

Travel & Outdoors

TRAVEL	34
Lake superior	
OUTDOORS	37
Swim with the tide	
GARDEN	38
Walled and wonderful	

Fighting fit

Forget that relaxing spa break abroad, toughen up with a military-style boot camp for women here in Scotland

MERCY BREHENY

A lot of the women at camp break down on the third day. There are usually tears by Wednesday,” says Sara Dwyer, organiser of Scottish Boot Camp when I speak to her before my planned week at the all-female fitness retreat. I’m sure I detect a note of muffled glee in her voice.

“Why do you think that is?” I ask her.

“Well, they imagine themselves arriving as they are, and they picture themselves leaving, slim and fit, but they don’t think about all the stuff that happens in between.”

SBC operates in the Royal burgh of Tain, north of Inverness. Our base during my visit is the gorgeous Pitcalzean House, an early-19th century country pile, in lovely rhododendron-filled grounds with more than enough room for 11 women to be tortured from

6:30am to 6:30pm. With table-tennis, a full-sized snooker table, a trampoline, Eighties classic Swingball, plus a library offering jigsaws and board games, it feels rather like a wholesome Brownie camp of dreams.

DAY ONE On our arrival on Saturday afternoon, the other ten guests and I are weighed and measured before being introduced to the staff members who will put us through our paces over the coming days. Happily for anyone with a military fetish (um... me), the staff are dressed in combat gear at all times, demand unquestioning respect and (bonus!) are easy on the eye. But more importantly, as the physical training instructors have all clocked up many years’ experience in the armed forces they know how to get the best out of us Boot Campers.

We assemble on the lawn for our first challenge of the week, a fitness test to ascertain how many push-ups, burpees and crunches we can complete in a minute (for each), plus a relay race in-

volving 7kg sandbags. After that we’re finished off by a few rounds of circuits and one of our number is physically sick. We all feel her pain.

Dinner is a Lilliputian salmon fillet, a tomato stuffed with bulgur wheat and steamed vegetables. What the meals here lack in size they make up for in

“We receive our first brutal wake-up call on the lawn at dawn”

flavour. Chef Lileen, who earned her chops in the Royal Navy, knows exactly what we need to sustain us while losing weight. And, thank the gods, has the skills to make our frankly quite meagre rations very tasty.

Before bed we’re informed that our first drill will commence at 6:40am, before breakfast. Dismay.

DAY TWO As promised, we receive our first brutal wake-up call on the lawn at near dawn: 40 minutes of circuits, led by PTIs Paddy and Tommo. Breakfast is porridge, a protein shake and a run on the surrounding country roads carrying a rucksack with a weight in it. Then it’s time for some team-building exercises and a game of (sort of) netball. Lunch is a dolls’ house-sized tuna salad which keeps us going for the following hill hike before we crawl on to the lawn for stretches. Over dinner we feel the mutual bond of exhaustion and most of us turn in just after 9pm.

DAY THREE The early start is not the shock it was yesterday but the circuits are horrible. “Bunny hopping” may sound adorable, but at 7am I would probably rather be waterboarded than endure minutes of jumping over hurdles. Breakfast is subdued.

The grounds at Pitcalzean House are so lovely that the views almost take the

Running up Nigg Hill; Nordic walking, below left



The PTIs put the Boot Campers through their paces



pain out of mid-morning interval training – almost. We are bullied and cajoled to sprint and jog for 45 minutes. By the end of the session I'm purple and gasping for air.

An afternoon of Nordic walking is actually rather pleasant except that I'm so hungry I'm scouring the scenery for something I can eat: blueberry bushes are everywhere but it's too early in the season for fruit. Foiled.

After lunch we have a Pilates lesson with Sara in the local village hall, followed by a game of touch rugby before dinner. Relaxing (collapsing) in front of the log fire in the library in the evening, I realise that I actually feel amazing: the culmination, no doubt of a three-day endorphin boost.

DAY FOUR Circuits, followed by a spin class and another Pilates lesson. In the afternoon we're dropped off at Inver to run along the 3.5-mile stretch of beach to Portmahomack. We sprint up and down the dunes in the sunshine and Paddy's dogs, Bray and Obee keep us company. Back at the house we're debriefed for the following day's activity which will be to climb Ben Wyvis, a Munro of 3,432ft. "Bring toilet paper," instructs Tommo. "It's not much fun if you get caught short and have to use your sock."

DAY FIVE The day starts well enough, ambling up the pretty heathery gentle slopes of Ben Wyvis, but as the climb gets steeper the gentle mist becomes a relentless drizzle. By the time we reach the first marker cairn (not quite the summit), I'm soaked in my own sweat, which is rapidly freezing in the 60-70mph winds. It's so gusty that Paddy decides it's no longer safe enough to continue and we turn around – not having bagged our Munro. I can't say I'm disappointed.

DAY SIX Circuits, interval training and a game of Swedish longball (it's like rounders but a little bit sillier). With the sun shining we embark on another spot of Nordic walking. We hike for 5.5 miles along the Firth, while the dogs find lots

of stinky bits to roll in. I feel like I could walk all day. In the afternoon we gather in the garden for a Q and A with Lileen about nutrition, after which we adjourn to the kitchen and she talks us through some of her recipes.

DAY SEVEN After circuits we pile into the minivan to Portmahomack and walk along the coast to Rockfield (carrying 7kg weights in our backpacks). A couple of hours later we're dropped off at the foot of Nigg Hill (a very steep hill) and informed we have to run to the top to get our lunch. There's very nearly a mutiny. As the van tootles up the road without us, we realise there's no choice but to get on with it. At dinner that evening (after a swim and a game of longball) every single camper is holding an ice-pack to some part of her body. "The only thing that doesn't hurt is my eyelids," says Tracy. She speaks for us all.

At the final weigh-in, two of the campers have lost 11lbs each. I've lost 4lbs and 7in in total, but I've gained so much more. I feel refreshed, and fizzing with energy. I realise that I have much more will-power in my tank than I had previously thought. I honestly feel in the best physical shape that I can remember.

Several weeks later I'm still feeling the benefit: I've kept up with the interval training. My weight has remained stable and – shocker! – I've become an early riser, making it into the gym in the mornings most days. Would I recommend a week of Scottish Boot Camp over a week on a sun lounger in exotic climes? YES SIR!

THE FACTS The cost for a week is £995, including all food and accommodation, plus a varied fitness programme, www.scottishbootcamp.com Travel from Edinburgh to Inverness with Scotrail starts at £30.20 return, www.scotrail.co.uk

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Whether you desire simple elegance or eye-catching flash, all tastes are catered for by Derwentwater

DAVID ROBINSON

Wastwater is more wildly impressive, and on a fine day you can make a good case for Conistone, but of all the English Lakes, for me the most picturesque, and the most in scale with the mountains around it, is Derwentwater.

Go to the south and you're in Borrowdale, and although I've long carried a torch for the Duddon Valley, I suppose that Borrowdale has to be the Lakes' most scenic valley – which, given that it opens out into Derwentwater, seems a rather unfair concentration of Nature's X factors.

When you're driving south past Derwentwater into Borrowdale on the road that, in a few miles, will wind up to be the highest one in England, the first turn on your right takes you over a weak bridge. There's a wooden sign marked "Hotel", and if you follow the direction of the arrow past summer meadows and discreet sprawls of relaxing hikers you'll come to the place Colin Harrison bought four years ago. It was only £1.6 million, which is an absolute bargain when you bear in mind that a four-bedroom house nearby went for £1.8 million the other month. "If you can afford to live round here," says Harrison. "You can afford not to work."

He's right. God only made a small

bit of Borrowdale, and because of that, Harrison reckons, the people who come to stay at his Borrowdale Gates Hotel, bang in the middle of it, come to gawp at the beauty of the valley rather than the amenities of his hotel.

So it's a big yes to quality, in rooms and food. But no to a whole lot of things. Weddings, because who wants to be an uninvited guest at one? A public bar, because it might be noisy. A spa, because it's not worth the hassle. A restaurant open to the public, because if you're going to keep good staff, you won't if they've got the added stress of making an unplanned 40 extra meals to order. Music in the lounge, because it's naff. Interior decorators, because his wife can do better. Chasing a Michelin star, because – why bother, when 65 per cent of your business is repeat business, when your staff are happy and don't move on: surely you must be doing something right?

"Look at that," he says, waving an expansive arm at the valley beyond the lounge windows, "That's the star, not this hotel. That valley out there. Not a road in sight. Some of the best walking in, well, England anyway, even if not Scotland. And the views. You know, I drive back home to Keswick on this side of the lake, the quiet side. And no matter how often I do it, there are times

when I look down at Derwentwater and I just stop the car and look out at the lake beneath me in the starlight and think how lucky I am. Got to be the best view in England. Got to be."

But is it, though? John Ruskin, the great Victorian aesthete, reckoned you'd have to go 60 miles south-west for that, to the view looking north-east over the River Lune at Kirkby



48 HOURS IN Nice

■ **Friday, 12pm** Arrive at Nice-Côte d'Azur airport and jump on one of the frequent buses to the city centre. Check into Le Petit Palais (www.petitpalaisnice.com). Rooms start at €110.

■ **2pm** Ease yourself into French culture with a stroll along the Promenade des Anglais. Hungry? Dine in one of the many restaurants that line the beach, such as Sarao (www.sarao-restaurants.com).

■ **4pm** Spend your afternoon rummaging through the dozens of antique shops that are scattered around the city.

■ **7pm** Eat some traditional French cuisine at the Restaurant Bella Vista (www.bellavista-nice.com).

Great lakes

Hiking by Derwentwater; Hipping Hall, below and far left



Lonsdale. The balance of wood, winding river, meadow and hill in that vista was, he wrote in 1875, "the prettiest in England and therefore the world".

Leaving the last bit of that to one side, look at how Andrew Wildsmith, youngish (34) lord and master of Hipping Hall, runs his hotel just a couple of miles away from such scenic splendour. He has nine bedrooms to Harrison's 25, and a main road passes close by his hotel. So maybe that's why his gorgeous nine-bedroom hotel seems to be straining every sinew to get itself noticed.

But it's working. Last November, Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon stayed there as part of Michael Winterbottom's cultish improv/gastro-tour documentary *The Trip*, shown on BBC2. Last

year it also won a plethora of trade awards, including being placed one below La Gavroche in the National Restaurants' list of Britain's top 100 restaurants and being voted one of the two most romantic restaurants in the North of England.

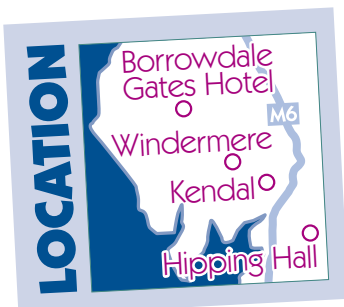
That's no great surprise to anyone who has tasted young New Zealand chef Brent Hulena's exquisite cooking in the 15th-century dining hall, which comes complete with minstrels' gallery, giant fireplace and medieval tapestries. All this by firelight and under vaulted oak eaves made from old sailing ships.

This is the hotel as star, not the surroundings. The two managers' approaches are completely different, and I find it hard to pick which I prefer. Why

don't you make your own version of *The Trip* and work it out for yourself?

THE FACTS Borrowdale Gates Hotel, Grange-in Borrowdale, Cumbria CA12 5UQ (tel: 0845 833 2524 or 01768 777204, www.borrowdale-gates.com). Dinner, bed and breakfast from £95-£125pp per night. Hipping Hall, Cowan Bridge, Kirkby Lonsdale (tel: 01524 271187, www.hippinghall.com) Doubles from £200 per night. For a great selection of self-catering properties in the Lake District visit www.holidays.scotsman.com/cottages

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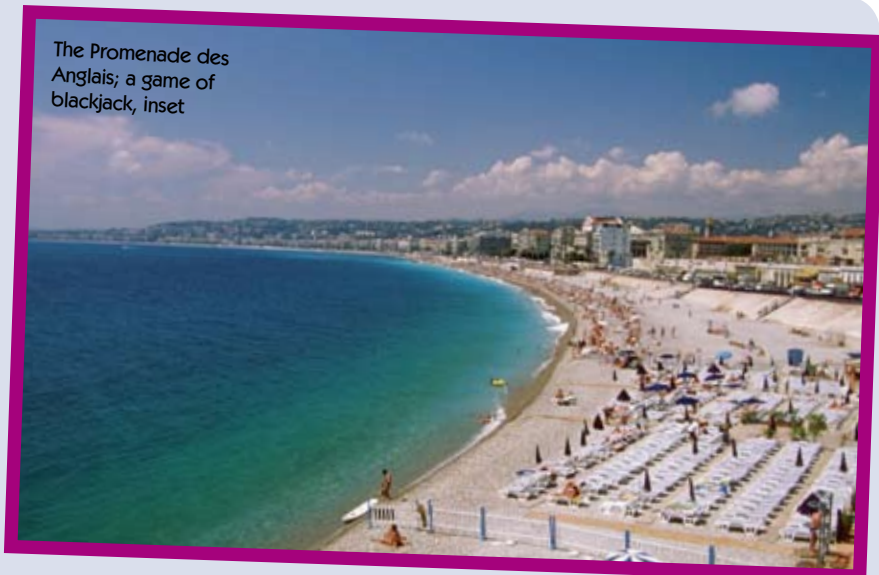


- **10pm** Play a game of poker in the renowned Palais de la Mediterranee casino (www.palais.concorde-hotels.com).
- **Saturday, 9am** Explore the French Riviera in a style to rival James Bond by renting a sports car from Rent-a-Car Classic (www.rentacarclassic.com).
- **11am** Picnic in Le Jardin du Monastère (Place du Monastère de Cimiez) and admire the beautiful flowers.
- **1pm** Jump on board the Trans Cote D'Azur (www.trans-cote-azur.com) for a mini cruise around the coast.
- **5pm** Visit L'hotel le Negresco (www.hotel-negresco-nice.com). This magnificent building is not only a hotel

- but also a museum where you can view French art ranging from the time of Louis XIII to more contemporary works.
- **7pm** Have a scrumptious dinner at the Brasserie La Renaissance (www.brasseriela Renaissance.com).
- **9pm** Take a late walk around the Marche Artisanal Nocturne et Expositions de Peintures. Pick up handmade jewellery or even a painting by one of the local artists at this night market.

AIMEE STANTON

THE FACTS See www.jet2.com or www.easyjet.com for return fares; *Cities Direct* offer four-star breaks to Nice starting from £449pp for four nights, flying from Glasgow (www.citiesdirect.co.uk/scotsman)



The Promenade des Anglais; a game of blackjack, inset

Bargain Breaks

COMPILED BY ALICE WYLLIE

PHOTOGRAPH: KEVIN EAVES



SWEDE DREAMS

Enjoy a long weekend in Stockholm with prices starting from £255pp. This includes three nights' accommodation at the three-star Scandic Bromma and return flights from Glasgow departing on 4 August. Call 0203 320 3320 or visit www.ebookers.com

TURKEY TROT

Prices for seven nights in Turkey start from £590pp. This includes accommodation at the five-star Grand Prestige Hotel in Side on an all-inclusive basis and return flights from Aberdeen departing on 17 July. Call 0844 412 5970 or visit www.thomascook.com

SPAIN AND PLEASURE

A seven-night break in Ibiza costs from £400pp. The price includes accommodation at the three-star Riomar Hotel in Santa Eulalia on a half-board basis and return flights from Edinburgh departing on 16 July. Call 0844 879 8191 or visit www.directholidays.co.uk