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The camp that boots out the chocolate

Kathryn Lundy experiences a 'weight-loss spa' – the boutique version of boot camp – that redefines your health priorities

MY name is Kathryn, and I am a chocaholic.

In the past month I have come to realise that I will probably be a chocaholic for the rest of my life, but strangely, and to the detriment of Cadbury's annual turnover, Dairy Milk no longer has me salivating wildly at the sight of a purple wrapper.

In alternative therapy terms I'm a self-confessed sceptic, but I really think this may have something to do with acupuncture.

Since someone stuck five needles in my ear and told me to obliterate the seductive image of that silky smooth Cadbury's chocolate bar, Dairy Milk no longer overrides the normal workings of my brain's control centre.

I guess you could call this a relative success story, and it's one I certainly hadn't foreseen, but, as it turns out, my presumptions were completely jumbled by a trip to Devonshire 'boot camp' Nu Beginnings.

According to its proprietor, Victoria Wills, Nu Beginnings is a 'weight loss spa' which offers specially designed weeks for men and women who want to lose weight and increase general wellbeing.

Victoria is well qualified to talk about the struggles of dieting, having tried and failed with attempts at every known fad diet, lotion, potion, pill and strict boot camp plan.

Frustrated at unrealistic eating routines, bizarre rituals and unsustainable weight loss, she decided, 18 months ago, to invent her own solution, and with her partner Frank launched the globe's first 'boutique' boot camp – a unique approach to health, fitness and weight loss, combining a nutrition programme, exercise and hypnotherapy with a beautiful setting, relaxing treatments and the tools to lead a healthier, happier and more positive life.

As it happens, all I'd picked out from the promotional catalogue was 'yoga', 'Pilates', 'sauna', 'massage' and 'weight loss' – what sounds, to me, like the makings of a flipping good holiday – and my preconceptions were thus thrown off course within seconds of my arriving at Westwell Hall, a grand mansion house nestled in leafy hillside and overlooking the sleepy town of Ilfracombe.

With no time to unbuckle my bags, seek out the sauna or command a pampering foot massage, I was directed to dig out my tracksuit and trainers and undertake a 'fitness assessment'.

I'd been prepared for some sort of weigh-in-but I was drastically unsuspecting of a physical fitness assessment, at 7.30 pm on a Friday evening, when my body and brain was already well into TV and takeaway mode.

Suffice to say that thoughts of lunchtime's chicken and bacon panini, chocolate waffle and large glass of sauvignon blanc weighed heavily on my mind, and a darn sight more uncomfortably in my tummy.

I was shocked, therefore, to discover I was able to complete 22 proper press-ups, and traumatised to learn that the scales weighed in at 10 stone 6 lb. Just one month earlier, I had weighed 9 stone 12 lb.

Proof, if any was needed, that my body is not immune to four weeks' of unreserved wining, dining, birthday booze-ups and bingeing,

and acceptance that some sort of physical activity and disciplined eating plan was now a matter of desperate urgency.

Eating is a big thing at Nu Beginnings, and, although the menu is largely wheat-free, gluten-free, alcohol-free, caffeine-free, Dairy Milk-free and chicken and bacon panini-free, the food is incredibly tasty.

Top marks go to the home-baked apricot, lemon and poppy seed breakfast muffins – so good that fellow guest and boot camp veteran Bob found it difficult to curtail his delight at the prospect, and launched into a funny sort of muffin dance after a fitness session on the beach.

Red meat is off the menu, but a most useful discovery is the number of ways in which you can cook chicken, fish and vegetables, as well as basic stir-fries, sauces and traditionally boring grains like quinoa and pearl barley.

Eating the right foods is important, but Victoria is keen to stress that it is also how, how much, and why you eat, which makes the difference. She claims that by following five simple rules, we can eat almost anything we like and still lose weight.

Those rules are:

- Eat every three to four hours.
- Chew.
- Put your knife and fork down between mouthfuls – and let go.
- Listen to your body, and stop when you feel full.
- Always leave something on your plate.

They sounded simple enough, but, in practice, I was to endure many mental struggles as I battled with my fork and a solitary prawn, willing my good conscience to countermand my desire to gobble it all up and lick the plate clean.

As my internal dialogue drove a wedge between the hope and fear that I'd ever be able to crack this 'new' way of eating, it had occurred to me that what I signed up for was something far removed from an idyllic spa and detox retreat.

Of course I did rather fancy the idea of dropping a dress size, but weight loss, we know, doesn't happen by accident, and soon I was beginning to realise that in order to drop those extra pounds, some effort was going to have to come from somewhere.

Exercise is another important part of the Nu Beginnings programme, and gentle activity like yoga and Pilates is interspersed with moderate effort like hiking, through spectacular Exmoor landscape, and more strenuous training like circuits and plyometrics, as well as relaxing Qi-Jong (a form of Tai Chi) and stretching sessions.

The programme is adaptable to all levels of fitness, so that those better acquainted with sitting down as opposed to sit-ups can be introduced at a gentler pace.

This is certainly no easy ride, however, and as I stood gasping and tortured at the top of a giant sand dune during a beach fitness session, I wondered why so many thousands of people now choose to spend strenuous holidays at boot camp, and not on poolside loungers in Barbados.

But then the appeal of such a holiday is undeniable – boot camp works because the thinking is done for you. Those who find it difficult to give into a good sofa session or a family bag of Doritos will inevitably see this type of trip as a quick fix to fitting a size 10 swimsuit, without the obstacle of self-discipline.

But Nu Beginnings is not your typical boot camp, and neither is it a quick fix.

Hypnosis, acupuncture and neuro-linguistic programming are a major reason why, be-



Kathryn Lundy (right) at a fitness session on the beach run by Nu Beginnings

cause they aim to tackle the root cause of the problem and equip the person with tools to change their habits through the power of the unconscious mind.

I'll use the Dairy Milk as an example. I was told by the acupuncturist that he could help me to moderate one bad habit with a technique that combined acupuncture with neuro-linguistic programming, to help give me more control over what I crave.

For maximum results, he said, be specific – so from a draft list of bad habits that included wine, chocolate, beer, cigarettes, crisps, new shoes and online shopping, I managed, after some debate, to chop it down to the Cadbury's.

Once my ear was jabbed, I shut my eyes and began to focus on the Dairy Milk. Having not touched the stuff for near on five days, the image was so vivid to me that my mouth was watering, and soon I believed I could taste it – until I was directed to obliterate that image, and see it explode in front of me, with which came an unexpected and strange sense of relief.

Although, since I have returned home, the process seems to have worked eerily well, I have developed a slightly more frustrating habit for Galaxy chocolate, which has sort of defeated the point.

It is difficult to know whether or not the hypnosis has been more beneficial, although the exploration of issues like my relationship with food, my body issues, confidence and self-esteem have become more prevalent in my thoughts, and I have found myself making more positive choices, and feeling, generally, more optimistic.

In fact it's hard not to feel optimistic as the week at Nu Beginnings wears on, and as you start to feel slightly lighter, slightly healthier, and slightly happier.

By Wednesday, even the prospect of a massage with a larger-than-life Yorkshireman

wasn't enough to dampen my spirits.

I'm sure I've had stranger experiences – right at that point I couldn't think of many – but, as it turned out, the massage was fantastic.

Probably more painful than enjoyable, but my sore muscles and shoulder knots were kneaded and loosened and, after days of tight thighs and tense calves, I found, the next day, that I could actually walk again.

Perhaps my greatest revelation, however, came with Thursday's weigh-in.

Funnily enough, I'd almost forgotten about the results of last month's wining and dining, and about the real purpose of this trip.

And, strangely enough, the scales didn't seem to bother me so much, because I already felt absolutely fantastic.

It was almost as if I'd realised that stones and pounds mean very little, because if you take care of your body on the inside, you don't need to worry so much about the outside.

But, of course, I wasn't going to go without one last weigh-in . . . to which the scales replied: 10 stone flat!

So, after my week at Nu Beginnings, I lost nearly half a stone, met some great people, and learnt some very important things about myself, which are that:

1. I can happily live without bread.
2. I don't need coffee or Diet Coke to perk me up.
3. Walking can be a great workout.
4. If I feel good, I look good.
5. Hours of mindless exercise can be packed into short, sharp bursts.
6. Herbal teas do taste nice.
7. I don't need to go back for seconds – or even finish my firsts.
8. Things are never as bad as they seem.
9. Regular massage can seriously help sore muscles
10. Nothing beats a Galaxy Ripple.

TOMORROW:
Audience etiquette