

Harpers and Queen Yogahikes

Every year from May to September I enter what my football obsessed husband describes as the yoga season, by which he means that this is the time of year I take groups away to Tuscany on Yogahikes retreats.

I have been running Yogahikes with my business partner and hike co-ordinator, Ian Flooks, a former music business supremo turned film producer, for over five years and during this time, these week-long retreats have made me realise that, at the risk of sounding smug, teaching yoga has to be the best job in the world.

Last September's retreat began late on Saturday night when my guests arrived in Florence after a much delayed flight from London. Like most travellers arriving at their holiday destination they had that look that only the horrors of modern air travel can give a person. The group consisted of the usual colourful and inspiring mix of characters including an over-worked corporate lawyer, a successful writer, a literary agent and a stressed out mother of four. They had all left their high octane lives, switched off their blackberries and swapped the school run for a week of energetic physical and spiritual exercise consisting of four hours of yoga and two vigorous hikes – one compulsory and one optional – a day, a healthy diet, no caffeine, alcohol or cigarettes and complete silence during the morning. If all of this sounds a bit monastically po-faced it isn't. This would prove to be a week of much laughter, great food, new friendships and dare I say, it good karma.

For a start the retreat takes place in one of the most ravishing and unspoilt areas in Italy, Val d'Ambra, the Golden Valley, about half an hour north of Florence. We stay at Iesolana, a private 250-acre estate consisting of a former farm and hunting lodge that has been converted into comfortable apartments. We are secluded from the outside world by olive groves, dense forest and that inescapable feature of Tuscan scenery the ubiquitous grapevine.

If I'm honest, on meeting the group for the first time I am full of conflicting emotions. I'm excited at the prospect of watching the transformation of my clients over the next 7 days but also anxious that everything goes well. Will the group gel? Will I suffer a kind of yoga melt down and forget how to teach? And, when I'm really over stretching my powers, will the sun shine? It's at this point that I'm relieved and grateful to have such a brilliant team of support to back me up. There's Lizzie my wonderful lissom yoga assistant, the two California fit masseuse flown in specially from Los Angeles and of course the indefatigable Mr Flocks who has managed to get every client no matter how recalcitrant up those Tuscan hills.

At 7 in the morning we meet for the first class and, judging by the grim and weary expressions on a few faces, some could well be questioning their decision of spending their valuable week off getting up at the crack of dawn for a pre-breakfast yoga class when they could be lying in bed at some Amman resort or other and ordering room service. These doubts are expressed in different ways during the first couple of days. Some fear life without coffee and cigarettes while others, in need of a shopping fix, have sought solace in the knowledge that only a couple of miles up the road is a Prada outlet store.

As Lizzie and I move around adjusting postures, I can feel this initial resistance give, just a little. As the group consists of people of varying degrees of yoga experience, I have to be aware not to push those who are beginners too quickly while also allowing the more experienced pupils to further their practice.

For me, yoga is not a dour self-improvement programme and so Yogahikes is not about committing yourself to a Spartan life of brown rice and navel gazing, nor is it concerned with the dulling narcissism of weight loss and looking like Madonna in a leotard. It is about cultivating a wise, compassionate and joyful relationship with who we already are and with the world that we actually live in so that we can be more awake to the possibilities in our lives.

Having said that this retreat is not a walk in the park, as the group would soon find out when we set off on the first of the three hour hikes after breakfast. The walks are in silence in order to maintain the meditative quality of the mornings yoga practise and to connect to the beauty of the surroundings. In spite of this I'm certain I can hear some muttering and cursing at the back particularly when the trail gets to what seems like an endless uphill climb. I feel like joining in.

At the end of the first walk we all fall on lunch which is a spectacular array of light antipasti: wafer thin grilled aubergines, salads of rocket, the milkiest mozzarella and tomato, piles of spinach sautéed with garlic, artichokes, roast red and yellow peppers. Nobody seems to mind that there is no pudding. That afternoon most of the group, including myself, have collapsed by the pool, a hardy few have elected to go on the second walk and a lucky some are being tended to by the masseuse. I can feel the group relaxing. The next yoga class is at 6 o'clock that evening followed by a light supper. Nobody's eyes stayed open much beyond 10pm.

Over the years I have come to notice that a yogahikes week has its own rhythms and after seventy-two hours I start to see the signs of that familiar karmic tipping point. The first indication of this shift is that there are no more bleary eyes at morning class and on the yoga mat resistance has been replaced by grace. Even the back of the hike moans have stopped and we now walk in a relaxed companionable silence.

A few years ago while I was on a meditation retreat in India, the teacher said, "If anyone tells you that the spiritual path is easy, step back and check your wallet". So if you are looking for an effortless yoga experience then yogahikes is not for you. This is an intensive but inspirational program designed to help us realise that real lasting happiness isn't found at a Prada outlet but in ourselves.