

## Wellness

## Yoga, hillwalking and raw food in Spain



A new retreat near Malaga combines yoga with cardio fitness. **Anna Murphy** checks in

**R**awFitYoga.Life. When one of my favourite yoga teachers, Simon Low, told me at the start of last year that he was launching a retreat that went by this somewhat idiosyncratically punctuated name, I thought several things.

First, that I'd got the yoga bit covered, in that I do it regularly. Second, that I'd got the life bit covered, in that I am alive — even though, as I write, what with this January drear, it feels as if that's only by a slim margin.

But raw? Sure, I eat the odd salad, yet I have never joined the growing numbers of raw and/or juicing obsessives, who tell me that they feel so much better since they increased the ratio of raw in their diet and who do, though it pains me to admit it, have an irritating glow. (One is Kirstin Arnesen, a Norwegian raw foodie I had met on another Low retreat who is now his business partner in RawFitYoga.Life.)

And as for the fit bit? I have to say that, although yoga has given me many things — improved mental calmness; a body that is, in its mid-forties, bendier than it was when I was a teenager — cardio fitness is not among them. (As William J Broad notes in his excellent book *The Science of Yoga*, the claims on this front remain, from a scientific perspective, unconvincing.)

So the idea of going on a retreat that combined four hours of yoga a day (two in the morning, two in the afternoon) with a fitness programme and a 100 per cent raw

diet interested me, although it made me slightly scared too.

I knew the venue already, a simple finca-style hotel called Santillan in the hills above Malaga that has, incongruously perhaps, one of the flashiest yoga studios I have come across. It's a beautiful minimal space with views down to the sea and a so-called Yoga Wall, a system of straps and sockets that facilitates even the most cautious of yogis turning themselves upside down, back to front, you pretty much name it. And I knew the way Low teaches yoga, somehow making it amenable to beginners — of which there were a number on this retreat — while also challenging to more advanced students.

Everything else was new. The day started before sunrise, at 6.45am, with a hike up a nearby peak, silent, the 24 guests organised into smaller, graded groups. If there is one thing I can do, daughter of a hillwalking Yorkshireman that I am, it's walk. Or so I thought. I could only just keep up with the top group, partly because I kept dawdling to see the landscape coming into focus, like a photograph developing in a dark room. We got to the summit just as the sun definitively rose. Beauty.

Then it was back to base for a probiotic drink and the first session of yoga: a yang, or dynamic, practice that keeps you moving and therefore helps to stop even the most flibbertigibbet non-yogic of minds in its tracks. It was an unexpected pleasure of the week for me and the other long-term yoga adherents to witness people who had little or no experience coming to understand, for the first time, what it is all about.

Time for a quick green juice (cucumber, celery, lemon and ginger, plus sunflower sprouts for protein) at 10.30am before a 45-minute session with David Tilston, a Royal Marines commando turned fitness expert. Tilston specialises in, er, primal movement patterns, hand balancing, parallettes and mace bells. Yep, I know.



The Santillan yoga centre



The grounds at Santillan

Even though, thanks to him, I now have some idea about what these activities are, I am still not confident enough to talk you through them in any detail.

Except to say that he is really, really good and that the primal movement teaching in particular is really, really interesting. Essentially it's about how to use your body as an animal would, rather than adhering to those rigidly two-dimensional, strangely mechanistic repetitions all too often found in gym-land. Learning how to crawl fast and fluid on hands and feet was one exercise. Shadow fighting—cum dancing with each other was another. We are animals, after all, and several days into Tilston's teachings everyone in the group reported that they felt more in touch in a good way with that fact; with body and mind, and the atavistic connection between the two.

On some days there was a second session with Tilston in the afternoon. (No one said this was a holiday) On other days one or more of his sessions might be swapped for

another walk, or a raw-food demonstration or discussion. All the activities are optional, although the kind of people who were there were not the sort to consider them so. The second yoga session is certainly not to be missed. It's restorative, or yin, yoga. Basically (shhhh, our little secret) falling asleep in assorted positions. At last.

And what of the food? A raw-food chef called Boo Maria Boafa is boss in the kitchen, and boss it she does, turning out a range of refusenik-convincing dishes. The emphasis is on sprouted things (full of "living energy", apparently), soaked things (easier to digest), dehydrated things (the signature crackers quickly became the retreat, er, crack), and surprisingly unhealthy-tasting — for which read "delicious" — things (raw chocolate mousse made with avocado, dates and carob powder).

Apart from one juice-only day halfway through, during which you consume four drinks in total (again, optional, but again, there were no wimps on this retreat), there were two meals, brunch and dinner, an electrolyte drink, and juice for breakfast and in mid-afternoon. (At the version of the retreat that will be held in Turkey this year, you can choose to do a three-day juice fast.) For me the highlight, aside from said crackers, was the "sushi" made with cauliflower rice. Nope, Le Gavroche this is not.

To my surprise, it was hard to feel hungry. But for me it was also hard even to look at a green juice by day five. Boafa assured us during her demonstrations that this was a natural way to eat, but her kitchen full of juicers, blenders, hydrators, spiralisers and the like was from the school of Professor Branestawm. This is, after all, a world in which you have to make your own "milk" (from almonds) and "cheese" (from the leftover "nutmeat").

Still, by the end I had that raw-food glow and was a couple of kilos down. And I could move like an extra in *The Jungle Book*. And a very inspiring mind-calm-ing, body-sculpting week was had by all.

## Need to know

Anna Murphy was a guest of RawFitYoga.Life (rawfityoga.life). This year week-long retreats will be held in Santillan, Spain, starting on May 4, 11 and 25 and September 14, and at Huzur Vadisi in Turkey on June 17. Prices start at €1,545pp (£1,370pp) a week for food and accommodation only

## More great yoga breaks

**The Clover Mill, Worcestershire**  
Set in a beautiful 17th-century watermill in the Malvern Hills, this boutique retreat offers year-round hatha yoga breaks, including meditation classes, a body-type assessment, ayurvedic treatments and delicious vegetarian meals. Retreats run for two, three or five nights; the longer ones also include a cookery demonstration and a gong sound bath. Two nights' full board in stylish eco lodges costs from £695pp (01886 880859, theclovermill.com).

**Absolute Sanctuary, Thailand**  
You'll get world-class teachers and the chance to pick and mix from a variety of yoga styles at this great-value retreat in a peaceful corner of Koh Samui. Whether your preference is hatha, hot flow or ashtanga, you'll find a class to suit, and there's an opportunity to combine your practice with Pilates, fitness classes and detox programmes. A seven-night, full-board yoga programme costs from £1,939pp, based on two sharing, including flights, transfers and unlimted classes (020 3111 0803, healingholidays.co.uk).

**Soul & Surf, Portugal**  
Combine yoga with surfing classes on a laid-back holiday in the Algarve. British couple Ed and Sofie Templeton have been offering their wildly popular Soul & Surf holidays in Kerala and Sri Lanka for almost a decade. In April they will open their first permanent European base in an Iberian farmhouse close to Lagos, on a stretch of coastline renowned for its great surf breaks. No previous yoga or surf experience is required, and family-friendly breaks will begin in the summer. Seven nights' full board costs from £712pp, based on two sharing. Three nights' full board costs from £370pp (soulandsurf.com). Fly to Faro.

**Destination Yoga, Italy**  
A family-run estate set in the rolling hills of Tuscany is one of three new locations added to Destination Yoga's programme for this year (the others are Madeira and northern Portugal). Surrounded by lavender fields, vineyards and olive groves, the Locanda Cugnanello features a luxurious villa alongside an 800-year-old farmhouse, which has recently been renovated to include stylish bedrooms, an air-conditioned yoga studio, a terrace for outdoor dining, a saltwater pool and a gym. Seven nights' full board costs from £1,095pp, based on two sharing, and from £1,695 single occupancy. Dates include July 19-26, August 24-31 and October 5-12 (destinationyoga.co.uk). Fly to Pisa or Florence.

**Formentera Yoga, Spain**  
The retreats run by Jax Lysyca on this low-key Balearic isle, a 30-minute ferry hop from Ibiza, have a devoted following. Expect creative and challenging classes pitched to suit all levels, morning beach meditations and

time for surfing and sunbathing on Formentera's powdery white beaches. Five nights' half-board costs from €1,295pp, based on two sharing a suite (formenterayoga.com). Fly to Ibiza.

**Huzur Vadisi, Turkey**  
This hideaway has been offering yoga breaks in a secluded mountain valley in Turkey for 25 years. Guests sleep in comfortable yurts surrounded by pine trees and join daily yoga and meditation sessions in the open-sided yoga shala. There's free time for lounging around the attractive stone pool or for excursions into the nearby resort of Gocek, a 15-minute drive away. The vegetarian food gets rave reviews. In recent years, Huzur Vadisi has expanded its reach to offer yoga holidays in the UK, France, Spain, Italy and Iceland, but the next break at the original Turkish location is from May 4-11. Seven nights' full board costs from €1,300pp, based on two sharing, and from €1,550pp single occupancy (huzurvadisi.com). Fly to Dalaman.

**Ananda in the Himalayas, India**  
Some of the more hardcore Indian ashrams and yoga retreats can be a little too "authentic" for western tastes. At the legendary Ananda in the Himalayas, you'll get world-class tuition and ayurvedic treatments (not to mention the soul-stirring mountain views), without having to sacrifice any creature comforts. The Ananda experience doesn't come cheap, but the resort has just launched a new series of six-night group yoga retreats on fixed dates between May and August, which offer a more affordable alternative to booking an individual programme. Six nights' full board costs from £2,000pp (£1,595pp), based on two sharing, or from \$2,700pp (£2,152pp) single occupancy. The next retreat is from May 26 to June 1 (anandaspa.com). Fly to Dehradun via Delhi.

**Kaliyoga, Spain and Italy**  
This retreat started its nurturing yoga breaks in the foothills of Andalusia's Sierra Nevada mountains 18 years ago and has since expanded into Puglia, southern Italy. The six-night programmes include two yoga classes a day, healthy vegetarian meals and additional treatments with the team of in-house therapists for those who want them. In Andalusia you can combine yoga with hill-walking on certain dates and in Puglia you can tag on an optional cycling tour. Six nights' full board on a yoga and hillwalking retreat in Andalusia costs from £895pp. The next retreat is February 17-23. (kaliyoga.com). Fly to Malaga.

By Joanne O'Connor

