



THE CHILL-OUT WEEKEND IS THE PERFECT REMEDY FOR THE EXCESSES OF CHRISTMAS. PHILIP WATSON EXPLORES THE BEST PLACES FOR DOING ABSOLUTELY NOTHING

CHILL FACTOR

YOU KNOW THE FEELING: you need a break after the madness of Christmas and the New Year, but you can't afford the time or the energy to go on that whirlwind tour of Rio or white-water rafting blast in Nepal. The solution is the chill-out weekend: three or four days kicking back that are so relaxing that you'll feel you've been away for as many months. Here's *Esquire's* guide to the perfect places to sleep, slump and stay put. ☺

LAKESIDE IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

You take a narrow path down from the main house – Stancombe Park in Gloucestershire – through groves of ancient beech and oak trees which open out into a hidden glen. Under ivy arches, you squeeze through a labyrinth of subterranean tunnels to emerge by

a secluded lake. Beside the lake stands the Temple, a folly built in 1815 for one Rev Purnell-Edwards. Having fallen for a local gypsy wench, he had the approach tunnels made too narrow for his portly wife so he could meet his mistress in secret. Inside is a long room with a high ceiling, leading at one side to a galley kitchen and shower room. At the other end, in an alcove, is a huge Chinese bed. While the Temple is offered on a self-catering basis, there are good restaurants in nearby Tetbury, Stroud and Bath. Gourmet Champagne lunches and dinners can be provided by a local catering firm and served in the Temple, on the terrace or in the gardens. *From £495 for three nights. Enquiries: Rural Retreats (01386 701 177; www.ruralretreats.co.uk)*

“Your body is like a high-performance car: it needs good-quality petrol and regular pit-stops”

TRANQUIL IN CYPRUS

From the sun lounger, the view is three colours blue: a cerulean Mediterranean sandwiched between a cloudless sky and the marbled swimming pool. Raise yourself onto your elbow to sip your rum punch and you'll notice that, beyond the pool, a grassy slope runs down past olive and carob trees to a secluded strip of fine-grained sand, sweeping away from a rocky headland across the unspoilt horseshoe of Chrysochou Bay. The elegant Anassa hotel in the remote Akamas region of Cyprus offers perhaps the most tranquil retreat in the Mediterranean. Modelled on the contours of a sleepy Greek village, the spacious modern complex is centred on a domed chapel, scented by nearby lavender bushes. The interior expands



upon classical and religious themes with cool, arched, monasterial antechambers and expanses of marble floor. The airy bedrooms all face the sea and lead onto small private terraces; the most exclusive have private plunge pools or outdoor whirlpools. In addition to the thalassotherapy spa, there's a heated indoor pool and a gym. Tennis, squash and watersports are available, and Anassa even has a private yacht, although there's no need to leave the hotel for anything other than the obligatory trip to a cultural site (the Baths of Aphrodite are a 10-minute drive away). And, as the most southerly and easterly island in the Mediterranean, Cyprus offers sunshine all year round. **SHAUN PHILLIPS**

Four nights from £720 per person, including flights, accommodation, breakfast and private Mercedes transfers. Enquiries: Seasons in Style (0151 342 0505; www.seasonsinstyle.co.uk)

ELEGANT IN ITALY

The Villa d'Este by sedate Lake Como, north Italy, is the luxury laidback option, but newer Palazzo Arzaga is more original and less costly. Just 10 minutes from Lake Garda and 30 minutes from Verona, this 15th-century monastery is now a chic spa. The frescoes on the bedroom walls are more than 500 years old. The modern Saturnia Spa offers almost 50 treatments, but if you feel active, you can walk in the wooded grounds, head to the lake or even play the two golf courses, one of which was designed by Gary Player. Four nights from £404pp, including return flights, Avis car hire and breakfast. Enquiries: Exclusive Italy (01892 619 650; www.exclusiveworldwide.com)

Chill seekers

This page, clockwise from above: The Samling, Cumbria; Palazzo Arzaga, Italy; Anassa, Cyprus; La Residencia, Majorca. Opposite page, Brigitte Bardot shows you how it's done

FARMHOUSE IN THE ALPS

As the hearty types turn left off the (Swiss) A40 to gung-ho Chamonix, you should head right for Megève. It's the ski resort where it doesn't do to ski. A medieval village which grew in the Twenties into the French answer to St Moritz (with fewer Eurotrash), Megève is one of the Alps' gastronomic delights, with *table d'hôte* at The Club House and Idéal Sports. Probably the most relaxed dining is at the best place to stay: Les Fermes de Marie, a bucolic idyll with its own spa. Get out and relax on the move: walk the marked paths, skate on the open-air rink in the village centre or take a horse-drawn sled ride. Even, dare it be said, try chilling out on skis. **CHRIS MADIGAN** Four nights at Les Fermes de Marie from £729pp, including flights, private transfers and breakfast. Enquiries: Momentum Travel (020 7371 9111; www.momentumski.com)

COUNTRY HOUSE IN CUMBRIA

Until recently, The Samling operated an exclusive-use policy, so parties had to take over the whole 10-suite property in Ambleside, Cumbria, for more than £3,000 a night. While this made the secluded and discreet 18th-century pile popular with the likes of Tom and Nicole, it's now running as a more conventional but super-stylish country-house hotel. One bedroom has a hot tub with views over Windermere, there are woodland walks in 70 acres of grounds, and the mod-Brit cooking is top class. Lots of open fires and armchairs, too. Doubles from £120 per night, including breakfast. Enquiries: 01539 431 922; www.thesamling.com

BOHO CHIC IN MAJORCA

It can be a little too popular (and during peak months the minimum stay is often five nights) but still, La Residencia in Majorca is tranquil, stylish and a long way from the happy hardcore of Ibiza. Located in the former artists' hangout of Deia, a mountain village in the north-west of the island, the hotel has two converted 16th- and 17th-century manor houses set in 30 acres of ancient olive and citrus groves. There are three swimming pools, a sauna, a spa, an outdoor heated Jacuzzi, tennis courts and a gym. Bedrooms are stocked with antique Spanish furniture. Owned by Branson, but don't let that put you off. From £465pp for three nights, including flights, accommodation, breakfast and transfers. Contact Elegant Resorts (01244 897 777; www.elegantresorts.co.uk)

DE-STRESS IN NORTH YORKSHIRE

The Orange Tree is a B&B retreat in the stunning North York Moors National Park, dedicated to "helping you escape the stresses and strains of modern living". As well as long, blustery hikes on the moors, hearty home cooking and good wines, a studio offers relaxation classes and stress-busting workshops. Aromatherapy, reflexology, yoga and a sauna are also available. Just seven bedrooms, though, so book early. Two nights £115pp, including all meals and relaxation sessions. Enquiries: 01751 417 219; www.theorangetree.com

DETOX IN DORSET

It's vegetarian and a bit hippy, but the Middle Piccadilly Natural Healing Centre in Dorset is the ultimate healthy haven. It offers holistic therapies and a "nurturing atmosphere"; no smoking or alcohol allowed. Most popular is the two-day detox programme of healthy food, exercise and purifying treatments (mud baths, reflexology, acupressure). "Your body is like a high-performance car: it needs good-quality petrol and regular pit-stops," says therapist Eliana Harvey. Good news for my old Ford Fiesta, then. Two-day breaks from £225pp, including full board, mud bath and two treatments. Enquiries: 01963 23468;