



The apartments at Borgo Iesolana. Below, yoga instructor Alexa Harris (left) and assistant Lizzie Galbraith hold the Triangle pose

Salutations in the sun

Italy Hours of yoga and miles of hiking every day may not sound like much of a holiday, but it works. Robin Eggar finds himself looking and feeling years younger. Photographed by Philip North-Coombes

A SATURDAY AFTERNOON at Gatwick's South Terminal is not exactly conducive to inner calm: queue upon queue, two hours for check-in and a never-ending crocodile through security, then a delay. By the time we board the plane I am somewhat agitated – so much so that Marie, one of my fellow travellers, describes me as 'weary and dishevelled'.

Not the perfect start to a week of yoga and hiking in Tuscany, which my friend Caroline, a music-business PR, has assured me will be just the tonic: an athletic detox-come-weight-loss with added bendy bits for my creaking lower spine.

Yogahikes was conceived by serial entrepreneur Ian Flocks, once upon a time a leading booking agent for bands including U2 and Eurythmics. In the 1990s he became a devotee of The Ashram, a boot camp in the Santa Monica mountains behind Malibu, where Oprah Winfrey, Gwyneth Paltrow and Cindy Crawford go to endure a regime of gruelling hikes,

yoga, massage, weight-lifting, salsa dancing and tiny portions of lettuce. The Ashram is where Renée Zellweger disappeared to lose the weight she gained to play Bridget Jones.

Flocks found the Spartan regime – drill-instructor mentality, shared bathrooms,

not enough food – annoying. 'The yoga at The Ashram was limited to a couple of hours a day and was little more than stretching,' he told me one afternoon as we hiked up a wooded path below the village of Sogna. 'I wanted something that was less about weight loss, and which was more comfortable, closer to home and where I didn't feel hungry all the time.'

Ian convinced yoga teacher Alexa Harris to join him, and after two years in Andalucía, they moved base to Borgo Iesolana, a secluded former farm and hunting lodge on a hill in the Ambra Valley between Florence and Siena. It has been converted into a series of attractive apartments, quiet sitting areas and a large if chilly swimming pool. The yoga studio is a beautiful airy room with views over the vineyards.

The regime is simple. Yoga starts at 7.30am, followed by breakfast and the morning hike, which from day two is supposed to be conducted in silence. ➤



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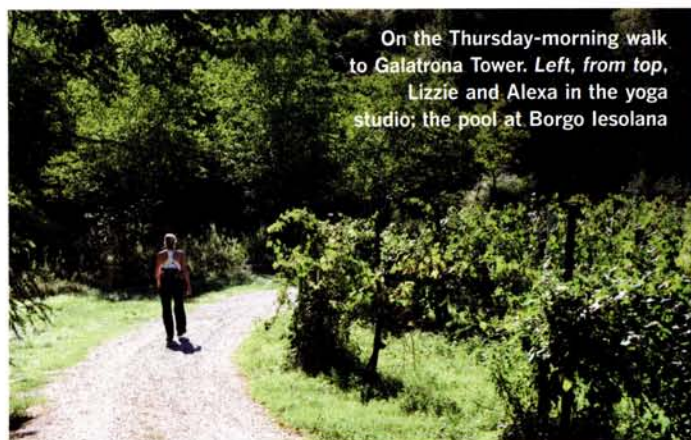


➤ To make it easier, walkers are spaced out, one minute apart. The second hike, after lunch, is voluntary, and is chatty and relaxed. Many prefer a good book by the pool or a complementary massage by Ashram veterans Laura and Mary, who have flown in from L.A. The second yoga session starts at 6pm and runs until 8.15pm, followed by a light supper, then it's early to bed.

Out of bounds are red meat, alcohol, nicotine and caffeine; bread and pasta make only fleeting appearances. The food is delicious and plentiful, though I remain unconvinced by lemon rind tea which looks suspiciously like pee. Lunch is the main meal, a buffet groaning with onion

tarts, aubergine parmigiana, cheese, lentils, rocket and tomatoes. Supper comprises salads, grilled fish and, on one memorable night, porcini mushrooms gently sautéed in Iesolana's own organic olive oil.

My initial misgivings about Yogahikes being for ladies enjoying a break after the long, stressful summer holidays, deepened on my first night. Of the 20 guests, 17 were female, of which nine were various shades of blonde. Yoga is not for the indolent and vapid, however, and my group included lawyers, cookery writers, publishers and a businesswoman who



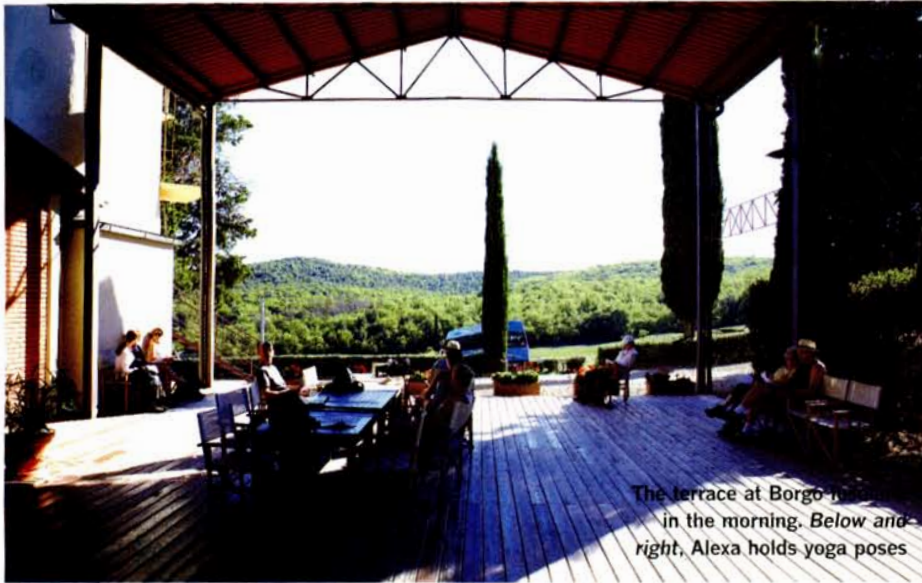
On the Thursday-morning walk to Galatrona Tower. Left, from top, Lizzie and Alexa in the yoga studio; the pool at Borgo Iesolana

appeared to be responsible for the importation of every MFI kitchen into the UK. Laurie had flown in from Washington DC; Clodagh ran a pub in rural Ireland.

During our walks, under blue skies studded with the occasional, aesthetically pleasing cloud, I became entranced by the sheer variety of the Tuscan landscape. Silence is conducive to observation and around me the colours unfolded in a rich, autumnal palette. In the woods there were infinite shades of green, mottled oak and beech bark, while juicy blackberries, rosehips, hawthorn berries, acorns and beech nuts lined the paths. Around the villages were olive groves, bulging purple Sangiovese grapes hanging heavy on the vine with pink, yellow and red roses planted at the end of each row. Green figs and red apples could be plucked and eaten on the hoof. On past trips hikers have stumbled across wild boar, but on this one there was little wildlife save geckos and butterflies. Empty shotgun cartridges littering the ground helped to explain the absence of birds.

In the course of a single walk from Montebenichi, the ground beneath my feet changed constantly. We followed a former riverbed with furrows of clay amid slabs of slate, a valley floor of bushes and waist-high grass, and a long, slow climb up a ➤

Active breaks



The terrace at Borgo in the morning. Below and right, Alexa holds yoga poses

➤ track that turned to sand dotted with flint, and the trees turned to pine. Ian had described it as 'undulating', by which he meant 'very long and steep with the odd flat bit'. Then downhill on a skiddy path and onto the tarmac of San Martino before winding back up through the olive groves into the hilltop village of Duddova with its stunning views.

The local deli had laid on a picnic: grilled peppers, bruschetta, mozzarella balls with baby tomatoes and ancient Pecorino studded with black truffle and served with chilli jam. La Bottega di Duddova subsequently did a roaring trade in orders for whole cheeses, and Ian had the largest take-up for the afternoon walk, down dale and up hill to Cenina.

As the toxins sweated their way out of my skin, my senses became noticeably sharper. The smell of rosemary and wild thyme grew stronger each day. Perhaps the most tortuous aroma was the blast of freshly poured espresso, mingling, a few paces later, with the scent of roasting chicken, which greeted us on the morning walk through Pogi. While that set my tastebuds going, nothing compared to the Victoria plum I bit into, two hours into the toughest hike of the week. I was somewhere past the Tower of Galatrona, hot, happy in my thoughts but aching in my quads, and sagging in energy.

For some people Yogahikes is primarily a physical experience rather than a spiritual one, and keeping quiet for five hours proved too great a hardship. Not being a particularly social animal first thing, plus having teenage children, I have always found grunts to be a perfectly satisfactory means of communication at breakfast. While some would sit in



companionable silence, I preferred to eat outside, warmed by the morning sun.

In September there were no other walkers and few grape-pickers, and even the villages seem deserted except for the occasional barking dog and little old lady. Walking in silence means you are really alone with your thoughts; mine raced and spiralled – sex, work, long-forgotten scenes from my past, ideas, possibilities, competitive urges (I'm walking too slowly), fantasies (more sex) – sometimes with the force of a hurricane, at others a still small voice of calm. Twice I was so lost in the rhythm of the walk that I don't remember reaching my destination.

On the last day, on the inside bend of the path from Rendola that snaked its way up through the oak trees, a timeless

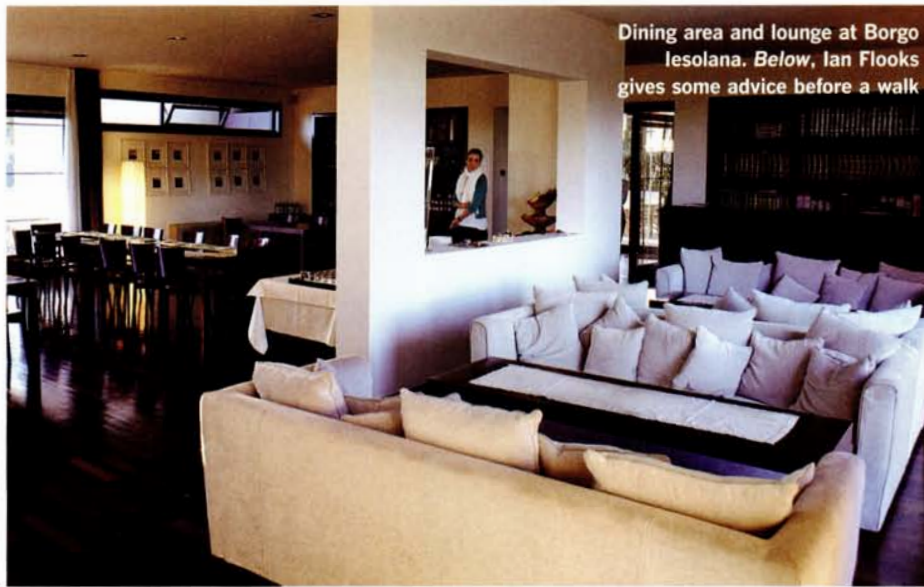


landscape spread out below and nobody to be seen, I felt like screaming with exhilaration. Instead I burst out laughing.

While the walks were wonderful, it was the yoga that made the week special. Alexa is an extraordinary teacher. Willow and close to six feet tall, she glides with the grace of Sylvie Guillem, exuding an air of absolute calm. With her round granny glasses she reminded me of a brilliant headmistress: fair but firm, definitely somebody you don't want to disappoint. If you can't do a headstand, according to Alexa, you are letting yourself become old. Prior to Yogahikes I had taken five of her classes at the Life Centre in Notting Hill. Knowing what 'Down Dog' and 'Warrior One' meant, coupled with a year of Pilates, made a tremendous difference.

Every day Alexa ratcheted up the intensity. Morning sessions generally followed the same routine, including ➤

Active breaks



that I could hike for ever, I had ended up with a pair of blisters and quad muscles screaming with lactic acid. That was one of only two days when I rejected the second hike in favour of Laura's healing hands.

After Wednesday, things started to get easier. Thursday's yoga session was a personal nightmare followed by the toughest hike yet, so steep in places that we were advised to walk in zigzags. But for some reason – maybe because Philip North-Coombes was taking photographs – everyone was in an 'up' mood and the silent rule was unilaterally suspended. Lunch was a riot of laughter, and nobody was drunk. In the afternoon some people chose to descend on the Prada outlet at Montevarchi, returning with beautiful coats and tales of Japanese tourists. But

➤ my favourite Tibetan Salutation in which the rhythm of the breath leads you through a series of positions called things like 'horse', 'bear' and 'super bear'. Evening sessions were more freeform, often including 'the pigeon', a notorious hip-and-thigh stretch that has been known to awaken memories of giving birth, and make people cry. It certainly brought tears to my eyes.

Her teaching is a mix of styles: ashtanga flow, Iyengar steadiness and the soft movement of Scaravelli. It could be tough, and some days I would be sweating so hard my feet would start to slide. At night my muscles ached, and sleep came slowly. I did manage a headstand, and when Alexa suggested doing a backbend I surprised myself by almost succeeding. The first couple of days I kept sneaking glances at my watch, but by the final session I was disappointed to find the end had come.

Everyone warns you about 'toxic Tuesday' but for me it was 'miserable Monday'. At the yoga sessions I was straining, not relaxing, and after boasting

shopping did not tempt me, and instead I let Mary go to work on my aching legs.

Thursday was the day of transformation. At dinner, pretty dresses replaced tracksuit bottoms, eyes sparkled and backs stood tall. Suddenly I realised how different, how *well* people looked. I was told that my left shoulder was no longer kissing my earlobe and that I was walking differently, and I knew it was true. Marie told me I was now 'suave and sparkling'. I had lost four pounds but it felt more like 10.

I'm trying to walk tall, stay calm and not quarrel with my daughter. I'm going to yoga twice a week. While my toes are still not designed to tickle my ears, nor my forehead to brush the floor while I do the splits, I know one day, maybe, it will. If I need more help there's always Tuscany. 📍

