

The holidays that changed our lives

Relaxing and working on your tan isn't everyone's idea of the perfect break. NOREEN BARR meets three women who yearned for adventure and discovered a holiday with a difference

JUNGLE TRIP MADE ME SUPER-FIT

FELICITY McCALLUM, 37, from west London, is the finance director of a sports clothing company. The promise of achieving "animal-like fitness" lured her to the north coast of Kenya, where she found herself leaping through mangrove swamps and circuit training in the jungle during a fortnight-long Wildfitness holiday

ON ONE memorable morning of my Wildfitness holiday we rose at the usual time of 6am and walked through villages and bush until we reached the mangrove swamps. There we took off our shoes and waded through the warm, murky water. It was pretty horrible – squelchy underfoot and the water came up to my knees in places.

Eventually, we ended up at a disused airfield where we had to run as fast as we could, again and again. Then, we waded back through the swamp, ready for breakfast.

We were also taken for an early morning trip over rough terrain in four-wheel-drive vehicles. We ended up on a secluded beach where we had to run up and down a massive sand dune. That was really hard because it was hot and we had to run as fast as we could to the top, walk down, rest, and repeat it – again and again.

Each time I reached the top I felt sick and thought I couldn't do any more, but everyone was cheering each other on and, in the end, I managed it about six times.

We were also set "jungle circuits" in an area where amazing trees were being cultivated. It was like being in a tropical house in Kew Gardens, except it was outside. We did skipping, boxing, press-ups, sit-ups. There was mud everywhere and everybody was filthy.

On yet another morning we were taken to the beach where 10 canoes were waiting. These were paddled by local guides and each of us had to pick a canoe and swim behind it for a couple of hours until we reached a little island where we sat down for lunch.

The idea behind Wildfitness is that you use your body in the best way, in the way that an animal would use its body, in a natural environment where you escape from the stresses of everyday life. We probably averaged five hours' exercise a day but it was fun.

There were 10 of us on the holiday last November. We stayed in a beautiful house overlooking the Indian Ocean, surrounded by African countryside – palm trees, rickety shacks, goats, other animals and little children waving. Monkeys watched us the whole time – they seemed to particularly like the yoga.

The founder of Wildfitness, Tara Wood, was there for the duration. She joined in all the activities with us and was very inspirational.

After two weeks, I felt fantastic – much more toned. I got off my flight home at

5.30am and went straight to the gym at 6am. I was craving more exercise."

● To find out more about Wildfitness, visit www.wildfitness.com or call 0845 056 8343.

MOUNTAIN CHALLENGE BOOSTED MY CONFIDENCE

PEPTA DIAMAND, 34, from South London, was scared of heights. She didn't even own a pair of walking boots when she signed up for *The Big Stretch*, a holiday in Spain where life coaching is combined with strenuous mountain hikes

WHEN I signed up to go on *The Big Stretch*, I couldn't quite believe I'd done so. I'd been looking for a business coach because I'd started a wedding gift list company called Wrapit, which was exciting but also a bit intimidating. I didn't have much managerial experience but there I was at the top of a company with employees who were my age or older. I wasn't sure if I sounded as authoritative as I should.

At the same time, I was desperate to go on a walking holiday but my husband wouldn't hear of it. Then a friend told me about Rosie Walford, a life coach offering *Big Stretch* walking holidays in Spain. I thought: "I'm going to go for this."

I wasn't quite sure what a walking trip would entail until I received my preparation notes. These said I needed hiking boots and a walking stick.

I'd never taken a holiday alone, never mind join an organised group in which you'll all be doing life coaching. There were seven of us in the group and we were all a bit hesitant when we met. I think everybody was probably wondering: "Is this going to be like group therapy?"

From the beginning I was obviously the princess – the one who hadn't done much walking and, physically, was the weakest link. I was petrified of heights, too. On day one when we were about to go on our first hike we were told there were no loos. I finally twigged I'd have to pee in a bush and was horrified.

Each morning we would have a couple of hours of life coaching lessons. We were taught to appreciate what our values were and did exercises in creative thinking. It was all about looking at your life from a different perspective.

By mid to late morning we'd be off on a trek in mountains or valleys, always in stunning scenery. During these three or four-hour walks, we had time to think through what we'd done in the morning. Because you're busy watching your footing and building up a sweat, all the ideas you've churned up in the morning settle.

One day we were about to do a very steep climb when our mountain guide looked at me and said: "I don't think you should do this," but one of the life coaches said: "You're doing this with me." And I did. When I got down, I screamed: "I can do anything!" That shift in perspective was the

most incredible thing.

When I returned home after *The Big Stretch*, people said my face looked different because I'd somehow been released from whatever insecurities had been niggling me before. In the office, my confidence levels shot up. I communicated with new vigour in the boardroom and with the team.

Before I went on *The Big Stretch*, in May 2003, my marriage wasn't the happiest. We did love each other and we are still good friends but there was something missing. When I got home I wanted to give my marriage a last shot – and I'm glad we did – but we'd grown apart.

I'd previously been insecure about recognising our problems but my new-found confidence gave me the ability to see that our best future was apart. I left the marriage amicably last September and now I'm single.

The Big Stretch has also given me such a love of mountains I've even started climbing in Scotland!

● To find out more about *The Big Stretch*, visit www.thebigstretch.com or phone Pura Aventura on 0845 430 8621.

I QUIT JOB AFTER SPA BREAK

CHRISTINA STEWART, 35, a credit manager from Weedon, Northamptonshire, was a stressed-out workaholic when she signed up for a lifestyle makeover holiday with *In:spa* in Morocco. On her return, she handed in her notice to her disbelieving boss

I HAD always wanted a good career and, as a credit manager for a builders' merchants, I had quite a lot of responsibility, managing a team of 100. I was working long hours and, although I tried not to take things home, it was always there at the back of my mind.

I was very wrapped up in my work, was probably difficult to live with and, towards the end of 2004, my four-year relationship came to an end.

By the time I signed up for a week's health and fitness makeover holiday with *In:spa* in Morocco in March, I was worked out and fed up. I felt there was something missing, that there had to be more to life than getting up, going to work and coming home every day.

When I arrived at *In:spa*, at a palm tree plantation about half an hour's drive from Marrakech, I knew the week ahead was going to be tough. Caffeine, sugar, wheat, dairy and alcohol were all outlawed. At work I lived on coffee and rubbish like



CHALLENGE: (left to right) Felicity McCallum, Pepta Diamand and Christina Stewart took adventure holidays to become fit physically and mentally

Pictures: GILES PARK, ROSIE HALLAM, KYOSH+ OTANEWSTEAM
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sandwiches and crisps because they were convenient.

My other crutch was cigarettes but, here, nobody else was a smoker or, if they were, they were trying to quit. So, I decided to give up. But to suddenly go cold turkey and not have any of these things was difficult and on the third day I felt really down and cried all the time.

Then there was the exercise. The 16 of us on the course were wakened at about 6am to get ready for a walk in the Atlas Mountains or an hour of yoga.

Although I used to run and have even done the New York marathon, I hadn't been able to exercise for a long time because in May 2004 I had a car accident in which I damaged my back and pelvis.

On the first mountain walk I struggled and thought: "I'm never going to do this again." But the instructors, who gave us lots of advice on lifestyle, diet and posture, were encouraging and gradually I started to feel better.

I went for my first run after my accident and was so overcome I sobbed for half an hour and couldn't talk to anybody that day because I was so emotional.

After my third-day slump, my body adjusted to the healthy diet and I began to feel amazing.

I was ready to go at 6am and, at the end of the first week, I decided to extend my stay to a fortnight. On the day the first group went home, I was having breakfast when I spotted the birds singing. My eyes had been opened to things I hadn't had time to notice for a long time.

When I left, I was given a healthy regime to follow and, after a one-to-one consultation, had a diet devised for me.

I was also told which vitamins to take and was given a specially prepared packed lunch so I wouldn't have to eat the airline meal.

My posture had improved, too. I felt about three inches taller and all my friends commented on it when I got home.

But the biggest change was in my job. I'd had lots of time to think in Morocco and had decided that life wasn't only about work so, when I got back, I handed in my notice.

My boss thought I'd been brainwashed – that's exactly what he said to me. I think it's only now, three months later, that he realises I'm actually leaving. Next Sunday, I'm going to India to study yoga for three months and, after that, I'm going to Nepal to teach English, on a volunteer basis, to Buddhist monks.

● To find out more about *In:spa*, visit www.inspa-retreats.com or call 0845 458 0723.

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