

Bootcamp for softies

Desperate to kick her Haribo habit and clear her mind, Debbie Attewell took off to Donegal. Could three days hiking, hatha and health food straighten out her body and mind?

Why is it that you can never see how much weight you've piled on until you see yourself in a photograph? My road to Damascus moment – the kind that strips away all pretence under the harsh illumination of reality – was when I uploaded my holiday photos and realised that sometime during the last 12 months I'd got fat.

Since hitting 35, working in a job that revolved around food, and cooking for a family of hungry boys – aged seven, 11 and 38 respectively – the evidence was there: on my face, arms, waist and thighs.

Determined to make changes, I scraped together enough willpower to cut out refined sugar (I had developed a serious Galaxy-bar habit), and joined my local gym. I lost a stone in two months, but I needed something else that would keep me on the straight and narrow (and hopefully make my body straighter and narrower) – a life-changing experience that would make me stop reaching for the Haribo.

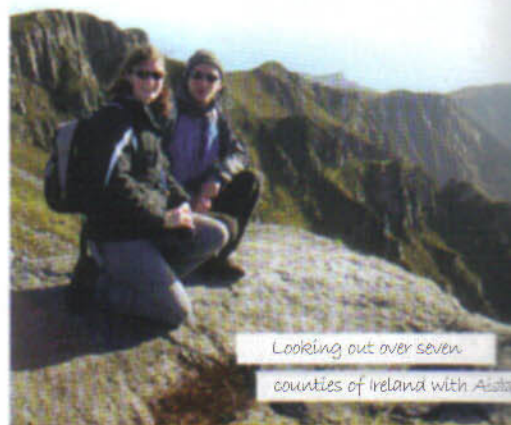
A search on the internet threw up www.bodyandsolexperience.com – an adventure detox programme with destinations throughout the world that had whipped the likes of Davina McCall into shape. So I booked myself onto one of their RenewU weekends, which claims to improve fitness and give you greater mental and physical strength with a combination of outdoor exercise and natural food at the beautiful Harvey's Point Country Hotel in Donegal, Ireland.

Day one...

There's no time to enjoy the view or the massive telly in my huge, comfortable suite as I have to meet Aidan Boyle, the yoga guru running the weekend. 'The point of the next few days is not to lose weight,' he says at the welcome meeting, 'but to improve your fitness and health. We run a no-alcohol, no-refined-sugar, no-caffeine, no-smoking policy which, coupled with the amount of activity we'll be doing, will mean you'll be detoxing as the days progress.'

Although everyone signed up for the course knew the rules, there are still a few lighthearted grumbles. And although Aidan may stress that the aim isn't to lose weight, our 1,200-calories-a-day limit is a sure bet we will. Aidan has run 'bootcamp'-style courses in Brazil with great success, so he finishes his rousing speech with: 'By the end of these few days we will gain greater mental and physical strength, become more flexible, and kick-start healthier eating habits.' Hurrah!

Without further ado our group of six is ushered into a yoga class. There are two guys – a hotelier from Switzerland and a writer from Cork. The rest of us are women – a health PR from London, a primary school teacher from Dublin, a mum from York and me. I have no idea what to expect from the yoga – and just hope that the incredibly loud grumbles from my stomach don't embarrass me too much. But I needn't have worried, the session is meditative >



Looking out over seven counties of Ireland with Aidan

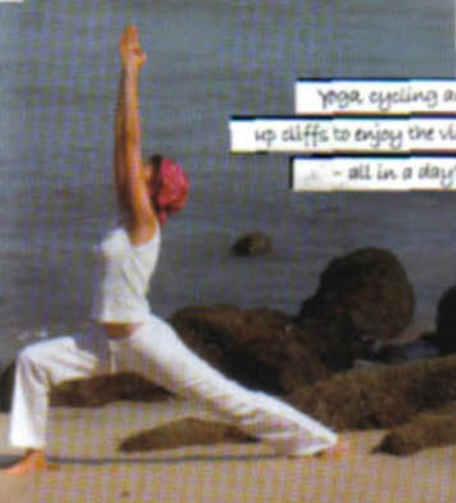


Stunning scenery

kept Debbie going on

the gruelling hikes





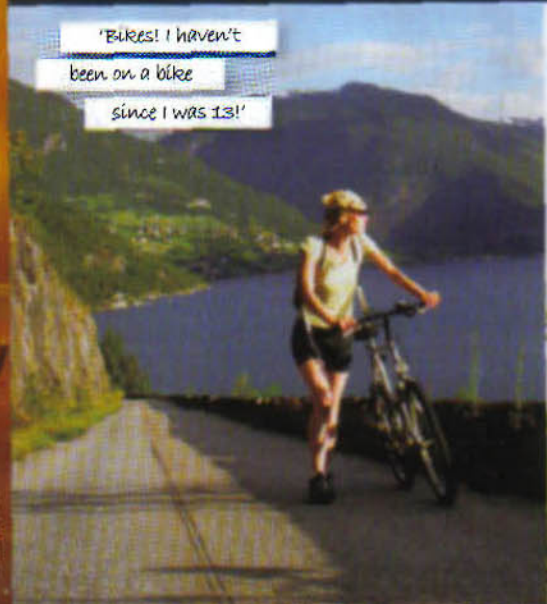
Yoga, cycling and hiking
up cliffs to enjoy the views
- all in a day's work!



Harvey's Point Country Hotel in the
lush surroundings of Donegal



The giant beds at Harvey's
Point Hotel are a
welcome sight for the weary



'Bikes! I haven't
been on a bike
since I was 13!'



'There's plenty of time to
let my mind wander as
my feet eat up the miles'



The comfy shoe is
what you're on
your feet all day



Sadly, idling away with a
glass of red in the luxurious
suite is not an option



Debbie and Big John

enjoy an endorphin

rush at the top of Slieve League

Portions are tiny but
the food is exceptional!

and involves lots of stretching and focusing on breathing. I am not surprised to feel incredibly relaxed and sleepy.

Day two...

The alarm shrills in my ear at 6.30am. Fifteen minutes later, still yawning, I pitch up at the yoga room. Unlike yesterday, this morning is less about stretching and meditation, and more about waking up our minds and warming up the body. I'm soon breathing, stretching and working harder than I've ever done before 8am in the morning! Back to the breakfast room for ginger tea and a bowl of porridge. With prunes. Or are they figs? Do I care? Nope. Hungry, I scrape my bowl clean and feel surprisingly full.

The day is outlined for us: a 20-mile bike ride followed by lunch, a massage, a hike and then more yoga. Bikes! I haven't been on a bike since I was 13 and there are rolling hills all around us. I know I'm going to fail when Aidan suggests we bring water in our backpacks so we don't have to stop and drink along the way. Half an hour later, I realise just how unfit I am. Two step classes a week do not an athlete make. Puffing my way up a steep hill, thighs screaming for mercy, I realise I won't be able to complete the full 20 miles. Thankfully, I'm allowed to opt for just 10. Gutted to be so unfit, I boost my spirits with the beauty of the Donegal countryside – especially as the route home is mostly downhill.

After indulging in a long hot shower, my spirits perk up at lunch – a delicious Niçoise salad and plenty of water. The rest of the afternoon flies by with a brisk walk around part of Lough Eske (not too challenging), a massage (heaven) and the early-evening yoga session (my inner thighs will so feel the stretch tomorrow...).

The night is topped off with an amazing dinner. Admittedly, the portions are tinier than I'd hoped, but the food really is exceptional. The three mini courses are mainly vegetarian, although you have the option of fish. My pan-seared scallops (two) on a bed of saffron risotto (about a tablespoon's worth) were absolutely fantastic.

Day three...

Wake up feeling surprisingly good. After yoga and breakfast we prepare for today's four-hour hike. We're heading off to Slieve League, the highest sea cliffs in Europe. Our guide, Big John, is hugely experienced, very entertaining and has a story to tell about almost every place we pass through. I fall into step with the school teacher from Dublin, and together we grit our teeth when the going gets tough. This is not a gentle stroll. Even for experienced hikers or ramblers (of which there are three in the group) the pace is still demanding. There are times when I think my legs just won't take me another step. But I find the determination from somewhere. Probably the thought of lunch!

Huddled into my coat – the temperature has dropped to freezing – the hot and spicy tomato soup is a godsend. One banana later, and I'm feeling re-energised and ready to make the push to the summit. The relentless pace uphill is worth it when we get to the top. The views are stunning: seven of Ireland's counties in full view.

Back at the hotel, feel-good endorphins from all the physical activity and the buzz of completion are flooding my system. More yoga and a massage and I'm ready for tonight's dinner: beautifully prepared remoulade of celeriac with tomato (gorgeous, despite being the size of a 50-pence piece) and half a dozen Donegal oysters. That night I fall into the deepest sleep I've had in years.

Day four...

Waking up early is getting easier. I feel physically tired, but more mentally alert, so, while not exactly bounding down to yoga (hobbling would be more accurate), I'm motivated to enjoy what today brings.

Breakfast is sugar-free muesli with soya milk, followed by a poached egg. I feel stuffed! We dress warmly for today's hike in the Bluestack mountains, as the temperature is -1°C. The hike is less steep than the previous day's, but still challenging as we crack on at a brisk pace through Irish peat fields. Once again the rolling countryside, baby-blue skies and pale wintry sun act like a balm on my soul, calming away all pre-Ireland stress. There's plenty of time to let my mind wander as my feet eat up the miles and I start finding solutions for problems at home that seemed, two days ago, unsolvable.

I'm gutted to find that lunch isn't hot soup today. A cold and rather unsatisfying orange and celery salad with low-fat dressing, an apple and some grapes, are all we've got to keep us going. Yet keep going we do, winding our way down through Lough Eske forest and round the back of the Lough itself. As we round the last bend, the hotel is a welcome sight.

Our last dinner is the tastiest by far. There are four courses to celebrate our new, clean-living lifestyle. As we tuck into a crab and chicory starter (the size of a sponge finger... Mmm, sponge fingers...), all of us begin to evaluate what we've gained from the experience. The school teacher feels energised and ready to face her class of eight-year-olds. The health PR is keen to boost her experience by booking something more extreme next time. Aidan reminds us that the effects of the detox will be felt over the next few days and that it's up to us to decide how much of it we will take with us when we go home.

As we say our goodbyes that night I feel quite sad to be breaking the fledgling bond our little group has formed. But I know I'll be leaving not just a little fitter and slimmer (when I get home I discover I've lost 2lb), but with a renewed sense of self. I know that I need to keep the physical activity high – maybe motivating the whole family to take long weekend walks. I've been inspired to continue to eat healthy meals – and portion size has been an enormous eye opener. But most of all, the meditation and letting my thoughts run free while walking has shown me that the power to change things in my life lies within me, and by replacing the 'I can't' thoughts with 'I can', I will make a huge difference in the future. □

FACT BOX

● A three-night RenewU weekend at the 4-star Harvey's Point Country Hotel in Donegal, Ireland, including all meals and scheduled transfers from Dublin, costs €820 (around £555). Forthcoming course dates include 1-4 February,

22-25 February and 29 March-1 April.

● A six-night Regenerate and Rejuvenate package costs €1,950 (around £1,321). Forthcoming course dates include 9-14 April and 31 May-3 June.

● For more information or to book a trip, call 020 8144

2562 or log on to www.bodyandsoulexperience.com or www.harveyspoint.com.

● Flights from the UK to Dublin cost from around £25 one way with Ryanair.com. But watch out for offers on both www.ryanair.com and www.easyjet.com, as you may pick up a deal for less.