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FreeRide

Styles: Experiential Gifts Create a Can-Do Spirit



**WHETHER IT'S CLIMBING** Machu Picchu or an IOU for a trip to the zoo, gifts one does instead of throws in the back of a closet are becoming a favorite option of buyers. Americans now spend more than \$250 million per year on experiential giving, according to Jupiter Research, and the appeal is clear: Not to be cheesy, but memories last way longer than a power tool or picture frame.

The last five years have seen a definite shift toward such gifts, says **Chris Carbone** of [Social Technologies](#), a D.C.-based firm that tracks consumer trends. "We have enough spin in politics and in reality TV shows that turn out to be staged," he explains. "In our own lives, we're looking for something more real and genuine. Experiences are as real as it gets."

"It's all about creating a connection," says **Robyn Spizman**, author of "[Make it Memorable](#)." "The person who gives me perfume when I'm allergic to it: Are they listening?" The person who remembers you wanted to learn golf, though — "he was listening."

The classic experiential gift is a dream activity well beyond the beaten path — the hot-air balloon ride, the race car-driving lessons, the private falcon hunts. ([Really!](#)) And a few years ago, it would have been up to you to track down said hot air balloon. Now, recently launched sites such as [Excitations.com](#) and [Signaturedays.com](#) can do it for you in a few clicks. (Needless to say, the options for eleventh-hour shopping are endless.)

Pre-planned packages are far from the only choices, though others might require more work. Classes and workshops make fine offerings (if the recipients have time in their schedules — don't give an overbooked stressball nightly tuba lessons). Networking spots like [Meetup.com](#) and [Craigslist.org](#) are excellent resources for out-there adventures, from tarot card-reading lessons to a poi (firespinning) group you can book for your next barbecue. If the budget's just not there, teach a friend to fly-fish or babysit his bratty brood.

Even kids — apt to toss a toy aside after a week of ardor — will get more out of an activity they can enjoy all year. **Matt Niemi**, who dishes out organizational tips on the blog [Unclutterer.com](#), encourages intangibles for his 18-month-old daughter, Ella. "She's in danger of becoming super-spoiled, so we're trying to curb the toys that come into our house," says the Pittsburgh Web designer. "We got her a year's pass to the zoo last year, and, hopefully, she'll get another one this year." (Hint, hint, grandparents.)

But how do you wrap a trip to the zoo?

Presentation is everything (or nothing — clutter-averse Niemi says to print the info and be done with it). "When you bundle a gift, it's like you're waking up the senses," says Spizman. If you're giving a friend dinner for two at an organic restaurant, throw in organic produce from the farmer's market, Spizman says. Look for a community garden your pal can join, or include an organic cookbook. And many experience vendors offer wrappable goodies — DVDs, pretty reusable boxes.

Don't be too obtuse, however. If it takes too long to figure out what the heck your carefully calligraphied free-verse poem means, "they miss the whole point and the excitement," says Dallas-based [etiquette expert](#) **Colleen Rickenbacher**, who advises companies on employer gift-giving. Cute but clear: a photo of a destination, hung from the tree as an ornament, she suggests.

It's all too easy to get caught up in the excitement and forget your recipient. "It has to be a life experience for them, not for you," says Rickenbacher. "Is this person going to want to skydive?" What if he or she is afraid of heights? Run it by family or friends for a second opinion ... then swear them to secrecy.

If you're the unlucky claustrophobe who finds a submarine ride in her stocking, say something right away, says Rickenbacher. Don't waste your loved one's money by using the gift miserably, or not using it at all.

As for reciprocation next year, it won't always be possible if the experience is extravagant, and that's OK. "The person gave the gift because they wanted to," says Rickenbacher. "You do have to thank them profusely. At least a thank-you note, and it'd better be a darn well-written one." Of course, if you fail, they'll know what to give you next year: thank-you note-writing lessons.

## LEARNING

*Enough of this "if only I could" or "I wish I were able to" grouching. Give a friendly nudge to someone who talks the talk but never makes time to walk the walk when it comes to honing a new hobby.*



#### » **Steel-Drumming**

**Rockcreek Steel Drums** founder **Kevin Martin** says it's never too early (or too late) to bang out a musical career. "Our students range from age 10 to 80," he says. "Most have never played an instrument before." Percussion pupils can take a two-hour go at the Trinidadian drums (that's \$35) or an eight-week course concluding in a concert; last semester, they performed Santana's "Evil Ways." Other hits: Calypso classics like "Marianne" and "Yellow Bird." The \$200 fee includes rental drums on which to practice at home. (The Community Center, 617 Baltimore-Annapolis Blvd., Severna Park; 443-794-3326; [Rockcreeksteeldrums.com](http://Rockcreeksteeldrums.com))

#### » **Pitching Practice**

Junior baseballers can use the off-season to score tips from former **Red Sox** pitcher **John Dopson**. The half-hour lessons (\$40) focus on sharpening

mechanics, like "putting the stride foot down, the arm at the right angle, the front glove hand at the right angle," says Dopson. "Once the basics are down, they work on new pitches." Most of his students are middle-schoolers, though he sees some high-schoolers, too. (John Dopson Pitching Instruction, 8274 Lokus Road, Odenton; 410-269-0208; [Propitchinglessons.com](http://Propitchinglessons.com))

#### » **Home Henna**

If you're ready for a girls' night in that goes beyond merlot and self-manicures, **Jessica Player** can bring henna lessons right to your door. For \$10 to \$20 per person, she'll lead a two-hour course on creating the Middle Eastern body art with henna, a natural dye. She also offers six-week (\$100) and four-week (\$75) in-home classes. (703-347-3644; [Khoobsuratmehendi.com](http://Khoobsuratmehendi.com))

#### » **Scavenger Hunts**

Get a clue (for real!) and gather 14 other snooping souls for a private scavenger hunt (\$525 and up) that will have you running amok through one of 12 D.C. area institutions. At the **National Gallery of Art**, for example, you can solve the murder of a (fictitious) curator or hunt down all the naked people in the collection. (877-946-4868, [Watsonadventures.com](http://Watsonadventures.com))

#### » **Clay Animation**

Fans of "**Wallace and Gromit**" both young and not-so-young will rejoice in **Andrew Morgan**'s clay animation parties (\$300 to \$500 for three hours), where kids and grown-ups learn to build clay characters and shoot stop-motion video. Everyone leaves with DVDs of the two-minute film the group makes together, which, Morgan says, is "always about things getting smushed." He also teaches workshops (\$99) at Glen Echo Park on Saturdays and Sundays. ([Glenechopark.org](http://Glenechopark.org) or [Claymovie.com](http://Claymovie.com))



## **ADVENTURE**

*Know someone who needs jolting out of his winter doldrums? Throw him out of a plane! While skydiving is a classic option, here are our picks for the thrill-seeking set.*

» **Dogsledding**

Skiing's sure rough on the hamstrings! Instead, head three hours west to Accident, Md., where dogs will do the work for you. During **Husky Power Dogsledding's** four-hour "**Musher's Experience**" (\$150 each for two, \$195 for one), you'll learn to steer the sled, command your canine team and, most importantly, stop. You don't even need snow: They have sleds with wheels. (2008 Bumble Bee Road; 301-746-7200; [Huskypowerdogsledding.com](http://Huskypowerdogsledding.com))

» **Zipline Tours**

Modern-day Tarzans and Janes can now soar sans vines. This spring, **ACE Adventure Center** will offer **Canopy Zip Line tours** (prices TBA). "You're up in the treetops, about 80 feet above ground," says marketing manager **Beth Gill**. "Cables run from one tree to the next — you hook in and zip from one tree to the next one." (Oak Hill, W.Va.; 888-223-7238; [Acraft.com](http://Acraft.com))

» **Operation Spy**

What's a Jack Bauer fan to do during the writers' strike? Gather a group of 24 for a private, after-hours journey through the **Spy Museum's** recently opened **Operation Spy** (\$1,500). You'll have an hour to interrogate a suspected double agent, break into a safe and do other sneaky stuff to locate a missing nuclear device. For extra dinero, Zola will feed your team. (International Spy Museum, 800 F St. NW; 202-393-7798; [Spymuseum.org](http://Spymuseum.org))

» **Camp Motorsport**

Not for overprotective parents, these weeklong summer sessions (\$975) at the **Virginia International Raceway** let aspiring road warriors learn NASCAR basics from behind the wheel of race-car simulators (cool!) to the math behind gear ratios (yuck!). (1245 Pine Tree Road, Alton; 434-822-2999; [Campmotorsport.com](http://Campmotorsport.com))

» **Skim, then Soar**

Can't decide between land and sea? Touring the coast of southern Maryland in a seaplane — a hybrid aircraft that lands and takes off on water — is a two-for-one attraction. "The freedom is you can just about land anywhere," says **Chesapeake Seaplanes** owner Stan Sweikar, who takes guests on hour-long rides in his two-seater (\$150). The flights, which soar above such sites as a replica of the 17th-century sailing ship the Dove, run April through Thanksgiving. (To book, e-mail [standy@tqci.net](mailto:standy@tqci.net) or call 301-904-3935)

**VIP**

*For the friend who gushes over the lavish lifestyle depicted in US Weekly, it's easier to provide star-quality services than the paparazzi-driven drama. Brit would be jealous, y'all.*

» **Home Yoga**

Ohm alone without relying on a "[Yoga for Dummies](http://Yoga for Dummies)" DVD — and without being Madonna. **Tranquil Space** offers hour-long, one-on-one sessions (\$100-\$150) for those who might be a little more comfortable contorting in private. "We often recommend it to someone who is new to yoga and wants special assistance," says studio manager **Jo Ann Kester**, "or for a regular practicing yogi who wants to deepen their practice." Most sessions are vinyasa yoga, which focuses on breathing, but they can be tailored for individual interests. (2024 P St. NW; 202-223-9642; [Tranquilspace.com](http://Tranquilspace.com))

» **Personal Chauffer**

Wouldn't it be divine to take a break from those horn-blaring, white-knuckling commutes? If only one could calmly peruse Express in the privacy of the Camry's backseat. For \$34.50 per hour (with a three-hour minimum), **WeDriveU's** insured staff will take your rust bucket anywhere you like. Your driver will wear a black suit (sorry, no cap) or, if you need to keep a low-profile, business casual. A perfect way to take in the dazzling [holiday light show in Bull Run](http://holiday light show in Bull Run), no? (202-293-8333; [Wedriveu.com](http://Wedriveu.com))

» **Manicure Delivery**

From nail emergencies to bridal parties, **Nail Taxi** is here to do your bidding. A quick phone call can schedule an appointment with one of the 12 D.C.-area technicians to come to your pad for an array of personal services, ranging from a classic manicure (\$35) to an Oh, Baby Pedicure for pregnant women (\$60). (Even the foot tubs — with disposable liners — are brought to you.) Party rates are \$85 per hour per technician. And, heck, this could be a godsend for spa-shy fellas who, suggests founder **Cinnamon Bowser**, could find nail nirvana "watching ESPN and drinking a beer." (Nail Taxi,



866-738-3979; [Nailtaxi.com](http://Nailtaxi.com))

#### » **Star Makeover**

Take it from the naked mugs of [Eva Longoria](#) and [Cameron Diaz](#) — a little makeup can go a loooong way. Know a gal who needs a little nudge from frightening to fab? Schedule a private consultation with D.C.'s **Erwin Gomez**. In an hour-long session (\$195), clients can vent their beauty woes, learn a makeup regimen — Gomez makes them repeat it back so he knows they've remembered — and take the products and implements home. (Erwin Gomez Salon and Spa, 1519 Wisconsin Ave. NW; 202-333-7290; [Erwingomezsalon.com](http://Erwingomezsalon.com), or [Excitations.com](http://Excitations.com))

#### » **Verizon Center Box**

Sick of scooching your butt in front of folks when it's time to make a beer run at the **Verizon Center**? If you've got an extra couple of G's lying around (who doesn't?), rent a private suite. Prices range from \$1,500 (a Caps game runs \$2,000-\$3,000) on up to \$10,000 (think a Bruce Springsteen concert). Each comes with 18 tickets, but food's extra. Sadly, it's too late to snag it for **Hannah Montana's Jan. 7 show**, says Senior Vice President of Corporate Marketing **Rick Moreland**. "The demand is off the charts. I can't compare it to anything we've ever had." (Verizon Center, 601 F St. NW; 202-628-3200; [Verizoncenter.com](http://Verizoncenter.com))

### COACHING

*Forget your high school memories of dudes in ill-fitted pants blowing whistles incessantly. These experts will whip your home, wardrobe, fridge or love life into shape.*

#### » **Nutrition Coach**

The food pyramid doesn't include sugary cereals, sodas and frozen taquitos, so registered dietician **Dulcie Ward** steers clients through the supermarket of their choice to hunt down more nutritious items to toss into the cart. "Typically, people get stuck in their own food habits, and they only have a handful of recipes," she says. Even folks who think they're smart shoppers might be surprised by her tips on reading labels. As Ward notes, "There's a lot that's not as healthy as it seems." Be prepared to spend quality time in the produce section while she rattles off ideas on how to reinvent stale menus. (\$80 per hour, Mint Fitness, 1724 California St. NW; 202-328-6468; [Mintfitness.com](http://Mintfitness.com))

#### » **Fashion**

With brutal honesty, style savant **Margaret Lilly** will go through every item in your armoire and announce whether it's a hit or hideous with her "Blue Jeans and Basics" package (\$325). "Is it dated, pillied, the right silhouette? People get too attached," she says of her process. After the carnage is complete, she offers up a shopping list of what needs to be added to the wardrobe. "Maybe they're missing accessories, a top or a cardigan," Lilly explains. For an extra \$250, she'll compile a "look book" of acceptable outfits, mixing and matching the edited closet contents. Guys, don't fret. You can play, too. (Lilly's Closet, 703-969-3087; [Lillysclosetonline.com](http://Lillysclosetonline.com))

#### » **Eco**

No one said it's easy being green, but **Anca Novacovici** can take some of the work out of it by doing a room-by-room analysis of your pad (\$200-\$300). While the price and time involved depends on square footage, expect about an hour and a half to review of everything from lightbulbs to cleaning products. Then Novacovici will present you with five key recommendations of what to work on, based on budget and eco impact — one easy fix is ditching scented stuff that can actually hurt air quality. "It's a gift that educates people instead of promoting consumerism," she says. (Eco Coach, 1415 Chapin St. NW; 571-275-7700; [Eco-coach.com](http://Eco-coach.com))

#### » **Dating**

Some people are natural pickup artists. If you're not, learn to be one from **Jae Ellis** and his crew of social interaction specialists. In a three-hour private session (\$396), you can head into the field for either nighttime bar hopping or an afternoon hunting down potential dates at bookstores and coffee shops. Expect to work on such skills as eye contact, body language, opening lines, flirting, listening and "vibing." Other options include getting an evaluation of your personal space or going on a mock date with a coach of the opposite sex, who can critique your behavior throughout the evening. Even if it doesn't score you true love, Ellis says, "improved body language will impact your confidence in business settings." (Ask Romeo, 703-537-8244; [Askromeo.com](http://Askromeo.com))

## GOURMET

*Your pasta-fiend sister or wine-obsessed dad probably both have all the gadgets they need. Giving them the gift of new tastes or skills might even result in you getting invited over for a sip or a snack.*

### » DIY Wine

Owning a winery sounds great, until you realize it could require rock-busting and chemistry skills. At new wine bar/distillery **Carafe Wine Makers**, customers taste varieties like Caesar's Pinot Grigio or Mayan Merlot before starting their own batch (30 bottles, \$130-\$563). Custom labels are available; "people put photos of everything from their weddings to pets on them," says manager **Rhett Orem**. "Someone did 'Drunken Pup' wine with a shot of their dog passed out." Would-be Kendall Jacksons can assist with the wine-making process (dropping yeast into "must" or juice, helping to bottle the stuff) or not. Either way, after four to eight weeks, the intoxicating results are enough to fill a small cellar. (111 S. Alfred St., Alexandria; 703-739-5850; [Carafewinemakers.com](http://Carafewinemakers.com))



### » At-Home Romance

Like an episode of "[The Bachelor](#)" sans bickering or invasive cameras, **Casa Lisette's** romantic dinner packages send a toque-wearing chef into people's homes to cook and serve three to six-course meals for two (\$160-\$250). "We bring the restaurant to your doorstep," says the company's roving chef, **Julio L. Matta**. Menus could include rosemary-orange glazed duck breast, shrimp souffle or New York-style cheesecake. Music, china, tablecloths and after-meal tidying up come with the package. "The kitchen isn't saying 'clean me up' in the morning, which is often the most romantic part for some people," says Matta. (La Casa Lisette, 240-925-3599; [Casalisettecatering.com](http://Casalisettecatering.com))

### » Sushi/Margarita Making

Sushi and margaritas originated on opposite corners of the globe, so learning to make them at **Zengo's** interactive happy hour (last Monday of each month, 7-9 p.m.; \$50 per person) seems both worldly and wild. Blond, boisterous bar manager **Claudia Maia** and chef de cuisine **Graham Bartlett** combine forces to teach cocktail-shaking and raw-fish wrangling. "I was born in Brazil, but my heart is in Mexico," says Maia. Guests chow down on appetizers like Thai chicken empanadas and edamame while watching demos. Then they try their hands at blending margaritas and other cocktails in metal shakers and putting together dishes like the Angry Zengo Roll — a combo of spicy yellowfin tuna, avocado and chipotle mayo. "After taking this class, you can definitely have people over for sushi," says Bartlett. (781 Seventh St. NW; 202-393-2929; [Modernmexican.com](http://Modernmexican.com))

### » French Pastry Skills

**Paula Shoyer** got a diploma in pastry from the [Ritz Escoffier school](#) in Paris and operated a dessert biz in Geneva, Switzerland. So, the tart-terrified and croissant-phobic would do well to watch and listen very carefully as she shows and tells them how to make Gallic treats from mocha layer cake to chocolate eclairs. In her pro home kitchen, she whips out her whisk and mixing bowls for set classes like Quick Elegant Desserts (Jan. 29 at 6 p.m., Jan. 31 at 1 p.m.) as well as custom sessions that include more than just the sugar stuff. "I do a lot of classes where we do a full menu — soup, fish, dessert," says Shoyer. "It's nice to sit down to a meal at the end." (Most classes are \$50, Paula's Parisian Pastries, 301-404-8998; [Paulaspstry.com](http://Paulaspstry.com))

*With contributions from Express' Jennifer Barger and Vicky Hallett*

Posted by Kris Coronado at 1:26 PM on December 14, 2007

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 Comments (2)


- This is absolutely fantastic. Forget giving these just as gifts, I'm doing them myself!

Posted by [Jason Yang](#) | December 14, 2007 6:12 PM

- For You: Original Stories and Photographs by Bruce Springsteen's Legendary Fans,?

Springsteen's fans are a pretty loyal and passionate bunch. This handsome, photo-packed tome is filled with the reminiscences of Boss fans worldwide. Available through [www.foryoubruce.com](http://www.foryoubruce.com).

Posted by **Joe** | December 14, 2007 7:28 PM

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