

Despite several attempts over the years, I have never 'got' yoga. Supple, yoga-mat-wielding friends in Lycra have dragged me to church halls for classes, but it's either been too new agey for me (I don't do chanting, ever), impossibly hard, ridiculously competitive while always claiming not to be, or just plain weird. I winced all the way through one class where a man in voluminous robes with a silvery mane of hair made us do the charmingly-named 'anal locks' – yoga-speak for buttock-clenching – for an hour. It was the longest hour of my life.

So when, after a back injury earlier this year, my osteopath told me it was either embrace yoga or see him every week for ever, you can imagine the affect this news had on my chakras. A friend recommended a retreat with Sally Parkes, reassuring me I'd like the way she does yoga – lots of laughs, no Tibetan bells and plenty of good food, based at a beautiful five-acre farm high up in the Andalusian hills. Sunshine, an infinity pool, stylish accommodation with exquisite Moorish details, plus a day-trip to stunning Granada mid-way through the week: what wasn't to like? I simply put the thought of three hours a day of yoga to the back of my mind, loaded up my Kindle and bought lots of sunscreen.

Challenging

It is during what Sally describes as a 'gentle' 45-minute welcome session of yoga soon after we arrive at The Hacienda that I realise the extent of the challenge ahead of me. This is dynamic vinyasa yoga, which is as much about the invigorating flow between poses as the poses themselves, with intense and sometimes swift sequences of movements rather than one stretch or pose at a time. As a novice who doesn't know her downward dog from her cobra, it's hilarious trying to keep up, and there are several I've-got-to-put-my-leg-WHERE? moments, but Sally is encouraging, funny and patient, as are more advanced members of the 20-strong mixed ability group.

After an al fresco dinner – all delicious vegetarian food, much of it grown on the farm – I crawl into bed, shattered, and with only one thought on my mind: oh lord, I've got 90 minutes of decidedly less gentle yoga as soon as I wake up in the morning.

The first two days, with two 90-minute sessions of yoga on each in sweltering hot weather, are undeniably tough. But it is on the second day, however hard I find the mix

of dynamic yoga and some Pilates in the morning (this is the yin part of the day), and a slower but equally demanding evening session (the yang part) where you move less and hold poses for longer, that I first 'get' yoga. Instead of comparing myself to others who could bend more easily and do fancy handstands, I focus on very small bits of progress I'm making in my stretches.

I begin to relish the repetition of poses I especially like, such as the Warrior sequences where I feel all Amazonian and powerful, even if the reality is a sweaty, red-faced middle-aged woman with tight hamstrings. It helps that the views out of the yoga studio across the hills are hypnotically beautiful, and also that, after a hearty post-yoga brunch each morning, there are several hours to while away with a book by the pool.

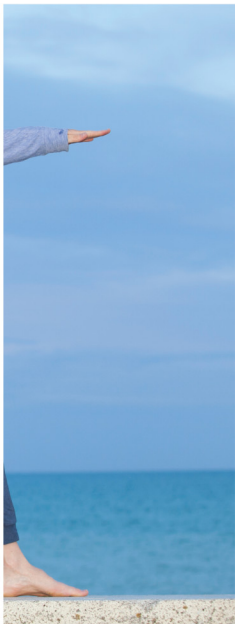
Jaw-dropping

After a day out in Granada, and some time off from yoga to rest weary muscles – we visit the jaw-dropping Alhambra Palace and gardens, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and all sneak an ice-cream and a glass of sangria – the second half of the week-long retreat is great fun. Whatever level we started from, we are all going beyond what we thought possible in the sessions (I get ridiculously excited when I manage a half-frog pose with both legs, and share this news with completely bewildered friends on Facebook), and I've finally conquered the hardest aspect for me: savasana, the meditative relaxation period at the end of yoga, which is all about stillness and calm.

After five days of intense, rejuvenating yoga in such life-affirming surroundings, my mind is entirely at peace; it's only then that I realise how much it usually races. After an extra-early morning yoga session at sunrise on the final day, I leave the retreat feeling physically and mentally so much stronger than when I arrived, and with a big grin on my glowing face. I've since signed up for a weekly class back in Cardiff, I now own a yoga mat, and my osteopath is no longer on speed dial. **14**

Travel details

Sally Parkes teaches classes and retreats in the UK and abroad – for details, see sallyparkesyoga.com. The next retreats at The Hacienda, Andalusia, are 13-19 June and 5-11 September 2015, priced from ££27 per person (full board, excluding flights and transfers from Malaga airport). Vueling flies direct from Cardiff to Malaga – see vueling.com for more details and prices.



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