

Evening Standard

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STEVE Halsall is known as the Body Whisperer. The breaks he runs at La Manga in Spain are "bikini boot camps" where he, quite literally, works your butt off for five days, feeds you a super-healthy diet and sends you off ready for the beach.

No smoking, drinking, caffeine, dairy, wheat or saturated fat, and lots of running at dawn, interval training and plyometric exercises (star jumps with weights). On arrival I went for a pear. "Drop it: no fruit or carbs after 5pm."

Lovely as it sounds to run down a beach at dawn I had difficulty enjoying it. In between sessions I took to my bed with caffeine- and nicotine-withdrawal headaches.

La Manga is a gated community for sports freaks. Chiva Som it ain't. Its concrete architecture is strung across 1,400 acres overlooking the sea on the Costa Calida: lumpy villas, Legoland apartment blocks, golf courses and a Hyatt full of footballers. Brits love it. The gym is outstandingly ugly and the spa looks like Alcatraz.

Some footballers' wives joined us. I didn't take to them - probably caffeine withdrawal and the fact that they could run faster than me on the beach. The pampered housewives were all smiles, pony-tails a swish, soft light reflected off expensive velour jogging pants hugging trim little bottoms with body mass indices of 19. I slouched behind, full of bile.

One pre-lunch exercise involved running up and down steps - as torturous as it sounds. But something about that lactic acid fuelled exercise shifted my mood.

The withdrawal symptoms went and I spent the next three days happier than I have been for months, happier than my skiing holiday, happier than the last time I was in love, happier than when I found an Alexander McQueen dress in the sales for [pounds sterling]200; the only thing which has made me happier recently was lunch at The Fat Duck, which cost the same as five days with Halsall, but we could smoke, drink and there was no quinoa on the menu.



The tight-bottomed wives became friends.

The gym no longer bothered me.

There were handsome, vigorous young men to ogle while stretching. When it started raining I still pounded the streets while others slept.

Our devotion to wellbeing only went so far, though. In between sessions I suspect Halsall wanted to talk about relaxation and the importance of nuts.

But the inner teen in all of us triumphed over his wholesome spirit and we slumped on the sofa watching TV.

"Would you like dinner at a local Thai restaurant?" asked Halsall one night.

No, we wanted to eat poached fish and watch Ab Fab. "Do you want to do some chakra visualisation work?" Stop it!

We're watching Bruce Almighty with mugs of detox tea.

The key to happiness is vigorous CV and a varied library of exercise. A month on and the improvements Steve made to my body are still in place and make bikini-wearing feasible.

Prices from £1400 excluding flights to Murcia, 020 7788 4087 info@fitness12retreats.com