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FREE

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Swimming in a creek on the east African coast, barefoot running and jungle fitness circuits – **Danielle Gusmaroli** finds a challenging way to get back into shape

ON THE mangrove shores of a stunning Kenyan creek, villagers stare at the curious sight of 12 “Wildfitties” engaged in a ritualistic warm-up ahead of a 4k swim across the Mida Creek on the east African coast.

“Disco hips – around and around; Shakira hips – side to side; and naughty hips – backwards and forwards,” instructs our muscle-bound coach Gareth Roriston.

I am nervous. The prospect of swimming for two hours fills me with utter dread, of the kind that paralysed me during a disastrous scuba diving trip in the Galapagos three years ago.

Admittedly the creek is not the Pacific Ocean. I wade into the warm, clear waters, blinking against the glare of the bleached white sands and... freeze.

Due to my abject fear, freediving instructor Augusto Vegas swims with me. Augusto is compact, smiley and softly spoken.

“OK, Danielle, goggles on, let’s go,” he smiles.

I imagine I’m strong and powerful, and launch myself into 20 metres of frenzied front crawl before stopping to congratulate myself.

“Great, Danielle,” coaxes Augusto encouragingly. “Now, count to 50 before you stop.”

I am slicing through the water like a dolphin. I have found my rhythm and even the boatman is smiling as he leads the way. Suddenly high winds whip up a frenzied dance on the water’s surface.

“Swim with the waves,” says Augusto as a giant one smacks my face. “Great technique, I’m right here.”

Tossing in turbulent waters, salt water gushing up my nose, I reach for Augusto and cling. We are only half an hour into this aquatic nightmare and I am terrified. I stick with the technique: swim 50 strokes, giant waves crash, I gasp for air, Augusto calms me down.

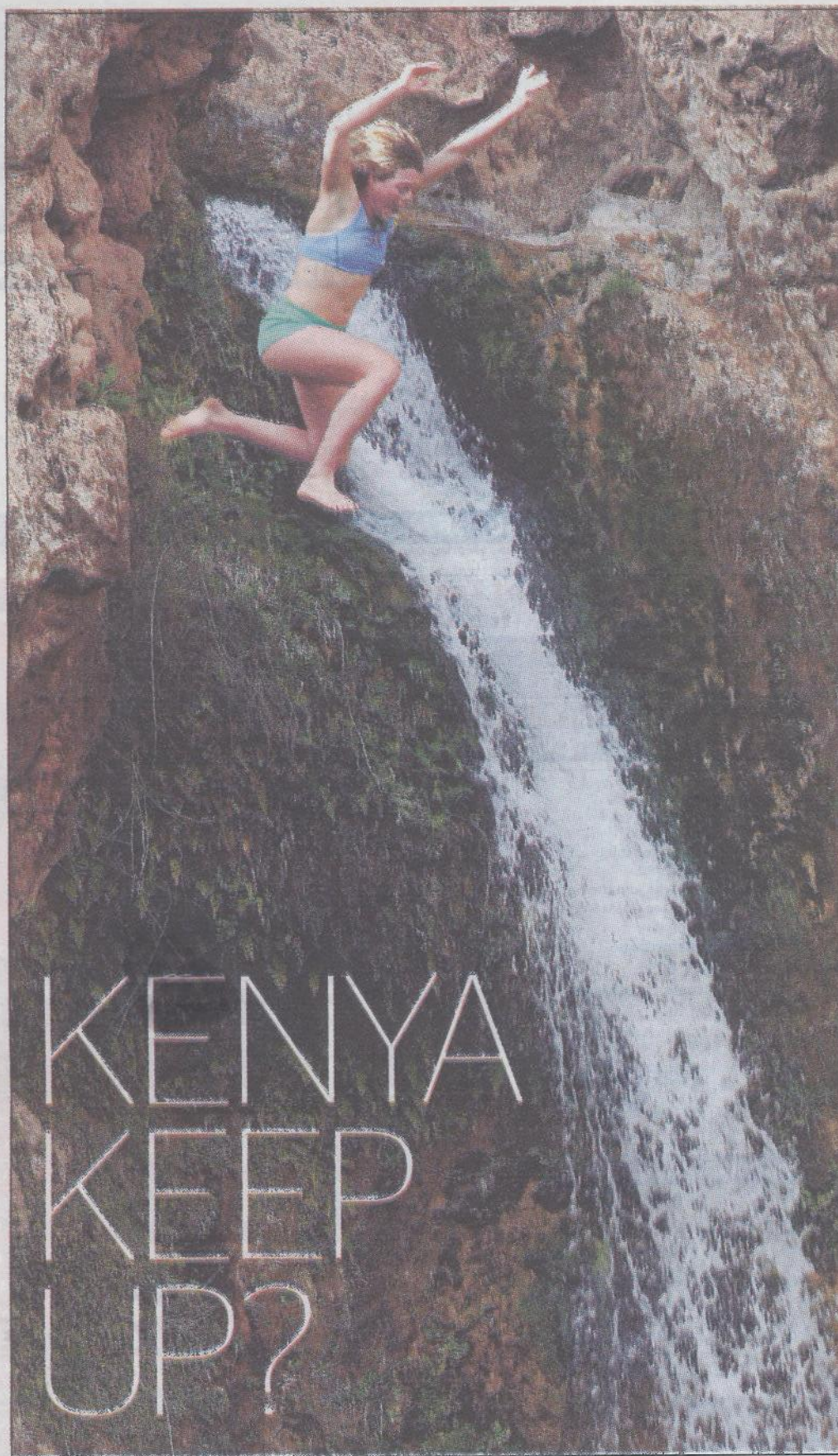
I eventually emerge, to rapturous applause from fellow swimmers.

“I’m so proud of you,” says head coach Jess, throwing her arms around me. “You’ve conquered your fear.”

Wildfitness, a health and fitness holiday, is designed to put the wild streak back into our lives. Based at Watamu, one of the world’s top beach resorts, there’s sand for barefoot running, a jungle-for circuits, a dojo for boxing and kettle bells, and screeching birds and monkeys for company.

Other Wildfitties include a pedantic lawyer, 28, a full-time mum, 50, a stressed-out London businessman, 37, a 30-year-old PR executive, a rotund financial consultant, 38, and Viani, a verbose American anxious to get in shape in time for his fortieth.

Development consultant Viani Gonzalez has signed up for a seven-week back-to-back course to get his once 250lb (17 stone 12lb) body honed.



He has already lost three stone in weight, the result of a trip to Wildfitness last year, and has three to go.

Wildfitness was developed in 2001 by Tara Wood, a tanned, affable biology graduate from Oxford who grew up in Watamu. The threat of losing the family home led her to launch an exercise holiday with a fitness philosophy.

The idea is to eat and exercise like a human in harmony with nature.

Things start gently with a game of volleyball on the beach and a restorative drink made from baby coconuts.

Day two: we run 5k through a village in scorching 73 degree African heat. Viani leads the way, and Sheila, the financial consultant among us, is walking – fast.

“Stay with it,” shouts coach Joash Akwiry Matakwa, a national 400m athlete.

The daily timetable goes like this: rise, 6.15am; rolling, 6.30am; boxing, 9.30am; seminar, 10.30am; hunter-

gather running drills on the beach, 3.30pm; volleyball, 4pm; jungle circuits, 8pm; supper, 9pm; bed.

Hours between are filled with heated talk about the challenges and the explosive topic of food. “Ugh, so green,” sighs Viani sitting down to a plate of broccoli, salad, raw fish and a glass of fresh cucumber juice.

We learn that intense bursts of exercise are more effective than long workouts, and the importance of sleep – when weight is shed.

Cue the stressed-out businessman who bails on day three to sleep and – dah dah – emerges the following morning looking svelte. Unbelievable!

By day eight, I’m fitter, thinner and very pleased.

I love Baraka House, Tara’s stunning family home and decide to extend my nine days to three-and-a-half weeks.

Watamu boasts a coral reef rich with marine life – more than 600 species of



Natural high: (left) on a Wildfitness course you eat and exercise in harmony with nature; (above) a traditional dhow in the shallow waters at Watamu Beach; barefoot kickboxing on the beach is just one of the exercises on offer on Wildfitness courses



TAKE THREE ACTIVE HOLIDAYS

Carrier has four nights (for the price of three) at the five-star Mala resort in the Seychelles, for £2,940pp half-board including unlimited group dives with daily sessions of Qi Gong meditation, yoga and self-shiatsu. Price also includes flights with Air Seychelles and transfers. Available until 28 February. www.carrier.co.uk

Walks Worldwide has seven nights in Marrakech following berber trails in the Atlas Mountains for £1,095pp full-board, accommodation includes Kasbah de Toubkal in the Atlas. Price includes transportation and a guide. www.walksworldwide.com

Ski Independence has seven nights at Heavenly in Lake Tahoe, California at the three-star Inn by the Lake for £799pp, B&B, with one free adult lift ticket. Includes return flights from Heathrow and transfers (based on two sharing). Available until March. www.ski-i.com

JO FERNANDEZ

We learn that intensive bursts of exercise are more effective than long workouts

My turn: I’m looking more slender with a petite waist but my stomach measurement has gone up by 2cm.

On the plane I tell a Canadian I’ve exercised hunter-gatherer style. “You can tell, you’re glowing,” he says.

DETAILS: KENYA

THE FLIGHT
Kenya Airways flies from Heathrow to Mombasa from £466 return, www.kenya-airways.com

THE COURSE
A nine-day kick-start course with Wildfitness costs from £1,790pp full-board with activities and transfers (next one 6 February), a two-week revitalise course from £2,290pp, and a three-and-a-half week transformation from £3,590, www.wildfitness.com.
www.fco.gov.uk
www.tourism.go.ke