

Make 2013 the year your holiday goes large. Martin Hemming has found the world's most epic expeditions, from narwhal-spotting in the Arctic to a wild cruise down the Congo

Unless stated, prices are per person and, where relevant, include flights from London; ask the operator about regional departure options. For some trips, you'll need a visa and insurance that's not dependent on Foreign Office advice; see fco.gov.uk

SIMON YATES AT 20,000FT Ecuador

To the climbing fraternity, or anyone who has wined their way through Touching the Void, Simon Yates will always be "the man who cut the rope" — after he let his dangling climbing partner, Joe Simpson, fall when their 1985 ascent of Siula Grande, in Peru, went belly-up. Not the most reassuring CV entry, but Simpson survived, and few mountain guides are more experienced than Yates, who next year leads an attack on the volcanic peaks of Ecuador. You'll tramp through cloud forest and alpine *paramo*, with Yates running you through glacier-skills training on your way up Cotopaxi, an active volcano at 19,300ft. The high point — the country's and yours — will be the 20,500ft Chimborazo. Boots-off time is spent in Quito, at Otavalo market and riding the Devil's Nose train. Maybe leave the Simpson conversation until the flight home. The 16-day trip departs on November 9 and starts at about £3,190 with World Expeditions (0800 0744135, worldexpeditions.co.uk).

TWO PEAKS IN A WEEK Spain and Morocco

If you suspect your expedition time is going to be limited by the boss/spouse/kids/mortgage in 2013, how about this: the biggest mountains in mainland Spain and North Africa, conquered in

just seven (strenuous) days? First on the agenda is Mulhacen, in the Sierra Nevada: it'll take you two days to reach its 11,400ft top. It's a similar, but even higher, story in the Atlas Mountains, so don't go too wild in Marrakesh the night before your second ascent — you can make the most of the souks and shishas once 13,700ft Toubkal has been seen off. The week starts at £443, excluding flights, with Spanish Highs (00 34 660 013445, spanishhighs.co.uk). The flights you'll need are UK-Malaga, Seville-Marrakesh and Marrakesh-UK: Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com) flies all three routes.

A MONTH WITH STANLEY Democratic Republic of Congo

Generally speaking, anyone who writes "dark heart" and "Africa" in the same sentence should immediately be dispatched to cliché-avoidance college. But in this case it seems unavoidable. On a 28-day adventure with Wild Frontiers (020 7736 3968, wildfrontiers.co.uk), you'll follow in the wake of the Joseph Conrad, the author of Heart of Darkness, and the controversial explorer Henry Morton Stanley as you navigate an epic 600 miles of the Congo River, west from Kisangani to Kinshasa. Don't go expecting an all-you-can-eat buffet and lounge singers on board. After you've crossed the border from Uganda, and made forays to waterfalls, forests and pygmy villages, you'll be sailing — at 7mph — on a traditional river cruiser that could be straight out of Apocalypse Now. It has a generator, a toilet, a cook and a coolbox full of Um Bongo, but nights are spent camping on the banks. The trip departs on September 6, and prices start at — the horror! the horror! — £6,845.



NARWHALS Canada

Narwhals: real or make-believe? It's hard to be sure sometimes, so fantastical and ridiculous is that barley-twist spike protruding from their heads. Well, unless Naturetrek (01962 733051, naturetrek.co.uk) is pulling a fast one, they are definitely nonfictional, and the place to see the 13ft mammals — as well as beluga and bowhead whales, and all sorts of bird life — is the ice floes of Baffin Island, in Arctic northeastern Canada. You'll fly in from Ottawa and, in the company of Inuit guides, make your way to the ice-edge camp by snowmobile and komatik sled. Departing on June 2, the 10 days cost a trip-of-a-lifetime £8,995. Narwhal fact: that "horn" is an elongated upper left canine tooth.

HIKE, HACK, RAFT Madagascar

Seeing as its small portfolio of trips for 2013 includes Iraq and Afghanistan, it's fair to say that Secret Compass

(020 3239 8038, secretcompass.com) is courting a certain tough cookie. So it's Madagascar expedition for sunbathing and Your "mission" — the complete west-east island by foot and p the island of Nosy B 9,400ft Mount Maro hatching through un the Bemarivo River. 75-mile, hold-on-tig "extremely challeng Indian Ocean, when allowed to chill out a day. The 22-day tri and costs £2,899. Flie £700 with Air France airfrance.co.uk, via Airways (020 8283 18 com), via Nairobi.

KARAKORAM BY Pakistan, China a

The thrills start early 600-mile cycle along highest paved roads,

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(007 346 3300, yaman.com)
free rates.



WITH STANLEY

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10ft mammals — as well as belugas
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Island, in Arctic northeastern Canada.
You'll fly in from Ottawa and, in
the company of Inuit guides, make
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snowmobile and kayak sled.
Departing on June 1, the 20 days cost
a trip of \$10,000-10,445. Narwhal
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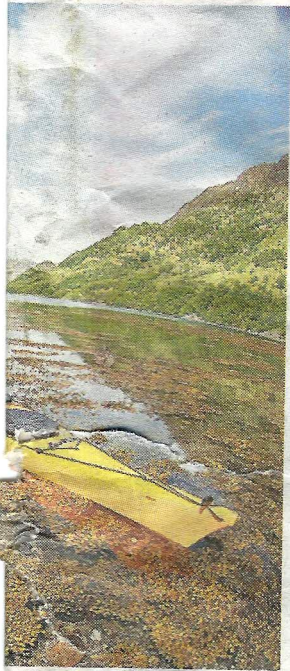
(020 3239 8038, secretcompass.com) is
courting a certain type of open-minded
tough cookie. So it's no surprise that its
Madagascar expedition doesn't settle
for sunbathing and lemur-gawping.
Your "mission" — their word — is a
complete west-east crossing of the
island by foot and paddle power. From
the island of Nosy Be, you'll trek up
9,400ft Mount Mammakoto before
backing through uncharted forest to
the Bemarivo River. Then it's a six-day,
75-mile, hold-on-tight raft ride over
"extremely challenging" rapids to the
Indian Ocean, where finally you're
allowed to chill out on the beach... for
a day. The 22-day trip departs on May 4
and costs £2,899. Flights start at about
£700 with Air France (067 663 577,
airfrance.co.uk), via Paris, or Kenya
Airways (020 426 3018, kenya-airways.
com), via Nairobi.

KARAKORAM BY BIKE
Pakistan, China and Kyrgyzstan

The thrills start early on this 21-day,
600-mile cycle along one of the world's
highest paved roads, the Karakoram

Highway. Ask nicely and the pilot of
your titchy Fokker F27 Friendship
plane will let you peep out of the
cockpit as you fly north from
Islamabad to Gilgit — you'll see K2
glowering on the horizon. By day 12,
you're pedalling over the Khunjerab
Pass into China, at 15,400ft. From here,
push on to the outdoor market at
Kashgar, eventually arriving, after
visa formalities, in Kyrgyzstan, a
world of semi-nomadic horsemen,
plains, grassy mountains and off-road
routes. You'll cover an average of 45
miles a day, 15% of them off-road, and
stay in a mix of hotels and yurts.
Support vehicles will travel alongside,
and, despite the ominous stats, the
trip notes say: "Remember, this is a
holiday not a competition." It departs
on September 21 and starts at £1,495
with Red Spokes (020 7502 7252,
redspokes.co.uk). Bike hire is £130,
and your flights will cost at least
£640: to Islamabad via Kuwait with
Kuwait Airways (020 7412 0007,
kuwaitairways.com); then back from
Bishkek via Kiev with UIA (01293
596609, flyuia.com).

AWFULLY BIG
ENTURE



AWL: Andy McCandish; Getty

If you'd rather tackle Pakistan on foot, KE Adventure (01768 773966, keadventure.com) has a 34-day Great Karakoram Traverse trek for £4,045, leaving on June 30 — it's graded 12/12 for toughness.

KAYAK THE HIGHLANDS Scotland

For an adventure to be awfully big, it needn't be awfully far away. New for 2013, Wilderness Scotland (01479 420020, wildernessscotland.com) has the Scottish Sea Kayak Trail North, a salty six-day paddle in and out of craggy inlets and wild Highlands islands around Plockton, Skye and the Summer Isles. Exploring in a team of eight, with two guides, you can expect to see seals, whales, dolphins,

medieval castles, brooding skies and all-around eye-bulging sublimeness. The price is £895, including kayaks, kit, packed lunches, hot showers and actual beds in B&B accommodation. There are dinners in good-quality restaurants and the pub — which definitely doesn't disqualify you from heroic-outdoorsman status.

If you have really big arms and a lot of time on your hands, you can add in the southern and central sections of

the trail, making a three-week, 125-mile trilogy of it. The 22-night trip from the Isle of Gigha to Ullapool starts at £2,685.

RIDE WITH DUNWOODY Cuba

One way of ensuring that your expedition breaks new ground and throws up some (hopefully pleasant) surprises is to sign up for a recce trip. "We want you to be our guinea pigs!" announces Wild Frontiers (020 7736 3968, wildfrontiers.co.uk), with a disconcerting shriek. Still, if something terrible happens on its Cuba horse trek, at least it'll make the news — it's being led by the champion jump jockey Richard Dunwoody. After a Cadillac tour of Havana, and a drive south, you'll be trotting in the hoofsteps of the *vaqueros*, camping out in Pinar del Rio province. The tobacco fields, the foothills of the Alturas Pizarosas and the limestone *mogotes* of the Unesco-listed Viñales Valley form the kind of landscapes even Desert Orchid would slow down for. There's time for swims in river and sea, and the home-cooked Cuban food will make Richard grateful that his weigh-in days are behind him. Departing on March 20, the 12-day trip starts at £3,160.

HIMALAYAN HELL'S ANGELS India

Phew. All that trekking, riding, rafting and cycling — it's as if nobody's invented the combustion engine. Take motorsport to new heights with this 15-day biker's road trip to the top of the world. In Amritsar, pick up your Chennai-made 500cc

Enfield Bullet — retro, very sexy, probably quite fast enough — and roar towards the holy Himalayas, pit-stopping at Dharamshala, home to the Dalai Lama and the exiled Tibetan government. As the passes get higher road conditions get more interesting. Speeding through the valleys of tea-planted Kangra, sheer Baspa, barren Spiti and Kullu, watch out for the drops and rest at flag-strewn gompas to pray to the gods of the road. Eventually, you'll reach the hippie hill station of Manali and colonial Shimla. You'll want to hang your head out of the window on the Toy Train back to Delhi, to feel the north Indian wind in your face one more time. Trips run in snow-free June to August and start at £2,978 with TransIndus (0844 879 3960, transindus.co.uk).

4X4 SELF-DRIVE Chile

Pay homage to Patagonia from the window of your own Jeep on an eight-day tailor-made itinerary with Cazenove + Loyd (020 7384 2332, cazloyd.com). Yes, they can sort a guide and driver if you really want them, but the way to go is self-drive, bumping and navigating your way round Chile's southern tip towards the lakes, glaciers and peaks of Argentina and the Torres del Paine National Park. The trip starts at £5,450 — it's a high price tag, but that's because you're staying, unlike a bona fide daredevil expeditionary, in the region's luxe lodges, estancias, tented camps and hotels, including the singular Singular Patagonia, a converted Victorian factory at Puerto Bories. Bruce Chatwin might not approve, but who cares when you're dining on Patagonian scallops, Magellan lamb and king crab?



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RIDE WITH DUNWOODY Cuba

Way of ensuring that your trip breaks new ground and isn't just some (hopefully pleasant) holiday is to sign up for a recce trip. "I want you to be our guinea pig!" says Wild Frontiers (020 7736 6666, wildfrontiers.co.uk), with a warning of a "certifying shriek. Still, if anything terrible happens on its first trek, at least it'll make the trip it's being led by the champion motorcycle rider Richard Dunwoody. A motorcade tour of Havana, and a road trip, you'll be trotting in the footsteps of the *vaqueros*, camping out in the mountains of the Rio province. The tobacco fields and foothills of the Alturas de Escambray and the limestone *mogotes* of the UNESCO-listed Viñales Valley are a kind of landscapes even a motorcyclist would slow down for. Time for swims in river and a taste of the home-cooked Cuban food. "I'll make Richard grateful that you're here in days are behind him." Departing on March 20, the 12-day trip costs £3,160.

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TALL SHIP CHALLENGE Tenerife to the Azores

At 197ft, with 18 sails and nine miles of rigging, the Stavros S Niarchos is the largest brig built in Britain for a century. It's bloody gorgeous — and it's yours when you join the 69-strong crew for an 11-night voyage across the Atlantic, from the Canary Islands to the Azores, with Tall Ships Adventures (023 9283 2055, tallships.org). No previous experience necessary, but prepare to muck in with the helming, climbing, hauling, standing watch and euphemistic "happy hour" (cleaning duty, done to music). Your reward: nautical miles under your belt, dolphins off the starboard and loads of new shipmates. It costs £650, excluding flights. Airlines serving Tenerife include easyJet (0843 104 5000, easyjet.com) and Monarch (0871 940 5040, monarch.co.uk); fly home to Gatwick from the Azores with SATA (0844 482 1678, sata.pt).

WORLD'S NEWEST COUNTRY South Sudan

Having gained independence in July last year, South Sudan is the world's youngest nation — and, despite renewed tensions at the border, the region is now on-limits to tourists. Be the first person you know to go with Undiscovered Destinations (0191 296 2674, undiscovered-destinations.com), which has an eight-day safari departing on December 9, 2013. Why bother? Because of Boma National Park, a flight away from the capital, Juba. Elephants, buffalo, lions, leopards and antelope have miraculously survived decades of civil war, and the park echoes with a migration to rival the Serengeti's. Visiting Murle, Anyuak and Toposa villages, and staying in a tented camp, you'll likely be the only visitors. Prices start at £3,499; an optional four-day visit to the Dinka villages around Bor costs an extra £1,749.

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See our 360-degree view over Torres del Paine National Park:
thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel

