

ELLE

APRIL 2018
£4.40

POW!

POP ART
HEROINES

BIKER
GIRRRLS

SHIMMER
QUEENS

COWGIRL
INTERRUPTED

ALICIA
VIKANDER

THE MAKING
OF A
HOLLYWOOD
RENEGADE

SPRING WITH
ATTITUDE



CALL ME BY MY NAME: THE VAGINA DIALOGUE



MOROCCO

THE BODY HOLIDAY

IN NEED OF A SPRING REBOOT, SUSAN WARD DAVIES HEADS TO MOROCCO FOR A NUTRITION AND PILATES RETREAT

Your heart is a pretty big deal, so it's scary when it malfunctions. Mine started missing beats after an intense period of stress – an unpleasant, dizzying sensation that makes you feel as if you can't breathe.

After a series of alarming A&E dashes – the first of which had me wondering if a will by text message would be valid – and a battery of tests, it turned out I had a slow heart rate that is more prone to skip beats. In some people the condition is made worse by exercise but, for me, raising the heart rate can kick it back into a normal rhythm – like bashing a wonky TV.

Not a big fan of long-term medication, I decided to get fitter, healthier and de-stress instead. When Ezzahra, Marrakech, came on to my radar with its promise of targeted nutrition and intensive Pilates, it was a no-brainer.

I know you can't swing a dumbbell without hitting a Pilates class in London, so heading to Morocco to find one may seem a little decadent but, somehow, getting on a plane gave the whole new-leaf-turning aspect of the retreat more weight and was therefore more likely to be effective.

A private estate of three traditional villas outside Marrakech, Ezzahra runs Pilates retreats twice a year: four-day courses with spa treatments on demand, a nutritionist, guaranteed sunshine and enough free time for reading by the tranquil pool or taking trips into and around Marrakech (the new YSL museum is worth the plane fare alone). And it's good for solo travellers, as owner Tamara Stewart-

Wilson runs the retreats like a fun house party, making sure singletons don't feel left out.

Set in the Palmeraie, a 54-square-mile oasis of palm trees to the north of the city, the main house, Ezzahra, sleeps 14, with two smaller villas, Alkhazama and Azzaytouna, sleeping four and six respectively. The look is all shady courtyards, terracotta tiles, ornate archways and tinkling fountains, with each room styled differently. Mine had a wall of framed mirrors, a fabulous tadelakt bathroom and French doors leading to the large pool set next to a bedouin tent, in gardens of date palms and orange and pomegranate trees.

I met my fellow retreaters at lunch, eaten, as are all meals, around two communal tables on a terrace outside the main house. Our group of 12 included just one man (half of a married couple, possibly here under duress); the rest were women in their 30s and 40s, a mix of singles, pairs of friends and one group of four – all here for a fitness overhaul.

Lunch was a gourmet feast, with nutritional therapy expert Andrea Carroll Langan working with Ezzahra's kitchen to produce Moroccan-style food incorporating all the health-boosting elements we needed – protein, carbs, fruit and veg, healthy fats and pulses – bound up into treats like berry and coconut ice-cream, aubergine salad, saffron fish brochettes with avocado salsa, and 'chocolate' mousse made from avocado.

The days had an easy rhythm: up at 7am to swim, then a one-hour Pilates session before a healthy breakfast of seeds, smoothies, yoghurt, dates, almond butter, eggs, avocado and fruit. Then there was time for the pool or a trip either side of lunch, with spa treatments, hammams and one-to-one sessions with Andrea and the BASI-trained (Body Arts and Science Institute) Pilates instructors, Victoria Turner and Mike Scott, slotted in before the evening mat session.

"It was good to get **ADVICE** from a nutritionist with a **PROPER** scientific background"

due to a protein deficiency (just porridge and berries for breakfast). She prescribed an almond-butter sandwich or wholegrain crackers with olive tapenade, hummous, lentil dip or cottage cheese mid-morning to keep blood-sugar levels stable and improve concentration. For brain and heart health, she advised getting plenty of anti-inflammatory Omega-3, found in oily fish, walnuts, pumpkin seeds and flaxseeds. Protein and/or healthy fats with each meal or snack, she said, reduce the rate of absorption of sugars into the blood stream, allowing for a slower release of energy and improving concentration.

For the Pilates, we split into two groups with either calm Mike or statuesque Victoria, the latter of whom's manner was part Miranda Hart/part school-games captain, jollying us into more repetitions as we stretched and planked in the early sunshine or pink dusk.

I loved the house-party atmosphere, the food was the most delicious healthy food I have ever eaten and there is so much fake nutrition news around that it was good to get advice from a nutritionist with a proper scientific background.

By the end of the four days, I felt more toned, fitter and energised by the combina-

tion of exercise and healthy food. I bought a mat, a stretchy band and jars of almond butter. Since then, I concentrate better and, while I haven't kept up the daily Pilates sessions (but I will, I will), it got me into the right frame of mind and instilled what I hope will be lifelong eating habits.

A four-night Pilates retreat at Ezzahra (ezzahra-morocco.com) starts from £1,350pp. The next retreat runs 16-20 May 2018, and there's also one in November. British Airways (ba.com) has return direct flights from London Gatwick to Marrakech from around £97. >

