

The Telegraph

The 10 best fitness holidays

Whether it's learning to surf off the coast of Morocco, running across the Scottish Highlands or traversing the glaciers of Switzerland, there's a holiday out there for you that is both fun and shape-changing.

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Pack your bags for the ultimate fitness holidays Photo: GARRY WALTON

BRITISH BOOTCAMP

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AS *une femme d'un certain âge*, who has always kept herself fit by gardening and dog-walking, I never thought bootcamp would be for me. Even the list of things to pack for Nubeginnings struck fear into my heart, not to mention my dodgy hip. I had got through life perfectly well without a sports bra until now, thank you very much.

Situated in a large Victorian house on the Devon coast, Nubeginnings is well placed for punishing exercises up and down hills and dunes. The approach is holistic, with classes

on everything from acupuncture to homoeopathy. Hypnosis is used to address personal issues that for many are played out in their relationship with food.

On the first morning we were in the gym at 7.30am. Then there was an hour climbing the nearby tor, and a pre-lunch boxercise class. After lunch it was back up the tor with Nordic poles, then an hour of stretching, followed by a sports massage. I was asleep by 9pm on this and every night.

Though my muscles were often screaming, 'Stop!' no one else was screaming at me: the staff are unfailingly encouraging, and adept at tailoring the programme to different abilities. Even a gym novice like me soon picked up the language of 'abs' and 'gluts'. Meals and snacks are based on low-glycaemic foods to stabilise the blood sugar, and while initially I was horrified at the portion sizes I never went hungry.

I also had a lot of fun. There were games on the beach, salsa and aromatherapy, learning the graceful movements of qigong and yoga. Its mantra is 'Helping you lead a healthier happier life', and I returned home feeling it had done just that. *Sarah Atkinson*

Weight -1.7kg

Waist -5cm

Hips -3cm

Bicep -2cm

Thigh -2cm

High point *Completing a big 7.5km hike on the second day - and the massages*

Low point *A mid-week dip in energy*

From £1,995 for seven days (nubeginnings.co.uk)

SURFING

In a parallel universe I have abs as firm as a surfboard and arms strong enough to carry an actual surfboard for miles. In the real world carrying a 7ft foam learner's board is exhausting, especially if you've just spent three hours falling off it into the sea. I discovered this on my first day with Surf

Maroc, the company that runs the Roxy Girls retreat in Taghazout, Morocco. In the summer this beguiling spot, where arid hills meet turquoise coves, swarms with novice surfers.

Our instructors started us off in the frothy white waves, which offer tough resistance to legs working beneath the surface. After half an hour my calves and thighs ached with the effort of striding out just to waist height. Later in the week, when we progressed to deeper water, I felt the full effect of continuous paddling: it was like doing bench presses, bicep curls and press-ups at the same time. But as soon as I was up and standing the pain was forgotten. I went to bed each night aching from my fingers to my toes, but couldn't wait to get back on my board the next day. Changeable conditions and busy beaches occasionally thwarted my efforts to improve, but while I'd been concentrating on my pop-up position, 2.5cm had disappeared from my waist and hips, despite the fabulous Moroccan meals each night at our bohemian villa. Shoulders and back were stronger, posture had improved with the daily yoga classes, and abs and arms, so weak before, were much more defined. *Amy Bryant*

Weight -1.6kg

Waist -2.5cm

Hips -2.5cm

Bicep same

Thigh -0.5cm

High point *Nailing my first surf into shore on a 'green' wave, catching it as it began to break*

Low point *You can't control the conditions - waves too small or big can be frustrating*

Roxy Girls Surf Week, £475 (surfmaroc.co.uk)

GLACIER WALKING

Walking uphill is hard. Walking uphill in snow is harder. Walking uphill in snow at altitude is hardest of all. And this is how I spent a week on the glaciers of the Bernese Oberland in Switzerland, a high mountainous region in which there are no roads, people or vegetation, only rocky

peaks, icy plains and yawning crevasses, all covered in snow.

While a basic level of fitness is required, and experience of 'normal' mountain walking useful, the trip is open to beginners, which was lucky, as I had never before worn a climbing harness and was frankly scared of any activity involving one. Expert tuition in these matters and more was provided to our group of five by our Mountain Tracks guide. After two days spent practising lower down the valleys, we roped together, tied on our crampons and set off up our first glacier, leaving behind civilisation. And roped together we remained all day every day, untying only when we got to the base of the terrifying ladders that led up to the mountain huts where we stayed each night.

It was gruelling at times, as well as occasionally frightening, but this was more than outweighed by the spirit-soaring experience of walking through such vast scenery. And the fitness benefits are clear: the cardiovascular system is pumping constantly to compensate for the thinner air and legs are working overtime against the resistance of the snow (to say nothing of the adrenalin released leaping over crevasses). And despite the *Kaffee und Kuchen* consumed each afternoon I could feel my stomach flattening by the day (calorie needs shoot up at altitude, and in the cold, especially if you're also carrying a heavy pack with all your clothes and an ice axe). If you like walking and love mountains, this is perfect. *Katie Drummond*

Weight -0.5kg

Waist -1.5cm

Hips -1cm

Bicep same

Thigh +1cm

High point *Enjoying beer and rösti on the terrace of the Finsteraarhornhütte above the Aletsch glacier*

Low point *Falling into a crevasse (on a rope)*

Bernese Oberland Traverse, £995 for seven days

(mountaintracks.co.uk)

YOGA

I've dabbled in yoga holidays before but never one with six hours of classes a day. Would Simon Low's retreat in south-west Turkey prove too much or would it kick-start a new more yogic me? The holiday is held at Huzur Vadisi, which means 'peaceful valley', near the small marina of Göcek. On the first morning we were awoken by Tibetan chimes and went on a 20-minute 'silent walk' through pine forests. This set the tone for the week ahead: serenity.

Low is one of the founders of the Triyoga studios in London and teaches a form of yoga known as 'yin yang'. Each day began at 8am with a dynamic 'yang' class. The flowing postures had my arms trembling with exhaustion, but as the days progressed I found my stamina improving. At 5pm there was a restorative 'yin' class, which included moves where we lay supported by bolsters, rolled blankets and blocks. I felt my hunched office shoulders opening up, millimetre by millimetre.

We slept in yurts, kitted out with mosquito nets, fans and a skylight through which we glimpsed the night stars. If the yoga was sometimes challenging, the poolside lounging gave us a chance to recover. Most people had come on their own but our friendly, mixed-level group included one mother and daughter, a smattering of couples and pairs of female friends. At night we dined alfresco on vegetarian dishes and chatted into the small hours - well, 10pm, by which time we were wiped out. By day seven I felt more toned and had a sense of calm that stayed with me. *Sophie*

Wilson

Weight -1.2kg

Waist -3cm

Hips -3cm

Biceps Same

Thigh same

High point *Exercising outdoors overlooking olive groves and wandering goats*

Low point *The class where I ran out of steam and had to exit early, exhausted*

Simon Low is teaching at Huzur Vadisi 20 June to 4 July and 22 to 29 August, from £675 for seven days

(simonlow.com ; huzurvadisi.com)

CYCLING

In spring 250,000 cyclists descend upon Majorca, attracted by the smooth roads, challenging climbs and favourable climate. Many stay as I did at a cycling centre like Sport Active in Port d'Alcudia. From there coaches guide groups of up to 10 riders, teaching them the disciplines of team cycling. Of my fellow cyclists, some raced at amateur level, but two were complete beginners. My experience was limited to diversions around the potholes of London. I hoped not to disgrace myself.

After the safety briefing we set off on our first ride, two abreast, at a steady 14mph, tucked into the slipstream of the hard-working front rider. At the sound of the whistle, we rotated to take turns. Initially, I felt nervous and hemmed in, but by the second day I relaxed and was able to enjoy chats with my ever-changing neighbours, catching sight of the odd passing windmill or olive grove.

An average ride covered 60 miles in four to five hours. As the week progressed I began to tire, but was surprised that I could still hang on to the pace (and noticed an increase in strength and stamina on my return to London). Being in a group made it seem physically and psychologically much easier.

At the end of the week I was climbing a tricky road to a 550m mountain pass, clinging to the back wheel of Sean Kelly, the famous Irish cyclist, who occasionally coaches with Sport Active. As I reached the top, Kelly turned to me and said, 'You've something of a climber in you.' I'd come a long way in a short time. *Jason Morris*

Weight -1.3kg

Waist -0.5cm

Hips Same

Bicep same

Thigh +0.75cm

High point *A solitary climb to Lluçmajor through pine forests - tough but rewarding*

Low point *A distracting neck-ache, which eased off as my positioning improved*

From £340 for seven days (sportactive.net)

SWIMMING

A swarm of yellow and black butterfly fish cut across my path and a lone parrot fish with rainbow scales nibbled at the pastel-coloured coral: the backdrop to my holiday in Egypt was like a Disney cartoon. It was all a long way from the plasters and hairballs of my local pool in London. Our base for the six-day trip was Dahab, considered sufficiently safe from sharks that many Sharm el Sheikh dive schools have relocated there. The 14 swimmers - aged from their twenties to their fifties - were split into three groups. Each had its own safety boat piloted by a fisherman; the two guides either swam with us or dispensed advice and drinks from the boats.

Each day we set off by Jeep or camel to reach a different part of the coast, and from there - begoggled and Vaseline'd - we had a one-and-a-half-hour swim towards our lunch destination. Like an aquatic stroll we followed the edge of the reef, 60 metres offshore, pausing to point out sea life to each other on the way. After lunch we had a second swim, bringing our average daily distance up to about four miles. One afternoon we were filmed in the hotel pool above and below water, then given tips on technique. It's the perfect trip for people new to open-water swimming, as the distances are quite short and the conditions fairly easy, while still providing a good few hours of exercise each day. On our last morning I spotted an orange and white clown fish. I had found Nemo, and now my local pool has a lot to live up to. *Alex McFadyen*

Weight -1.8kg

Waist same

Hips same

Bicep +0.5cm

Thigh -1.5cm

High point Coming face to face with a poisonous but beautiful lion fish

Low point Cutting my foot on the reef

Egyptian Red Sea Winter Safari, from £720 for six days (swimtrek.com). EasyJet flies to Sharm el Sheikh from £133 return (easyjet.com)

FOREIGN BOOTCAMP

I arrived at the Château de Robernier in Provence for an In Spa fitness holiday - 'intense' level - apprehensive that a week of being bossed about by instructors would be a form of torture, but thinking it might at least make a funny story. I left a convert.

The classes were just as intense as promised, but mitigated by the staff's sense of fun. You couldn't dodge their eye, but you also felt encouraged - they wanted you to succeed, to see the point of being fit. There was a combination of group classes and personal sessions tailored to one's needs. Yoga with an amazing teacher and wonderful massage helped salve sore muscles; a constant topic of conversation was our aching bums.

It was the people who made it special; the great staff seemed genuinely to like the guests, ate every meal with us, took part in yoga classes and hikes, and helped to meld us into a group - four men and nine women, mostly in our thirties and forties, mostly professional, including a super-fit couple on their fourth In Spa holiday - they, like me, converted to fitness by In Spa.

As food editor I had been dreading the meals. Would breakfast be herb tea, and lunch carrot purée? Read about it [here](#). *Elfreda Pownall*

Weight -1kg

Waist same

Hips same

Bicep same

Thigh same

High point *Watching dawn break over the valley on the early walk through thyme-scented vineyards*

Low point *When the trainer on the first day's circuits said, 'Have a drink of water, then we'll do it again.' I thought I'd be sick*

South of France Intense, from £1,895 for seven days

(inspa.co.uk)

OFF-PISTE SKIING

Skiing is the hair-of-the-dog route to kick-starting your fitness regime; all that rich Alpine food and drink do not a cleansed liver make. But the sub-zero temperatures and ceaseless exercise burn off calories like nobody's business. And after seven days of thigh-firming, adrenalin-pumping activity I've come home with something like an endorphin addiction. As I write this - 24 hours after landing, legs still heavy with lactic acid - I'm fighting the urge to go for a run. This is far from normal for me.

I went to Tignes with Inspired to Ski, which runs courses throughout the French Alps. They, in association with Skiworld, put you up in sociable chalets (most of which you can ski to and from) with breakfast and a four-course dinner every night. You'll need the fuel. Courses range from Novice and Nervous to Off-Piste Performance, and all involve five half days of lessons. Unlike traditional ski school, there's no standing around waiting for 15 people to attempt a move before getting a go. Groups are small and advice is given on the move. The video feedback, wherein you're filmed tackling the trickiest terrain and critiqued in the chalet, is particularly good.

I went off-piste in everything from knee-deep powder to sheer, icy slopes. It was so exhilarating I hardly noticed my screaming muscles until I unbuckled my boots and found I could barely walk. Later in the week it was an effort to ski through the burn (especially in my inner thighs) but the adrenalin always took over. And frankly, any sport that involves *vin chaud* and fondue is my kind of sport. *Nisha Lilia Diu*

Weight -0.3kg

Waist -1cm

Hips -5cm

Bicep -1cm

Thigh -4cm

High point *Gliding alone through a moon-like landscape of unspoilt powder*

Low point *Wiping out on camera*

Off Piste Performance, from £709 for seven days

(inspiredtoski.co.uk ; skiworld.ltd.uk)

MOTHER-AND-BABY BOOTCAMP

A military exercise probably involves less planning and equipment than going to the gym with a five-month-old baby. Four hours of training a week is pushing it. Four hours a day is not an option. So a Tuscan villa with bootcamp exercise for mums and TLC for their kids (aged up to three) has a unique appeal, particularly if - like me - you have only

12 weeks before your wedding to lose extra pounds.

Rita Kobrak's Baby Experience Fitness breaks were launched last year when she teamed up with the trainer Alessia de Magistris from Fit Chicks, to run this programme from her villa. The first joy is travelling light with a baby. Rita provides car seat, buggy, cot, sterilising unit and toys, meaning clothes are the only thing you need to pack. With just five bedrooms in the house, the atmosphere is more villa holiday than bootcamp, and so is ideally suited for sociable NCT groups. But the exercise bit is deadly serious, and single bookings are routine.

There are four classes a day covering 'fusion' (a mix of tai chi, yoga and pilates), cardio, circuits, 'fighting fit' (Alessia's version of kick-boxing), aqua aerobics and pilates. Food is three small healthy meals a day with no snacking, no second helpings and no alcohol. The combination is a winner and in five days I lost 3 per cent body fat. Time for that final wedding-dress fitting. *Harriet Ryan*

Weight -3.4kg

Waist -3cm

Hips -2cm

Bicep -1cm

Thighs -2cm

High point A happy baby

Low point Learning the moves - some classes were over-complicated for such a short period

Baby Experience Fitness, from £800 for seven days (mum-and-baby-experience.co.uk)

RUNNING

Having recently completed my first half marathon, I couldn't wait to take my running to the next level. But on arrival at the lovely Glendavan House, a luxury B&B an hour from Aberdeen, the scale of the task dawned on me. The only terrain I'd pounded hitherto had been the treadmills and pavements of London. Looking out of my window at the snowy hills I wondered if I'd bitten off more than I could chew.

Neil and Emma Stewart of Running the Highlands offer custom-made trips. I went with my brother, an experienced runner, and Neil chose routes that were suitable for us both. It turns out that running on an uneven woodland path in snow is a completely different form of exercise, and it soon showed up my weaknesses. The slightest incline felt like a huge slog, though by day three I was making progress, developing new strength in my legs and acquiring the puff to match. Arriving at the top of each hill and taking in the breathtaking moorland views made each lung-busting climb worthwhile. Other distractions abounded: chats with Neil about nutrition and gait; the romantic turrets of Balmoral and Crathes castles; a herd of red deer surprised on the path.

Afternoons were spent in various ways, including a useful class from Emma in stretching and core strength, and vicious but effective sports massage. By the end of the trip my sceptical brother was completely won over by both.

And I was won over, too. I hadn't realised running could actually be fun. *Portia Webb*

Weight same

Waist -2.5cm

Hips -4.5cm

Bicep +0.5cm

Thigh -3cm

High point *Running down hill in powder snow*

Low point *Two miles into the first run I felt I wouldn't be able to manage the rest of the holiday*

From £120 for a one-night, two-run trip (runningthehighlands.com)