



Pure & simple

Can an active weekend of hiking, biking and yoga cleanse the body and clear the mind? Detox virgin Helen Saunders gives it a go in the hills of Donegal

Detox and Ireland aren't two words you often find in the same sentence. The highlights of a trip to the Emerald Isle usually include the artery-furring delights of an Irish breakfast and the convivial charms of the country's pubs. Still, when the invitation came to take part in a detox weekend in the wild and woolly region of Donegal, I brushed aside any cultural clichés and accepted in an Irish twinkle.

Like many of us, I exercise regularly (but not religiously), watch what I eat and try to take care of myself. Yet I still lean on the props of a modern lifestyle: a double-shot cappuccino every morning, stodgy shop-bought

sarnies and vodka-and-cranberries every Friday night. Could I hack a four-day 'active spa vacation' that forbade alcohol, sugar and coffee, and demanded six hours' exercise a day? More worryingly, could I – a woman who turns into a screaming banshee if she's not given carbs every few hours – do it on a daily diet of just 1,200 calories? Nervously munching a chocolate croissant on the plane to Belfast, I wanted to find out.

Three hours later I'd crossed the border into the Republic's northernmost county, and as my taxi approached Harvey's Point Country Hotel on Lough Eske, a rainbow arced over it, setting off the Bluestack Mountains behind. I hadn't seen (or noticed) a rainbow for years so I took it

as a reassuring sign. Once I'd booked into my palatial premises – huge room, vast plasma TV, even vaster bath and a taxing choice of three sinks – I and my fellow detoxers sipped on the first of many cups of ginger tea as we waited in the library for our host, local boy Aidan Boyle.

STRETCHING OUT

I'd been expecting a hyped-up lifestyle guru to come bounding into the room – after all, this is the man who until recently was running a famous bikini boot camp in the Brazilian jungle, where health-minded celebs like Mariella Frostrup, Davina McCall and, er, Jade Goody have sweated into shape. But I was relieved to find that 43-year-old Aidan (a former scientist with a PhD in chemistry) was laid-back and unpretentious, with a wry turn of phrase which implied that a sense of humour was part of the detox deal.

After a reassuringly tasty snack of a smoothie and a mixed-leaf salad, we had a short briefing (getting to grips with some Irish vernacular, like 'bonnet' for 'hat' and 'runners' for 'trainers') and then it was time for our first yoga lesson with Michele Van Valey, a yoga teacher and holistic health consultant from California. It was years since I'd done yoga, but the moves were gentle, using a mix of hatha yoga – easy for beginners – and the more dynamic vinyasa. As we entered the final relaxation stage of the session, with the



The hotel overlooking Lough Eske

light fading over the hills outside, I could feel stress slipping away.

The yoga session was followed by another relaxation ritual – a lavender bath in our rooms, filled with Aidan's secret cocktail of hand-blended salts and essential oils. A G&T would've been the perfect tonic to go with it, but the minibar had been stripped of all temptations. There were, however, some shortbread biscuits, which I studiously ignored, and a few teabags. The retreat's rules had outlawed coffee (and 'diva-like behaviour') but said nothing about tea, so I put the kettle on.

At the dinner table later, our anxious band of detoxers waited for our first full meal. The 12 of us were a mixed bunch: all but one were women, aged 30 to 55, with varying levels of fitness. Some had come for the fresh air and exercise, some wanted to prove something to themselves, one was there to stop smoking, while others were enjoying time away from stressful careers and the demands of family life. We exchanged looks when the first course arrived – crab and avocado on a single leaf of chicory. It was minuscule but exquisite and was followed by vegetable soup, then monkfish wrapped in leeks with lentils (a veggie option was also available). Each dish was abstemious but delicious.

TAKE A HIKE

The next day started at 6.30am with an alarm call for our 7am yoga class. Suitably limber and alert afterwards, we feasted on

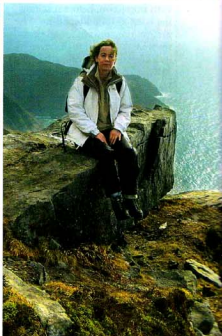


'I hadn't done yoga for years, but I could feel stress slipping away with every gentle move'

porridge and prunes before heading off for the first of the weekend's two hikes – 11 miles along the Bluestack Way. Laden with the stipulated two litres of water (that's a lot), a flask of vegetable soup and a lunchbox with a banana and apple in it, we set off through the peaty landscape just as the heavens opened. Five minutes later, the sun came out. Five minutes after that, the rain returned... and so it continued.



Clockwise from above: the start of the second day's hike; Helen takes a breather at the top of the highest sea cliff in Europe; the weekend's host, Aidan Boyle



'Changeable' doesn't come close to describing the weather in these parts, but it somehow added to the experience. The untamed landscape, inhabited by muddy, shaggy sheep, seemed impervious to the elements. As an urbanised townie, it was liberating to put on a pair of boots and feel something other than hard unyielding tarmac beneath my feet.

Led by our guide, Michael McGarrigle, a fifty-something rambler who knows the history of the hills inside out, we headed up into the Bluestack Mountains, stopping for the occasional

'comfort break' in a tumbledown ruin, until it was time for lunch. We rested our bones on a damp rock and gratefully consumed half our soup – carefully saving the rest for later. Perhaps it was because of the banana I'd scoffed mid-hike, but I was amazed to find I wasn't ravenously hungry.

GIDDY HEIGHTS

The remainder of our soup and a handful of fruit and nuts were consumed an hour or so later, after a climb that brought us high above the shores of Lough Eske. Our legs beginning to tire, →