

fitness holidays

Survival of the fittest

Fitness holidays offer the chance to kick-start your routine in new surroundings. **Melanie Swan** is put through her paces at a boot camp in southern Spain

"Pain is weakness leaving the body. Pain is the body reminding you you're alive." Not words which, when screamed at you as you run uphill in the pouring rain, most people would call a holiday.

I like to try new things when I go away and I'm not afraid of going alone. I always like to meet new people and I thought a military fitness boot camp in the year-round sunshine of southern Spain, staying in a converted mill, would be a great idea.

I was told it never falls below 16°C there so I imagined balmy spring days – only to find the worst rain in the area for 50 years.

When most people fly to Malaga, they usually head for the city's cobbled streets with quaint tapas bars and art galleries, the luxurious hotels of Marbella or the snow on the stunning Sierra Nevada mountain range.

From the airport, I was to drive 50 miles away towards the mountains, near to the town of Iznajar on the borders of the provinces of Malaga, Granada and Cordoba.

There was nothing close by, so it was clear to see there would be no distractions. No temptation to get a chocolate bar from the nearby shop – the closest amenities were a 20-minute drive away.

Iznajar is an old Moorish stronghold with a ruined eighth-century castle on the shores of Lake Iznajar, which is the largest in Andalusia. At 900 metres above sea level with stunning views, it is a perfect location for running and hiking. It is also the largest olive-producing region in Europe – leaving you with no doubt the largest olive oil in the world.

In Abu Dhabi I go to the gym four times a week and consider myself pretty healthy, but I knew from the start that this week would not be easy.

My trainers would be two of the British Army's 400 physical training instructors (PTIs) – the boys who keep the army fit.

I braced myself for the worst: horrific wake-up calls at the crack of dawn, people shouting at me until I cried. With these preconceptions, of course, it could only be better.

Military boot camps have been rising in popularity over the last year or so. In the UK, you can even find bridal boot camps for girls desperate to lose the last couple of pounds to squeeze into their wedding dresses.

They fundamentally consist of old-school skills: running, hiking, hill treps (running up and down hills) and circuit training. Oh, and a lot of sit-ups and press-ups.

Having trained with a former English professional footballer, I knew the standards were going to be tough. I was right.

One of the camp's directors is Mark

Anthony, a fitness professional from London, who has trained the likes of the Bollywood stars Bipasha Basu and Akshay Kumar, and the Qatari princesses Muneera and Azemah.

His philosophy is to keep it simple, using basic exercises and repetition to get fast results.

The executive chef, Cynthia Kilmartin, compiled a menu to cater for the different needs of the participants. She has cooked for celebrities such as U2 as well as the late Princess Diana.

Some boot campers want to simply lose weight. They are fed carefully planned, calorie-counted meals. Others, like myself, come for the personal challenge, the desire to be pushed further than ever before and to use this week as a kick-start to getting truly fit.

Three main meals and two snacks are provided to help you through the long days. The menu is made to detoxify the system. There is no wheat, caffeine, sugar or processed food. Everything is made fresh in the house with local seasonal produce. Fresh fish, salads, home-made soups and plenty of eggs provide the mainstay of the week's meals.

The week started quite tamely after we had all been up since around

4am to catch our flights. We were weighed, measured (including around our arms, thighs and waist) and then asked why we were there. "Personal challenge," I answered. "What did I want to get out of the week? To get through it. Everyone was eager to know how our week was planned, hoping for an itinerary to stick by and brace ourselves for what was coming. Everything being weather-dependent, this was not going to happen.

On the daunting first day, we started our fitness tests. These were taken in order to show us how much we had achieved by the end of the week. Two minutes of sit-ups and press-ups to begin with. Any done incorrectly would not count.

Then came the "bleep test" or multi-stage fitness test consisting of 20-metre shuttle runs to be completed within a certain time.

There are 21 levels and as a gauge, we were told that at peak fitness most soldiers are around level 16. Army entry level for men need to be level 10.2, women, 8.1. I made 5.2. I had a lot of work to do.

Over the course of the week, we would aim to increase our results through a series of activities including log runs, boxing circuits and hiking.

The days are packed with activities. One day, after a morning run and circuit training, we hiked for nearly six hours in El Morisco, a part of the seabed in the Jurassic period and now at an altitude of 1,300m.

A full day of the week is spent hiking, while another is spent doing water sports such as kayaking on Lake Cubillas. This was considered our "easy day", which came towards the end of the week as everyone began to rapidly flag with muscle fatigue, knee pains and, well, every other body part that could possibly hurt after so much exercise.

One of the best things about such an intensive week working alongside such experienced fitness professionals is the education. They really make sure you take home good techniques for safe and healthy workouts in the future. We were encouraged to learn about our muscles, stretching, preparations for exercise and the importance of rest for muscle recovery.

We were shown how to create our own circuits, thinking about multiple exercises for each muscle group. We were taught the importance of running outdoors, not conditioning your body to run on flat surfaces in straight lines like when running on a treadmill.

Every one of us left that camp knowing more than when we came. For me, I left with confidence.

On my final day's fitness test, I'd finally cracked it. I was army fit. I reached level 9.1 on the bleep test and it surprised me how

quickly I saw results.

I didn't lose much weight – just a couple of pounds – but at 57 kilos, I wasn't there to lose weight as much as one up and get fit.

The measurements around my thighs and the tops of my arms did get smaller and my upper body was certainly firmer, thanks to the grueling core training we did most days.

But now I can take to the streets with confidence, not afraid to run in public, not perturbed by a little rain.

I've run up muddy, virtually vertical olive groves. A minute of weighted full sit-ups or press-ups now feels like routine and my tricep dips are now perfect.

Getting to the end of my week at boot camp gave me a great sense of achievement, though by the end I could not bear to see another nut, salad leaf or bowl of soup. I did refuse to undo all my hard work by going back to my old habits... apart from a Snickers on the flight home.

Travelling to do one of these

courses is a very intensive way to work out and kick start your regime whether you are obese, unfit or just want to take your fitness to a higher level.

There were no distractions and you're among like-minded people who all know that you get out what you put in. At the gym, people aren't always using correct techniques whereas here, everything is catered to your needs and skill level to ensure that you go home able to be independent, not needing expensive personal trainers in the gym.

People can get lazy at the gym too, not pushing themselves, falling into routines. We can all do more than we do and boot camp proves this. One woman, aged 46, had never exercised in her life and she left being able to run, press weights and generally have the confidence to walk into a gym, which she never had before back home in London.

The camp is a perfect location to reach some of the local sights too. Just

an hour away lies Granada, a historic treasure, the last stronghold of the Moors in Spain and home to the Alhambra, a stunningly well-preserved Moorish citadel and palace. Nearby is the Hotel Bobadilla, just 10 minutes from El Molino (The Mill). The hotel is a copy of an Andalusian palace and is a favourite of King Juan Carlos of Spain as well as celebrities including Tom Cruise. Further West lies Seville, famous for its oranges and as the setting for the opera *Carmen*.

That's if you've got the energy to move – I was so shattered for a couple of days that I could barely walk, but after that I was so bitten by the exercise-bug that I couldn't wait to start running again.

✉ mswan@thenational.ae

● **A place at Boot Camp Spain costs US\$2,395 (Dh8,810) based on two people sharing, for a minimum of six hours daily training (all inclusive). See www.bootcampspain.com**

country house set in a 1,300 hectare estate in south-west Scotland.

A six-night stay at *The Camp* (www.thecamp.co.uk; 0044 7879 555 041) costs from \$2,707 (Dh9,943) for a private room and \$2,243 (Dh8,238) based on two people sharing, including meals, kit, transfers, insurance and taxes.

The Complete Retreat, Spain

This up-at-dawn boot camp – "a body and mind overhaul" – takes no prisoners. It's been called torturous and is the hardest thing you'll do. Mixed groups of 10 to 12 come for a one-week course. Cue full-on days of lengthy hikes and mountain climbs combined with three-hour sessions of toning and stretching yoga. Hungry work. And the food – it's raw everything. Which means green veg and sprout drinks three times a day, litres of water, almond milk and baby-sized portions of salad, gazpacho, beans and seeds. The menu aims to strengthen your immune system and aid weight loss. There are occasional treats: massage and dips in the pool and the location, a whitewashed villa in the hills of Gaucin, is stunning.

A six-night stay at *The Complete Retreat* (www.thecompleteretreat.com; 0044 79 4121 4750) costs from \$2,862 (Dh10,512) per person sharing a double room, including meals, activities, treatments (except massages) and taxes.

The Camp, Scotland

This was the first boot camp to introduce week-long, women-only courses in the UK. That was three years ago, and it is now frequently lauded as the best. Run by ex-Special Forces personal trainers who had the idea while serving in the Middle East, this military-style training promises "you'll safely drop a dress size and tone up in a week". You rise at 5.45am, stand down at 10pm, and in between is a constant assortment of adrenal-in-fueled activities: boxing, river crossings, hillwalking, biking, fell running, cardio workouts and yoga. The target is to burn 5,000 calories a day. The diet is rigid too, designed by the nutritionist on hand for personal advice on the way you eat. The location is a stunning



Main image and above, Mark Anthony's boot camp follows the simple philosophy of basic exercises and repetition.

↳ The best of the rest

Fresh air, good food and exercise – all in a holiday

Wildfitness, Kenya

Wildfitness takes a rigorous but exotic approach to its retreats. Located on the Watamu coast, it uses the natural habitat to get you fit. A sample itinerary of the nine-day Kick Start programme includes barefoot boxing on the beach, sprinting up sand dunes and swimming across creeks. You're exercising by 6.15am most days but you'll have had a mental shift and be completing eight-mile jungle circuits by the end of it. Set up in 2000 by the athlete Tara Wood, who grew up in Kenya, the trips are run by hand-picked expert personal trainers.

The diet here contains no sugar or caffeine. Everything is fresh but it's a delicious mix of tropical fruits, fresh fish and coconut trifles, depending on the menu you choose, (Pilgrimage Hunter Gatherer). And the elegant Baraka house, with five villa-style rooms overlooking the Indian Ocean, makes it feel less grueling than it is.

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Kangaroo Island Health Retreat, Australia

Run by Sue McCarthy, who has spent 30 years teaching health and well-being, this centre offers a detox designed to help combat the problems of stress, burnout, weight control and getting fit. The focus is on healthy diet, exercise and education. The days start at 7am with a skin brush, a litre of water and a 3km power walk. It goes on to sea dips, Pilates, swimming and more beach and bush walking (60-80km in the week on the Dynamic Detox package,

also included is yoga, meditation, chakra cleansing, massage and reflexology along with food classes and lectures on nutrition and anatomy. The fast-food process starts with water on the first day, fruits and seeds the next, then grains, pulses, vegetables and salads, then finally eggs and cheese. The centre, with six simple rooms on the unspoilt island, is equally contemplative and motivating.

A six-night stay at *Kangaroo Island Health Retreat* (www.khealthretreat.com; 061 88553 5374) costs from \$2,386 (Dh8,580) for a private room, including taxes.

Rancho Cortez, USA

Spa, spurs and sweat. This Texan ranch offers a fitness programme in addition to the dude ranch experience. The routine includes a three-hour hike and all the exercise classes you can pack in, along with ranch activities and horse-riding. There is a state-of-the-art gym and indoor pool, but the beauty of *Rancho Cortez* is its outdoor gym – 2,000 hectares of hill country providing about 104km of hiking and riding trails. Teaching includes listening to your body, the correct way to train and trying new exercises (horseback yoga, for instance). It's all done on a low-fat, low-calorie but gourmet menu: wheat pancakes and fruit, grilled shrimps, bean soup, and ranch juice. You design your fitness package with the help of the personal trainers, who will push you to work out as much as you are able. Then slow it down a bit with a hot tub and hammock before enjoying a massage, sunsets and campfire marshmallows.

A six-night stay at *Rancho Cortez* (www.ranchocortez.com; 001 830 796 9339) costs from \$1,450 (Dh5,327) per person sharing a cabin, including meals, five-to-seven hours of workout opportunities, three horseback riding activities, classes, dinner demonstrations and taxes.

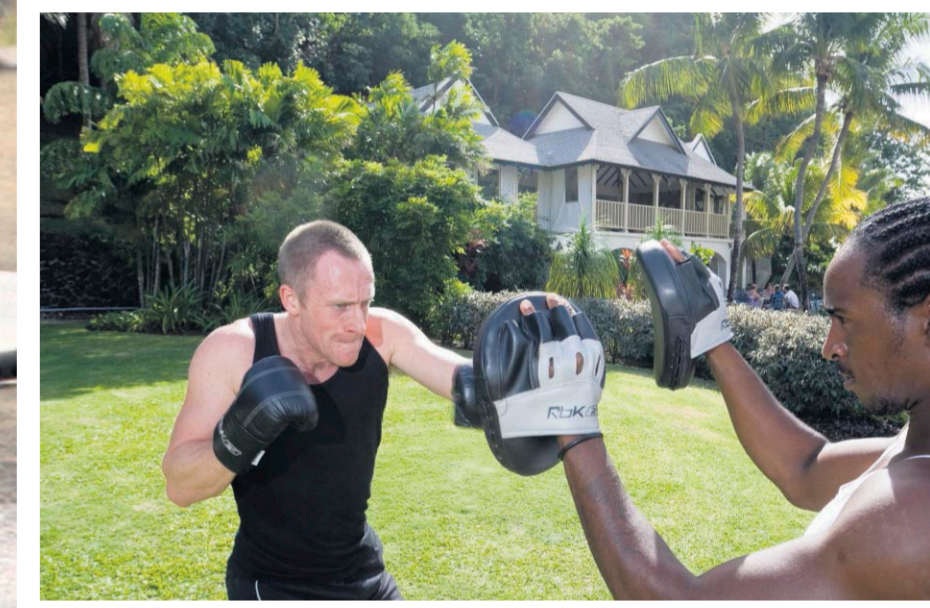
Camp Biche, France

The foie gras and strawberry gateau is a clue – this is a luxury camp that will not make you feel guilty for having a glass of red or dessert. Based in the hills of south-west France, not far from Toulouse, the camp doesn't even have weighing scales. The objective? "To make sure everyone leaves appreciating their body as it is now," says Libby Pratt, who planned it all. "It's about fitness, not weight, and you don't need to suffer." Not that the Kick Start programme doesn't have a tough schedule: abs at 6.30am, yoga at 7am, followed by daily 16km hikes, ending with Pilates and more yoga. But there are five-course candlelit organic suppers to relish – with wine. The rules: smaller portions, no snacks, be more active, stay thin – it's the French way. No two hikes are the same, exploring the beautiful countryside of Tarn-et-Garonne. Other highlights: the 800-year-old mansion catering for just five guests at a time, swimming pool and water therapy spa.

A seven-night stay at *Camp Biche* (www.campbiche.com; 0044 7617 7253) costs from \$3,738 (Dh13,730) for a private room, including transfers, meals, daily massages, activities and taxes.

The Body Holiday, St Lucia

The Body Holiday might sound a bit full-on, but the reality is different. At this luxury resort, located on the tip of St Lucia, pampering, sunbathing and peace of mind is more important than weights and workouts. Think as much daily yoga as you could want or need, given by international masters, plus anything from Pilates, scuba diving and golf lessons to running, cycling and aerobic and relaxation classes. Instructors cater for everyone's needs, and you can always give yourself permission to do none of the above and have a lie in. But



Top to bottom, the New You Boot Camp, Portugal; The Camp, Scotland; The Body Holiday, St Lucia; the Kangaroo Island Health Retreat in Australia. All photos courtesy of the resorts

New You Boot Camp, Portugal

This British outfit started in 2007 offering a back-to-basics bunk-style military regime in the UK but added the luxury spa retreat in Portugal last year. As they say, "Why train in the rain?" A boutique resort near the fishing village of Carvoeiro is your stylish base, and it's a mixed group. Days are broken up into hourly lessons and include sunrise walks, bike riding, abseiling, water sports and relaxation sessions. Army-style activities still feature too: command tasks, logs runs, BodyPump, boxing and hiking along the Algarve coast. There's also a spa. The local chefs have worked with their "Nutrition Squad", which sounds scary, but the food never leaves you bored or hungry.

A six-night stay at *New You Boot Camp* (www.newyoubootcamp.com; 0044 12 9255 8336) costs from \$2,313 (Dh8,495) for a twin room, including accommodation, food and drink, activities, transfers and taxes.

Fitscape, Morocco

Launched in 2009, Fitscape hosts week-long boot camps in exotic locations (the Moroccan coast, the Dolomite Mountains in Northern Italy and Ibiza) and take expert trainers, massage

therapists, nutritionists and a yoga guru as a source of inspiration. The focus is on getting fit and "feeling energised, recharged and motivated". Hikes, circuit training, jogging and bike rides are optional – you customise your routine with the trainer's advice. Add swimming, massage and golf to the agenda, plus early nights, beautiful surroundings and a cleansing diet, and this camp delivers.

A seven-night stay at *Fitscape* (www.fitscape.co.uk; 0044 208968 0501) costs from \$1,848 (Dh6,787) based on two people sharing, including taxes.

Body and Soul Adventures, Brazil

Body and Soul Adventures, a spin-off of the famous Ashram Spa in California, is a balance between exercise, relaxation and reflection. Located 150 miles from Rio de Janeiro, Mike Mitchell has run this retreat for nine years. A maximum of 10 guests split their time between a remote beach in chalets 50m from the water and Paraty, "The Venice of South America". Kayaking and rainforest hikes are the cornerstones of the programme, with swimming, surfing, tree-canopy walking and Capoeira as your "relaxation". Difficult trails are rewarded with sunbathing on beaches and twilight massages.

But be warned: activities become progressively more challenging, ending in a 660m climb up Mamanáguá Peak. Healthy meals include fresh veggies and fruit, optional seafood and a restricted calorie menu for those who want to lose weight.

The six-night *Paraty Adventure* (www.bodysouladventures.com; 0044 20 3002 0936) costs from \$2,250 (Dh8,264) per person sharing a double eco room, including taxes. Water rappelling costs \$150 (Dh918) extra.

✉ Kitty Melrose