

(Where, Oh Where?)



ALISHA SMITH

A FITNESS RETREAT GIVING 'BALI BELLY' A WHOLE NEW MEANING

Alisha Smith gets off the beaten track and puts her fitness to the test in Bali.



There is absolutely no way that I can run another step. They stretch on for what seems like an eternity, each appearing taller and further apart than the last. Ahead of me, Julia, one of the fittest of our group, is down to a walk, her lithe and lean legs using every last ounce of strength to cover the third and final climb. Behind me, someone is crawling, the last 50 steps proving too much for fatigued legs.

Reaching the top, I collapse on the grass with the other water-guzzling, pink-cheeked survivors as they pant and scrunch up their faces in an effort to get back both their breath and enough sensation in their legs to stand again.

I brush grass and sand from places

that grass and sand have no business being, and haul myself onto the back seat of a golf cart, trying not to let my sweaty body make contact with the clammy thighs of the person sitting next to me.

The cart whisks us away from the beach (and the nasty, horrible, mean steps of doom leading down to it), through manicured grounds and comes to a halt outside heavy wooden doors. Excited voices, shaky legs and red faces briefly disturb the peace of the other Ayana spa patrons as we're ushered into swimsuits, robes and slippers.

Keen to enjoy the serenity and solitude of the spa I slide into the Aquatonic® Seawater Jet Pool ahead of the group,

sighing audibly as the water begins to soothe my aching muscles. With the day's fitness over and a relaxing night of drinks and dinner with new friends stretching ahead of me, I sink appreciatively down into the bubbling brine and realise that this is my idea of the perfect holiday.

Founded in 2012, Active Escapes (owned by Zanna Conlan), offers one-week fitness retreats on the Indonesian island of Bali. But a typical retreat, it most certainly is not. Based on the idea of the surf retreats and boat trips for which Indonesia is well known, Zanna wanted to create an active holiday concept that was as fun, fit and cheeky as they are themselves. And boy, is that what they deliver!

Located about 40 minutes from Bali's Denpasar Airport and about 25 minutes from the bustling Seminyak, the retreat is set in Pererenan Village, close to Echo Beach in Canggu. Famous for its rice fields and varied waves (with everything from a slow, crumbling beginner wave at Batu Balong, to plenty of fast left and right breaks at Echo Beach, Canggu and Pererenan), the region provides the perfect setting for sun, surf and squats.

The accommodation is nothing short of luxurious with two, three and four bedroom villas, each housing between four and six people. Each one contains a private swimming pool, a living area, and dedicated villa staff who will not only make up your room and do your washing each day, but they'll also get busy in the kitchen so that you don't have to. In fact, three meals a day are provided and there's always a protein bar or piece of fruit to be found if you need a snack. The food is simple yet healthy and delicious, with vegetables, protein and rice based meals helping to replenish energy stores in between daily activities.

Arriving late on Sunday afternoon, I've missed the first session of the week, which was boxing, but arrive just in time to head to the local Echo Beach House to get to know everyone over dinner. We're a diverse group of both males and females, ranging in age and fitness levels; but the common thread is that everyone is friendly and palpably excited about the week ahead.

While encouraged by the trainers to participate, all sessions are optional meaning that retreat guests can choose just how active or inert you want your time there to be. Days spent at the villas usually alternate workouts with free time (translation: lazing blissfully by the pool) and surfing. With all those varied breaks to choose from, it's Zanna's personal mission to ensure every beginner stands up on their surfboard by the end of the week.

Just like the waves, training sessions can be as hard or as easy as you like.



While no two days are alike, most start at 6.50am with a run, walk or workout. Daily sessions include mat-based Pilates, circuits, boxing or 'Body Blitz' – a short, but intense, circuit comprising three rounds of five one-minute bodyweight exercises.

Days spent away from the villa are mostly still active and always fun. From surfing at Jimbaran Bay and the amazingly luxurious Ayana spa, to a high ropes course in the Bali Botanical Garden in Bedugal, the Active Escapes team have successfully sought out the best that Bali has to offer.

And while the food is healthy and the sessions are challenging, Active Escapes is most certainly not a strict health retreat.

They love to surf. They love to train. They love to box. And they love to have a few beers too! So while the week is absolutely about fitness, it's also about meeting new people, having a few ciders on a night out in Seminyak and, generally, having a great time. 'If everyone's having a great time, then my job's done,' Zanna smiles. It's a mission statement that the Active Escapes team all achieve with ease.

On the last morning of the retreat, we all gather to have our final breakfast as a group. 'Excuuuse meee?' Kadek's singsong, Balinese-toned English broke in over my right shoulder as I contemplated another banana pancake. 'You finished?' I looked at my plate where pancake crumbs intermingled

with mangosteen casings, grape seeds and skerricks of gluten free muesli. While I'd had more than my fill of post-training breakfast, handing over my plate would mean that the week had come to an end. More than any active holiday I've taken before, I really, truly did not want to leave. Looking down the length of the table, I saw new friends that just a week before had been complete strangers and I'd fallen head-over-heels in love with an island that had never really interested me previously. As delicious as they were, another pancake wouldn't delay the inevitable, so I hand over my plate, but resolve to come back as soon as I possibly can. **OH!**



Active Escapes run retreats in Bali and the Maldives, and is offering all *OH! Magazine* readers \$100 off any 2014 retreats. Visit activeescapes.com.au for dates and details or email info@activeescapes.com.au