Hyne — and, as you paddle out, see phytoplankton sparkling in the water like an Irish northern lights. The price is £40pp, through Atlantic Sea Kayaking (00 353-282 1058, atlanticseakayaking.com).

Stay at the West Cork Hotel (0282 1277, westcorkhotel.com), in Skibbereen, which has doubles from £88 per night.

Fly to Cork with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com) or Aer Arann (0870 876 7676, aerarann.com). Car hire starts at £43 a day with Budget (0844 544 3407, budget.co.uk).

September 17-19

Culture, Tenby

You don't really need a reason to go to Tenby, but the Pembrokeshire resort's annual arts festival (www.tenbyartsfest.co.uk) is as good an excuse as any. Expect music, opera, poetry, comedy and, hopefully, a repeat of last year's pint-sized plays — pub dramas performed in packed bars. Coastal Cottages of Pembrokeshire (01437 772760, www.coastalcottages.co.uk) has a weekend at Shellside cottage, in Tenby, sleeping five, for £291.

September 24-26

Walking, South Devon

At the South Devon Walking Festival, you can choose from photography walks, wild-food hikes, lighthouse tours, war-history rambles, even a mystery trail leading to Agatha Christie's Greenway estate. Walks start at £3.50 for adults and £1.50 for children — register at southdevonwalkingfestival.co.uk. Stay at Start Bay Lookout, where Coast & Country Cottages (01548 843773, coastandcountry.co.uk) has three nights in a cottage sleeping four from £438.

October 1-3

The other Palio, Alba

The ludicrous Palio degli Asini is possibly the most extravagantly staged donkey derby on earth, and a sobering reminder that in a battle of wills between man and ass, it's the latter that usually wins. This hilariously asinine diversion coincides with Alba's sublime white-truffle festival. Bailey Robinson (01488 689700, baileyrobinson.com) has two nights at Relais San Maurizio, a 17th-century monastery turned luxury hotel, from £550. The donkey race is free; sadly, the truffles aren't.

October 8-10

Kinsale Food Festival, Ireland

The picturesque port of Kinsale, 16 miles south of Cork, has earned the title of gourmet capital of Ireland, with the greatest concentration of top-class restaurants in the country. This weekend, it hosts its gluttonous food festival, with hundreds of hungry visitors following their noses from venue to venue, pausing only to top up with Guinness and Rennies. Tickets for the Saturday food tour cost £80 (kinsalerestaurants.com). Stay at the Trident (00 353 21 4779 300, www.tridenthotel.com), which has doubles from £120 per night. Fly to Cork with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com) or BMI Baby (bmibaby.com). Car hire starts at £43 a day with Budget (0844 544 3407, budget.co.uk).

October 15-17

Mountain biking, the Lakes

The Lake District is possibly the best destination in the UK for mountain biking, and now that the Altura Trail is fully open, it's even better. The trail is a 12-mile red route starting 1,600ft above Keswick, with hair-raising downhill sections, berms, jumps, skinnies, corkscrews and table tops. There are also some nice views, apparently. Bike hire starts at £15 a day with Keswick Bikes (017687 75202, keswickbikes.co.uk). Lane Head Farm (017687 79220, laneheadfarm.co.uk) has doubles from £70 per night, B&B.

October 22-24

Bon appétit, Gascony

It's all very well being able to cook, but if you can't make your creations look like art on a plate, you've wasted your time. This weekend in the ancient Gascon village of Gramont combines instruction in classic French cuisine with lessons on restaurant-style presentation over three days from Friday afternoon to Sunday. It costs £354, including accommodation, with Golearnto (0844 502 0445, golearnto.com). Fly to Toulouse with EasyJet (easyjet.com); transfers are £22.50 each way.

October 29-31

Get spooked, Northumbria

And we mean truly spooked. The Schooner Hotel (01665 830216, theschoonerhotel.co.uk), in Alnmouth, is Britain's most haunted hostelry, according to the British Psychic Society, with more than 60 restless spirits within its walls. "Room 28 has the most activity," says the manager, Annette Charlton, "probably because of the French family murdered there by a local gypsy 300 years ago." Room 30 isn't much better: a staff member sleeping there before Christmas woke up with ghostly hands around her throat. Sceptical? You won't mind checking in, then. Two nights' B&B and a ghost hunt with Ray Bokor, a local medium, start at £100.

November 5-7

Kick up leaves, the Cotswolds

Catch a falling leaf and breathe in the earthy odour of autumn on this gentle guided walking weekend through ancient beech woods and unspoilt Cotswold villages. Your guide is David Howell, a local-born enthusiast who will entertain you with lore as you wander.

It's all rather relaxed, with tea and biscuits at 11, hot soup beside a campfire for lunch and long dinners in local inns. Accommodation is in Cotswold B&Bs chosen for their character as much as their comfort. The cost of the weekend is £305, with Foot Trails (01747 820626, foottrails.co.uk).

November 12-14

The Book of the Dead, Cairo

The British Museum's second big exhibition of 2010 focuses on the Egyptian Book of the Dead, an ancient anthology of hymns, spells and directions, apparently designed as a guidebook to the afterlife. Once you've seen the show, head to Cairo for a private guided tour of Saqqara, the very tomb that inspired the book. It costs £695 with The Traveller (020 7269 2770, the-traveller.co.uk).

November 19-21

White-water rafting, Devon

Just because it's late November and it's dark and it's cold, it's not an excuse to stay indoors. With hair-raising rapids, the River Dart provides the perfect location for an introduction to white-water rafting — and, now the fishing season is over, the river is open to thrillseekers. CRS Adventures (01364 653444, crsadventures.com) offers descents on two- or six-person rafts, led by qualified guides. The price is £35pp, and you'll get very, very wet. Dry off and warm up at the lovely Browns Hotel (01803 832572, brownshoteldartmouth.co.uk), in Dartmouth, which has doubles from £90 per night.

November 26-28

Weeding and hoeing, Derbyshire

Spend the weekend tending the Elizabethan knot garden at the Old Manor, a medieval hall now in the hands of the National Trust, in the pretty Derbyshire village of Norbury. As well as the weeding, there's a woodland walk to be cleared, but there's also the opportunity to skive off and explore the hall, the church and the valley of the River Dove. The price is just £55, including meals and lodgings in a comfortable B&B in the village. Book on 0844 800 3099 or nationaltrust.org.uk/volunteering.

December 3-5

Tapas on the hoof, Andalusia

Saturday: gallop across the Sierra de Aracena astride a punchy andaluz for a lunch of tapas y manzanilla in some gorgeous pueblos blancos before hacking back to the Finca el Moro for a long Andalusian dinner. Sunday: see Saturday, minus the dinner, because, sadly, you'll be on the plane home.

The finca itself is all chestnut beams — horse chestnut, presumably — terracotta tiles and hand-painted furniture, with fridges loaded with the local vino mosto. A fabulous pre-Christmas present. The weekend, excluding flights, is £500, booked with the hotel (00 34 959 501079, fincaelmoro.com). Fly to Seville with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com), Vueling (vueling.com) or Iberia (0870 609 0500, iberia.com).

December 10-12

Winter fun and games, Sweden

It's only two weeks until Christmas, so leave the malls to the madding crowds and flee to the snowbound silence of Halsingland, 2½ hours north of Stockholm. Deep in a fairy-tale forest, Lasse and Asa Frick have turned their farm into a winter wonderland offering family activities such as tobogganing and horse-drawn sleigh rides. Meals are eaten with your hosts, and after dinner there'll be tales of the tomte, a Rumpelstiltskin-like creature said to live in the deep, dark woods. The cost, for two nights full-board and activities, is £166 for adults and £84 for children, booked through Nature Travel (01929 463774, naturetravels.co.uk). Fly to Stockholm Arlanda with SAS (020 8990 7000, flysas.com) or British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com); car hire is from £30 a day with holidayautos.co.uk.

December 17-19**Beer, Belgium**

Not just any beer festival, this one. The Kerst festival (ober.be) is a season-specific strong-beer event featuring more than 100 rare and specially brewed Christmas ales. Admission is free, and you buy the beer in 150ml measures, which seems a wise move when you consider that some of these brews outtrump wine on the alcohol front. Driving to the party is probably a bad idea. Take Eurostar to Brussels (0843 218 6186, eurostar.com; from £69 return), then head on to Essen with SNCB (www.b-rail.be; £20 return). Stay at the Hotel De Kerselaer (00 32 03 663 6141, dekerselaer.be; doubles from £50 per night).

December 24-28**Fairy tale of New York**

Forget the rubbish Christmas lights, the overcooked turkey and the dyspeptic relations, and make a break for a city that really does know how to do the festive season in style. Virgin Holidays (0871 222 5825, virginholidays.com) has a cracker of a four-night Big Apple break in the hip luxury of the London NYC for £1,102. Make sure, though, that you don't forget to book your Christmas dinner in the hotel's Gordon Ramsay outlet