

Yoga retreat



Body-changing bootcamp



Digestive healing



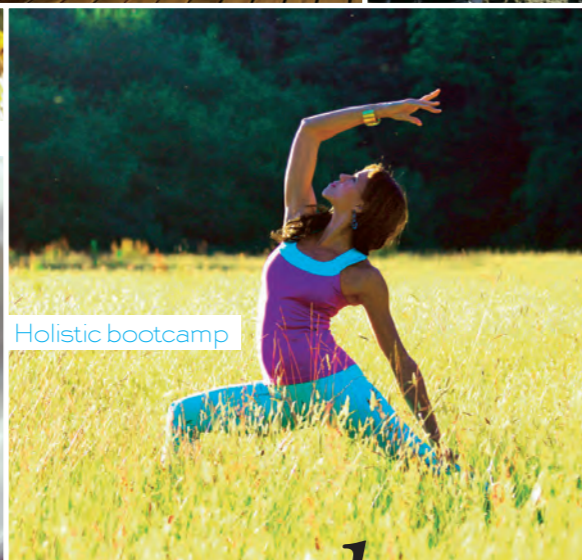
Macrobiotic



Ski fitness



Ayurvedic detox



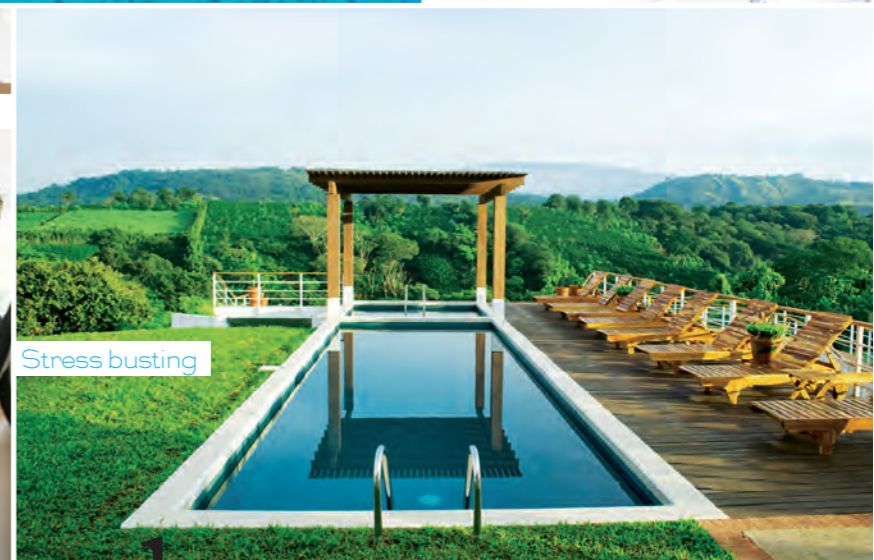
Holistic bootcamp



Anti-ageing



Tummy toning



Stress busting

How to *change your* life in a week

From meditation in Costa Rica to macrobiotics in Scotland, we present the 10 best holidays to help remodel you – body and mind

The body-changing bootcamp

What better way to approach a milestone birthday than to get in shape with a week at Prestige Boot Camp in Spain, with its three lavish villas, plus pool, sauna and hot tub, perched on beautiful hills outside Marbella? Days start early with

a run and circuit training, followed by breakfast then boxing. It sounds intimidating, but time flies due to the impressive variety of exercises – no day is the same – and the enthusiasm of the trainers (all of whom have backgrounds in military fitness).

During the course of the week I tried a mixture of beach training, canyoning,

boxing, circuit training and hill walking. There is an assortment of ages, abilities and reasons for being there: the odd chief executive enjoying not making a single decision all week; some, like me, there to shift pounds for a special occasion; and many repeat visitors who choose Prestige over a conventional holiday.

The nutritionally balanced food is delicious and cooked with care by the resident chef. The here emphasis is on low-fat, low-calorie dishes packed with 'super-foods' and plenty of fresh fish. Any down-time is spent languishing in your beautiful villa, or enjoying the various beauty treatments on offer. Bliss.

This is a programme that gets results fast; even after just three days I felt my shape starting to change. At the end of the week I'd lost half a stone and 6½in from my waist. Needless to say, I felt so good about myself by the end that the birthday was a roaring success. £1,595 for seven nights (prestigebootcamp.com) RS

The yoga retreat

I thought my life had already been changed by yoga when I booked a week's retreat with Simon Low and Jeff Phenix. (I had dabbled in yoga for a while, been on a couple of retreats.) I was wrong. Low and Phenix are two of this country's most celebrated teachers, and at Yoga

Thailand, a beachside retreat in Koh Samui aimed at serious yogis, I quickly discovered why. Six hours of yoga were scheduled daily, a morning 'yin' or dynamic practice, and an afternoon 'yang' or restorative practice. This is at least two hours more than at most retreats but it flew by.

Low's development of so-called yin-and-yang yoga stems from his belief that much Western practice is far too regimented – that we bring to our mats those very control-freak tendencies we are supposed to leave behind. His dynamic practice has beautiful flourishes introduced from other disciplines such as chigong (a Chinese martial art), which help your *chi* – life energy – flow more freely.

The toughness of the dynamic sessions somehow went unnoticed until they were over, and my mind floated free throughout. For the first time I glimpsed what the physical meditation that is yoga can be. The afternoon sessions – at an initial glance, lying around awkwardly on bolsters – were equally remarkable, designed to restore the body after its earlier exertions.

I worked so hard that week, yet it all felt effortless. No physical tiredness, no aches. Yoga was new to me, and me to it. *Jeff Phenix and Simon Low are running a joint course in Thailand, 5 to 12 Jan 2013, £709; Simon Low is running a course 12 to 19 Jan, £659 (simonlow.com; phenixyoga.com; yoga-thailand.com) AM*

The macrobiotic week

Based in a beautifully restored 19th-century manor house near Dumfries in Scotland, the Penninghame Foundation's Ultimate Health Experience offers its guests a tightly packed programme of macrobiotic learning that aims to change your health by changing your habits.

Macrobiotics has its origins in ancient Chinese medicine and promotes a diet based on traditional Mediterranean and oriental food. Fats, sugars and meat are swapped for nutrient-rich vegetables and wholegrains, the aim being to achieve an acid-alkaline balance in the digestive system. This, we were told, is the basis of good health. Our teachers were Marlene

Watson-Tara, a counsellor and a chef with a passion for the cause, and her Californian husband, Bill, a leading light in the world of macrobiotic education.

On a typical day you might rise early for yoga, take a short stroll through the woods to a lecture by Bill, delving into the mysteries of nutritional science, and then pop across to the swanky new



Above: Penninghame House in Scotland. Right: the pool at Aphrodite Hills in Cyprus

kitchen block where Marlene waxes lyrical on the benefits of miso soup before showing you how to roll the perfect vegetarian sushi. With an afternoon lecture and a home remedies class to come, there is barely time to consider your rapidly disappearing cravings for chocolate and coffee (the food here is so delicious it's enough to convert even the sweetest tooth).

Following a macrobiotic diet has been shown to give respite to sufferers of a wide variety of illnesses, but for others like me it's an investment in future health. My diet – how, what and when I eat – has been completely transformed. Plus, my pecan nuggets are a show-stopper. *From £995 for seven nights (penninghame.org) JM*

The tummy-toning week

Exercise, in my book, means running, star-jumping, squat-thrusting or, ideally, a frantic combination of all three. So I couldn't help but think that the five-day

Wellbeing Escapes Pilates and Power Plate programme at Aphrodite Hills in Cyprus sounded a little, well, tame. But Elle Macpherson and Claudia Schiffer are both fans of the Power Plate, a raised platform that vibrates rapidly while you hold various poses on top of it. So channelling my inner supermodel, I dipped into my first lunge.

My trainer, with whom I spent an hour in the gym one-on-one each day, explained how the plate's vibrations, combined with pilates poses, would strengthen my muscles without bulking them up. For an hour each day I lunged, crunched and squatted on the jiggling platform. Despite moving no more than a metre from where I started, I was spent by the end of every session. By day three, my legs looked sleeker and my stomach flatter. By day five I'd shed 1½in from my



Claudia Schiffer is a fan of the Power Plate so, channelling my inner supermodel, I dipped into a lunge

waist and lost 6 per cent of my body fat.

This is the perfect programme for those who don't fancy a bootcamp and want to concentrate on toning up fast. Aphrodite Hills itself is a gorgeous, gargantuan coastal resort and accommodation is in its five-star hotel. The itinerary allows for plenty of me-time, so is suited to those who enjoy a rest as much as a work-out. If you're self-disciplined enough, your free time can be spent at the other exercise classes on offer. If not, the sun-loungers beckon. *From £1,579 for seven nights (wellbeingescapes.co.uk) AB*

The ayurvedic detox

Parkschlösschen, Europe's only strictly ayurvedic hotel, lies in the pretty Mosel valley, home to some of Germany's best wines. Not that you'll be sampling any of those. A stay here means sticking to a strict diet (no sugar, dairy, meat and alcohol) and living according to the principles of ayurveda – the ancient Indian art of living 'in balance' with ourselves and our surroundings.

My week began with a comprehensive medical consultation with a doctor. I was told I was a mixture of two *doshas* (body types) – *vata* and *pitta* – but that they



I struggled from the lack of meat, sugar and caffeine, and the headaches induced by withdrawal

were out of balance. Ayurvedic medicine is based on the philosophy that if your *doshas* are out of balance, you cannot achieve optimum health.

An average day started with a 7.30am wake-up call and a 'breakfast' of eye-watering ginger juice, followed by a full body massage. Then there were the various herbal concoctions (and, whisper it, enemas) to 'cleanse' your system. But there were also incredible massages (particularly unforgettable was *shirodhara*, where oil is poured over your head in a continuous flow).

Food is organic vegetarian and tailored to your *dosha* type. It's all delicious but, even so, by the end of the week I was struggling from the lack of meat, sugar and caffeine, and the headaches induced by withdrawal; this detox is not for the faint-hearted. Despite the cravings, by the end of the week I had lost 7lb and was glowing with health. *From £2,255 for seven nights (parkschloesschen.de) RL*

The stress-busting week

As a single, footloose and fancy-free woman about town, I was slightly ashamed telling friends with children I was off on an 'anti-stress' week. But the reality is I work hard and play hard.

The Asclepios Wellness and Healing Retreat in Costa Rica is in a remote spot with limited internet access, which meant – hurrah – I was soon forced to break my BlackBerry addiction. The 12 light, airy rooms reflect the general atmosphere of blissful serenity.

One of Asclepios' biggest selling points is that food is prepared according to your



Left: Parkschlösschen in the Mosel Valley. Above: a relaxing treatment at Asclepios

blood type. The idea is that different blood types are predisposed to thrive – or not – on certain foods. As a type O, I was told I had the constitution of a primitive hunter-gatherer. This meant lots of protein, fruit and nuts, and ruled out refined wheat and starchy foods. Each meal was fantastic, much of it organic and grown on the estate. Sure enough, I soon felt less bloated, and my sleep grew less disturbed.

The week includes gentle physical activity in the mornings, such as Tibetan breathing exercises and yoga. Afternoons are based on more restful therapies: reiki, meditation and acupuncture. Intersperse all this with sessions in the

hammam and sauna, and gazing poolside on to the distant volcano and tropical vegetation, and you have no choice but to unwind.

The resort is set up to ensure guests fall into a sunrise/sunset sleeping pattern, so this is not a place for night owls who want to spend their evenings at the bar. After I shook off my double-espresso habit (no coffee here), and avoided the delicious selection of organic wines, I realised it was perhaps the most relaxed I'd been in a decade. *£2,609 for seven nights (asclepioscr.com) CH*

The ski fitness week

Ski holidays and getting fit should go hand in hand, but in my experience they don't. With all the stodgy food and *vin chaud*, I've always ended up fatter. But there is another way, as I discovered at Ferme du Ciel in Samoëns in France. Its owners, Andy and Su Lyell, have turned a 17th-century cow byre into a luxurious chalet, which is the perfect launching-off point for the six-day Ski Healthy Winter Weight-Loss Programme.

Samoëns offers access to the Grand Massif, the largest ski-linked area in France. There are pistes to challenge all levels (one, at 14km, is the longest blue run in Europe) and plenty of off-piste, too. Three and a half days of the boot camp are spent on the slopes (Andy and Su are excellent ski guides, and lessons can be made part of the package if required). The rest of the time is divided between cross-country skiing (exhausting), snowshoeing (exhausting and picturesque), and yoga – a mixture of Indian hatha and Chinese Taoist I was told by our teacher, Michele Willmott (who also offers life coaching as part of the bootcamp, to help with mental barriers to weight-loss or fitness).

Midweek there's a lymphatic-drainage sports massage to ease aches and pains, and – a highlight – the healthy cooking workshop with the chalet's chef (the food at Ferme du Ciel is unlike anything you'll have experienced in a ski resort: imaginative, perfectly executed and healthy without shouting about it).

I returned trimmer (an inch all over – it would have been more if I'd eschewed alcohol) and an unlikely convert to

yoga, with a headful of recipes that are already transforming the way I eat.

From £1,300 for seven nights (fermeduciel.com). EasyJet flies to Geneva from £22.99 one way (easyjet.com) TA

The holistic bootcamp

I'm the kind of girl who considers a fast trot up the Tube escalator sufficient daily activity, but the promise of a clear mind and body and perhaps a little weight loss was enough to encourage me to don some trainers and embark upon Yeotown's Yeotox programme. Based in a converted farmhouse amid 50 acres of picturesque north Devon countryside, Yeotown is run by Mercedes Ngoh, a yoga teacher, and her husband. Their holistic approach to detoxing combines hiking, exercise sessions and yoga with healthy eating. And there's no denying it's hard work; a typical day begins at 7am with a strenuous one-hour yoga class followed by a breakfast smoothie (all the delicious vegetarian food is free of wheat, dairy, sugar and caffeine).

Next a challenging but scenic six-mile hike, then back to the house for lunch before an afternoon exercise session in the studio. A good stretch and light dinner wind down the day's activities. Deep-tissue massages relax muscles, while acupuncture aims to banish bad habits, be they related to food, addiction or behaviour; this is a multi-faceted approach to getting fit and well.

Waking up every morning with sore muscles was tough, but the programme was also fun and eye-opening, learning the movements of chigong and meditation techniques, as well as receiving nutritional advice on the importance of a low-GI diet. While the aim of Yeotox is not weight loss, a decrease in body fat is often a happy side effect; I lost 1½lb and ½in from my waist. *£1,780 for four nights (yeotown.com) FG*

The digestive healing week

The Viva Mayr clinic in Austria is something of a mecca for all those with dodgy digestions (I have suffered from the aptly named irritable bowel syndrome for years without ever being able to pin down its cause). The clinic

sits on the shores of Lake Wörthersee – a beautiful spot. But this is no health spa for ladies who lunch, and the Mayr 'cure' is a famously strict regime. The philosophy is that the gut holds the key to our overall health, and eating the wrong things, at the wrong time, leads to a raft of ailments (the clinic hosts everyone from high-fliers with 'burn-out', to those with chronic diabetes). A stay here is an education in the right way to eat: chew thoroughly, eat slowly, and have your smallest meal in the evening (which, at Viva, is a measly clear vegetable broth and some deliberately stale spelt bread). As well as avoiding foods that are irritants, the idea is to give your overworked digestive system a rest – and that means eating very little. At first the raging hunger pangs, daily dose of Epsom salts (to 'cleanse' the system), and withdrawal from sugar and caffeine left me practically bed-bound. But my



Above: beside Lake Wörthersee at Viva Mayr. Right: bathing at the Terme di Saturnia

programme – individually tailored by a doctor – also included abdominal massages, detoxifying foot baths, rest and full body massages. The team of doctors and staff closely monitor your progress, so you feel you are in very safe hands. On day four I bounded out of bed bursting with energy. Six weeks on, still following the Viva principles, I find my symptoms have almost disappeared. Pretty remarkable after 15 years of a very irritable bowel indeed. *From £2,500 for seven nights; tests and medication are paid for separately (viva-mayr.com) KS*

The anti-ageing week

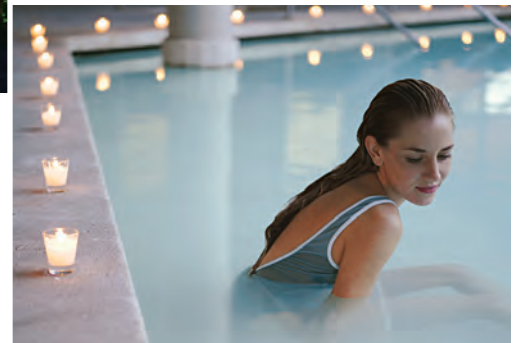
Imagine soaking yourself gently in a hot spring pool while looking out on a wooded hillside topped with a medieval castle. The thermal source of the Terme

di Saturnia spa, in the glorious Maremma area of Tuscany, gushes from the earth at 500 litres per second, at a constant 37°C and has been known for 3,000 years. Its waters, recently analysed, were found to have strong antioxidant properties and the spa bases many of its anti-ageing treatments and hydrotherapy for arthritis, skin and respiratory problems on the spring water and the black plankton it produces.

Doctors practising aesthetic medicine undertake such treatments as SkinB injections of hyaluronic acid to tone the face, and a week later it certainly seemed to have given me a more youthful complexion. The Carbositherapy injections into the cellulite-ridden bits of my body didn't have such an impact, but this is a long-term treatment. A hot thermal-mud overcoat did wonders for

The spa bases its cures on the spring waters.

The hot thermal mud did wonders for my typing-sore elbows



my typing-sore elbow joints. There are skilful massages aplenty with products based on the plankton.

Thermal cures are well known in Italy and this hotel is very Italian. The food is superb, with more Tuscan specialities than virtuous slimming fare. The rooms are luxurious and the service kindly and efficient. The only downside is the sulphurous smell wafting from the pool. That said, after a few minutes you don't notice it, as you feel so well. *From £1,650 for seven nights (termedisaturnia.it). EasyJet flies to Rome from £23.99 one way (easyjet.com) EP* ●