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Our Quite Interesting site



Holistic retreat that's no holiday

Qigong, kayaks and no caffeine. **Casilda Grigg** swims and surfs in Lanzarote

It's a perfect spring day in Lanzarote. There's not a cloud in the sky and I'm just about to settle down by the hotel pool with my third margarita of the morning. Bliss? Alas, this is the sad, escapist fantasy of a woman who for the last three days has been rising at 7am for qigong, three-mile runs and circuit training – and that's *before* breakfast.

Today I am standing on a wind-lashed Atlantic beach, dressed in a wetsuit, desperately trying to hold onto a huge, slippery surfboard. Waves are thrashing against the shore, the sky is slate grey and, along with several others, I'm huddling like an Antarctic penguin around the teacher, a stocky, weather-beaten Welshman called Tim. After a quick series of warm-up exercises on the beach, we're shown what to do in the water, how to lie on our stomachs with the nose of the board facing the shoreline and how to paddle with our hands. Minutes later I'm struggling barefoot across the beach, heading towards the water, board in tow.

"Come on, push the board into the waves and show a bit of attitude," Tim shouts, as I wade out slowly, watching each wave roll in with increasing anguish. And then suddenly I've twisted the board towards the shoreline and I'm on top, arms paddling furiously as a wave comes up behind me, sending me spinning forward. Water is seeping into my wetsuit and it's hard to describe the welter of emotions

I'm feeling – stomach-churning terror combined with an endorphin rush like no other.

Conscious that my sedentary lifestyle was in dire need of an overhaul, I have signed up for a week at

Purescapes, a fitness holiday set up just two years ago by Reza Niam, 46, a former engineer from Canada, and his business partner, Susana Vidal, 35, a Portuguese marine biologist. Aimed at transforming couch potatoes and burnt-out high-flyers into visions of health and sportiness, it combines boot camp activity levels with a holistic ethos (massage, yoga, organic food).

Booze is off-limits, as is chocolate and caffeine, and modern technology – whether it's mobiles, BlackBerrys or laptops – is discouraged. Only a desperate woman shells out for such a "holiday" (men are rare), but I, along with five other women ranging in age from 27 to 53, and in professions from racehorse trainer to management consultant, am such a person.

It is my third day here and I have already kayaked two miles across the Atlantic from mainland Lanzarote to the island of Graciosa. I have also cycled 30 miles in horizontal rain trailed by four buses panting menacingly behind me. As someone who was always the last to be picked for netball and lacrosse at school I am frankly amazed at my own stamina.

Within hours of arriving at the camp, a medley of rustic cottages in the centre of the island, I am brainwashed by the infectious enthusiasm of the personal trainers, Lily and David, who manage to get us doing all sorts of disagreeable things with kettlebells and Swiss balls



Let's get physical: wannabe surfers are shown how it's done, top; and Casilda catches a wave, above

without once resorting to military-style shouting or intimidation. Nothing can dampen their youthful high spirits. Not even my fellow participants, a group of strong-willed women who expend a great deal of energy lamenting the ant population (normal for the Canaries), the weather (mostly bad) and the food (too delicious for our own good – what if we get even fatter?).

Every evening over dinner, Reza, a man so fit he positively radiates endorphins, announces the next day's expedition to a sea of sometimes mutinous faces. "Tomorrow, guys, we're going to look at three volcanoes at the centre of the island," he says, smiling beatifically at us. "I'm not interested in nature," snaps Vicky, a twentysomething from Shropshire, flashing him an angry look. "Why would I want to go and look at volcanoes?"

Why indeed – but that's exactly what we do and it's fascinating. So much so that as we climb through meadows dotted with wildflowers and along precipitous coastal paths, we forget that we're exercising at all. Each morning, lunch in our rucksacks, we leave for different parts of the island, to kayak, swim, surf, cycle or hike in a landscape that's unexpectedly

empty, beautiful and varied, before returning for personal training, evening yoga and sensational tagines and risottos cooked by Vere, the camp's bossa nova-loving West Indian chef.

Within 24 hours I'm standing taller, my shoulders have relaxed and my normally billowing waistline is starting to look positively Scarlett O'Hara-esque. Could progress really be this quick?

As the week progresses I feel the stresses of modern

life peeling away – no deadlines, no pressures, no expectations from anyone else. Night falls suddenly, day breaks quickly and although I often long for books, glamour and stimulating chat, there's a wonderful absence of responsibility, and a sense of genuine physical and mental wellbeing.

As I leave in a taxi for the airport, I realise I will miss Holly's soothing yoga sessions at dusk, the surprising beauty of the island and the sense of elation with each mission accomplished. Armed with a customised CD, an exercise plan featuring pictures of a Californian beefcake in various poses, and an ingenious five-minute stretching routine involving banisters and doorframes, I vow to keep the weight off and the body moving.

♣ Purescapes' next Lanzarote retreat is in October. Other venues include Gerona (June), the Algarve (July) and Tuscany (July and August). The retreats cost £1,940 per person. To make a reservation, or find out more, call 020 7644 6110, or visit www.purescapes.com

♣ Low-fares airline Monarch offers flights to Lanzarote, including taxes, from £77.50 one-way (visit www.monarch.co.uk)

The food is delicious, but what if we get even fatter?