



# Holiday in the sun

Writing course by the beach? Trevor Baker comes home with a suitcase full of ideas

Every writer is familiar with the feeling that they could get their book finished if only they were somewhere else. Home is a very distracting place. That's why so many novels are written in cafés, sheds or, best of all apparently, prison.

Much more appealing, though, than spending six months inside, is the idea of the literary retreat. Who could fail to produce a couple of thousand words a day if they were away from the tyranny of work and family for a couple of weeks, somewhere hot and sunny, with a pool to cool off in between bursts of inspiration? Especially with an expert at hand to help you out.

That's why many intensive writing courses have abandoned the traditional environment of the university campus or the local library in favour of somewhere more exotic. You can now learn how to write novels, short stories or even sitcom scripts in places like Tuscany, Ibiza and Andalusia. The combination of expert

## COURSE DETAILS

Anne Aylor's next residential course is the week-long, intensive So You Want To Write A Novel, 8-15 June 2013, La Torre de Dalt, Camós, Catalonia Spain (from £895). She returns to the Holiday Inn Algarve in Armação de Pêra from Friday 25 October to Sunday, 27 October 2013 (from €235, including accommodation). Other courses are available in London and elsewhere throughout the year.

Website: [www.anneaylor.co.uk](http://www.anneaylor.co.uk)

tuition, escape from the distractions of ordinary life and a burst of energising sunshine is highly appealing.

At least that's what I thought when I signed up for a course at the Algarve Holiday Inn in Armação de Pêra, Portugal, run by published novelist and experienced writing tutor Anne Aylor.

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Anne comes highly recommended by many of her ex-students, among them Robin Bayley, who says that his memoir *The Mango Orchard* would never have been published if he hadn't met her.

'For me her courses were indispensable, he says. 'I needed to get that kind of help because I'd never written a book before. It would be a very rare person who wants to get published who wouldn't find that kind of help indispensable.'

Even so, as I sit looking out at the beach from the hotel balcony on the evening before the course starts, I have some reservations. The blue skies, swimming pool and, beyond that, the rolling waves of the Atlantic may be a more pleasant distraction than work but they're still a distraction. And what's it going to be like being stuck with a bunch of writers for two days? I worry that they'll either be super-competitive, or else the kind of people who attend writers' groups as a form of therapy, bearing tear-stained manuscripts high on

emotional spillage and low on grammar and punctuation.

Meeting the rest of our group, though, they seem unpretentious, friendly and refreshingly normal. Some of them have flown here from parts of the UK but most are British or north American expats living in Portugal. The youngest

is just seventeen but many are retired or semi-retired and looking to shape their memoirs into a book. Some have studied with Anne before and have only good things to say about her.

When she arrives she looks, with her abundance of long hair, like someone you might expect to find running a meditation or reflexology class. This seems to be confirmed the next day when we arrive in the hotel's conference room for our first class. We're sitting in a circle around a small table, where we can see, among other things, a joss stick and a toy plastic cow that she introduces as the 'cow goddess'.

Initial impressions prove misleading. The most impressive thing about the writing exercises that she set us is how efficient they are, successfully producing the maximum amount of creativity in the minimum amount of time. Even the cow goddess serves a practical purpose, as we'll discover later.

It's not so much the exercises themselves. They usually have a

fairly simple starting point (we read something, or listen to a song, or look at a picture and then write whatever we want about it). There's something about the atmosphere of quiet concentration, broken only by the sound of twelve scribbling bios, which lends itself to total absorption. Anne's theory is that many of us attempt to write and edit what we're writing at the same time, causing a mental block. To cure this she encourages beginners to start by simply switching off the more critical parts of the brain. We can edit later but for now the plan is simply to get words on to the page.

After each exercise Anne asks for volunteers to read their work and the rest of us critique it. This is where the cow goddess comes into her own. Anne squeezes it, producing a comedy mooing sound, if anyone deprecates their own work. What's impressive, though, as we listen to everyone's writing, is that the standard is good. Everybody in our group of twelve manages to create some kind of structured story in those fifteen-minute sessions.

A disconcerting side-effect is that we reveal more about ourselves than we normally would to complete strangers. All writing, good or bad, says something about the writer but what we're coming out with here is the rawest of the raw, straight from the sub-conscious. But Anne has a knack for creating an environment where we feel comfortable with this level of exposure.

'I taught ballet for many years,' she explains after the first day's exercises. 'And if ballet is one of the hardest things you can do with the body, writing is one of the hardest things you can do with the mind. Ballet, too, is a very vulnerable thing. You're putting on a skin-tight leotard and standing in front of a mirror for an hour and a half. It's very exposing. There are a lot of parallels with writing.'

This rings true when we regroup after dinner for what she calls the 'open-mic' night. This is where we have the opportunity to read our own novels, memoirs or stories. Immediately the atmosphere seems much more tense and serious. If, with the exercises, we've been doing the literary equivalent of *Gangnam Style*, now it's time to attempt a series of fancy pirouettes.

It's a helpful, but humbling, experience. Robin Bayley describes it as being like 'a

songwriter taking their songs out of their bedroom for the first time.'

In my case the group quickly spot the central problem of the novel extract I read, which is that there's a confusing array of names and information to take in within the first few lines. Where we've been relatively gentle with the earlier critique, now the group and Anne take a much more rigorous approach. The atmosphere is still warm and supportive.

The next day everybody re-appears after breakfast looking more tired than the day before. They don't call what we're doing 'exercises' for nothing. However, the general standard is even better. This might be because we're starting to appreciate what the rest of the group likes and what kind of writing works when read aloud. One of our number, actress Emma Shaw, who's appeared in *Silent Witness*, *Bergerac* and *Holby City*, has a distinct advantage. Her comic timing gives her stories an extra edge. In an age when many writers make as much money from readings and talks as they do from selling books it's a skill worth acquiring.

Perhaps the most important lesson of the course for me was how much fun writing can be if there's no pressure to produce an end product. As a professional freelance writer (journalism and non-fiction books) I'm used to writing every day but I'd forgotten the satisfaction of creating a story for its own sake. By the end of the course, with thirty scribbled pages and twelve different stories or story-fragments, I've come up with more characters and plots than in the last thirteen years. I become aware of a problem with these kind of courses: they could become seriously addictive.

One student, Carole Goodley from Northamptonshire, has attended many of Anne's groups in the UK, Portugal and Spain and is clearly hooked. She says that her first classes with Anne, two years ago, kick-started her novel and that after each fresh course she feels inspired again.

'At home there are too many distractions,' she explains. 'There's too much everyday life going on. If you go away somewhere you're not connected to all those things and your mind is completely free. A week away gets you in the rhythm of writing regularly and you can sustain it for quite a long time. Then you need to do another course and that

## THREE OF THE BEST

### Sitcom writing in Tuscany

At the watermill in Tuscany they run various writing courses but one of the most interesting is a week's intensive sitcom course with Laurence Marks, one of the men, alongside Maurice Gran, behind *The New Statesman* and *Goodnight Sweetheart*.

29 June-6 July 2013, from £1,236 full-board (including airport transfer)

**Website:** [www.watermill.net/writing-holidays/](http://www.watermill.net/writing-holidays/)

### Learn to write on a Greek island

At the Skyros Centre on the small island of Skyros they run creative writing courses of all different kinds throughout the summer months. Days start with a yoga session and then a three-hour writing session every day. Comedian Jimmy Carr is their most famous alumni. He decided to become a comedian after other members of the course kept telling him how funny he was. Courses from £595

**Website:** [www.skyros.com](http://www.skyros.com)

### Arvon

The Arvon Foundation run courses throughout the year in four locations in the beautiful British countryside: Shropshire (John Osborne's old house); Lumb Bank in Yorkshire, Moniac Mhor in Scotland and Totleigh Barton in Devon. From £675 (or £605 sharing a room) full board, with grants available for those on low incomes.

**Website:** [www.arvonfoundation.org](http://www.arvonfoundation.org)

kick-starts it again.'

Anne's teaching and the escape from normal life are the kick-start, rather than the holiday. We barely looked at the beach and the course would have worked just as well in a conference centre in Swindon. The hotel has a lovely position on the beach but the town of Armação de Pêra itself, modern and slightly unreal in its white concrete blandness, would only really be inspiring to JG Ballard or another dystopian writer.

The chief lesson of Anne's teaching is not that you need to get away to write, it's that you need to find the story that's already inside you. If you happen to find that by the beach in the Algarve or by a pool in the Catalonian countryside, that might be a bonus but it's really not the most important thing. 