

BOOTY CAMP
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By

Kathy Gilfillan

For the past three years I have found a week to disappear to Tuscany on a Yogahikes Retreat, which charges me up spiritually, and physically for the rest of the year. I'll come clean here and admit that I'm a reluctant broadcaster of Yogahikes because I want to hug it to myself but that would be selfish and yoga is about heart opening.

Ian Flocks, a former music business agent and now a successful film producer set up Yogahikes because he couldn't find its exact pleasure combination anywhere else. As long as he doesn't lose money, he's happy. This is a man who, after all, bottles his own organic olive oil. He runs Yogahikes with Yoga Goddess Alexa Harris from The Life Centre in Notting Hill Gate who works her magic with her apprentice, Lizzy. Twice a year in May and September they take over Iesolana, a beautiful converted olive borgha near Arezzo in the Tuscan hills and fill it with about a dozen acolytes and two gifted masseuses.

There are about four hours of yoga and two hikes (one optional) every day for a week relieved by massage and pool lounging or naps. By the way there is no alcohol, no coffee, no meat, and no talking in the mornings. . And mobile phone usage is banned apart from your room.

We flew from Gatwick to Florence, and then bus to Iesolana, which is less than an hour away. There are only two men apart from Ian on this trip. Either yoga is a predominately female fascination or Ian (blessed are thou amongst women) prefers the mix that way. Four of the group have very limited yoga experience and I'm just not that bendy. The rest are adept at peering through their legs as if searching for a lost sphincter.

We are housed in roomy apartments clustered around the mother house, which is where we eat and do yoga in a spare white space with doors that can be thrown wide to the Tuscan sunsets.

The food is delicious with the main meal at lunchtime. If this is vegetarian food I could eat it forever. Caramelised onion tarts; aubergine parmigiana, pecorino, spicy marrow mousse, lentils, herby beans, asparagus and delicate omelettes. The evenings have lighter fare with fish.

Willowy Alexa leads us into our first group yoga. . She has the looks of a young Joanna Lumley and a voice like a Meltus lozenge. It's all about breath, the prana of life. Breathing channels the body's energy. Through narrowed eyes I focus on the turquoise colour of the yoga blocks by my feet as her voice susurrates over my bowed head. The blocks morph into blue Tiffany gift boxes. Clearly I'm not at the right mental level yet.

The weather is sunny and clear as we set out on our first hike through the vineyard and into an ancient oak forest. Compared to what is to come, this is literally a walk in the park. The hikes become progressively more difficult as the week advances and on the second day, the no talking before lunch rule comes into play. So a silent yoga followed by a silent breakfast. We eat muesli homemade by Alexa teeming with almonds and seeds and carried out here by her from London (probably on her head). There is honey from hives outside the back door and eggs with yellow, yellow yolks. Round here they don't eat an egg unless they've been introduced to the chicken first.

Ian leads off the walks and after a decent space a hiker follows the arrow trail he has left so that we are spread out across the landscape like beads on a necklace. We walk alone with our thoughts and the natural sounds and sights of the landscape. There are proper hedgerows with red splashes of wild poppies. Meadow sweet and elderflower are in blossom and I heard a cuckoo. I begin to understand what meditation means. There is a danger, though, in becoming too introspective. The danger of getting lost. Wandering along in a doolalley fashion crucial arrows can be missed. I know, I was that person and had daymares of being eaten by wild boars. So a cell phone on silent is allowed to accompany you on the hike. Just in case!

Toxic Tuesday arrives; the day when all the withdrawal symptoms come looking for payment. Caffeine headaches are intense. I don't drink coffee but I'm weary and sleep for two hours in the afternoon while the super keen are marching off on the optional hike. In the evening yoga Alexa instructs us to smile an inner smile. I have a low tolerance for New Age (Sew Age) babble but my resistance is crumbling.

Alexa has evolved a form of slow precise yoga that has a grace and simplicity that sweeps you up. She says it's a mixture of Astanga flow with the steadiness of Iyengar and the soft movement of Scaravelli yoga. What it is not is easy. And just when you feel you are going to cry with frustration, she tells you it took her ten years to learn how to do a hand-stand. As Beckett, said. 'Fail better'. When she tells me my twists have improved dramatically I feel I've been given a merit star. Swami...how I love ya, how I love ya

By mid-week the transformation of the poor huddled masses is visible. It's like watching evolution. Backs are straightening and legs are standing strong. Arms stretch up in sun salutes and on the hikes all those Downward Dogs are making us upwardly mobile. We eat up the miles and stride along mountain ridges. This is not so much a boot camp as a booty camp. Does my bum look buff in this? Definitely.

As a surprise Ian arranges for a local restaurant to spread a feast for us at lunchtime outside under the trees on a big wooden table with wildflowers in jam jars. Dish after delicious dish is produced. Tomatoes that taste of the sun and aged cheese with a chilli jam are memorable.

On Thursday the outside world intervenes. We hear of an Outlet down the road. Prana has become Prada and there is a genteel stampede in that direction. Italy is surely the land of olive oil and honey and fashion. I was expecting a shed with a jumble of clothes but this is a well-appointed vast warehouse with row upon neat ordered row of Prada, Jill Sander and Miu Miu. Shoes, lingerie, clothes, bags and belts. All new and a fraction of what they cost retail. Joan Rivers would like to be buried here.

On Friday I have the best massage of my life from Mary who works in LA. She and Laura also from the States have firm, knowing fingers that sort out the kinks and cramps caused by this constant exercise that has kidnapped our bodies. I'm sure they must be a major part of the expense but this is massage heaven.

We all left on Saturday with clear eyes and heads vowing to return. My yoga practice still needs ten more minutes in the oven but the next Yogahike is in September so if you fancy your own taste of a Guru with no gnocchi, the details are below.

Prices include return flights Gatwick to Florence, all internal transport in Italy, yoga and hiking, full board and two massages. From £1600.

Details on www.yogahikes.com.