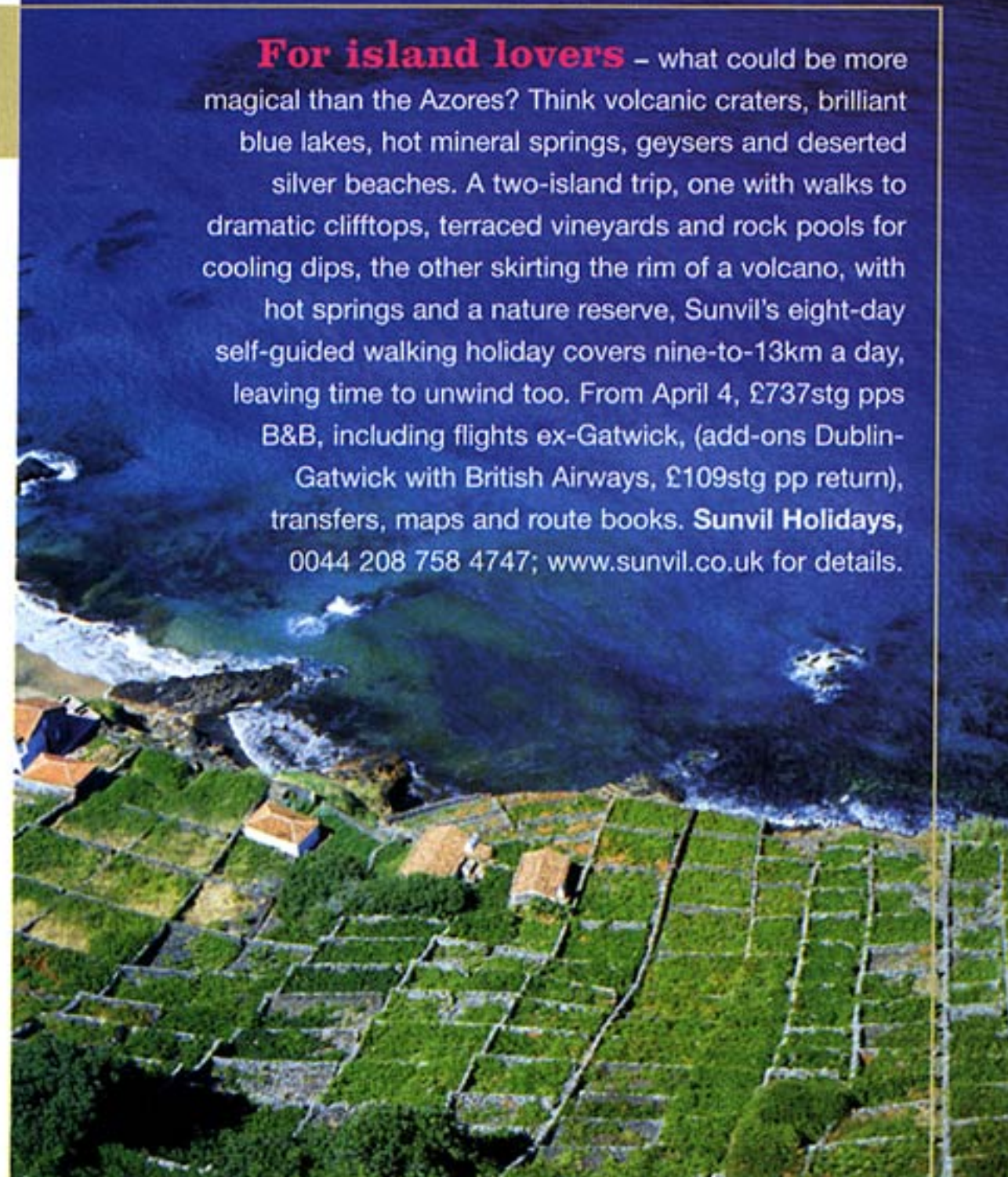


THREE OF A KIND ... BOOT CAMPS

For hardy hikers – if you're not fit before this eight-day trek in the Pyrenees, you certainly will be afterwards. Winding along the French and Spanish borders, over peaks, through pastureland, olive grove and ravines, each guided walk guarantees stunning views – and shapely pins. Accommodation is in no-frills pensiones or low-key hotels with picnic lunches and local restaurant dinners. Good for singles or those who want to stay off the beaten track. Contact Explore Worldwide, 00 44 870 333 4001; www.explore.co.uk; Maxwell Travel, Hawkin Street, Dublin 2, 01 679 3662.

For strollers – to the Julian Alps with you, that's Slovenia by the way (this year's hot spot), to wind your way through *Sound of Music*-type scenery, taking in lungfuls of ozone. Feast on views of snowy peaks, pick your way through limestone gorges, sitting beneath the country's largest waterfall – and, most importantly, refuel handsomely at restaurants and inns en route. Best thing? Your luggage is transported to your next night's stay. Get there before the crowds ruin it. Seven-night walking holiday by Uwalk.ie, Navan Travel, 1890 289 255; www.uwalk.ie, from May 21, €999, including flights ex Dublin-Ljubljana, half board in pensiones or hotels, maps, guides and restaurant suggestions.



For island lovers – what could be more magical than the Azores? Think volcanic craters, brilliant blue lakes, hot mineral springs, geysers and deserted silver beaches. A two-island trip, one with walks to dramatic clifftops, terraced vineyards and rock pools for cooling dips, the other skirting the rim of a volcano, with hot springs and a nature reserve, Sunvil's eight-day self-guided walking holiday covers nine-to-13km a day, leaving time to unwind too. From April 4, £737stg pps B&B, including flights ex-Gatwick, (add-ons Dublin-Gatwick with British Airways, £109stg pp return), transfers, maps and route books. Sunvil Holidays, 0044 208 758 4747; www.sunvil.co.uk for details.



Good trip
Can you handle it? Fuchsia and black damask weekend bag by Jasper Conran for Tripp, €100, exclusively at Debenhams, from March.

hot pursuits

FRANCES POWER goes off road.

TRAVELLING LIGHT What is the epitome of eco-chic? A Timothy Han candle, that's what. Made of soy wax, with a cotton wick and essential oils, pop it in your bag and, wherever you are, you'll be at one with nature. Available in unscented for purists, lavender, marjoram and lemongrass or grapefruit, sage, clove and orange; €40 from Appassionata Flowers, 7a Londonbridge Road, Sandymount, Dublin 4; www.appassionata.ie, or mail order from www.timothyhan.com.



Books we love

If you're popping over to Prague – as you simply must this year – remember to pack the handy *Eye Witness Guide* (Dorling Kindersley, €18.99). Not only did this clever series recently scoop Best Guide Book in the *Guardian* and *Observer* Travel Awards for the second year running, but 13 of their top sellers have just had a facelift for the 2006 holiday season. Already jammed with visuals, the guides have upped their restaurant and hotel listings, added a must-see section for each city and, our favourite, sketched out “four great days”, an itinerary for the tireless weekender. Check them out.



A LITTLE DOWN TIME Only in New York ... forget the in-room masseuse, the butler, cute little designer cosmetics or plasma screen, the chicest hotel guest service must now go that bit deeper. Shopping sprees not doing it for you? Can't get a table at Nobu? Don't stress, just make sure to stay at Chambers Hotel in midtown Manhattan, where one of their team of on-call therapists will talk you through it, a snip at just \$350 or so an hour. What are you waiting for? Pack up your troubles ... Chambers Hotel, 15 West 56th Street, New York, 001 212 974 5656; www.chambershotel.com.