

travel



The regimen at the Wildfitness camp at Watamu, just south of Malindi on Kenya's coast, includes swimming, jogging, kettlebell and stretching routines, boxing and seminars on proper diet and exercise. Courtesy Wildfitness

Taking the plunge

You sit behind a desk all day, order takeaway food for lunch and drive everywhere. Buffets at hotels and restaurants are de rigeur – and, lo and behold – you can't get into your favourite jeans any more. You start to feel heavy and lethargic; gym classes don't seem to make much of a difference.

Yet since when did anyone actually need to eat their way through a full Friday brunch? Even a professional athlete would have trouble burning off the sheer volume of food offered in a single sitting. Which is why, after too much eating and not enough moving, I joined Wildfitness in Kenya for a nine-day "kickstart" back to the land of health and fitness.

Even though I wasn't technically overweight, I badly needed to tone up and get fit: having played football in the past, a training session with the UAE women's team showed me rather painfully that two circuit classes a week at the Abu Dhabi Country Club just wasn't enough. I wanted speed, agility, more flexibility and less flab – and it was going to hurt.

Luckily, Kenya is just a four-hour flight from Dubai, and after a 90-minute drive north from Mombasa airport, our group arrives in Watamu, a wild promontory just south of Malindi, in time for lunch. We are all introduced – those taking part are mostly professionals in their 30s and 40s from the UK, Australia and the United States – and we check into our accommodation at Baraka House, a rustic villa on a forested slope overlooking the sea.

I'm sharing a three-bedroom house down the hill with Deborah, a manager at CNN, and Emma, who works for the UN in Nairobi. All of us want to shape up but have a holiday at the same time: Deborah and I are here for nine days, while Emma is here for the three-and-a-half-week

A fitness holiday on Kenya's coast provides the perfect antidote to life behind a desk. **Rosemary Behan** signs up

“transformation” programme. Back up at Baraka House, we're introduced to our trainers: Luke and Heidi, both Australian fitness fanatics, Gareth, an ex-professional mixed martial arts competitor from England, and Joshi, a Kenyan ex-national sprinter. After a lunch of fresh local tuna ceviche with salad on the open-air veranda, we're given a brief introduction to the programme before a game of volleyball down on the beach.

After travelling overnight, it's a relief not to be rushed into anything too strenuous and the trainers explain that the Wildfitness programme is as much about eating properly and rest and recovery as exercise. Most people, it seems, have arrived straight from demanding jobs and the last thing the trainers want is to have us collapsing with flu in the first few days. Beside our beds that night are print-outs of the programme for the next day. Each day brings a different motivational ditty; this one reads “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result”; later on, we get Jedi master Yoda: “Do or do not. There is no try.”

After a falling asleep to the sound of bullfrogs, our first full day starts with breakfast in our gym gear at 7.30am. We choose from a spread of fresh mango, pineapple and melon, yoghurt, nuts and honey, eggs and herbal tea. I can't usually face the day without coffee, so my face drops when I'm confronted with a choice: ginger or lemongrass tea? I down several cups of the ginger and fight the urge to ask for caffeine: for serious addicts, it's available on request.

Fitness, continued on 3 →

test

your stamina. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the 'discovery' of the remains of an ancient Inca city on Machu Picchu, Peru, at an altitude of 2,350m by the US academic Hiram Bingham. Hike the beautiful Inca trail for a closer look.



By the end of the week my back feels stronger, my shoulders lighter

→ Fitness, continued from 1

After breakfast it's back out onto the verandah for the first of a series of "seminars". "Wild Movement 1: how to move like a wild human" explains how wild animals have adapted to move efficiently. "This is about strength, speed, endurance, flexibility and being injury-free," Luke says. This week, we will be aiming to perform movements in a "wild" versus a "zoo" way: instead of pounding away at the treadmill, we will be climbing, throwing, lifting, catching, balancing, swimming and running in the open air.

I shudder at the thought of long runs, but I'm relieved to discover that this week is also more about improving posture and technique than wearing ourselves out. One after another, all 11 of us have initial "assessments", which involves being photographed standing in front of a chart and being filmed lifting weights and punching. These will be reviewed tomorrow; for now, down at the dojo between the house and the sea, surrounded by forest, we get "back to basics" with Luke and Joshi and some heavy wooden poles. Luke explains that he wants us to counter the monkey-like posture we adopt when we sit behind desks all day, bent over keyboards with our shoulders pulled forward.

We are shown how to twirl the poles around ourselves in circular motions, holding them at the top. The result is extraordinary. As I rotate the pole I feel and hear a series of cracks running all the way from my hands up my arms to my neck and shoulders. It's as if all the tension and rigidity in my arms is suddenly being released. Next, holding the poles above our heads with one hand at each end, we move them forwards and backwards keeping our arms straight. It's surprisingly difficult. Next is the hunter-gatherer squat, demonstrated again by Luke and Joshi – we are to squat down with our feet flat on the floor. At first it's difficult to stay down for any length of time and some of us have to put the poles under our feet for support. The grunts and gasps from the group tell the tale, though Gary, a 43-year-old from Melbourne, speaks for most of us when he exclaims: "I just wish I could go back to the beginning and live my life properly."

My physical assessment reveals a good range of motion but a rather lax posture; Luke tells me I need to strengthen my back muscles to prevent my shoulders from hunching forward, and to work on a better transference of power in my punching. My squats see me rocking back slightly while holding a weight; I need to work on initiating this movement from the hip rather than the knee.

After lunch there's a boxing class followed by a 90-minute siesta and then dinner. By evening I've developed a headache and I suspect it's the lack of caffeine, but when the alarm goes off at 5.30am the next morning the body aches suggest it could also be dehydration and a basic lack of fitness. I take some painkillers before our 6.30am "running drill" which will look at our gait. In a car park down the road, we are again filmed running normally and then after coaching – that is, picking our feet up properly and maintaining a straight back. After the drills we're invited to run the two km back to breakfast. I never run, and have dreaded this, but I find that by jogging slowly I can get there, though most of us are boiling and dripping with sweat by the time we finish.

Later on, before lunch, there's another seminar. This one is about "wild living and eating", and the benefits of natural ways of moving, using the body's weight efficiently and its innate elasticity to help prevent injuries, which, Gareth claims, are a symptom of "lack of skill in harnessing gravity".

Wildfitness also believes in low-carbohydrate, high-protein diets, arguing that this was the type of food man ate when he was at his most athletic, as a hunter-gatherer. "Fat is not the enemy," we are told, "excess sugar can be your enemy." The trainers explain how foods such as pasta, rice, bread and even fruit juice are basically "all sugar" and make the body crave more of the same without



Participants in a Wildfitness circuit training session practise balancing, to improve flexibility and core strength. The programme introduces people to skills they can use at home. Courtesy Wildfitness

meeting our nutritional needs. Far better, they argue, to eat a variety of unprocessed vegetables, nuts, meat and fish, with limited amounts of fruit. As a fruit obsessive I find it hard not having a large glass of orange juice every morning, but I can see their point. Protein is a far better way of satisfying your hunger – although I'm not convinced that hunter-gatherers ate quite as much meat and fish as we did during our week: it's served at virtually every meal.

Dairy, too, though tasty, is not particularly advantageous. "If you never ate dairy again your body wouldn't miss it," says Luke. "There's more calcium in broccoli than milk." Bread, pasta and cheese are certainly things I want to cut back on, and with the food provided during the course, I don't miss them at all. Yet all the trainers stress that normal life should be more about balance than perfection. They cite the "5:2" rule, whereby for every five "right meals" you can allow yourself two "treat meals" without ruining your body. We're also encouraged to think about portion sizes, and only eat when we're hungry. For many of us, this talk is a much-needed wake-up call illustrating needs versus wants and the importance of cutting back, if not completely cutting out.

After lunch, and time to "rest and digest", it's the first of several kettlebell training sessions. Kettlebells are heavy, black, bell-shaped irons with handles that come in different weights and sizes. The smallest we use is about five kilograms; we're put to shame by Heidi, who loves kettlebells and wields them with formidable agility even though she is five and a half months pregnant. The aim is to use them to develop the arms and core strength, and they work.

Performing 50 squats while hoisting a 12kg kettlebell over your head while Heidi remarks "you're just not bending your legs enough" and Gareth urges "push those hips out! Clench your butt!" is the time at which you make a mental note never to go mad at a buffet ever again. I push myself to the limit and my headaches resume; the following morning, every muscle aches, as does my lower back. We've all been urged to roll our body over foam rollers every morning and evening to ease our muscles and push back the fascia, a membrane which covers them – it's agonising but therapeutic.



The flight Return flights from Dubai to Mombasa with Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) cost from \$479.96 (Dh1,763) including taxes

The programme Prices for the Wildfitness '9-day Kickstart' programme start from 1,950 (Dh11,050) per person including accommodation, meals, two or three group training sessions a day, seven workshops and two massages (www.wildfitness.com; 00 44 207 734 2526)

tic. It's just as well I "roll" that morning, as it's just in time for the swim.

Our trainers have been deliberately vague about "the swim". We read before joining Wildfitness that one of the activities would involve swimming across a creek, but it's not until we get down to Mida Creek that we realise just how tough this challenge will be. The other side is so far in the distance that we can barely see it. My back and shoulders are still aching dully, so I imagine that I'll be in agony at the other end. "This is about pushing your boundaries," says Heidi, "so just try your best. If you get into trouble just wave and we will come and pick you up in the boat."

None of us wants to suffer this indignity, so each with our own "canoe guide" (a Kenyan fisherman in a canoe paddling alongside us) we set off on what we now know will be a five km swim. I decide to swim steadily for as long as possible, but after 20 minutes of breaststroke I look back and we have barely come any distance at all. I front crawl for a bit before going back to breaststroke, and my guide is realistic if not effusive. "Rosemary, you are not a strong swimmer, but you are in the front line." "Are we halfway yet?" I ask. "No," he says, "you are not halfway." I hit a patch of weed and my guide, a Christian, starts singing Bible songs. It's strangely uplifting, and although I feel a bit like a dead weight in the water, and wish I could front crawl all the way, I realise that I can simply slog this out.

The front four have pulled away and I'm alone with the group be-

hind me, but there's nothing I can do but push on with eyes on the distant horizon. At first I'm bored: fitness is sometimes a battle against boredom but the trick is usually to keep your mind focused on the end result and not let it wander. Yet as the other side draws nearer I love being in my own peaceful, quiet space, with the mangroves and green forest beyond and no traffic on the water. There's no point being scared or panicking, even when we realise that we are not just swimming to the other side but around a bend and upstream as well.

Finally the white sand beach we are heading towards comes into view and I reach the end in a respectable hour and a half. When I get out of the water I can feel the lactic acid burning across my shoulders, but I don't care about that or anything but drinking the fresh coconut water proffered by Joshi. That afternoon I'm treated to an hour-long massage, and after a strenuous yoga session on the roof before sunset, I feel that I have turned a corner.

Wednesday morning is our morning off so five of us go to Gede ruins, just 10 minutes from Watamu and a fascinating site, where we're shown around by Ali Mwarora, its education officer. The ruins are of a self-sufficient, 12th-century Arab trading town filled with palaces and mosques; there is a museum attached containing relics but the best thing is to wander around the site, overgrown with baobab trees, strangler figs and scadoxous flowering bushes. Afterwards, quoting the 5:2 rule, our group makes a quick detour to Anna and Andreas's legendary Italian ice-cream bar in Watamu. I don't feel guilty for having delicious mango and chocolate ice cream and a cappuccino, and there is, after all, a circuit class later.

That evening our running assessments are analysed and I notice from mine that I have been running bent forward from the hip, with my feet falling too flatly on the ground. The difference after Gareth had pointed this out was marked. To show us how it's really done, we're shown videos of the American sprinter Michael Johnson winning races. The following morning, I surprise myself by completing a 5km run through local countryside. Usually, I struggle to do 10 minutes on a treadmill; here, I run-jog-run for half an hour; the

mid-point comes surprisingly soon and the end even sooner: visualising Michael Johnson on the track motivates all of us.

The training continues intensively until the end of the week – more running, more press-ups, kettlebells and squats. There are three injuries in the group by Friday, but luckily I'm not one of them, and by the end of the week my back feels stronger, my shoulders lighter and my techniques have all improved. My punches, which first looked like I was in a bar-room brawl, now have focus and power. I haven't lost much weight, but there's less flab on my stomach and my legs and arms are toned. The whole group seems to be noticing that this is how they are meant to look when the effects of modern-day life are taken away.

Hjalmar Parleviet, 41, a banking IT consultant from Utrecht, says in two weeks he has gained mobility in an injured shoulder and lost more than 10cms from around his middle. "I had a lot of trouble with my shoulder before and I was really unfit," he says. "My lifestyle was too hectic."

Countess Zanardi-Landi, 46, said her normally healthy lifestyle had suffered since she moved out of London to the countryside. "I used to be a cyclist and did Ashtanga yoga but it's too dangerous to cycle where I am living now. I've put weight on and I'm finding it too hard to practise yoga on my own. I haven't done any sport since school and before coming here I had aches and pains which are now completely gone. I wanted to learn to run but my Achilles tendon went on the first exercise, but I love the fun stuff and am beginning to feel core strength."

The "fun stuff" includes archery – I get three bullseyes in a row and win an impromptu tournament – and a reaction game in which we move left, right or in a circle, catching upright poles in the process. I vow to get back into sports when I'm home.

Now, two months later, I can run for 20 minutes without feeling out of breath, I watch what I eat and don't always finish what's on my plate. And it isn't a battle because Wildfitness teaches you to work with your body rather than against it. Whenever my mind wanders, I remember the Kenyan kettlebells and realise that living a balanced life is so much easier.

✉ rbehan@thenational.ae