

FIT FOR RELAXATION

by LOUISE
ATKINSON

Opt for tough love or just unwind by the pool — the choice is yours at this sumptuous Greek retreat

ALTHOUGH athletes wax lyrical about the 'runner's high', euphoria isn't a word I've ever associated with exercise.

But a quest to find joy in fitness finds me throwing star jumps and playing 'keepy-uppy' with a medicine ball on the precipitous edge of a Greek mountain.

I'm on a three-day Spartan Spirit of Adventure package at the Euphoria Retreat, 135 miles south-west of Athens. And I'm not here to take things easy.

I'm terrified of being pushed too far past my comfort zone, but the outrageous views and clean air going through my screaming lungs provide an element of distraction. I'm so fired up by a competitive compulsion to push my middle-aged limits that it is a while before I notice I'm grinning.

Our group comprises a motley crew of ages and fitness levels. Sandra, a 43-year-old Briton living in Israel, is on a mission to lose weight fast because she's been told she is staring down the barrel of a diabetes gun.

Raoul, a fit French marketing exec in his 30s, is here to escape the exhaustion of two pre-school children and imminent burnout. While Julie, a Dutch divorcee with a surgically enhanced bosom and skin-tightened cheekbones which make it impossible to tell if she's 30 or 60, is looking for adventure.

Our daily itinerary combines gruelling fitness (two to three-hour sessions on a mountain, at a beach 40km away, in the bowl of an ancient amphitheatre), yoga and pilates (on a rooftop platform, a forest glade or under the shade of olive trees) with tailored massage-based treatments as well as 'down time' by the pool.

The Euphoria Retreat was built two years ago around an old mansion, with a spa area cut into the hillside and 45 bedrooms spreading in ascending honey-stone layers through the pine forest above.

THE front gates are a steep climb from the village of Mystras, then it's a flight of steps to reception, another to the spa, and three more up to my room. That extra effort required to crawl into bed each night is not lost on me.

Spartan fitness is just one of the many packages on offer. Most of the guests are on relaxation, immunity-boosting, or 'emotional transformation' programmes.

Underpinning the resort's ethos is an adherence to 'the five elements' — a spiritual mash-up of Chinese medicine and ancient Greek healing. Every guest gets an initial consultation and a prescribed treatment designed to help us reset. (I am told I am heavy on

the water element, so my massage incorporates surprisingly vigorous lymphatic drainage moves.)

The place is big on nature and history. Guided hikes set off most mornings into the hills to visit castle ruins, an old chapel hidden in the caves, and renovated churches scattered along the ridge of Mount Taygetus.

The area is a Unesco World Heritage Site and a pilgrimage destination for history buffs from around the world which means it has a refreshing vibrance in mid-winter when most Greek beach resorts are dormant.

Although Greece is open to British tourists, the country is currently on the UK's amber list, meaning a ten-day quarantine is required on return to the UK.

Many of the guests choose to opt out of the organised activities, booking treatments and wafting in and out of the sauna, steam room, salt cave and hammam, instead. I can see there is euphoria, of sorts, to be had in that. But I'm here on the Spartan fitness kick and that means *action*.

'Go Spartans! Go!' shout our trainers, Vassilis and Dimitra, as we set off each morning, hiking or biking into the hills.

Their enthusiasm is infectious

and it does feel good to be spending so much time outside. There are studies which show the powerful health and mood-boosting effect of being 'in nature'.

Mercifully, the exertion levels are tempered to suit us all, with cushy moderations for Julie who doesn't like to sweat, and extra 'man' challenges for Raoul.

DIMITRA tells me: 'We had a couple from Monte Carlo in their 60s earlier this year, which was a bit of a surprise. But we adjusted the programme and they loved it.'

The super-fit get rock-climbing and sea swims thrown in.

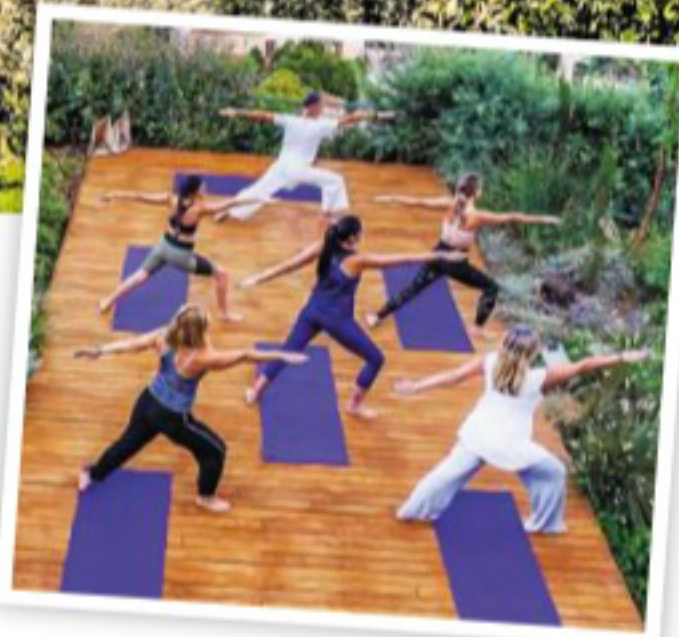
We Spartans eat together, choosing from the same a la carte menu as everyone else. It is fundamentally healthy food: nothing deep-fried, lots of vegetables and salad, with a choice of Greek specials.

Alcohol is available, but discouraged (for us). The portions are smaller than I'd serve at home, but no one raised an eyebrow when Raoul ordered double, while a mid-morning smoothie and mid-afternoon snack (dried fruit, nuts, cheese) stop me feeling hungry.

By the end of three days, we

Bliss: The hotel at Euphoria Retreat in Mystras, Greece (above) and, inset, a yoga class with reviving views

Pictures: STAVROS HABAKIS



Spartans are comrades in arms. It is remarkable how much fitter and healthier I feel: my stomach seems flatter, and there's definition forming in my upper arms.

And it turns out euphoria really does lurk around the most surprising corners.

For Sandra, it is the finger-prick blood test showing her blood sugar levels coming down. For Raoul, it is three nights of 'the best sleep I've had in my life'. And Julie has clearly been lost in her own reverie among the extensive spa menu of treatments.

For me, euphoria lies in saying 'yes' to aerial yoga, fighting the fear and allowing myself to hang upside down in a length of cloth

suspended from an olive tree. As Dimitra tries to coax me into a pose she calls a 'half mosquito', I am overwhelmed by delight. After three days of pushing my body to its limits, this gently swaying yogic dangle is utter bliss.

TRAVEL FACTS

EUPHORIA Spartan Spirit of Adventure Group Retreat (three days) costs from €2,195pp (£1,890) based on two sharing a Superior Deluxe Room on Full Board (euphoriaretreat.com). Transfers from Athens cost €230 (£198) each way. BA (ba.com) London to Athens from £120 return.